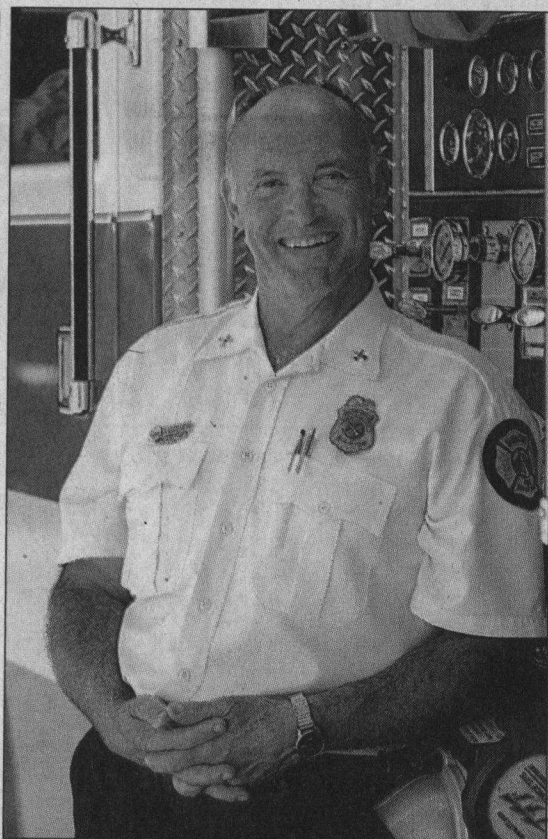


Bio-L

7-22-11

Longtime Battalion Chief John Lucchesi retires



By **STEPHEN BAXTER**
sbaxter@santacruzsentinel.com

'You can't replace him. He's the senior battalion chief in the county and he's commanded more fires than anyone in the county.'

MIKE DITANO, a Santa Cruz fire captain

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz Fire Battalion Chief John Lucchesi retired Thursday at age 58, after 25 years as battalion chief and 39 years as a firefighter. He leaves a legacy of leadership, firefighters said, and a measure of confidence during emergencies that only comes with decades of experience.

Lucchesi's two sons are firefighters in the county, and his father and brother are retired San Jose firefighters.

"It's what we do. If you're a Lucchesi, you go in to fire service," he said.

Lucchesi commanded firefighters' response to nearly every major fire since 1986, as well as the aftermath of the 1989 earthquake and oth-

er emergencies.

"You can't replace him. He's the senior battalion chief in the county and he's commanded more fires than anyone in the county," said Mike DiTano, a Santa Cruz fire captain. "The Lucchesi name will never be forgotten in our fire department."

Lucchesi started as a full-time, seasonal fire crewman in Santa Clara County in 1972 as a teenager. He later worked at the UC Santa Cruz fire department and joined Santa Cruz Fire in 1979.

Lucchesi was promoted to

captain in Santa Cruz in 1986 and became battalion chief later that year.

Lucchesi said one the largest firefighting operations he commanded came in 1987, when Seabright Plaza caught fire.

Arson was suspected in the 4 a.m. fire at Seabright and Soquel avenues, and a Laundromat, bagel shop and shoe store burned. Fifty-five firefighters fought the fire with nine engines from at least eight fire departments,

SEE **CHIEF** ON **B4**

Battalion Chief John Lucchesi retired Thursday after 32 years with the Santa Cruz Fire Department.
DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

EXTRA

CHIEF

Continued from **B1**

Lucchesi said.

"We lost three businesses and it was headed toward a post office" before the blaze was contained, Lucchesi said.

Lucchesi said the three-alarm fire was one of the first major tests of "mutual aid" — a now-common system where separate fire departments help each other during calls. In the Seabright fire, no one was injured and the post office was saved.

Lucchesi recalled a fast-moving wildfire in Pogonip in 1996 — which involved 17 fire companies and threatened homes before it was doused. Other fires at the Municipal Wharf and Holy Cross Church in 1994 stood out for him.

"I'm relieved and I'm tired, I really am," Lucchesi said of his retirement. He said he was proud of the full-service fire department that Santa Cruz Fire had become. Santa Cruz Fire has expanded to include full paramedic services, hazardous materials cleanup and rescues. Santa Cruz Fire also does cliff rescues and has taken on lifeguard services in its marine division.

"I'm going to miss who we are, not what we've

BIOGRAPHY

RETIRING SANTA CRUZ FIRE
BATTALION CHIEF JOHN LUCCHESI

AGE: 58

RESIDENCE: Soquel

CAREER: Santa Cruz Fire Department Battalion chief for 25 years, 39 years as a firefighter

EDUCATION: Willow Glen High School [San Jose], San Jose City College

Source: Santa Cruz Fire Department

done. I'm not going to miss the fire at 2 a.m. with people trapped, but I'm going to miss what we've designed and developed as a fire service."

Lucchesi said Thursday that his 39 years as a firefighter in the county were rewarding and humbling. The years also took a toll on his body, and he said a series of injuries played a role in his decision to retire.

Technology has advanced tremendously in the 39 years since Lucchesi started, and some firefighters under him joked that he is something of a Luddite. Lucchesi was known to use overhead projectors and slides in recent years rather than

computers and digital images.

DiTano said firefighters recently found a projector and a slide carousel or two at yard sales that they planned to give Lucchesi as gag gifts.

DiTano, 48, said Lucchesi was his mentor.

"I'm speechless when it comes to what he's done for me personally," DiTano said. "He was always prepared for anything, and he was educated and experienced. He'd bring a certain level of comfort and he would make good decisions — often life-saving decisions," DiTano said.

"I'm trying to fill his boots and it's a huge task."

DiTano will be the acting battalion chief while the department seeks a permanent replacement.

Lucchesi, a hunter and outdoorsman, said he did not have any specific plans for his retirement. He said he simply wanted to say "Yes" more often when people asked him to be places — rather than say "I have to work."

He will have more time to spend with his wife, Linda, and family. Lucchesi's son Marc, 28, is a Santa Cruz firefighter and paramedic. His son Nick, 30, is a Branciforte firefighter who also works in the District Attorney's Office. His daughter, Kaitlyn attends Cabrillo College.

Lucchesi said his line of work humbled him. "It reminds you of how fragile life really is."