

The Fire Guy

January, 2019

Fire Marshal Dave Tyler retired at the end of 2018. We took a look back at his storied career.

Story by Jonathon Taylor

Dave Tyler took the phone call while working at a Best Buy in Texas, decked out in a blue polo shirt and name tag. It was the winter of 2015, and a little more than three years since his retirement as the Alaska State Fire Marshal, the position was vacant again, and he was getting pressure to come back.

"These were good people with good vision," Tyler says of the Division of Fire and Life Safety. DF&LS falls under the Department of Public Safety, and the Fire Marshal oversees the division. "My wife, Connie, is always up for the next adventure, and when I told her about the call at Best Buy, she just said, 'When do we pack?'"

By February of 2016 – just three months later – Tyler was back in Alaska and in Juneau meeting with legislators and fire chiefs from across the Last Frontier to advocate for the Division he was leading for the second time, and its critical work to protect Alaskans. As he prepared to hang up his hat and head back into retirement at the end of 2018, he reflected fondly back on the people and relationships he's formed here in Alaska, and remained optimistic about DF&LS's future.

"These folks are consummate professionals, who did their jobs even during uncertainty and budgetary challenges," he says. Their commitment and quality work indicate even better things to come.



Tyler's formal U.S. Navy headshot.

Alaska-Bound

David Tyler graduated high school in Wisconsin in 1974. He joined the Navy, spending six-and-a-half years on an aircraft carrier where he received his first fire training. For a time, he worked flight control on the carrier, helping manage the arresting gear that can bring a 54,000-pound aircraft traveling 150 miles per hour to a complete stop in only two seconds. After being honorably discharged, he found his way up to Alaska.

Tyler initially planned to go to the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) in 1983 to get into nursing with an assist from the GI Bill, but found himself taken with emergency services. He served as a 911 dispatcher at UAF and the Fairbanks International Airport and volunteered with the Steese and Chena Goldstream Fire Departments. By 1991, Chena Goldstream Fire & Rescue hired him as their chief.

It was thanks to these experiences that Tyler learned the importance of relationship building – especially in a small state like Alaska. After spending seven years in Chena, he spent two more as the Assistant Fire Chief in Homer, followed by six years in Interior Alaska as North Pole Fire Chief, North Star Volunteer Fire Department Chief, and Emergency Operations Director for the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

"I was very active in the Fire Chief's Association; I was a part of the Alaska Municipal League (AML)," Tyler reminisced. "We were doing some really good things, and I was getting to know some quality people."

Those contacts came in handy following the 2006 gubernatorial election. Tyler had previously served on the DPS Transition Team in 2002 for then-Governor-Elect Frank Murkowski as the fire protection representative. He reprised that role in 2006. The Fire Marshal at the time was preparing to retire, and an opportunity existed for Tyler to take on that role. Eventually, he applied for and was offered the job.

"I talked to my wife about it, and she said, 'Let's do it!'" he says with a chuckle.



Tyler during his firefighting days - with his now-wife, Connie. 33 years ago, Dave first asked Connie out while driving an ambulance to a motor vehicle collision call on which she was the medic.

State Fire Marshal, Parts 1 and 2

He took over as State Fire Marshal in 2007, and spent five years in the position, notching some significant accomplishments. First, the Office of Rural Fire Protection received funding from the State Legislature for the first time. Firefighting in rural Alaska is not at all like firefighting in urban portions of the state: departments are often small, run by volunteers, and sometimes suffer from out-of-date equipment. Those responsible for firefighting sometimes can't afford to make it into urban areas to receive training, new resources, and support from the fire community. The funding for ORFP marked a sea change and allowed Tyler's Division to engage like never before with people in remote parts of the state, and work to provide them with the resources they needed to protect their communities.

Second, working with the Alaska Fire Chief's Association, Tyler was able to secure Legislative funding for the Alaska Fire Standards Council. Like its counterpart for police, AFSC establishes minimum training and performance standards for firefighters statewide. The funding meant that, instead of relying solely on fees for operation, funds could be expended to help firefighters maintain their certification requirements and provide assistance to those from more remote communities to better access training and support opportunities.

His signature accomplishment is one that, like the other two, has key impacts even today. Over the five years of his first tour as Fire Marshal, Tyler pushed to get his Deputy Fire Marshals Alaska Police Standards Council (APSC) certification. Deputy Fire Marshals are the ones who respond to high-profile fire events and conduct investigations into the cause of those fires. Holding APSC Certification means that the Deputy Fire Marshals have additional credibility, and can access the court system to aid them when necessary on their investigations. It also took a significant investigatory burden off the Alaska State and Wildlife Troopers as those divisions also dealt with budget cuts.

"It really increased efficiency," Tyler says. Deputy Fire Marshals could now take the lead on fire investigations and allow AST and AWT officers more time to conduct their ongoing police work.

Tyler fought long and hard to get the APSC certification requirement for his deputies, almost the entire time he first served as Fire Marshal. In a fitting end to his efforts, on his final day before retirement in August of 2012, he signed the paperwork certifying that his first deputy had completed the requirements to get their APSC certificate.

Following retirement in 2012, Dave and Connie left the Last Frontier for a time, bouncing around the Lower 48 enjoying traveling, and Tyler's passion for photography. A professional photographer, he taught some classes and they even considered turning the venture into a full-time business. He continued traveling with his wife and sharing his photography when they landed in Texas and he took the job at Best Buy to keep busy.



Tyler (center) and the Division of Fire and Life Safety Team.

What is the Division of Fire & Life Safety?

The Division of Fire & Life Safety's mission is to prevent the loss of life and property from fire and explosion. There are three bureaus within the Division:

- **Life Safety Inspection Bureau** - This bureau houses the fire inspectors, who determine if a place of business or other commercial property is in line with code requirements. It also houses the Deputy Fire Marshals, who respond to and investigate major fire events.
- **Plan Review Bureau** - Anyone planning a construction, repair, remodel, or addition to any building or structure is required to get a permit before doing so. The Plan Review Bureau makes sure all planned building construction adheres to state law and will be safe for occupancy once completed.
- **Bureau of Fire Accreditation, Standards, and Training (BFAST)** - BFAST houses the Alaska Fire Standards Council (AFSC), which establishes education and training requirements for firefighters. The bureau also coordinates statewide fire service training, manages fire service professional requirements, and provides public fire and life safety education services.

When Tyler came back to Alaska in 2016 to serve one more time as the State Fire Marshal, things had changed. Two years earlier, oil prices had plummeted to just \$26/barrel, and all state departments were in the middle of absorbing significant budget reductions as Alaskans grappled with key questions about revenues, spending, and the Permanent Fund Dividend. Tyler now had to pilot his division through a completely different landscape.

Through it all, he's remained passionate and optimistic. "If you want to make a difference and save lives, this is where you do it," he says about the division. His staff have worked tirelessly even during budgetary uncertainty to educate Alaskans on how to prevent fires, mitigate fire danger, and plan for a fire so that residents of a building or home can all escape safely. He says his team is dedicated to their work, and to making sure that the first responders they support have the backing and resources they need to do their jobs as effectively as possible.



What's Next

Looking back on his combined eight years overseeing DF&LS, Tyler is proud of what his team has accomplished. Today, the division is almost 100% staffed, and the deputy fire marshals have established an incredible reputation for themselves thanks to the knowledge, skills, and abilities they've demonstrated in getting their APSC certificates and performing their job duties. Even in the face of budget reductions, the division is hard at work educating Alaskans and keeping firefighters statewide up-to-date on changes in the industry.

As he takes one more stab at retirement, Tyler is still passionate about his photography. "I'm not in it for the money," he says. "I'm fortunate to have the ability to travel, I'm fortunate to have the equipment, and I'm fortunate to be able to share my work with others." He plans to travel – both nationally and internationally – to find more subjects for his photos, and he'll still maintain the quality relationships he's built in Alaska after more than three decades in the fire protection community.

Tyler is incredibly humble, and always credits the partnerships he's built and members of his team for the key successes he's achieved over his career and while at DPS. He's a Marshal beloved by his team and the fire community statewide, and his passion and gratefulness for that community is evident when he talks about his time as a fire chief in different parts of the state, the contacts he's made over three-plus decades, or the team at the Division of Fire and Life Safety he's had the privilege of supporting two separate times.

His gratitude and optimism are perhaps summed up best by Tyler himself. In the final "Fire Flyer", a newsletter for Alaska's fire and building professionals, he thanks those colleagues for the privilege he says it's been to work with them.

"You folks are doing things we never dreamed of, and you're doing it safely," he writes. "Your focus on safety and training is impressive. I am excited for you and the future of fire and emergency services in Alaska." ■



Professional photography is one of Tyler's not-so-hidden talents. You can see him in action in action above; these are a couple of his favorite shots.