

Former Santa Cruz fire chief helped modernize department

By JOHN SAMMON

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Charles A. "Chuck" Schneider was remembered as the Santa Cruz fire chief who took the department out of what fellow firefighters called the "dark ages," and modernized it during a period of great change in the 1970s.

Schneider, a resident of Bella Vista, Ark., died Aug. 14 at his home. He was 83.

"Chuck became the fire chief and promoted me to captain. This was in 1970," recalled Santa Cruz resident Harry Mayo, 87. "He modernized the department and made it much more professional than it had been, using new fire engines. He was a great organizer. He sent his firemen to schools like Monterey Peninsula College and San Jose City College to improve their skills."

Born Feb. 24, 1928, in Bismarck, N.D., he served in World War II from 1944 to 1946 aboard the USS Intrepid as a seaman and also an "unlisted" pilot. His daughter, Terri, said this designation meant that he volunteered to fly planes off aircraft carriers without any formal previous flight training.

"It was hands-on learning, impromptu," she said. "When they needed extra pilots, though he was a seaman, he volunteered. That's how brave he was."

A personal sports trainer living in Aptos, Terri Schneider said her father also took his role as a provider and mentor seriously.

"My dad went to school at night so he could advance himself and his career," she said. "He never bragged about

his accomplishments. No matter what we did as kids, he would step in and help. My siblings and I would sometimes give him plenty of opportunity to complain, but he never did. He'd just bail people out of problems. He was like a rock, a very solid man."

His son Steve, 55, said his father's even temperament and steady dependability under stress made him unique.

"He never showed a lot of anger," Steve Schneider said. "He was concerned about teaching rather than getting angry. One time when I was younger, my car broke down in Roseville and I called him and he made a six-hour drive in the middle of the night to pick me up. He took me back home and had my car towed and paid for everything. When you needed help, he took care of business."

Schneider served at the Santa Cruz Fire Department from 1955 to 1980, working his way up through the ranks to become chief, a post he held from 1970 until his retirement in 1980. After retiring, he moved to northwest Arkansas where he became an entrepreneur and volunteer active in the Salvation Army and Kiwanis Club.

Mayo said Schneider guided the Santa Cruz Fire Department through a period of great change. The department unionized in 1970 and joined the International Association of Fire Fighters.

"We had about 41 firefight-



SCHNEIDER

BIOGRAPHY

CHARLES A.
'CHUCK' SCHNEIDER

BORN: Feb. 24, 1928

DIED: Aug. 14, 2011

HOME: Bella Vista, Ark.

OCCUPATION: Retired Santa Cruz fire chief

SURVIVORS: Wife of 32 years, JoBeth Schneider; children Stephanie Gibson of Bella Vista, Ark., Mary White of Colorado, Stephen Schneider of Springdale, Ark., Julie Blaney of Rogers, Ark., Terri Schneider of Aptos and Linda Wright of Centerton, Ark.; sisters Marian Haltiner and Mildred Grufman, both of St. Paul, Minn.; 10 grandchildren; eight great-grandchildren; and many nieces and nephews.

SERVICES: A military interment was held Aug. 19 at the Fayetteville National Cemetery. A memorial service has been held.

MEMORIALS: Charles Schneider Memorial Fund, Arvest Bank in Springdale Ark., Account No. 17012777, 3950 W. Sunset Ave., Springdale, Ark., 92762.

ers in the department back then," he said.

Upgrades on the fire engines during Schneider's tenure included devices called "pre-connects," specially made lines allowing water to start spraying immediately at the scene of a fire for a quicker response.

"The older engines that were replaced were slower to hook up and we derisively called them taxis or hose and water carriers," Mayo said.

Mayo said Schneider was easy to work with, but also more communicative than former chiefs had been.

"We used to have regular meetings, and we had never had them before," he said.

Fellow firefighter Jack Simpson of Santa Cruz also remembered Schneider's even-handed yet authoritative management style.

"Chuck was a real good guy and he was easy to be around," Simpson said. "He did a lot to take us out of the dark ages and was the kind of person who related well as a liaison between the department and city officials. He was chief in an era when fire engines became much more sophisticated and was very supportive toward his men in the department."

Kent Rice of Scotts Valley, now retired, served as personnel director for the city of Santa Cruz during the years 1971 to 1982, working closely with Schneider.

"The Fire Department did the hiring of new personnel and we did the recruiting," he said. "I worked with all the departments and the Fire Department was in public safety, so it always had a lot of activity. Chuck was a very professional guy. He was excellent, honest and direct. He was really liked by his troops."

Bill Schuette of Santa Cruz, who served as fire marshal and battalion chief under Schneider, took over as acting chief when Schneider retired.

"David Koester was the city manager who appointed Chuck fire chief," Schuette said. "Chuck took over at a time when changes in the department needed to be made. He was the right man at the right time."