

MY STRUGGLES IN RETIREMENT – A FORMER FIRE CAPTAIN

📖 Knowledge 👤 Rob Shaul



By Joe Hogan

I had a great fire department career but my retirement was inglorious. I'd sustained a hearing injury. Tinnitus and muffled voices were an obstacle but I was physically sound. My biggest problem was, and is, discerning speech from background noise. I could have let it go but made the choice to press for hearing aids as my specialist had recommended. I did so

knowing that it was likely to lead to a medical retirement and it did. You could say I quit and I would not argue.

There was no open house or congratulatory speeches. I was placed on medical leave for several months while my case was reviewed, then I received a notice that I was done. I came in, turned in my gear, and left. That's how I wanted it. I'd always hated watching guys on their last shift. Everyone feels obligated to let them know they will be missed, while also planning the meal for the next shift and watching to see who's transferring into the open slot. The fire department is a closed community and even those who spent decades in it are outsiders on their last shift.

I could go over why I decided to leave, but we all have our reasons. Some people find a home in the fire department and they never want to leave. Some want to leave but they cannot afford to. Some are forced off kicking and screaming due to age or disability. I empathize with all of this but did not land in any of those categories. I felt that staying longer would not be good for me, my family or ultimately the department. I was in a position where I could afford to go, so I accepted the medical decision without protest. It's been nearly two years since my last full shift and over a year since my retirement was official. I've not regretted the decisions once but there have been struggles.

Retiring Did Not Exercise My Demons

I once thought traumatic injuries or cancer were the biggest workplace hazards and I've definitely seen firefighters suffer from both. But I've realized that the grinding impact of sleep deprivation and exposure to tragedy are a more universal threat. As I aged I felt the sleepless nights more and more and I noticed mental health red flags. I looked forward to the restful nights and peace of retirement as I blamed the job for many of my personal issues.

I will say, without hesitation, that regular sleep has done wonders. I think more clearly, I have more energy and I'm a better person overall when I'm fully rested. I suspect we all are. But getting 8 hours a night has not changed who I am. I continue to suffer from many of the traits that concerned me when I was working. I can still be hyper-vigilant, quick to anger and prone to bouts of depression. I haven't seen a traumatic event

since I left the job and the only dangers I've faced are recreational, but I still fight the same demons.

I had been regularly visiting with a therapist before I retired but quit when I left. I assumed that leaving a stressful job would alleviate the need for him. I was wrong. Whether my issues stem from PTSD or just being an asshole, I don't know. But I do now know that a year or so without riding a fire truck wasn't enough to fix me. The hard, embarrassing, uncomfortable work of addressing my personal issues remains. I do have more time to reflect and less overall pressure, but I still need and use therapy.

I Manage Time Poorly

I once spent a couple of years assigned to a slow firehouse. I was disappointed by the assignment but vowed to use the free time well. I was going to up my fitness, increase my administrative skills and read more. None of those things happened. In fact, having free time only served as an excuse for procrastination. Not only did I fail to capitalize on my time for self-improvement but I found myself regressing. If anything, my fitness and professionalism shrunk instead of grew.

Retirement has proven to be much the same. The honeymoon phase of sleeping in and lounging had no definitive end. I found myself growing restless with inactivity but struggled to solve for it. I had no schedule, which is probably great for some people, but it wasn't for me. I needed a morning alarm and a list of things to do or I'd find myself doing nothing at all. The problem was, I lacked the personal discipline to make that happen. I've found that I must have external deadlines to meet or I'm likely to do little if anything of merit.

I Need Purpose

Being a firefighter had been part of my identity since I was 19 and I'd often wondered how I would define myself without it. I took great satisfaction from my work and I enjoyed the admiration of the public. I also loved being a part of a wider family. I was welcome in any firehouse in America, or the world for that matter. What would become of me without that sense of belonging? How would I deal with being a regular civilian?

Surprisingly, the lack of belonging has not bothered me in the least. I don't get envious when I see an engine roll by with lights and sirens. I don't have any desire to drop by any firehouses to swap stories. I don't wear many shirts with my department emblem. I'm fine without all that. What bothers me is a lack of purpose. I realize now that the draw was not so much the trappings of the job but the importance of it. My work had weight. The things we did were really needed and we really mattered. That leaves a hole when it is gone.

I took a part-time job at a farm and home store to get out of the house. The pay was minimal but I wanted an outlet. Plus, we'd moved to a small rural community and I wanted to meet people. My coworkers were great. They get up daily and work their asses off to make a living in a place with limited opportunities, and they do so without complaint. I respected them but the work left me empty. I took no satisfaction from building a neatly stacked pallet of dog food or loading someone's car with their merchandise. I've always loathed the kind of people who act as if simple work is below them, so I was bothered by my own outlook. Why was honest labor so unsatisfying to me? It finally dawned on me that it was because it had no meaningful impact. I've become addicted to purpose. If my family needed me to bring that check home it would be another story, but we didn't need it. I was just taking up time and gaining nothing.

I have an egotistical need to impact the world around me. I have to know that what I'm doing matters. That was something I rarely questioned in my professional life. When I was on the line, every shift held the potential to save a home, deliver a baby or comfort someone in grief. Even as a training officer I knew my efforts were equipping others to do vital work over their entire careers. I realize now what a unique life that is. So few people get the chance to see the direct impact of what they do in others' lives. Having spent my entire adulthood doing so, I can't be without it.

Purpose does not mean I have to make ladder rescues. In retirement, I've found purpose in helping people improve their fitness. I've found purpose in mentoring young people. I've found purpose in writing. I have to seek meaningful outlets for my energy or I will be restless and unsatisfied.

I Miss the Relationships

Firefighters are fascinating. I've fought fires beside former Olympic medalists and former ironworkers. I've been fed by some of the best cooks in the world and I've been put in stitches by some of the funniest storytellers you'll ever hear. The diversity and talent that exists in your local fire department is truly astounding and I spent decades living with these people. The intellectual stimulation alone was enough to make the job great, but the real value was getting the chance to build real friendships with solid people.

Being a firefighter lends itself to forging deep bonds. Melodrama aside, it is largely just the schedule and intimacy of the workplace that builds that. Firefighters often spend more time with each other than their own families, so we know each other in ways others do not. While firehouse socialization is built mostly around cooking, practical jokes, or pointless banter, there is an unspoken depth to it. We knew when someone's marriage was on the rocks or their mother was sick. We watched each other's kids from the time they were climbing on the trucks for fun until they were married. We also relied on each other in life and death moments. I knew certain guys just by their shape in a smoke-filled hallway and they knew me the same way. Then, one day, that was gone.

A few months ago I was struggling with the things I spoke of above. Frustration had given way to depression and I knew hopelessness would soon follow. That's a deep hole to climb out of once you've fallen in, so I picked up the phone. I told an old firefighter friend I was having a rough patch and we met for beers. We didn't talk much about my issues or the fire department. We just checked in and had a few laughs. All I needed was a reminder that I was accountable to someone outside my home. I needed the know that a man I respected would be let down if I didn't get my head on right. That used to be something I could count on every shift and I'd missed it.

I Should Have Made a Plan

I had no doubt that it was time to move on from the fire department but I had no plan for my future. I just figured I'd just focus on my family and recreation and something worthwhile would reveal itself. I'm not sure why I thought that. All the important things in my life have been built. None of

them have fallen into my lap. Thinking that I'd find direction without actively looking for it was pretty naive.

I've begun to try on some things. I took the retail job described above. I've done a little instructing for my local volunteer fire department. I've done some fitness coaching. Writing this essay is part of a mentorship that I'm undergoing. Some of these ventures have proven to be unsatisfying or unsustainable. Some are quite enjoyable and promising. None of them have exactly parted the clouds and handed me my new life's mission, but they have all been worthwhile. Each plan I pursue either eliminates a possibility or illuminates a promising new one. I still don't have a complete plan for this phase of life but I do have movement toward one.

This is Nothing New to Me

I never planned to be a firefighter. I stumbled into an Air Force recruiting office at 19, desperate to recover from a failed attempt at college. The Air Force was literally the first open door at the recruiting center. I signed an open general contract and left home two weeks later. I was assigned to firefighter training, even though it was the third choice on my career "wish list". I obviously found a path that suited me. That was almost 30 years ago.

My successes in life have never been due to my ability to peer into the future and follow a master plan. Instead, my success has come as a result of my ability to persevere through difficulty, identify available opportunities and leverage them. This made me well suited to my profession. Firefighters don't know when, or what, the next alarm will be. Firefighters deal with emergencies as they find them. They learn not to over-plan, but the good ones do prepare. Good firefighters drill on their equipment and skills so they can deal with the next surprise. In that regard, I'm suited for this. I have made a habit of self-assessment and improvement. I'm adaptable, with solid communication skills and openness to new challenges. Retirement is a challenge I can meet.

I did not think this would be easy. I don't want easy. I want adventure, and the fact that I was a little unprepared just makes it more interesting. The struggles of retirement remind me that I need to look for the opportunities around me and try them on. I did not set out to become a firefighter but I did set out to improve my life. In the process, I found a calling that shaped my entire life. Retirement must be the same.