

12-10-1968 Smithfield RI – Norman G Vezina – LEO Attempted Ice Rescue**Sergeant Norman G. Vezina**

<https://www.odmp.org/officer/13650-sergeant-norman-g-vezina>



Smithfield Police Department, Rhode Island
End of Watch Tuesday, December 10, 1968

NORMAN G. VEZINA

Sergeant Norman Vezina drowned while attempting to rescue a 5-year-old child who had fallen through thin ice.

BIO

Age 38

Tour Not available

Badge Not available

**INCIDENT DETAILS**

Cause Drowned

**PROVIDENCE JOURNAL-BULLETIN
BOY, POLICEMAN DROWN IN RESERVOIR**

<https://smithfieldpd.com/in-memoriam/sqt-norman-g-vezina-1968-newspaper-accounts/>

December 11, 1968

A five year-old Smithfield boy who fell through thin ice and a town police officer who desperately tried to rescue him were drowned about 4 p.m. yesterday in the frigid waters of lower Spragueville Reservoir.

The victims were Kenneth Firby, son of Mr. and Mrs. Archie Firby of Deer Run Trail, and Patrolman Norman G. Vezina, 38, of 6 Camp St., a policeman only eight months and the newest regular member of the town police force.

As Patrolman Vezina struggled to lift the boy above water, town firemen tried unsuccessfully several times to throw a rescue rope within his reach.

First the boy, then the policeman succumbed to the icy water and went under as Mrs. Firby, a neighbor, another patrolman and firemen watched helplessly.



Firemen launched two rescue boats. Rescue squad members in the first boat found the boy about five minutes later in water eight feet deep about 25 feet from shore. He was pronounced dead at Our Lady of Fatima Hospital.

Firemen in the second boat searched for nearly an hour before they recovered Patrolman Vezina's body.

According to police reports and the accounts given by eyewitnesses, the child was playing alone on ice one-half to three-quarters of an inch thick when it gave way.

The first person to see the Firby child was George Simmons, 17, a senior at Smithfield High School who lives across the street from the Firby family, a few hundred feet from the water.

"I was walking down to the shore to see if the ice was thick enough for skating when I heard splashing," he said. "I grabbed a rope from my house and ran several hundred feet along the shore when I saw Ken on his back, splashing in the water."

The Simmons youth said he waded into the water four feet deep "and tried to throw Ken the rope. But he was talking softly and was incoherent and couldn't grab the rope. I tried to reach him but I couldn't."

The teenager then waded out of the water and ran toward Mrs. Firby's house.



He dashed by the home of Mrs. Edward A. Crino of Totem Pole Trail. Mrs. Crino said she saw him run by, picked up a pair of binoculars, looked out the parlor window and saw the child struggling in the water. She called the fire department.

The Smithfield Police Department, which monitors fire calls, immediately dispatched Patrolman Vezina and George H. Kelley, a special patrolman.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Firby saw the Simmons youth running toward her home and went outside to meet him. "She asked me immediately if there was someone in the water," the teenager said. "I told her yes, her son, and we ran back together."

The two arrived at the scene just in time to see Patrolman Vezina throw his jacket and hat in his cruiser, leave his wallet and jacket liner on the shoreline and plunge into the water.

Mrs. Crino, who joined Mrs. Firby and the Simmons youth, said that Mrs. Firby shouted to her son: "Stay floating, honey, it's okay."

As Patrolman Vezina reached the boy, Patrolman Kelley and the fire department arrived. Mrs. Firby, apparently assured of her child's safety, told the Simmons youth to go home and change his clothes.

Private Paul A. Gantz of the Greenville rescue unit said Patrolman Vezina began to lose his grasp of the Firby child "even before we got out truck stopped."

He said he raced to the water's edge with a life rope and tried to reach Patrolman Vezina with it, "but it was impossible to get it to him before he went down."

Once the patrolman went under, the boy's red knit winter cap floated to the surface.

"They just disappeared," Mrs. Crino said.

The reservoir is about 4,000 feet long and ranges in width from 50 to 1,000 feet.

The drowning occurred in a cove about 300 feet wide, and about 500 feet from Mrs. Crino's waterfront home.

As a result of the double drowning, Roger W. Wheeler, a state recreational safety inspector, advised parents yesterday to keep children away from all ponds and other bodies of water until they have been declared safe.

He said most of the state's ponds probably are covered only by a "skim coating" of ice. He also recommended the use of boards, branches, ropes and even clothing to save persons who have fallen through the ice. If these means are available, he said, rescuers should not jump in the water to help.

PROVIDENCE JOURNAL-BULLETIN WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1968 DROWNED POLICEMAN PROMOTED

The Smithfield Town Council last night awarded a posthumous promotion to sergeant to Patrolman Norman G. Vezina, who was drowned yesterday while trying to rescue a five-year-old boy in Lower Spragueville Reservoir.

Town Council Chairman Carl R. Adler said it has been customary in police departments that when an officer's life has been taken in the line of duty that he be promoted to the next highest rank.



40th Anniversary Ceremony

On December 18th, 2008, members of the Smithfield Police Department and members of the Vezina family congregated at the Veterans Memorial in Deerfield Park to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the passing of Sgt. Vezina. Officers placed a wreath at his monument and reflected on the supreme sacrifice that he made in December 1968.

The promotion, he said, was recommended by the local Fraternal Order of Police and by Police Chief Arthur B. Gould, who described Patrolman Vezina as "one of the finest patrolmen" he had seen in many years. "He was an asset to the department," Chief Gould said.

Visibly shaken, Chief Gould added: "He was a good police officer. I still can't believe it."

After awarding the promotion, the council suspended its regularly scheduled meeting in Patrolman Vezina's memory.

Patrolman Vezina was the department's newest regular member with only eight months' service on the force. Previously he worked 18 months as a special patrolman.

The child he tried to save, Kenneth Firby, also was drowned.

Sgt. Norman G. Vezina Police & Fire Reports

<https://smithfieldpd.com/in-memoriam/sgt-norman-g-vezina-police-fire-reports/>

Recreated from the actual reports.

REPORT OF DOUBLE DROWNING AT LOWER SPRAGUE RESERVOIR OFF TOTEM POLE TRAIL, SMITHFIELD, R.I. DECEMBER 10, 1968. DISPATCHER'S REPORT

3:50 P.M. Radio call from Smithfield Fire Station 1 was monitored at the Smithfield Police Station to the effect that rescue equipment from that Fire Station was responding to the report of a drowning in the Lower Sprague Reservoir off Totem Pole Trail. Sgt. James H. McVey dispatched Patrolman Norman G. Vezina to check. Patrolman Saverio E. Serapiglia who was in the station at the time was also dispatched to assist.

3:58 P.M. Radio call received from Patrolman Saverio E. Serapiglia who stated that Patrolman Vezina was under water and requested a rescue boat right away. Patrolman Serapiglia was advised that the boat was on the way.

3:59 P.M. Patrolmen Robert A. Lachapelle and William F. Cunningham who had reported to the station for duty on the 4:00 P.M. to 12:00 Midnight shift were also dispatched to assist at the scene. Patrolman Joseph Larkin also dispatched to assist.

4:01 P.M. Request from Patrolman Serapiglia that Chief Arthur B. Gould come to the scene.

REPORT OF PATROLMAN SAVERIO E SERAPIGLIA FROM THE SCENE

4:01 P.M. Upon arriving at the scene, Patrolman Serapiglia was informed by Pvt. G. Gillmore, Rescue 1, that Patrolman N. Vezina was in the water. An unknown man was throwing a rope to Patrolman Vezina.

Patrolman Vezina came to the surface, then sank out of sight.
Patrolman Vezina again came to the surface, then sank out of sight, the last time.

Rescue boat from Station 1 arrived on scene and was immediately launched in an attempt to recover the bodies of the child and Patrolman Vezina.

The body of Kenneth Firby, age 5, 5 Deer Run Trail, Smithfield, was recovered at approximately 4:07 P.M., immediately transported by Rescue 1 to Our Lady of Fatima Hospital.

4:10 P.M. Chief Arthur B. Gould arrived on scene.

Rescue 1 boat relaunched with Patrolman J. Larkin and Special Officer G. Kelly in an attempt to recover Patrolman Vezina. At this time, Rescue 2 arrived on scene and the boat was immediately launched. Patrolman W. Cunningham and Lt. M. Corey, Smithfield Station 2, were in this boat.

Both boats proceeded with dragging operations.

At **4:34 P.M.** the body of Patrolman Vezina was recovered and placed in the Smithfield Ambulance.

4:50 P.M. Father Geddis, St. Philip's Rectory arrived and administered the last rites of the church.

4:55 P.M. Dr. Simone, medical examiner, arrived on the scene, viewed the body and pronounced him dead, due to accidental drowning and gave permission to release the body to the family.

The body of Patrolman Vezina was then transported to Station 2 in the Smithfield Ambulance, escorted by Patrolman S. Serapiglia, per order of Chief Arthur B. Gould, and to standby at station 2 until body is picked up by the undertaker.

FIRE DEPARTMENT REPORT FIRE ALARM REPORT

3:49 P.M. Call from Mrs. Crino, Totem Pole Trail, person in water.
3:50 P.M. Rescue on way.
3:52 P.M. Brush 1 and boat on way
3:53 P.M. Rescue 1 on scene, reported two (2) under water.
3:54 P.M. Brush 1 and boat on scene, also request ladder 1.
3:58 P.M. Tank 2 and boat and ladder 1 on way.
4:01 P.M. Called RISP.

- 4:07 P.M.** Ambulance 2 requested—rescue 1 on route to Our Lady of Fatima Hospital
- 4:10 P.M.** Tank 2 on scene with boat.
- 4:12 P.M.** Ladder 1 and ambulance 2 on scene.
- 4:15 P.M.** Rescue 1 at Our Lady of Fatima Hospital.

SPD Dedicates Community Room To Former Sergeant

<https://www.valleybreeze.com/2017-10-04/observer-smithfield-west/spd-dedicates-community-room-former-sergeant#.YPtS6Y5KiUk>

10/4/2017 By JACKIE ROMAN, Valley Breeze

SMITHFIELD – On a frigid December day in 1968, Smithfield Patrolman Norman Vezina gave his life in the line of duty while attempting to rescue 5-year-old Kenneth Firby, who had fallen through the ice and into the Spragueville Reservoir.

Nearly 50 years later, Vezina is being honored for his selfless actions. The Smithfield Police Department’s community room now bears Vezina’s name and includes a small display honoring the local hero.

“It’s a man and a story that I sort of bonded with,” Smithfield Police Chief Richard St. Sauveur Jr. said. “He did an incredible thing that day.”

According to a written history, Vezina had arrived on scene before firefighters and the rescue squad and plunged into the icy water. He reached the boy but struggled to lift him above water. Town firefighters tried several times to throw a rescue rope but both Vezina and Firby disappeared beneath the surface before the firefighters could reach them.

Vezina was promoted posthumously to the rank of sergeant. He was 38 years old when he died and the newest member of the department. He had been a police officer for eight months.

“It’s just an incredible story of a true hero in this town,” St. Sauveur said.

In a statement sent to The Valley Breeze & Observer, members of Vezina’s family recalled the sergeant’s courage.



The 900-square-foot Sgt. Norman G. Vezina Community Meeting & Training Room comfortably seats 50 people and overlooks the stunning Stillwater Reservoir.

(Breeze photos by Jackie Roman)

"We are proud to be members of Sgt. Norman Vezina's family," read the statement sent by Russell Oceau and Jennifer Shaker on behalf of Norman Vezina's family.

"We are proud because on Dec. 10, 1968, Norman demonstrated personal sacrifice and an ultimate respect for life when he made the decision to jump into the water on that cold December day to try to save a child. Because of his selfless decision, that boy did not die alone."

The family also commended the department for coordinating the dedication.

"The vision statement of the Smithfield Police Department states that they strive 'To be recognized as the most professional, well respected, highly trained, proactive, community-oriented law enforcement agency in Rhode Island.' The newly dedicated community room is a concrete demonstration of that strong commitment to community oriented law enforcement.

"We are grateful that members of Norman's family – present and future – and the residents of Smithfield will know his story and benefit from this space dedicated to his service and his memory."

The community room also contains a small display featuring Vezina's sergeant badge, his burial flag, and his wallet. St. Sauveur said a second display case is in the works and will include medals, family photos, newspaper articles, and a letter to Vezina's family signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

"We anticipate this being used by the community," he said.

The Smithfield Police Department Building Committee announced last year that it was seeking individuals, families, or businesses to sponsor or make memorial dedications in certain areas within the newly expanded and renovated police headquarters at 215 Pleasant View Ave. The dispatch center, for example, is sponsored by The 100 Club of Rhode Island.

The 900-square-foot community room wound up with four sponsors: Smithfield Fraternal Order of Police Lodge #17, Adler Brothers Construction, Inc., Andrew Delli Carpini of Seasons Corner Market, and Rep. Thomas Winfield and family.



The Sgt. Norman G. Vezina Community Meeting & Training Room is sponsored by Rep. Thomas Winfield and family, Adler Brothers Construction, the Smithfield Fraternal Order of Police, and Andrew Delli Carpini of Seasons Corner Market

St. Sauveur said the department raised approximately \$30,000 through this campaign and anticipates purchasing an interactive smart board for the community room with the funds.

In Memoriam – Sgt. Norman G. Vezina

https://smithfieldpd.com/in-memoriam/?fbclid=IwAR3_j1S2pNwiz3_i-3pJdD0eT8UqpN1zjYAtz5h8DbF8ErZ0HRQ4YEJodIQ&doing_wp_cron=1627083962.8877770900726318359375

On a freezing cold day in December of 1968, Smithfield Patrolman Norman G. Vezina gave his life in the line of duty while attempting to rescue five year-old Kenneth Firby who had fallen through the ice and into the frigid water of the Spragueville Reservoir. Patrolman Vezina had arrived on the scene before the firefighters and rescue squad and, without hesitation, plunged into the icy water and reached the boy. Patrolman Vezina struggled to lift the boy above water, town firefighters tried unsuccessfully several times to throw a rescue rope within his reach. Tragically, both Patrolman Vezina and Kenneth Firby disappeared beneath the surface of the ice before the firefighters could reach them.



Sergeant Norman G Vezina

Norman Vezina was promoted posthumously to the rank of Sergeant. He was 38 years-old when he died, the newest member of the Smithfield Police Department. He had been a police officer for only eight months.

Sergeant Norman G. Vezina unselfishly gave his life while in the performance of his duty, and he died upholding the highest traditions of the Smithfield Police Department.



In a ceremony on September 14, 2017, the Smithfield Police Department dedicated the Sgt. Norman G. Vezina Community Meeting & Training Room. The 900 sq. foot room, overlooking scenic Stump Pond, includes a display case that features Sgt. Vezina's police badge, his burial flag, and his wallet.



A second display case is planned and will include medals, family photos, newspaper articles, and a letter to the Vezina family signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson.



Today, there is a permanent memorial to Sgt. Vezina at the [Smithfield Veterans Memorial](#) in [Deerfield Park](#).



"THE MEMORY OF SERGEANT NORMAN G. VEZINA WHOSE ULTIMATE GIFT, HIS LIFE, TAKEN IN THE ATTEMPT TO SAVE THE LIFE OF A CHILD DECEMBER 10, 1968, SHALL CONTINUE TO LIVE ON FOREVER IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE OF SMITHFIELD"



Sgt. Vezina is memorialized at the [National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial](#) in Washington, DC. (Panel 34 W - Line 10):





Hero Officer Honored For His Sacrifice 50 Years Later

<https://www.valleybreeze.com/2018-12-12/observer-smithfield-west/hero-officer-honored-his-sacrifice-50-years-later#.YPtTKo5KiUk>

12/12/2018 By [JACQUELYN MOOREHEAD, Valley Breeze & Observer Staff Writer](#)

SMITHFIELD – Fifty years ago, on a cold and windy day, probationary officer Norman Vezina of the Smithfield Police Department responded to a call to rescue a 5-year-old boy fighting to stay above the surface of the frozen waters at the Spragueville Reservoir.

Vezina's cousin, Marilyn Bellemore, retold the story of the day Vezina forever became an unforgettable Smithfield hero.

On Dec. 10, 1968, two days after his 38th birthday, Vezina arrived at the scene before fire and rescue units. Running to the water to save the drowning boy, he removed his outerwear, gun belt and wallet and dove into the icy waters.

Vezina, a Korean War Marine veteran and Purple Heart recipient serving less than six months on the force, reached the boy, Kenneth Firby, and they struggled their way back to shore. Previous attempts to rope in the boy to safety by a neighbor had failed.

Subsequent attempts by other fire personnel to lasso the pair failed, and they disappeared from the surface one final time, their bodies discovered later that day.

Officer Vezina was posthumously promoted to sergeant, and is remembered today through the memorial Sgt. Norman G. Vezina Community and Training Room at the Smithfield Police Station, 215 Pleasant View Ave, dedicated in his name last year.

On Monday, Police Chief Richard St. Sauveur remembered the 50th anniversary of Vezina's heroic sacrifice with a ceremony and the unveiling of a time capsule.





Across the street, the frozen water of the Stillwater Reservoir acted as a reminder of that day, shining grayish blue through the windows of the training room.

St. Sauveur pulled the blinds down halfway to cover the distraction during the ceremony's speeches and blessing.

"This is the saddest day in history for the Smithfield Police Department," the chief said. "It is a day to remember the man and courageous hero, and to continue to remember him."

A display of Vezina's war medals, magazine clippings, photographs and a letter to the Vezina family signed by President Lyndon Johnson is mounted on the wall of the training room, opposite a shadow box containing the wallet he tossed aside half a century ago.

Photo Courtesy of the Vezina Family

The chief remarked how the wallet still has his final paystub in it. Vezina's nephew, Russell Oceau, and grandniece, Jennifer Shaker, donated the medals and wallet to the station to memorialize Vezina forever.

"This is incredible. Fifty years ago and he is still remembered as a hero. He was a hero to our family long before he joined the force," Oceau said.

He remembers the day like it was yesterday, Oceau said. He remembers the looks on the faces of his aunt and uncle when they heard the news on that sad day in 1968. Even 50



Sgt. Norman Vezina's nephew, Russell Oceau and his daughter, Jennifer Shaker join Smithfield Police Chief Richard St. Sauveur during the unveiling of a time capsule memorialized on the 50-year anniversary of Vezina's death. (Breeze photo by Jacquelyn Moorehead)

years later, the emotions of the day come back to him.

“Thank you for helping keep his memory alive,” he said.

Octeau said though it is a sad day for his family, he also remembers Kenneth Firby and his untimely death. Firby was playing by his home on Deer Run Trail when he fell down an embankment and broke through the ice surface of the reservoir.

“Life was over too fast for him. I think about his family often,” Octeau said.

A donated 155mm Howitzer powder can, used for cannon shot in the Korean War and painted in Smithfield Police Department colors and seal, will be used for the time capsule.

Inside, contemporary items such as a Motorola portable radio, all current SPD patches and patrol officer badge, a Nov. 6 general election sample ballot, a Dec. 6 edition of The Valley Breeze & Observer newspaper, the Providence Journal article covering President George H.W. Bush’s death, and an SPD employee directory will all be saved.

The capsule will sit encased in plexiglas for 50 years, to be opened on the 100th anniversary of Vezina’s sacrifice.

The Smithfield Police Department also created a memorial page on its website, www.smithfieldpd.com, for Vezina, including links to the Police and Fire Department reports from Dec. 10, 1968.

Veterans’ Memorial at Smithfield

<https://www.smithfieldri.com/veterans-war-memorials/veterans-memorial/>

Located within [Deerfield Park](#).

In November 2001, hundreds flocked to Deerfield Park in Smithfield for the dedication of the Smithfield Veterans Memorial. The original event was held two months after the September 11th terrorist attacks.

The monument was designed to honor all veterans from every branch of the armed services who have served in every U.S. armed conflict from the 20th century on.

he memorial is located across from the Smithfield Senior Center in [Deerfield Park](#). Leading to the memorial is a walkway of approximately 8,000 bricks. Many of these bricks are engraved with the name and branch of service of a veteran. The walkway includes ten pedestals indicating the wars that our military veterans fought in, the number of participants and the number of those killed and wounded in action.



Across the back of the site, there are seven large natural stones (boulders) representing the six service branches they are honoring and the seventh is a memorial stone. There are granite benches, trees, and flagpoles holding the American flag, the State of R.I. flag and the MIA/POW flag.



There is also a memorial to [Smithfield Police Sgt. Norman G. Vezina](#), a veteran and Smithfield Police officer who died in the line of duty.

Anyone can purchase a memorial brick for the walkway (see photo at left) at the Smithfield Veterans' Memorial to honor any veteran of United States service. All veterans are eligible. Bricks are \$50 each and proceeds go toward the upkeep of the site. Application forms are available at the Smithfield Senior Center. Call 949-4590 for more information.



[Return to the Veterans & War Memorials page](#)

https://smithfieldpd.com/pdf/1968-12-10_Vezina_Report.pdf

SMITHFIELD POLICE DEPARTMENT

OFFICE OF CHIEF

84 FARNUM PIKE

GEORGIAVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

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- 4:01 P.M. Request from Patrolman Serapiglia, that Chief Arthur E. Gould, come to the scene.
- 4:01 P.M. REPORT OF PATROLMAN S. SERAPIGLIA, AT SCENE.
Upon arriving at the scene, Patrolman Serapiglia, was informed by Pvt. G. Gillmore, Rescue 1, that Patrolman N. Vezina, was in the water. An unknown man was throwing a rope, to Patrolman Vezina.
Patrolman Vezina, came to the surface, then sank out of sight. Patrolman Vezina, again, came to the surface, then sank out of sight, the last time.
Rescue boat from station 1, arrived on scene and was immediately launched in an attempt to recover the bodies of the child and Patrolman Vezina.

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4:50 P.M. Father Gaddis, St Philip's Rectory arrived and administered the last rites of the church.

4:55 P.M. Dr Simone, /medical examiner/ arrived on the scene, viewed the body and pronounced him dead, due to accidental drowning and gave permission to release the body to the family.

The body of Patrolman Vezina was then transported to Station 2, in Smithfield Ambulance, escorted by Patrolman S. Serspiglia, per order of Chief Arthur B. Gould, and to standby at station 2 until body is picked-up by the undertaker.

FIRE ALARM REPORT-

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4:10 P.M. Tank 2, on scene with boat.

4:12 P.M. Ladder 1 and ambulance 2 on scene.

4:15 P.M. Rescue 1 at Our Lady of Fatima Hospital.

NOTE: At a meeting of the Smithfield Town Council on the night of December 10, 1968, Patrolman Vezina was promoted posthumously to the rank of Sergeant by said Town Council.