

**ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK**  
**THE HEROES BECAME THE VICTIMS**  
**By Larry Hall**  
**Member, North Park Historical Society**

It was the day after Christmas on December 26, 1962. Just an average day. As the alarm bells sounded at 2:10 PM, firemen throughout the city waited to see who was going to a fire. As the bells sounded and holes were punched in paper tape to give the box location code, the firemen at stations 14 (32<sup>nd</sup> and Lincoln), 17 (Chamoune and Orange), and 18 (Felton and Adams) donned their turnout coats and helmets because it was their fire. They were going to the 3600 block of Cherokee. Responding engines saw smoke showing from a distance and the radio added further information that it was a fire in a canyon. Because of distances, Engine 14 arrived first, followed by Engine 17. It was then that the call came on the radio that made everyone stop. Engine 18 was reporting that they had been involved in a serious injury accident at 35<sup>th</sup> and Orange and ambulances were needed – code 3.

After crossing El Cajon Boulevard, Engine 18 was headed south on 35<sup>th</sup> with red lights, siren, and air horn in use. As they approached the four-way stop signs at 35<sup>th</sup> and Orange, Engineer Emil (Tommy) Tomsovic and Captain Dee Rogers saw that cross traffic was stopped. As they entered the intersection, a pickup truck that had pulled around the stopped westbound cars suddenly appeared in front of them and the inevitable collision occurred. Tomsovic swerved to the right and the engine, pushing the pickup truck in front of it, traveled up over the curb and into the house on the corner (4194 35<sup>th</sup> Street). When all came to a stop, it was discovered that Hoseman Richard (Dick) Wood had been thrown from the tailboard of the engine and lay critically injured in the street because his head had hit the pavement after his helmet flew off. While Tomsovic, Rogers, and the other hoseman, Gerald Anderson, had been badly shaken, their own injuries were ignored as they treated Wood and the occupants of the truck.

The engine, San Diego Fire Department apparatus 1156, was a 1954 Van Pelt engine built on a GMC chassis. It carried 1250 feet of 2-1/2" hose, 150 feet of 1-1/2" hose and all of the usual equipment required on a fire engine. The big difference was that it had a 500-gallon water tank rather than the usual 100- or 300-gallon tanks that were common on other engines. The engine had actually been part of a program of the Office of Civilian Defense to place engines in strategic departments and had been built to their specifications. It had no power going up hills and it was difficult to stop with 500 gallons of water on board.

Initial responders found the pickup truck and engine partially in the house, with the engine's hose thrown up over the front seat due to the sudden stop. Wood was critically injured and the crew was reasonably distressed. As the injured were treated and transported to hospitals, the task turned to stabilizing the structure and removing the engine and pickup truck. The engine had to be towed back to Station 18 so that the hose and equipment could be loaded onto a reserve engine manned by a relief crew. The tank was emptied, a wrecker took hold of the engine and the intersection was cleared.



*Engineer Emil Tomsovic (upper right) in  
the engine at the accident scene  
Evening Tribune, Dec 27, 1962*

It didn't end there. Although the fire department's shop was able to return 1156 to service, the job was never the same. Lives had been changed. Wood, on the job since 1947, was retired due to his injuries. Rogers, who began his career in 1944, went on to become the city's fire chief from 1975 until 1979. Tomsovic, who had been on the job since 1946, ultimately was retired as an engineer due to medical reasons, but was always haunted by that day. Everyone knew that the motorist was at fault and had failed to heed the red lights and siren, but Tomsovic could not accept that he had been driving and that Wood had been seriously injured. As his health declined and he was forced to retire, he finally resolved his dilemma by taking his life in 1968 at the age of 51.

Was a canyon fire ultimately worth someone's life? The answer has to be no, but the dedication of our fire and police personnel often puts them in unwinnable circumstances while trying to protect us. Tomsovic was no stranger to danger. He had been acknowledged several times for making dangerous rescues including several at the Victory Hotel fire in September 1948, in downtown San Diego. He was used to risking his life for others, but could never accept that he had contributed to someone's injury. Yes, he was a hero in many ways, but like so many heroes, his acts came at a great personal price.



*Fire Station 18 circa 1956, with the fire truck involved in the accident (Apparatus 1156)  
San Diego Fire Department Almanac, 1956*