



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Lazy Boy Learning

Colonel David Hackworth was one of the most decorated soldiers of the Vietnam War. He earned over ninety service decorations, which consisted of both personal and organizational citations. After he retired he wrote a book, with author Julie Sherman entitled "About Face: the Odyssey of an American Warrior".¹ In that book he touts the theory that every fire officer in this country needs to literally understand. His admonition to all of those who are going to take people into combat was "practice doesn't make perfect – it makes it permanent....." And "Sweat in training saves blood on the battlefield."

In other words, what the Colonel was telling us then was that repetition over and over again does not make us perfect especially if the repetition is done improperly or inappropriately. Repeating mistakes of the past is simply not an effective strategy of being able to predict future performance. No where can this be any truer than in the concept of training of our firefighters for their role in combat.

If you are like me you are probably getting very frustrated with reading continuous stories about firefighters being killed or worse yet badly injured at the scenes of fires. And probably the worst of all is when you read a story about a firefighter dying in a training exercise. In almost all cases practice did not make it perfect for these individuals. What is being made permanent, is their death and/or long term recovery from something that could or should have never happened in the first place. I particularly am dismayed when they call the death of a firefighter 'an unfortunate accident' There is nothing accidental about going to the scene of a fire. We do it on purpose and everything we do while we are there should be on purpose too.

Over the last few decades, training has followed a convoluted path that may or may not be making the fire ground safer for individuals who are going into harm's way. Simply, stated much of what we are calling training in the firehouse is being relegated to media delivery systems instead of fire ground competency.

In this particular case what brought it to my attention was a conversation with a young firefighter after a recruit academy graduation. Periodically I have individuals call me up to go to lunch and talk about what is happening in their department. This particular individual is on the verge of becoming a fire captain in a fire department in California. I have known him since he was in Boy Scouts and have had numerous conversations regarding being prepared for his career. When I saw him at the academy he asked if we could talk,

¹ Simon Schuster ISBN 671526928



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In this particular case he lamented to me that his fire department's training program has now almost turned into nothing more than watching video tapes and complying with state and federal standards over emergency medical services training. He told me that one of the reasons he taught at the fire academy was to get in on the burns that they would do for the rookies, but couldn't seem to do for the in-service crews.

I would ask you to think about that complaint for just a few minutes and ask this question: does that kind of training make for a safe firefighter on the fire ground?

In my opinion it doesn't. What makes firefighters safe on the fire ground is physical, face to face competency with the kinds of physical aspects of combat firefighting. It really boils down to being able to wear breathing apparatus, climb ladders, use powerful tools to tear apart vehicles, or to force entry into buildings. None of those skill sets come from lying in a lazy boy recliner watching a video tape.

Unfortunately there is another side to this coin. It is also true that many fire departments lack adequate training facilities to conduct that kind of hands on approach. Moreover, many of them are not equipped with a departmental training officer to oversee the creation of a curriculum that makes sure that these competencies are being assessed frequently. Lastly, today many organizations are so burned out on trying to maintain compliance with bureaucratic standards that they are failing to realize their inadequacies for physical combat.

If I described your fire department as being amongst one of those that might fit into that category I apologize. But, before you dismiss this consideration as not existing in your organization, I would like to give some thought to another element. How much of your training program is actual drilling as opposed to merely exchange of information.

How much of your drilling is aimed at improving the ability of your firefighters to perform their job exactly in the same fashion every time? In short, has your redundancy resulted in competency?

Hackworth noted in his book that it is useless to practice with wooden guns. A real gun has recoil. A real gun has consequences. A real gun can hurt you if you don't know what you are doing. The same might be said with active firefighting. It is very critical that we train firefighters using techniques that are as close to fire ground conditions as possible. I personally have some concerns about some of the simulation exercises that are being touted as being "live fire" because they are artificial in their nature.

Now before anybody gets too upset that I am suggesting that these training props are not useful, that is not what I said. What I said was that I have concerns about the lessons that we are teaching people by giving them the idea that a fire can go out with the turning of a valve or that a flashover looks like it really is when it is created by liquefied petroleum gas.



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We have a challenge before us. With all of the initiatives that we have taken on as well as the near miss reporting system, and all other philosophical discussions, we have got to do something to improve upon the skill set to combat firefighters. One of the things that I believe needs to be brought to bear sooner or later is a thorough examination of an individual's training profile in the event that they are killed in the line of duty. Admittedly that might become problematic for some departments because they may not wish to have those records examined to closely. But, Hackworth would have told you that that kind of loss is predictable.

I am often reminded that when individuals get hurt in combat situations of a statement that was reportedly made by the General who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. "The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eden". What he was referring to was developing the skill set of soldiers by teaching them team skills in sports.

Near the end of his life Hackworth was interviewed about his philosophy of life. In that interview he was asked what leadership technique he used in combat to assure his soldiers would not die needlessly. His reply was quick and to the point.

"I talked to my soldiers. I was there. I would never give an order that I wouldn't do myself. And I loved my soldiers I never wasted them. They knew that and we formed a very perfect team. I was very hard on them, meaning I was like a father that took his children and laid a very disciplined trip on them."

One might call that tough love or others might call it being a hard butt, but in both cases Hackworth wanted, more than anything else, for his people to survive their experience and was willing to be a little unpopular at the time. My concern is that we don't have enough officers willing to take that extra step to put some starch back in the need to have a rigid training program that involves work. Lazy boy training might work for clerks and typists, but it does not work for those that have to perform at a 150% when the chips are down.

Unfortunately Colonel David Hackworth died on May 4th of 2005. He was aged 74. He left a legacy of courage and commitment that few will be wrong by emulating. Lastly, among his quotes is this statement. "Its human nature to start taking things for granted again when danger is not banging loudly on the door."

What he was referring to is the presence of apathy in the face of long gaps between our need to be trained and the demand to produce a skill on the fireground. Don't let apathy be the reason your troops aren't ready.



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For a guy with only a 7th grade education when he entered the Merchant Marine at age 14, Hackworth lived a life of duty and diligence that was marked by his devotion to the value of training and the quest for perfection.

We can use a few more like him in our business.