



The new Snohomish County Fire District 5 station and Public Safety Center in Sultan. (Olivia Vanni / The Herald)

A 'three-month handshake' led to 23 years as Sultan fire chief

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Longtime Fire District 5 Chief Merlin Halverson has retired. One of his last achievements was a brand new station.

By Jake Goldstein-Street

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SULTAN — Ask Merlin Halverson for memories from his roughly 50 year career in Snohomish County fire departments and this is the one that first comes to mind:

A few years back, the chief of Fire District 5 in Sultan was sitting in his office when a call came in for a high-speed, head-on collision on Old Owen Road. It was described as a medic call needing extrication.

As he did for most major calls, Halverson drove out to the scene.

On the way, his phone rang. He ignored it.

It rang again.

And again.

He finally looked at the phone. His wife was calling.

“And I think, ‘Oh she probably sees this accident and she’s trying to tell me there’s an accident up there,’ which I already know. I’m responding,” Halverson said. “So I answer. It’s not my wife on the phone.”

The voice on the other end was urgent.

“Your wife has been involved in an accident and she wants you here now!” the caller said.



Merlin Halverson (Fire District 5)

A driver in a sports car was speeding and hit Halverson’s wife’s vehicle. She ended up being OK.

“That was difficult,” he said. “It’s always more difficult when you’re dealing with your own family because you can’t take your emotions out of it.”

Other moments stick out in his long career, about half of which he spent leading Fire District 5, where he retired at

the end of 2021. But those only come out when he’s with friends, as they recall big fires and gruesome crashes.

With Halverson at the helm, the department with a 72-square-mile coverage area in rural Snohomish County has built a new fire station, drastically improved response times and shifted its staffing dynamics.

‘Three-month handshake’

Halverson’s fire career started in 1972.

He was 22. He’d started his own construction company after his family moved from South Dakota. But one day he got a call from his mother. She’d seen an advertisement that the new fire department in Lynnwood was

hiring. She always thought he should be a public servant and urged him to apply.

He thought he would do it for a little while and return to construction. In his first few months on the job, a kid drowned, a mother was found dead and a man died of a heart attack. Halverson wasn't sure he could handle it. But he learned to live with the tragedy of it all.

“By the time I realized what was going on, five years had passed,” Halverson said. “So I stayed.”

Thus started his five-ish-decade stint working in fire departments in Lynnwood and Sultan.

When he started working in Lynnwood, the department had no aid cars and the fire trucks were yellow. It was a different world, Halverson said.



A Snohomish County Fire District 5 truck in the garage area of the new building in Sultan. (Olivia Vanni / The Herald)

He became an EMT in 1974. This was where Halverson said he felt most useful. Halverson's career in Lynnwood continued another 30 years, until 2004.

In 1998, he also took a job as the part-time chief of a fledgling operation in Sultan. It was called Fire District 5.

The position was taken on a trial basis — a “three-month handshake” that turned into nearly a quarter century.

Deputy Chief Jim Fulcher's first impression of Halverson was that "he was pretty slick and he was really buff."

But Halverson quickly realized work looked different in Sultan.

When he got there, the department was made up of 35 to 40 volunteers who would report to the station when a call came in.

"There's nobody at the fire station. They tone it out, people show up. And I don't understand how this system works," he said. "What I learned shortly was that it didn't work. That's why they were bringing me."

Calls would come in and no one would show up. Halverson would sit in the station waiting for volunteers to respond to emergencies. If nobody came, they'd have to ask another fire district to respond.



A large conference room and staging area at the new Snohomish County Fire District 5 station in Sultan. (Olivia Vanni / The Herald)

By the time Halverson left, the staffing had shifted. Last month, the department had over 20 part-time firefighters, five full-timers and three in leadership positions, Fulcher said. And that's still supplemented with a half-dozen volunteers, give or take.

As a result, response times have improved, the deputy chief said. It would take six to 10 minutes to get an engine out the door under the old system. Now they're out in 90 seconds.

Halverson has an attitude he imparted on his crews.

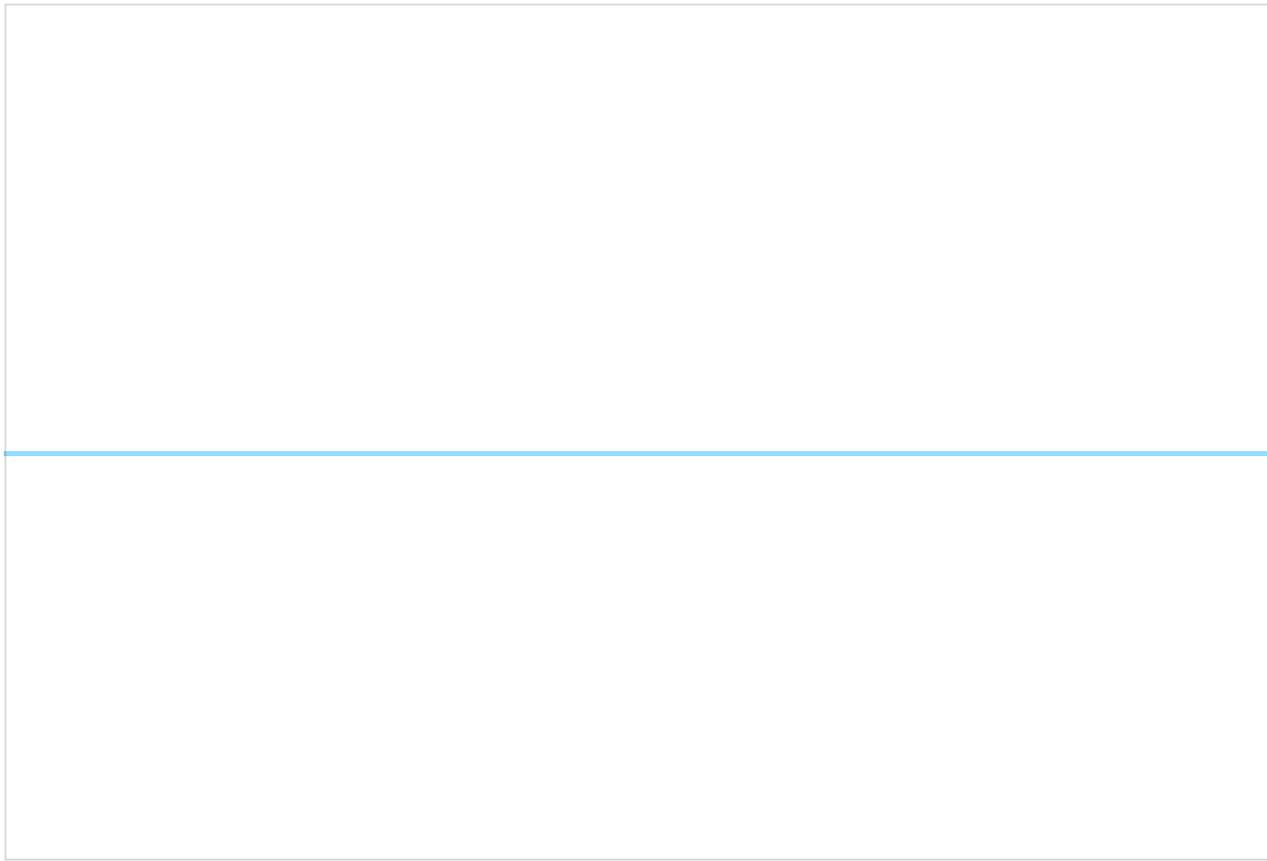
“If my family or your family needs help and they can choose only one team to save their lives,” he would say, “if that wouldn’t be us that they would choose, then we have got to get out there and train and learn and do better.”

Fulcher said his boss led with integrity. There was no one he would have rather worked under.

One of the calls Halverson will remember most is one he didn’t respond to.

He was off duty when one of his crew mates called at 3 a.m. One of Halverson’s younger brothers had died by suicide.

“It was a pretty horrible event in my life, I gotta tell you,” Halverson recalled. “There’s an old saying that life is a tragedy where at first you’re a spectator but ultimately have to stand up and play your part. It’s just a question of when each of us has to stand up and play our part, I guess.”



One of the dorm rooms in the new Snohomish County Fire District 5 station in Sultan. (Olivia Vanni / The Herald)

Halverson, now 72, realizes life goes by so fast. He thinks people spend too much time going through life's motions, instead of focusing on what truly matters to them. He has asked people he knows to write what they would have done differently. Halverson wants to give them to his five-year-old grandson to open when he's older.

In his retirement, Halverson now plans to spend more time with his kids and grandkids.

‘There’s just a time in everybody’s life when they should move on and I felt like it was mine.’

A new home

Halverson leaves behind a revitalized fire department. A new station in Sultan is proof.

The old one was inadequate, Halverson long argued. It was built in the late 1970s. It had no shower, no kitchen and no sleeping quarters for responders to stay overnight.

And every few years, firefighters would get flooded out of the station by rising rivers. If that happened, they’d have to move their vehicles to parking lots and respond from there.

“The need was real,” said Fulcher, the deputy chief.

But it took almost 20 years to get to this point.

The department bought the property in 2004 and wanted to build the new station there in 2009. But the Great Recession got in the way. The department lost tons of property tax revenue in 2009 and it took a decade for that money to come back, Halverson said.

Then COVID-19 hit and slowed construction.

Finally, in August, the new station opened. This one has dorm rooms and a kitchen, among other amenities. It features an emergency operations center for major events, replacing a cramped trailer.

The walls of the old station were dark and sooty, saturated with exhaust from the trucks. The new one has filters, so firefighters can breathe easy.

The department plans to host an open house in May. Its new hovercraft for water rescues might be a draw.

“We were hoping that it was something that the community could be proud of, that people driving by would be able to see that Sultan has a nice fire station and that we’re coming along,” Fulcher said.

And with the new fire station comes a new chief to replace Halverson. Late last year, Seth Johnson and his family arrived from Prosser, where he was chief at the West Benton Regional Fire Authority. The second-generation firefighter said he has big shoes to fill.

“Replacing a chief that spent two-and-a-half decades leading an agency is definitely a little daunting,” he said. “Chief Halverson and the leadership team here did a fantastic job of getting the department from what it was 20 years ago into what it is today. They’ve built a beautiful, brand new facility and really set this department up for growth.”

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