

Former chief storms home fire looking for kids

North Potomac man says he acted as any firefighter would

Joanne M. Haas

Staff Writer

Victor Esch of North Potomac is a soft spoken man who says he did what any firefighter would do when discovering a home where children lived filled with flames, smoke and a lot of heat.

Go in.

"Well, I think what he did was pretty heroic," Eugene Roesser Jr., spokesman for Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department, said this week of the actions of the department's former chief. It was later learned none of the home's five occupants were home at the time, but don't try telling Esch he did anything heroic.

Esch was leaving his home Jan. 30 when he saw tons of black smoke billowing up. He drove up and found the Russell C. Bills' home at 13604 Maidstone Lane on fire.

"I live close by. I could see the smoke and I could tell no fire apparatus was on the scene yet," he said. The smoke was dark brown, he said, meaning it was burning on its own. When the firefighters apply water,

the smoke turns more steamy or white.

Once on the scene, he used his car telephone to alert emergency officials. Officials later linked the fire which destroyed the home to an electric short in a Jacuzzi resting behind the house.

But by the time Esch arrived, he didn't know anything about what was behind the house.

"I couldn't even see behind the house. The house was pretty involved when I got there," he said.

The man who served as chief of the Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department for "six or eight years about four years ago" knew by what was resting around the house that kids could be inside.

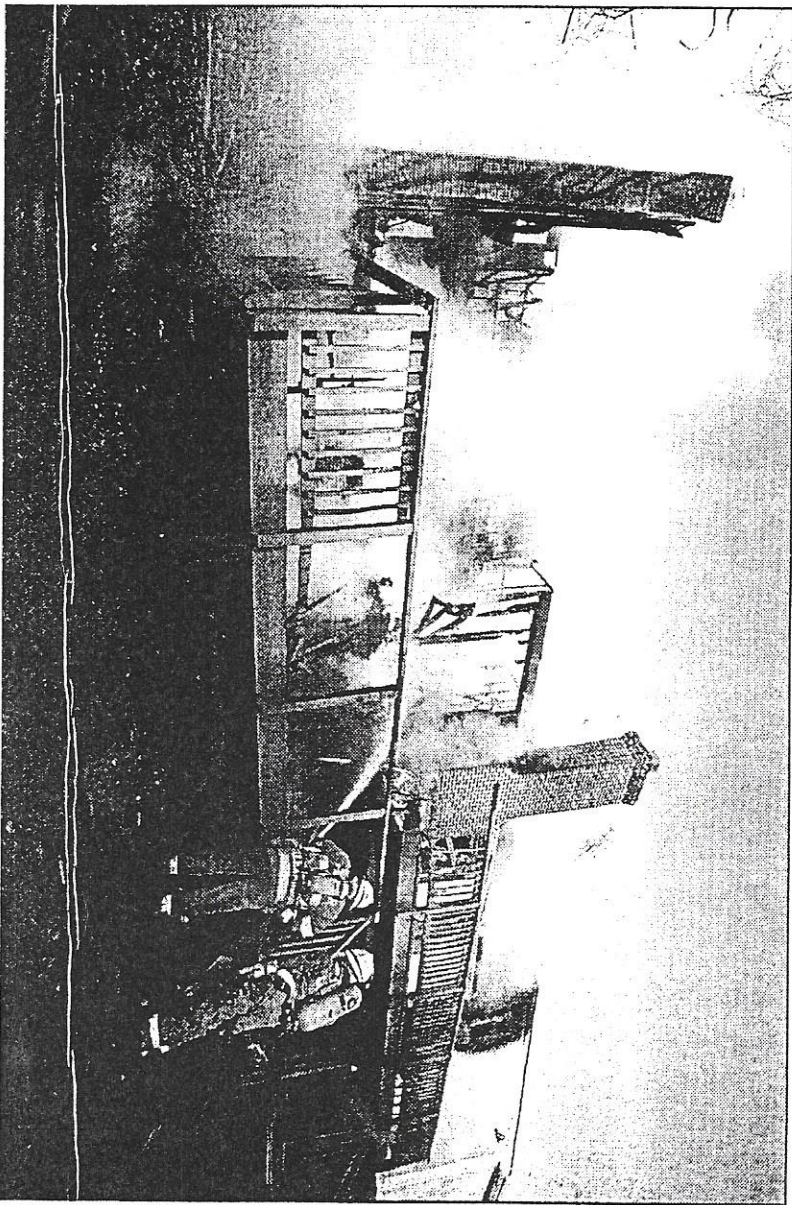
"It was just about 3 p.m. which is a good time to find a child home after school ... It was feasible that there could have been a child there," Esch said.

So he stormed the house.

Four times.

On his own, without backup, fighting the smoke in his lungs looking for bodies.

"I got disoriented once and had to come out," said Esch, who joined the department when he was 16 about 23 years ago. "I couldn't stay in too long. There was so much fire



Firefighters on the scene of the \$1 million home fire which destroyed the Russell C. Bills home at 13604 Maidstone Lane in North Potomac.

Brian Schoenli/GAZETTE

and smoke. It was everything I could do to get out."

At least he came out. He got a good swallow of smoke, but he said he is fine and has the usual after effects.

He works as a realtor and a home-builder now, but still volunteers for the Cabin John

fire department, which responded to the fire with Rockville Volunteer Fire Department personnel.

County fire department spokesman Capt. John Rooney said the fire caused \$800,000 in damage to the structure and \$200,000 to the contents.

Roesser said the fire call came in at 3:01 p.m. and crews were done at 9:45 p.m. "This was a very, very large home," Roesser said. "It is just amazing the force and speed that fire when through the home. It is total devastation of the home."