



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Great Waldo Pepper

Robert Redford is a great actor. He has made heroes out of some rather interesting types of people, including outlaws, prison wardens, and attorneys. One of his more unique roles involved playing the great Waldo Pepper. Waldo was a pilot. Not just any kind of pilot--but a barnstormer, adventurer, risk-taker, and pioneer.

If you saw the movie, this might be redundant. For those of you who didn't, Waldo is one of those "magnificent men in their flying machines" types that got aviation off to its start. Unfortunately, as the movie progressed, more and more of his friends found themselves flying into the ground and, he came to be pursued by a government agent that was part of the fledgling Federal Aviation Administration. The federal bureaucrat only wanted one thing from Waldo--he wanted him to fly planes more safely and to conform to "the rules." Of course, Waldo resisted this. The movie ended with the Great Waldo Pepper flying off into the sunset.

What a way to become a legend!

While the movie was entertaining, I doubt very seriously that any of us want the Great Waldo Pepper piloting a 747 that is attempting to land at Chicago O'Hare Airport late on a Friday evening with the air traffic controllers up to their eyeballs in potential collisions. The aviation industry jealously guards its safety record now by eliminating the Great Waldo Peppers.

However, legends live on. And, there continues to be the perception that heroes are those that take the risks and break the rules. Compare Waldo Pepper with some of his modern day counterparts --the famous Chuck Yeager, or the racecar driver Dan Gurney. Both are top-notch professionals in a high-risk occupation that live to tell their stories instead of becoming combat casualties.

How does all this relate to the fire service?

Well, safety is rapidly becoming a key issue in the fire service. With increased emphasis on safety standards and with the provisions of the new NFPA 1500 being debated, the fire service can ill afford Waldo Peppers. It is apparent to most that monitor the evolution in safety that the future belongs to fire professionals who do everything they possibly can to minimize risks--instead of taking unnecessary ones.

The fire chief is right in the middle of this issue. On the one hand, the chief's task is to build an organization designed to respond to a wide array of hazardous conditions. Simultaneously, he has the responsibility to create a working environment that reduces the risk to the individual firefighters to an absolute minimum.



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On the surface, this may seem to be an inherent and irresolvable conflict. In actuality, this phenomenon exists in almost all high-risk occupations and has been dealt with over the last few years by those industries. It has often been stated that fire fighting is among the most dangerous of professions. Is it really?

How about test pilots? Or astronauts, racecar drivers, stunt men in the movies, helicopter pilots, etc., etc. Granted, the fire service faces a lot of hazardous conditions, but so do many other occupations. What has given our vocation its bad name in safety is the fact that our casualty rate is so high. This coupled with the fact that many of our casualties occur under circumstances which are not only non-hazardous but essentially non-emergency conditions. Danger is not what makes an occupation hazardous. It is the inability to deal with that danger, resulting in death and injury that make it hazardous.

The current controversy over increased standards of safety in the fire service is primarily a reaction to the imposition of a new set of "rules." It is unlikely that many of these rules would have had to have been established on a national basis if they had been followed on a local basis to begin with. The casualty count in the fire service has prompted the setting of some ground rules to protect the fire service from unnecessary losses. Or, stated another way, we have entirely too many Waldo Peppers on the fireground and not enough Chuck Yeager's!

How do we distinguish between a high-risk occupation and a high-risk employee? Is firefighting dangerous--or are some firefighters dangerous? Is flying experimental aircraft dangerous--or are some people unqualified to fly high performance aircraft?

If we stand back from the fire service and take a look at other high-risk occupations, there are some elements that seem to stand out from these professions. These elements are as follow:

- a. Broad based knowledge
- b. Specific technical competencies
- c. Standards of performance
- d. Process of certification
- e. Exclusivity
- f. Intense focus on the investigation of accidents

Let's explore each of these in more detail to observe how they relate or compare to the fire service. In almost all high-risk occupations the professionals who practice them have an extremely diversified and generalized educational base. While they may often be accused of breaking the rules, they can often accomplish this because they know all the rules. Knowing aerodynamics is just as important to a stunt pilot as knowing suspension systems is to a racecar driver.



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The minimum standards of performance that appear in high-risk occupations are usually peer-oriented. In other words, these individuals are comparable across the entire country because of mutually accepted standards of performance. A NASCAR driver in Tallahassee is the same as a NASCAR driver in Ascot Stadium.

Licensing and certification are not window dressing for the professional risk-taker. It is bona fide evidence of the possession of technical competency, broad-based knowledge and meeting the minimum standards of performance. High-risk individuals often have to interact with other high-risk individuals. And, the possession of certificates and licensing is a mechanism that the peer group uses to make sure their counterparts are not a danger to them.

This results in exclusivity. That is, not everybody can be one of them. You might aspire to be an astronaut. But, the system is designed to screen out those individuals from those who wish to be an astronaut down to those who have the ability to become astronauts and on down to those who have superior ability to perform. The issue of exclusivity is not one of discrimination--but a winnowing out of those who lack the "right stuff" to perform in high levels of risk.

Which leaves us the fact that sooner or later high-risk people become casualties. Airplanes crash. Cars crash. Stunt men are killed. And, often when some high-risk professionals go, they take a lot of people with them. When a 747 flies into a mountaintop the professional can take a lot of non-professionals with him.

It is interesting to note that the high-risk occupations focus intensely on the investigation of any accident that result in the fatality of one of their members. Moreover, when the fatality results in the death or injury of non-professionals, it is literally dissected inch by inch until the final causal relationship has been determined. The objective: to make darn sure that the accident will never again occur.

In comparing this list of parameters for high-risk professionals, the fire service possesses many of these items, but only to a limited degree. For example, we do have broad-based knowledge. But is it broad enough, especially to prevent combat firefighters from becoming casualties from lack of adequate knowledge of building design and construction? Is a first responder on a hazardous materials incident adequately protected with sufficient knowledge of the hazardous materials that may be in that leaking container?

Do we demand technical competency in the fire service? Granted, many fire departments have a probationary period. However, the probationary period is often used more as a device to determine whether the person is compatible with the work group than it is to determine a technical competency to remain as part of the force. Tests and measurements used to evaluate individuals as they move up



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through the fire service through apparatus operator, fire captain, chief officer--and even to fire chief--are often arbitrary and capricious and do not deal with the real world of the risks taken outside the firehouse door.

The issue of certification is very controversial. Many firemen resist the concept of being certified as if it were some sort of disease. This is unfortunate because the mere act of certification is irrelevant. It is the process leading to certification that is important in the development of the individual.

Exclusivity! We sort of have that. The fire service is known to be a form of subculture. But, is that exclusivity based on competency or compatibility? How often do we actually see someone removed from the service because of their inability to perform?

Accident investigations in the fire service are on the increase. It is interesting to note in reviewing many of these reports, that the equipment worn by the firefighters often bears the brunt of the blame or the incident commander is blamed for inadequate control. Seldom is the focus on the lack of preparation, competencies, or decision-making processes of the individuals involved in the incidents. While it is important to have adequate protective clothing to fight fire, even the most carefully designed equipment cannot protect an individual who engages in a death-defying act or breaks all the rules to expose themselves to injury.

Someone once said that immortality in the fire service can be assured by making a heroically inept error in judgment that results in some form of catastrophe. In short, if you make a big enough mistake, you will be assured of a place in the history books. The Great Waldo Pepper would love that opportunity.

Earlier in this column, we alluded to the future. The future of the fire service belongs to those who recognize the difference between taking risks and calculating risks. The true professional knows just exactly how far he can push the rules without suffering the consequences of failure. In the movie "The Right Stuff" there was considerable discussion regarding "the envelope." The envelope was a set of parameters surrounding the performance of a high-risk aircraft. The key to survival of a test pilot was to know what the rules were and to take them right to the edge--but never over the edge.

As long as we are staying in the movie mode, it might be appropriate to recall the opening speech in the movie "Patton." In that movie, George C. Scott, in an impassioned yet carefully thought-out speech, stated, "It is not your job to lose your life for your country--it is to go out and make someone else lose his life for his country." The implication is simple. There is absolutely nothing heroic about dying. Sooner or later, everyone has to do it. Survivability is what makes for tomorrow's heroes.

Our enemy is not like Patton's. We don't fight people. Our enemy is nature. And the physical and chemical phenomena of fire, coupled with the reaction of hazardous materials, and the necessity to



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enter hostile environments to save lives, often do require heroic efforts. But, becoming a casualty gives the enemy the advantage.

Recently this author had the opportunity to hear Miss Barbara (Sandy) Lee. This young lady shares a moving and yet realistic tale. For those who have never seen her, I encourage you to do so. For those of you who have seen her, I hope that her lesson is clear.

We see evidence every day that conditions are improving in the fire service. The establishment of national standards for training and certification and the clear-cut guidelines of NFPA 1500 are forcing the issue of safety on all sides. However, we also see evidence that there are Waldo Peppers in the fire service today. How many times have you seen a photo in a fire magazine with a chinstrap of a fire helmet safely strapped holding the back brim onto a fire helmet, instead of under the chin and around the neck where it belongs? This helmet retention device has been relegated to a “macho image” by putting the liner up over the back of the helmet. Yet, when that same fire helmet is knocked from the man’s head and he suffers a crushing, brain-damaging injury, the helmet will be blamed for its inability to protect.

And, the “aerial circus” of firefighters dangling off the back of fire trucks attempting to put on coats, struggle into boots and dress as they leave the fire station has all the professional connotation of the Red Baron and the Flying Circus of World War I.

Firefighters who enter into burning buildings without the protection of self-contained breathing apparatus are not much different from barnstorming pilots who refused to wear parachutes. The lack of an incident command system to keep track of decisions and people which results in structural collapse with firefighters being trapped inside the building is not much different than dogfights over the trenches in World War I--every man for himself.

So the issue is safety. Are we barnstormers or professionals? In discussing this issue with firefighters across the nation, I have heard it stated that safety is for “wimps.” Safety is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength, a sign of real risk takers. For real heroes are the ones who know just how far they can go without losing it all. The recent example of the man/woman team that circled the globe with an aircraft exemplifies risk taking matched with a high degree of professionalism. We might say that “real men don’t eat quiche.” However, real firefighters don’t do stupid things and get themselves hurt.

Recently at a conference, an individual made a statement that closely matches this need and necessity. It reads: “Thinking firefighters don’t get hurt--hurt firefighters didn’t think.”

Think about it!