



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Memories We Haven't Made Yet

By

Ronny J. Coleman

Firefighters are wonderful story tellers. You can prove this almost any night, in any firehouse around the country. Just sit in at the dining room table, after the meal is over and listen to the swapping of wild tales. Often they are generational based, in that the old timers have a lot more stories to tell. Other times they are more contemporary, as our younger firefighters belly up to the process of sharing their experiences in this open dialogue.

I cannot believe that there are any of you out there who haven't had this one specific experience. That is, to sit in on a discussion of a story that sounds exciting and is adrenaline generating, but also creates a mixed feeling. The feeling comes from the reality that somebody either died or some serious consequence occurred in the event. I know I have heard a few of these stories. As a matter of fact I can remember every fatality I have gone on as a firefighter and there have been way too many of them. I have a list of individuals that I personally knew that have been either severely injured or killed in the line of duty. The very person that convinced me to get in the fire service, Rusty Brooks, died on a fire in El Cariso in the early 1960's. I knew one of the firefighters who were among the casualties of the incident in Arizona recently. He was the grandson of a Fire Chief I knew.

But what about memories we have never had? That may sound like an oxymoron. But what I am talking about are visions of the future that can perhaps be part of somebody else's experiential or career arc. I wonder what the fire service would be like if we would have an entire year in which absolutely no firefighters died in the line of duty. Would we celebrate that occasion or would there be a backlash? The idea that we would have zero casualties may well stimulate some misinformed and misanthropic people to come to the idea that we don't need firefighters anymore because it's not that dangerous an occupation. I find that particular assumption somewhat ridiculous because we are not supposed to be using fire trucks to haul patients and victims from the scene of an emergency. They are supposed to be able to walk away from them intact. And that is the objective of the future; no combat firefighter deaths.

What about another vision that many people have had about the people we serve?. What about if an entire year goes by without a single multi-family death in a single family dwelling in the United States of America? Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing to contemplate? What if we went by and not a single firefighter lost their life on the fire-ground? No headlines, no memorial services, just a clear cut set of circumstances where if there is a fire - people get out of them alive and live to tell the story of their own survival. And we are responding to these same fires, we do not engage in any behavior that results in the death of a comrade.

This desire to have zero casualties is somewhat hypothetical and abstract in the sense that they are extremely unlikely to ever occur. It is my personal belief that there is a consequence of being in the business of danger and that is the possibility of the loss of your life. Soldiers face it. Law enforcement officers face it. Heck, even guys who work on the highways face it. Danger can never be reduced to zero. And, it is very unlikely that we will have that reduction of fire deaths for the very simple reason



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that we have poverty class that generates fire conditions and we have richer class that generates another type of fire condition: excessive and flammable contents.

As a profession we cannot say we have not been adequately warned about the risk we take. Two reports come to mind that I would hope every fire chief in the country would read. The first is the "[Trends in Firefighter Fatalities Due to Structural Collapse.](#)¹ The other is a more recent publication; [Physiological Stress Associated with Structural Firefighting Observed in Professional Firefighters.](#)² What both of these reports demonstrate is that we know more about the causes of firefighter deaths than at any time in the history of the fire service, but we are still demonstrating a lack consensus that we should act on what we already know.

It should not go without notice that even in the richest or poorest of homes we are still stuffing them with combustible materials including plastics and materials that give out byproducts when they burn. Those same materials burn just as viciously when they are placed in a bigger home. The American fire problem is probably unlikely to go away out of sheer enormity of it in the first place.

So, I wonder what other dream we might have that is relevant to this discussion. Perhaps our dream could be that we get there on time all the time to be able to save people's lives before they are victims. Maybe more sprinklers will be used. Maybe our dream ought to be that we get there with the right equipment and adequate personnel to be able to do something about every problem before it turns into a catastrophe.

The corollary to a dream is a nightmare and that is what we are in the business of trying to avoid. Everything we can do to make a community more stable and safer makes for a better story to tell at the dining room table years later. If we can have fantasy football, we can have fantasy fire protection too. The next time you think about your life in the fire service, ask yourself the question of how much better you would feel about your career if you had never lost a single solitary person while they are under your watchful eyes.

¹ Trends in Firefighter Fatalities Due to Structural Collapse, 1979-200, NISTIR 7069

² ; Physiological Stress Associated with Structural Firefighting Observed in Professional Firefighters., Indiana University Firefighter Health and Safety Research, Bloomington, Indiana (No date)