



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Firefighters in Peace; Soldiers in War

A statue stands in Excelsior Field in Gettysburg Pennsylvania that you should know about. Two young men are standing together. One is in a uniform of a Union infantryman. The other is in the uniform of a volunteer firefighter. The soldier carries a musket; an instrument of death. The firefighter carries a speaking trumpet; a symbol of authority. At the base of the statue are plaques that identify this monument as being dedicated to the 173 Infantry Regiment, from New York City. It was an organization made up of volunteer firefighters from that famous city on the Hudson.

The monument was placed into its current position in the year 1892. No one has kept record of the number of visitors to its specific location, but it is known that the Gettysburg Battlefield receives between one and two million visitors every year. Perhaps you have visited it yourself while attending the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg. Few people recognize that this statue is iconic as it really is. It represents the sea change in the American Fire Service that followed the Civil War. Not every member of the current fire service, paid or volunteer, recognizes the link between the Civil War and the modern fire service.

Perhaps it would be helpful to retell the tale again. By doing so it may help us understand the world of today, as the statue reflects upon two of the fire services most cherished values; courage and commitment.

The story does not start in Excelsior Field. It starts with a dashing young man by the name of Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth. At the time, Ellsworth was not actually a volunteer firefighter himself. He was a military enthusiast. In his early twenty's, he became enamored with the concept of military discipline, as well as becoming a student of military strategy. He began the process of drilling young cadets to instill that skill into them. At the time he lived in Illinois. He was a personal friend of a politically active attorney named Abraham Lincoln. That attorney was running for President of the United States. When President Lincoln was elected, Ellsworth went to Washington with him, knowing full well that conflict was going to be part of his future. He prepared for it by becoming even more militaristic in his demeanor and his activities.

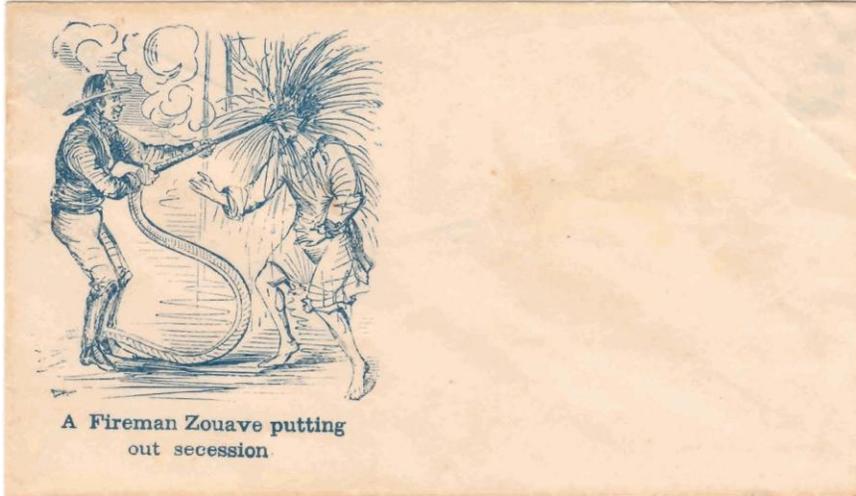
In 1861 when the saber rattling was just starting to occur, he became interested in organizing his own brigade. He wanted to be in on the action. This desire led him to visit with a legendary fire chief of the time, Chief John Decker in New York City. Decker supported the youthful officers desire to mount a military organizational effort. He encouraged his volunteer fire companies to enroll in the nascent brigade. Hundreds flocked to the opportunity and by May of 1861, Ellsworth was in charge of his own troops.



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The brigade was given the official title of the 173<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment. It carried the second title of “The Fire Zouaves”. The term Zouaves came from a very elite French firefighting force that wore elaborate costume for uniforms, complete with colorful array of symbols. Ellsworth chose to be seen in the more



A Fireman Zouave putting out secession.

contemporary uniform of a colonel in the Infantry. He and his firefighters were going to go to war to prevent succession. A popular post card of that era illustrated this point. Arriving in Washington DC, Ellsworth's troops were billeted near the White House. Notwithstanding their military commitment the firefighters could not just

rest on their reputation. On May 9, 1861, the Willard Hotel caught on fire. The 173<sup>rd</sup> left their rifles in military stacks and responded to the hotel in their previous role of firefighters. The assembly of FDNY volunteers overwhelmed the efforts of the local Washington DC vollies and a two part battle ensued. The first was to fight the fire. The second was to control the riotous behavior. Eventually, the New York Volunteers prevailed. The Willard still stood. It still stands today because of the effort.

Meanwhile, Ellsworth took up his relationship with Lincoln. He went to visit the melancholy chief executive. Lincoln apparently had a great deal of affection for the young officer because he allowed him a very open access to the White House. Their meeting was brief but intense.

The event that changed the course of action for Ellsworth was prompted by this friendship with the President. One morning the President was looking out of the White House and saw a Confederate Flag from a building in Alexander Virginia. It was right across the Potomac from the White House and served as a reminder to President Lincoln that hostility was very close to home.

Ellsworth, hearing the President's distress, volunteered to take a small contingent of forces over to Alexandria and have it removed. At this time, it seemed like such a simple task that Ellsworth mounted his patrol in a very short time and proceeded without any concern for his safety.

Upon arriving on the shores of Alexandria, it was quickly discovered that the offending flag was flying from the top of a tower in town above a bar. The patrol moved to that location at a brisk pace, not anticipating any military resistance. There were no known troops in the area. The flag was soon located whipping from a flagpole atop the building owned by Proprietor James Jackson.



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Ellsworth leading from the front entered the hotel and quickly bound up the steps to the roof. There he removed the stars and bars of the confederacy and started to proceed back down the stairway. His journey was blocked by the tavern owner Jackson brandishing a shotgun. A shot was fired striking Ellsworth directly in his upper torso. He fell in the stairwell, mortally wounded.

A member of his patrol, Private Brownell quickly returned fire, instantly injuring the angry tavern owner. The soldier then proceeded to bayonet the man, killing him almost instantly.

In just a matter of moments, Ellsworth went from being motivational and inspirational to his troops, to a martyred and visible symbol of the conflict. His body was taken back to Washington DC where it was placed in the Rotunda of the White House for days of mourning.

Lincoln was quoted as saying "I make no apology, gentlemen for my weakness; but I knew poor Ellsworth well and held him in great regard..... The event was so unexpected and the recital so touching that it quite unnerved me."

Shortly thereafter, the Zouaves became known as Ellsworth's Avengers. The soldier who killed Ellsworth's killer was given the Congressional Medal of Honor and promoted to Lieutenant. Many of the remainder of the volunteers were engaged to become casualties themselves. In engagement after engagement, including the one identified by the statue in Gettysburg, the volunteers were struck down in combat. The die was cast. Volunteer firefighters would be both heroes and victims of a terrible war. For the remainder of the war, many other volunteers exchange their speaking trumpets and fire axes for muskets and bayonets. No one record system can measure how many there were but one factor is fairly measurable. Volunteer firefighters were killed and injured at a devastating rate in the war.

When the war was over, they were mustered out. Soldiers in war became firefighters in peace once again. And, here is where the stepping stones to our future began. Not only did the volunteers return, but many of the metropolitan cities were beginning to create full time, paid fire departments. The number of the returning veterans represented a labor pool that had already been tested and found worthy under stress. Many were brought into the paid service.

Interestingly, world of firefighting was also changing. With the introduction of the steam fire apparatus, which necessitated the hiring of Teamsters, who could take a horse team pulling a steamer at a gallop from a dead start was a premium skill. The Civil War volunteer based units provided many veterans who had both experience and skills at the process of coping with danger.

A quick review of lithographs from the end of the Civil War reveals the fire department recycled army uniforms of that era into the uniforms for the paid firefighting force. Terms like "battalion" and company officer, i.e. captain began to replace "foreman". Soldiers became firefighters. It wasn't just



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part of the Union side of the conflict where this drama played out. There's ample evidence that volunteer firefighters were just as engaged in the war the rebel army. They copied many of the military practices when they went home.

One only has to look at Louisville Fire Department in Kentucky to realize that this use of the term Colonel; instead a chief represents this approach.



The year 2013 represents the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the July 4<sup>th</sup> battle in Gettysburg. There will be many events to commemorate the event on one of our turning points in our system of government. Simultaneously there are firefighters today, both volunteer and paid, who are wearing the uniform of our country in far flung war zones. We should take time to pause and reflect upon that journey and the road ahead.

As we remember the events of the Gettysburg, we ought to pay homage to the idea that the growth, evolution, change and increased requirements of the members of the fire service has and will continue to be a part of the fabric of protection that keeps the country free.