

The late Divisional Commander (DC) William John Olivier, a born fire fighter at heart



In this edition of Fire and Rescue International, we continue with our 'Your story' articles, paying tribute to the people in service, sharing their backgrounds, experiences and achievements, telling your story. In this issue, we are profiling William John Olivier, best known as Willie, of the City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue Service, who passed on 9 September 2021. This is the first of the 'Your story' articles that we are doing posthumously. We were busy with the article prior to Willie's passing and asked those who worked with him to assist us in finalising it in his honour. We thank CFO Ian Schnetler and his colleagues Pat Muir and Craig Cyster for their input and assistance.

Born on 25 December 1963, one of eight children, Willie grew up and attended school in George in the Southern Cape. On completion of school, Willie joined the then South

African Prison Service for around two years. In September 1981, he decided to change careers and joined the then Parow Municipal Fire Department. From those early days and changes in the municipal structures, until his passing, Willie chalked up 40 years of fire service, 19 years at Parow, eight years at Belhar as divisional commander operations and 13 years in Milnerton as divisional commander fleet operations.

Pat Muir, now retired from City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue Service, said, "During the early days of his career, we were still independent separate municipal services. 18 fire services, in the greater Cape Town Area. The only time that we really got together, was for 'darts, snooker, volleyball and of course the 'Pram Marathon', a lot of crazy firemen pushing prams from the Forshore, around Chapmans Peak, Cape Point and ending at Lakeside Fire Station."

"I have known Willie just on 36 years, having been at Tech together, with a few others from then different services. 1994 saw the start of changes to the municipal structures going towards the formation of the Unicity and saw the six substructures starting to work together and getting to know each other on a more personal level, with the 'mutual aid agreement' being utilised more often," added Muir.

"The first inter-sub-council working committee was established in 1999, working towards the standardisation of the fire service. This was chaired by Ian Schnetler, our present CFO, then still with the CMC, looking at all aspects of the fire service. Here, Willie and I started our full-time working relationship, shaping the

way our City of Cape Town Fire Service would go. With the formation of the Uni-city, initial standardisation was relatively slow due to funding restrictions of the new city. In 2006, we saw a change in local government and a definite boost for the fire service, with funding made available for the replacement of 'old' vehicles. Also at this time, the 2010 Soccer World Cup was in the pipeline", said Muir.

He continued, "A fact finding trip was undertaken in 2007 to visit the larger fire vehicle manufacturers at that time, to establish the capabilities of the various role players to deliver vehicles to the city. In 2008, Willie transferred from divisional commander operations in Belhar to head fleet operations stationed at Milnerton and planning started in earnest looking forward to the 2010 Soccer World Cup. The arrival of the first new vehicles and equipment was in 2009 and our workload increased and we were then joined by Willem Moolman and Leigh Wallace, as well as the ex-ambulance workshop staff in the fleet office. The first major project was the start of rebranding of entire fire fleet, chevrons and high visibility markings, which has now become the standard through most services."

"With Willie's perseverance, Mr Ackerman's ability to find the funding, help from our friends at corporate fleet services and Councillor JP Smit, we managed to bring the fire fleet to where it is today! 311 vehicles replaced with some 12 still to be delivered. A fire service to be proud of!" said Muir.

He added, "As our officer and head of fleet operations, Willie was a

great team player. Normally the first person in the office each morning, he would usually make the first cup of coffee of the day and by 07h30, we would have concluded our morning meeting of planned activities for the day. Willie served on various work groups and committees both within and outside the City of Cape Town Fire Service always giving it his all. He was an excellent, manager, organiser, he just had a way with people. One of his favourite quotes was 'to be successful, one must look successful'; well the fire service looks just that!"

Muir continued in saying, "With the distribution of vehicles and equipment, he was always as fair as possible to make all members felt equally important, hoping that this would lift the moral of the service. It was his passion that helped with the introduction of various additional items at that stage not freely found on the fireground such as the Polaris 4x4 and the 6x6 fire fighting vehicles, compressed air foam systems (CAFS), high flow/pressure backpack blowers and drones, to mention but a few; we tested all personally."

"Willie also played a major role in getting the Incident Command System (ICS) programme into the city. But he was at his happiest when in a jump suit. We spent many hours together on the fireground, even when not on call. He would usually come to my office saying "kom ons gaan net vinng kyk wat daar aangaan, ons is nou nou terug"; well, the rest is history. We spent many nights in the mountains. We spent a lot of time together. We had the uncanny ability to communicate without actually speaking, knowing precisely what the other would say or do, given a situation."

"Willie's unending support for programmes such as the seasonal fire fighters every year speaks for itself. Clearing and control burning on Robben Island for a week at a time, here Moolman normally accompanied him with the seasonal staff and some of the training officers. Willie also gave much

of his time assisting at incidents outside the boundaries of the City such as in Knysna, Clanwilliam, Porterville, Betty's Bay, Hermanus and George, to mention but a few. He also played a major role with the establishment of a central breathing apparatus (BA) and hose room at Bellville Fire Station to support our service as well as input into many of the new fire stations that we see around us and ones that are still to come," Muir added.

He continued, "Willie was also very supportive of the many events that involved the fire service such as, the International Fire Fighters' Day (IFFD), the World Rescue Challenge (WRC) and various vehicle extrication competitions, the Toughest Fire Fighter Alive etc. He was also the driving force behind the "Pink" Fire engine for special events.

"Willie was very competitive by nature, always striving to do his best for the yearly fitness evaluation, in the gym any time from 05h30 in the mornings, always encouraging all in the office. But he suffered setbacks and fought back hard and being a 28-year cancer survivor never got him down. The will to overcome these obstacles showed his past 18 months since his stroke and he really pushed himself to the limit to get back to work right to the end."

"Willie's greatest Love definitely was his family! From the Brotherhood of fire fighters, know that you and your family will always be in our prayers and thoughts."

The latest fleet of new state-of-the-art fire vehicles at Goodwood Fire Station are shining beacons of William Olivier's burning passion for the fire service as he helped procure the funds needed to bring the vehicles to the station as one of his last projects before he passed away.

Memorial service held in honour of City of Cape Town's DC Willie Olivier

A touching memorial service was held at the Goodwood Fire Station in Cape Town on 29 September 2021 honouring the memory and celebrating the life of Divisional

Commander (DC) Willem John Olivier. The memorial started off with a welcome from City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue Service's Craig Cyster, head: Command and Control, followed by a prayer by Chaplain Alan Kelly. Chief Fire Officer Ian Schnetler provided the obituary followed by a tribute to DC Olivier by Patrick Muir, who had known Olivier for just on 36 years. A script reading and homily followed by Reverend Linda Idas, a prayer by Chaplain Bridget Jongbloed, a reading of the Fire Fighter's Prayer by Tracey Whittaker and a bell ceremony by the Guard of Honour. CFO Schnetler then handed over the flag to the Olivier Family followed by a blessing from Reverend Idas.

A message from CFO Ian Schnetler

City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue Service's CFO Ian Schnetler sent us the following message. "William John Olivier or always known as Willie, (I used to always ask him – nou Willie, hoe het so 'n egte Afrikaanse man soos jy, so 'n Engelse naam gekry en hy het altyd geantwoord, dis nie ek nie meneer, dit was my Ma) was a special fire fighter, officer and a stalwart in the fire and rescue service, from his beginning days at Parow Fire Brigade, through to his final days with the City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue service."

CFO Schnetler continued, "He was a son, a brother, a father, uncle, a fire fighter and a true officer and a gentleman."

"As a chief fire officer, I would "never fear when Willie was near" as his heart and soul was part of the fire and rescue service. He had a vast network of people; his knowledge gained through his willingness and assistance to everyone in the fire services family was legendary. Virtually everyone in the fire services environment from across the country knew him. If there was a challenging fire to deal with, Willie was first on scene. Even in his last few months, when his body was giving up, he was at fires to try and manage and have the necessary resources put

Your story: DC Willie Olivier, City of Cape Town Fire and Rescue

▶ in place to deal with it. His last big one was at the Helderberg where a fire from a neighbouring municipality threatened our borders and I remember him calling me and saying, "My Baas" (his nickname for me at the best of times in his distinctly Afrikaans accent), ek gaan net gou kyk wat daar aangaan en sal meneer laat weet".....and off he went (with an officer having to drive him due to his disability at the time) around the area to ensure the City borders remained safe."

"We had many times where he and I worked "back to the floor" shifts on weekends on a skid unit during the summer, where we assisted those on duty with vegetation fires; we would complete the shift many

times having tasted smoke and fire again, the very reason we originally joined the service in the first place. Unfortunately, in the latter part of his illness after his stroke, we could not manage to do that anymore."

"It's such a pity that a man of his calibre and passion for the profession, would be struck down so suddenly and yet then still have the fight to continue, where mere mortals would have given up. He fought to the end but there were higher forces calling him away."

"I am glad he went to heaven, as if he went the other way, I would have already have received the STOP message from him, saying that the fire is under control and 'die saak is reg, ons sal nou nou klaar wees'."

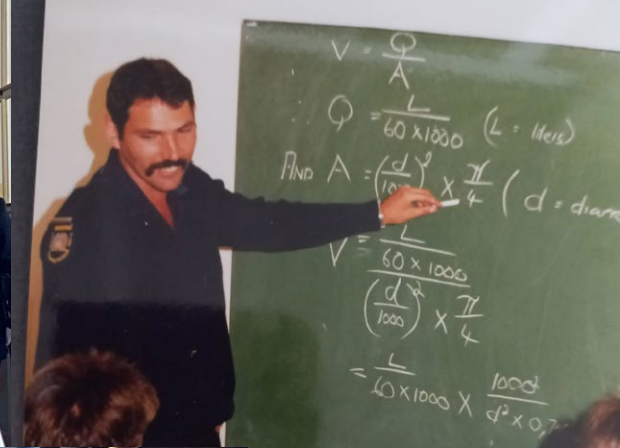
CFO Schnetler concluded, "We will always miss him and his 'can do' attitude to everything in life. We salute you, Willie. Long may you live."

From Fire and Rescue International

DC Olivier was a 28-year cancer survivor, with ups and downs. A mentor to many, he will be sorely missed by all those who knew him, worked with him and were friends with him. A fire fighter deep in his heart. Willie, may you rest in Peace, my friend. Thank you for the legacy that you leave behind. You are a hard act to follow.

To Anja and children Lliam and Hannah, our deepest condolences on the loss of your husband, companion, friend and father. May he rest in Peace. 🕯





**William John
Olivier
1963-2021**

