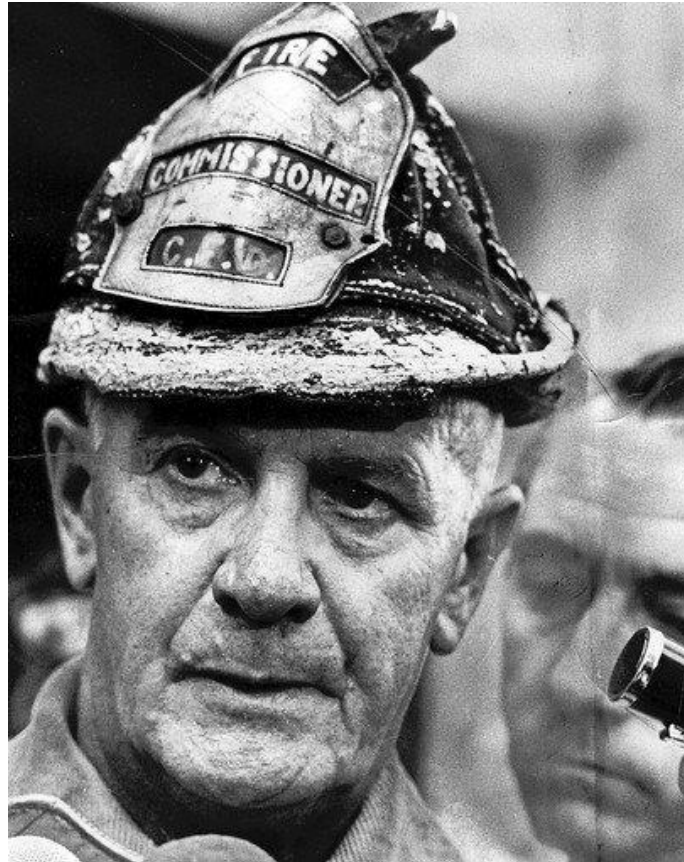


Chicago Fire Commissioner R.J. Quinn Battered Helmet Story



Born in Chicago 12 May 1905, he was Nellie O'Boyle's son, He began his career in the 1928 Chicago Fire Department candidate class. He served in the Navy in World War II, He was decorated for heroism during a three-day battle against a fire on a tanker loaded with aviation fuel. . he then served just shy of 50 years with the Chicago Fire Department.

He proudly wore a battered helmet, who in a 1971 interview said "I wouldn't trade it for a solid gold one. I have worn that helmet since it was given to me the first day I entered the fire academy as a recruit. It was my good luck charm."

He invented a most innovative piece of fire fighting apparatus, the snorkel.



His name was Robert J. Quinn, the Fire Commissioner of the Chicago Department between 1957 and 1978. He has been well called, an innovator and a leader.

He was named Commissioner In March 1957 by Mayor Richard J. Daley replacing Anthony J. Mulleney. Quinn's solid reign over the Chicago Fire Department corresponded with Daley's hold on the city. At the Chicago Fire Alarm Office, he was simply known by his radio signature of 2-1-3.

Quinn was a hero early on. In 1934, he climbed eight stories to rescue three from a fire in a Loop building. The same year, he put a 200-pound woman over his shoulder and, with her clothing on fire, leaped 4 feet to an adjoining building.



As Commissioner, Quinn presided over dozens of Chicago's worst fires — including the horrific Our Lady of the Angels school fire, 3820 W. Iowa on December 01, 1958, the Hubbard Street fire in 1961, in which nine brave Firefighters died, the original McCormick Place in 1967, the blizzard of 1967 the 1968 Mickelberry Sausage factory explosion, and the 1968 West Side riot fires.

Quinn was a builder. In two decades Commissioner Quinn opened 36 large new fire stations. In 1957, he ordered the installation of radios in all fire apparatus. That enabled the fire alarm office to dispatch companies from one assignment to another, and allowed the fire companies to leave their stations to inspect buildings, drill, replenish fuel and supplies, yet stay in service via radio.

In 1957, Commissioner Quinn had an idea. He knew of six heavy duty rescue trucks that the Federal Government had supplied the city, to use as they saw fit. The rescue vehicles were all brand new, fully equipped but just sitting idle in City of Chicago garages, collecting dust and waiting for the big one. Quinn decided to approach Mayor Richard J. Daley with a plan for these Rescue Squads.

It would involve an all-volunteer unit to facilitate and operate this equipment with proper training and personnel to provide ancillary support at fires and other disasters. A handful of volunteers were gathered together between October of 1957 and January of 1958. The Chicago Civil Defense, Fire and Rescue Unit was then born.

Then in the mid 1970's, the Chicago Civil Defense was incorporated into the Chicago Fire Department as the Emergency Preparedness & Disaster Services, (E.P.D.S.)



Quinn supervised the construction of huge water cannons deluge units known as "Big Mo" and "Big John" He acquired helicopters that gave fire chiefs a bird's-eye view of a blaze and established a photographic unit

The old Drill School was replaced in 1961 by the modern Fire Academy Street. In 1871, on this same site, Catherine O'Leary's barn then at 137 Dekoven, housed her cow who supposedly knocked over a kerosene lamp causing the Chicago Fire.



Quinn introduced new bureaus and services such as, Air Sea Rescue which utilized helicopters and boats, manned by firefighter pilots and scuba divers. The Photography Section was formed so fires could be documented and studied. The Bureau of Fire Investigation was formed with increased building inspections and education. The 911 emergency phone number to call fire, police and ambulance service, was inaugurated in September, 1976.



He famously opposed switching from limousine ambulances to the boxy modern EMS vehicles, “apparently on the theory that a Chicagoan would rather die in style than be saved in the back of a panel truck,” the Tribune noted. He was quoted that people wanted to go out in style! However, the Emergency Medical Service (EMS) grew from 16 Cadillac ambulances in 1957 to 43 modern modular vans by 1977. There are now 80 or more ambulances.



His biggest legacy however might be his title as “the Father of the Snorkel.” Back around 1958 he took notice of tree trimmers using an aerial platform. He then invented an odd-looking hydraulic aerial work platform, a steel arm hinged in the middle like an elbow. “A fireman in a crow’s nest at the top of the tower directs the stream and gets his orders from below by observers using a walkie-talkie radio.” The snorkel revolutionized urban firefighting and enabled firefighters to stand firmly on a flat platform instead of precariously clinging to the top rungs of a Truck Companies ladder.

That first snorkel G-145, a 1959 GMC 50’ Snorkel was put into service at Engine 1’s Quarters at, 419 S. Wells St. on October 14 1958. It was used to fight the horrible Our Lady of the Angels fire, less than two months later. It was originally called Water Tower 4.

Along with three other 1920’s Seagrave water tower’s. On May 01, 1959, and once the snorkel proved itself the name was changed to Snorkel Co. 1 (6-6-1). the original Snorkel shop apparatus # G-145 was used by the fire department from 1958 to 1967/1968, roughly 10 years.



He was not without controversy, when the White Sox clinched the American League pennant with a late-night victory on September 22 1959, Quinn set off the city's air-raid sirens at 10:30 PM scaring the daylights out of many citizens. "If the Sox ever win another pennant, I'll do it again," Quinn once remarked. The Chicago Tribune reported that some Chicagoan's knelt in prayer thinking that we were under atomic attack while others fled into the streets in their night clothes.



In 1978, Robert J. Quinn retired after leading the department for 21 years with service just months shy of serving fifty years. Robert J. Quinn died on January 18, 1979, in Naples Florida while on vacation and visiting friends. He was 73 years old.

He rests now in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery Lot 14 Block 2 Section 3.

