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Forty one years in firefighting has left Dave 'Coop' Cooper all burnt out.

And about the only thing Cooper wants to light up in retirement is the grill for his chip wagon that he will be parking just east of Napanee.

The Glen Miller resident turned 60 years old March 29. Two days later, he retired from the Belleville Fire Department.

"It's not an old man's job to be hopping on the fire truck every day," Cooper said with a smile. "Your body parts wear out because the majority of firefighters end up with bad backs and bad knees. I'm no exception."

Still, he counts himself "blessed" to walk away from four decades of firefighting — 22 years with the Canadian military and the last 19 with the Belleville Fire Department — in relatively good health.

"The only hazard I'll be facing in my new job with the chip wagon will be eating my cooking," he laughed.

Cooper was renowned for his cooking prowess with the city fire department. He cooked all the meals on his every shift at Firehall No. 2 on Dundas Street East and treated his platoon to such delicacies as cordon bleu and weiner schnitzel.

He was also in charge of the travelling food booth for Christ Church in Glen Miller for the past 12 years.

"I got a lot of my knowledge from my mother and my wife and

cooked whenever I had a chance," he said.

Cooper said four decades of firefighting is truly a career, considering that most firefighters retire after 30 years' service.

"In my time with Belleville, we have lost eight brothers who passed away from medical reasons caused by on-the-job hazards ... I have been very fortunate to escape any life threatening injuries."

Cooper said firefighting has changed a lot during his career in terms of the different materials and hazardous chemicals that firefighters have to deal with and the increasing number of medical assistance calls they have to handle.

"I'm relieved that I won't be facing the stress load placed on firefighters ... I'm giving my body a chance to heal in retirement."

Two fires, just days apart in March of 1994, stand out in his mind. One blaze was in the tower

at Belleville city hall while the other was next door to Greenley's book store.

"They were the worst fires because of the weather conditions and exhaustion. We had 90 kilometre an hour winds in the city hall fire and we couldn't get the natural gas shut off in the other fire."

Cooper was still a teenager when he got his start in firefighting.

The Cannington native joined the Royal Canadian Navy after graduating from high school in 1964. He did on-the-job training as a firefighter aboard the helicopter-destroyers HMCS Skeena from 1965-69 and HMCS Saguenay from 1969-73.

He was posted to CFB Shearwater, N.S. in 1973 and worked in structural firefighting and crash rescue. He spent another five years in Lahr, Germany, before transferring to CFB Trenton in 1981.

Cooper retired from 8 Wing in March of 1986 and, several days later, joined the Belleville Fire Department.

He loved his time with the Department of National Defence.

"They were good years and I would do them all over again. I enjoyed being at sea because with ships, the personnel on board were like family. I also enjoyed travelling the world with the military."

Cooper said the Belleville Fire Department job gave him the chance to plant his feet in one location, Glen Miller.

"I have enjoyed the 19 years spent here. The friendships I made here are irreplaceable and I loved the work. The one thing about this job is that you never knew what to expect. Every day was different, except for the cooking."

Cooper is building his chip wagon that he will place at McCormick's General Store in Camden East, just east of Napanee, exactly 61 kilometres from his home.

"A fellow firefighter offered me a location to place a chip wagon there from May to November. I'm going to do it as a family project."

Cooper and his wife, Mary — they have been married 37 years — will take turns in the chip wagon, as will their only daughter, Angela, and granddaughter, Codi.

He is looking forward to his retirement venture.

"It's quite a change in professions, that's for sure."

Cooper will miss his firefighting brethren.

"Firefighters spend about half their life in the firehall. This is like a second family ... I won't necessarily miss the job but I'll certainly miss the firefighters."

He has even been asked to return and occasionally cook for his regular platoon.

"It was nice of them to ask me. But I'll be busy with the chip wagon."

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