



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Everything's Fake but the Fire Protection

When you go to the movies and see the spectacular special effects they really look lethal. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mel Gibson and the rest of the action heroes always look like they're on the verge of death because of explosions, fireballs, and death defying stunts.

But, if you recall the statement at the beginning of each movie or at least during the intermission they always ask you to sit back and enjoy "the magic of movies." Because movies are not real. They attempt to give you a visual impression of something that looks frightening and dangerous but, in fact, most everything that is done in the movie industry to produce those films, are done so, quite safely.

The reason we can say that with a great deal of confidence is that the California State Fire Marshal's Office is responsible for oversight on the safety of people making films. We have a unit that's called the Film Industry Liaison, whose sole function is to work with the industry to assure that the use of special effects and stunts are not dangerous to either the actors, the stunt people or to the general public.

The Film Liaison Unit first came into existence in the aftermath of a catastrophic event on a film called "The Twilight Zone." Some of you may recall that actor Victor Morrow and two child actors were killed in a stunt that went wrong. Shortly thereafter the Governor's Office contacted the Fire Marshal's Office to create a Film Industry Liaison.

The individual who currently staffs that position is DSFM Al Adams. Al is headquartered with the California Film Commission in Los Angeles. His job entails a great deal of travel in that he works with the studios all over the southland as well as coordinating with individual fire departments who are working with films when they are on location.

The information that we use to run this program is encapsulated in a book called "Filming in California." Those Ranger Units who have film crews on location visiting them from time to time may wish to contact Al Adams for either a copy of this book or for scheduling a future training event. Al Adams has conducted training programs all over the state involving both local fire officials along with the film crew personnel and stunt industry.

Among our latest activities of the Film Industry Liaison was to create a new set of regulations for the State of California to deal with fire safety on production sound stages. Prior to the creation of this regulation there was no uniformity to the process. The Film Industry was complaining that the variation in rules and regulations throughout the state was counterproductive and costing the



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industry considerable expense. Therefore, a committee was put together to partner between the industry and the fire service to come up with a set of requirements that could be consistently applied throughout the entire state.

These regulations, now called Article 40, have been incorporated into the codes of California and are the minimum standards for any community enforcing fire and life safety regulations in motion picture or television sound stages.

What is interesting about this particular unit is the fact that it is so small in comparison to the enormity of the industry. California's entertainment industry is now our number one export. It is estimated that the entertainment industry alone is responsible for approximately 15 billion dollars in income in the state. Preserving that industry and, at the same time, assuring that it's done safely is left in the hands of a relatively small group of individuals.

Paralleling the motion picture television group are the requirements that we also enforce regulations on the use of pyrotechnics for special effects when audiences are present, such as in rock concerts and other forms of entertainment. Al Adams along with DSFM Marge Yarborough and several of our deputy staff often find themselves working very closely with facilities such as Disney Land, Universal Studios and various open theaters throughout the state to assure that entertainment packages are within the requirements of the California Pyrotechnic Laws.

Recently, a task force from my office went down to Los Angeles to do some research regarding a very specific problem. Right now we are having some difficulty in adapting existing technology to deal with platforms and hard ceiling sets in some of our studios. In a period of about eight hours we visited almost a half a dozen sound stages. No two are ever alike. We in the fire service often say no two fires burn alike. The film industry can honestly say that no two-stage configurations are alike either. It's an interesting challenge to find a technology that is flexible and mobile enough to cope with this problem and yet, at the same time, provide a high level of fire and life safety.

While visiting the set of one feature length movie that is due to come out, the team noticed that there were fire extinguishers all over the area. The setting was the inside of the NASA Headquarters. I remarked that I had never seen that much fire protection put on a single set before. The set designer had me walk over and look very closely at the cabinet. There on the cabinet was a sign that said, "This is a prop - don't use in a real fire."

The significance of that is that fire protection in the movies may appear to be there but is actually being provided by an entirely different technology; automatic sprinkler systems, heat detectors and fire alarm equipment that Article 40 requires to be installed on these sound stages.



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So, the next time you go to the movies and you watch some spectacular explosion or fire affect you can be reasonably assured that the actors were unscathed, even if they appeared to suffer their demise in the scene. In the movies everything is fake except for the fire protection.