

Keeping Northern Virginia safe

Three career interests spark assistant fire chief service

BY HALI CHIET ('07)

Brett Bowman, Tim Butters and John Caussin have two things in common – they are all graduates of the Class of 1980, and they are all second-in-command at major fire and rescue departments in Northern Virginia. Although these former Dukes are all assistant chiefs, each followed a rather different ladder to top careers.

For Bowman, becoming a firefighter was a childhood dream. “I was always interested in a career in public safety,” he says. “My father was a volunteer firefighter, and sometimes he’d bring me to the fire station. This made me more interested in a fire service career.”

Bowman, who was active in the Manassas Volunteer Fire Co. during high school, joined Harrisonburg’s Volunteer Fire Co. while he was a JMU student. He was named captain his senior year. After graduating, he worked in fire service for a few years and then left to become a training and safety instructor for the Virginia, Maryland and Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives. He returned to fire service three years later and progressed to his current position as assistant chief of operations for the Prince William County Department of Fire and Rescue. He helps run the day-to-day operations of the county’s 19 fire stations.

In addition to his busy career, Bowman earned an associate’s degree in Fire Science Administration, and a master’s degree in public administration and completed a program at the National Fire Academy. “JMU made me appreciate lifelong learning and encouraged me to continue my education,” he says.

Tim Butters, like Bowman, began as a volunteer firefighter in high school and then joined the Harrisonburg Volunteer Fire Co. He also worked his way up to captain during his time at JMU. He and Bowman met at JMU and became friends and roommates their junior year.

Butters’ career path to fire chief has not been typical. He says, “I wanted a job that was connected to the fire service,

but I [also] wanted to work in public policy.” After graduating, he accepted a position with the Federal Emergency Management Agency helping to develop fire safety programs. Later, he became director of government relations for the International Association of Fire Chiefs working on legislative and regulatory issues. His next job was as managing director of CHEMTREC, a 24-hour hazardous materials emergency center.

Even while working in public policy, Butters continued his fire-service involvement as a volunteer. After nearly 10 years with CHEMTREC, a position as assistant chief of operations for the Fairfax City Fire Department opened up and he applied for and got the job.

“What I like most about my job is the fact that every day is different and there are always new challenges,” he says. “My education at JMU certainly helped prepare me to think strategically.”

When Butters and Bowman met **John Caussin** at a local fire chief meeting, they quickly discovered their JMU connection. Unlike Butters and Bowman, Caussin never considered a public safety career until after working on a JMU class project that involved interviewing the captain of the Harrisonburg Fire Department.

After graduation, Caussin worked in retail, managing several part-time employees whose full-time careers had been in fire service. “It was the combination of the two – working on that project and hearing stories from the employees I managed – that sparked my interest.” Caussin worked his way up through the ranks and is now assistant fire chief for Fairfax County’s Fire and Rescue Department.

Caussin says his Madison Experience helped prepare him for his career. “Through my classes and daily interaction with others, I learned how important effective communication and effective working relationships are in achieving team goals in your professional life. These core values help me on a daily basis.” **■**



1980 classmates and assistant fire chiefs in the Northern Virginia area Brett Bowman, Tim Butters and John Caussin at the Sept. 11, 2001, memorial outside of the Pentagon.