



Captain Robert D. Clark, Department Engineer, Wethersfield Volunteer Fire Department

Where's Oily?

On the occasion of Captain Robert D. "Oily" Clark's passing, this tribute was written to honor his memory and over 50 years of service to The Wethersfield Volunteer Fire Department.

Bob Clark was a proud oilman, as his father was before him. Hence, he was known by all in the post-war period, when everyone had nicknames, simply as "Oily".

Wethersfield was his home.

Since youth, Oily was fascinated by fire trucks. The old wooden firehouse on Main Street captured his attention as it was a very active place with the comings and goings of volunteer firemen at all times of the day and night.

World War II took the life of Robert M. Clark (no relation to Oily) and every Memorial Day since then, members of the Wethersfield Fire Department visit his grave in the Village Cemetery. They pay honor to the person who is represented by the single gold star on the war service flag honoring fire department members who answered the call to serve their country.

Since 1946, when the gleaming red ladder truck called the Quad (because it did four fire related chores, all in one vehicle...pump, lay hose, carry ladders and bring men to

the fire) has been the focus of firemen's attention. It was delivered to the WVFD just after the war ended and traditionally leads the Memorial Day Parade with the huge red, white and blue service flag draped proudly over the nose of the truck.

Oily was very young when the war ended and the veterans came home. Wethersfield was bursting out at the seams and Oily was following in his fathers' footsteps in the oil business.

He had two other loves in his life...The Wethersfield Volunteer Fire Department and his wife Jean. John Procyk, another storied volunteer fireman, served as his best man when they were married.

Oily had the firefighting bug from an early age. He started in the Wethersfield Fire Department Auxiliary as a teen and his fascination with trucks grew stronger every day. It went right along with his growing experience as a truck

Where is Oily?, Page 2 cont.

driver. He learned to love the big red quad. He polished, washed and cared for it and soon began to drive it in the Memorial Day Parade and then walk with fellow members to the fallen soldiers' grave where a wreath of honor is traditionally placed.

From those days forward the Quad, the memorial flag and Oily became the signature of tribute to all town veterans of all wars.

Over the last half century Oily has enjoyed the birth of five children and a multitude of grandchildren. They will now carry on with the company he founded, R. D. Clark & Sons, a successful oil delivery service.

After a recent full restoration of the Quad, which was directed by Oily, it was sold to him and now is one of twelve fire engines he purchased and maintained over the years in his Cromwell garage.

A consummate truck driver and skilled driving instructor, Oily taught a multitude of firemen over the years how to drive trucks and qualify for the privilege of driving trucks to fires. He was strict and demanding in his pursuit of safe operation of emergency trucks at all times. He showed new drivers how to use the clutch pedal and cleared up the mystery of "double clutching" without grinding the gears of the fire engine being driven.

It is a great tribute to him that over the years the WVFD has suffered a minimum of accidents with fire apparatus while responding to fires. Oily's diligence and continuous preaching of safety is in great part responsible for this enviable record.

The quad has an open cab. When going to fires you could see the flames and smell the smoke long before you reached the active blaze. The feeling of wind, sleet, snow and rain in your face was part of the exhilarating experience of riding with Oily on the quad. He drove it to all the "big ones" and a myriad of "small ones" and many "nothing at all" runs which all started with the ear-splitting blast of the fire horn on the roof of the firehouse, coupled with the roar of the diesel engine as it flew down the street under the experienced hands of Oily. He went to the lumberyard fire, Grey Rock, Tina's Diner twice, the towers fire in Rocky Hill, Dougherty Drug and many more damaging and sad alarms.

It is said that his greatest moment was reached on the day of Martin Luther Kings' funeral when the Wells Stable & Barn on Wells Road went up in flames. The

powerful wind and radiated heat from the burning hay was so intense that it caught the old Wells farm house on Ridge Road on fire also. In the intense moments of redirecting the fire efforts from the barn to the house all you could hear above the din was the loud voice of Chief "Jiggs" Hughes calling out "where is Oily...is he hooked up to the hydrant yet?".

Oily was there with the quad and the water flowed, as it always did.

Over his 50 years of service, Bob "Oily" Clark directed the engineering and design of every modern fire engine at the WVFD. He also had the responsibility of annually pump testing each fire truck he helped purchase.

As a respected member of the community and father he enjoyed much recognition. But most of all, Oily will be remembered behind the wheel of his beloved Quad roaring off to find the hydrant in front of every fire scene.

But he will be most remembered, and missed, while sitting bolt upright with his white hat on, in the drivers' seat of his beloved quad... driving slowly down Main Street in the Memorial Day Parade.

Many in the assembled crowd, when seeing him, would point and lean down to tell their children...

"There's Oily".

We will miss him.

Captain Richard T. Fippinger (*Retired*),
Wethersfield Volunteer Fire Department
May 19, 2011



The Quad, on a Memorial Day gone by