

Tahoe Douglas fire chief to make last call

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – The longtime firefighter/paramedic remembers the day as if you had asked him where he was during 9/11.

It was June 24, 2007.

After 31 years, Tahoe Douglas Fire Chief Ben Sharit will retire at the end of the month, capping off countless memories of his time spent rescuing people and property. One of those times is the Angora Fire nine years ago.

Sharit was returning to the basin from vacation, crested Brockway Summit and noticed the strong winds.

“This was a big concern,” he said.

As a battalion chief at the time, he knew his forestlands were dry, and the combination seemed dangerous.

“I sent the whole department,” the 54-year-old told *Lake Tahoe News*. That’s 15 firefighters on a given shift. Within 45 minutes, the agency was backfilled from other agency firefighters in three out of four stations.

“I’ll never forget it,” he added solemnly.



Tahoe Douglas Fire Chief Ben Sharit retires on June 30.
Photo/Susan Wood

It wouldn't be the first time Sharit had come to the rescue, in particular on behalf of the Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District.

Two years later, the Nevada fire agency was taxed yet again with more of a long-haul challenge by enduring and surviving the recession. Tahoe Douglas Fire's budget was cut by \$1.6 million. He found a way to whittle expenses through the normal attrition of staff leaving – without laying off firefighters. The Zephyr Cove station that was reduced to an ambulance is now fire-staffed through grant funding that Sharit secured.

It's times like these that show why Sharit has gained widespread respect among his underlings, peers and community members like those he knows in the Tahoe Rotary Club.

Since "Ben knows everybody," according to fellow Rotarian Erik Watada, there's even a "Ben" burger at Watada's Neighborhood Burgers on Kingsbury Grade.

Sharit's even-keel demeanor has served him well in his career.

After "being around a lot of firefighters" as a child, his best friend who worked for CalFire introduced him to the adrenaline-induced world in his younger years. Sharit started out as a paramedic, logging five years in busy Oakland, where he admits to seeing it all. The stories are so abundant it was hard to single one out. He studied fire science in the East Bay.

Once he discovered the natural beauty of Lake Tahoe, Sharit knew he was destined to come and stay here.

"I wanted to live in the mountains and get out of the busy city," he said. He developed an inner peace that made him feel at home with staying calm in stressful situations.

Enduring the multi-year drought could put grey hairs on any firefighter's head in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range.

He's responded to his fair share of structure fires, vehicle extrications and lived through tragic losses on the job. He's also delivered a number of babies in cars, homes and restrooms. And the thought of operating the district's bomb squad robot put a gleam in his eye.

"You can't get riled up," he said, while chatting at his Round Hill station desk. Although he has just a few days left to work, his desk is still covered with papers. Awards and other recognition-type décor line his shelves, Tahoe photographs adorn the walls and a marker board posted in his office indicates things to do. Items such as "engineer test" and "audit" have been checked off, leaving the unchecked "retire" on the bottom of the list.

At home, the chief holds a long list of "honey dos," quests to "see the world" and visits in waiting to spend time with his

three children and four grandchildren.

"It's been a great career, a great ride. I tell my guys it's not a job. It's a lifestyle, and you're on duty all the time," he said.

This lifestyle includes acting as a family in active summers and long winters.

And to top it off, the job comes with a long list of criteria of characteristics – intelligence, physical fitness, dedication, commitment and the need to help others. Oh, and incidentally, a candidate can't be afraid of heights or be claustrophobic.

The fire chief's biggest concern as he leaves is of course altruistic – "the safety and welfare of the firefighters and the people they serve." If that's not the sign of a good steward, it's hard to imagine what is because Sharit is dead serious when he insists what means the most to him.

And what will he miss most?

"The people – that'll be tough (to leave). You give so much after a long period. But now it's time to see my (grandkids') baseball games," he said, albeit admitting to projecting a possible temptation to respond to public safety calls while in retirement.

Nonetheless, Sharit plans to back up and relax from feeling like he needs to solve a problem in two minutes. And he'll enjoy sleeping normally again.

"You always sleep with one eye open," he said of being a firefighter.

Before he became chief, he quipped with friends and family members that he would call them during the night to see if they could be cognizant waking up from a hard sleep. He wanted them to know what the job was like. First and foremost, Sharit

likes to share with the people around him. Those who work with him inside and out of the district appreciate the candor.

“You always know what to expect with him,” Tahoe Douglas fire Capt. Kevin Green said, while pulling the engine into the Round Hill fire station.

Douglas County Sheriff Ron Pierini goes back decades with Sharit, and the two chiefs have crossed paths often to positive results.

“I found him to be an outstanding employee. He’s a very ethical person – someone I can trust,” Pierini said. “I’m going to miss him. I’m sorry he’s leaving, but people move on, and I understand that.”

The community is invited to Sharit’s retirement party, slated at Harveys from 4-6pm on his last day – June 30.

The following day, Assistant Fire Chief Scott Baker will take over.