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Ronny J. Coleman

The Military Metaphor

The fire service has often been characterized as paramilitary. The reason for this is because the roots of our organizational structure were derived from military origins. The “corps of vigils” the original Roman Fire Brigade was literally a unit of the Roman Army. And we have proceeded forth throughout our history by adding additional components from the military. For example, the European Fire Service has a very strong military construct. The American Fire Service has so many vestiges left over from the Civil War that it literally shaped the language and vocabulary of the fire service at the turn of the century. Moreover, almost every generation of the fire service up until fairly recently had a strong element from veterans returning to serve in the fire service after they had military experience.

It is no wonder therefore that we had a tendency to think of firefighting as being the same as military combat. That may be good and it may be bad for us. For while we use many of the military terms in our profession there are certainly significant differences between going into combat and going to fight a fire.

What got me to thinking about this was a recent series of newspaper articles that involved photographs of young soldiers in Iraq accompanied by pictures of major fire losses that had young firefighters in the forefront. In both cases the images had similar connotation; force against force.

Nowhere does this analogy come quite as close to being real as the fact that people die in combat. However, it is not necessary that people die in combat. It is a potential. It is a probability. But it is also fairly true that the side that loses more of its people to injury and death in a war usually loses.

If we wish to continue the military metaphor in the fire service then perhaps we should go back to the military and examine some key questions about how true our methods of operations match one another. For example, in the military you seldom find combat individuals, i.e. those carrying a rifle and/or firing weapons are above the age of 40 years old. Granted for the most part you will find staff NCO's and maybe senior members of those companies that have age but the vast majority of those who are sent into combat are youthful, lithe, flexible and in good shape. Can we honestly say that about the fire service? I have been at a tremendous number of recruit academies and can attest to the fact that we tend to hire people who meet that criteria upon appointment but how long do they stay that way and are they in that condition when they reach the end of their potential useful life as a combat firefighter?

There is a reason that active combat is limited to the young. For one thing there is a tremendous need for the discharge of energy, a directness and endurance that tends to erode over time. So when the fire service talks about its combat fire force in comparison to the military we need to recognize that we have not clearly established the physical aspect of firefighting as something that needs to be maintained up



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to and including the day a person walks off of the fire ground. We have, consciously or unconsciously condoned the fact that as individuals get more tenure in the fire service they are not held as physically accountable as they have the day the came on the job.

A second interesting concept to me is the idea that in the military there are enlisted people and there are officers. Officers don't come from the enlisted ranks. Generally speaking most officers come from an institution of some kind that provides that person with a broader based education prior to them becoming an officer candidate. In our delivery system we tend to believe that everybody starts at the bottom including the organizational equivalent of the General; the Fire Chief.

On one hand I tend to believe that the military model doesn't work as well in civilian life for the very simple reason that there is not a categorization of classes between officers and enlisted personnel as there is in the military. Nonetheless there might be a lesson or two we could learn from this idea of treating officers as different from everybody else. One of our means of achieving the same goal is to educate people to the highest possible level before we promote them to officers.

I can almost hear somebody in the fire station saying out loud "education means nothing without experience". I believe an argument can be made to support the idea that what makes experience really relevant is when it relates back to a person's knowledge base. In other words if people know more and more before they experience more and more they tend to learn more from it. Therefore, it may not be an entirely bad idea for us to consider the idea that no one becomes an officer without an adequate education.

And how about this whole idea laying your life on the line. When a military officer looks his troops in the eye and tells them that they are going after an objective there is a high degree of possibility that some of those people are not going to come back. David Hackworth one of the most decorated military officers of the Vietnam War in his book, "About Face" clearly articulated the idea that an officer who doesn't plan for and doesn't prepare for the nth degree of safety is going to lose a lot more people than those who actually practice what they really are going to do in reality. In other words, when a military officer tells a young person that they are going to face an enemy they make it really clear that the enemy has to be killed or the battle will not be won. However, it is also true that the enemy is trying to kill you at the same time. That is how battles are lost.

Our analogy on the fire ground is that when we send people forward to do difficult jobs in the fire service they need to know that they could die. That may sound a little bit harsh maybe even outright dramatic but the truth is firefighters do die fighting fire. And some of the reasons they do suffer that kind of tragic loss is the fact that they clearly don't understand that the enemy is trying kill them too.



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I have often compared how some people approach the fire ground to a story that was told in Hackworth's book. He witnessed a training exercise one day in which individuals went walking up the hill waving their weapons and firing blanks as if it were a game. When those same individuals got into actual combat many soldiers were slaughtered because they exhibited the same kind of behavior that they had learned under tutelage in the training program, i.e. to treat it as if it were a game. I have seen that same kind of mindset on the fire ground. This is not a game. It is deadly business. If we allow people to treat the training experiences that they have in preparation for going into combat trivially then you can pretty well expect that they are not going to respond appropriately under fire.

I have born witness in more than one case to watching individuals who know exactly what they are supposed to do, do something entirely different because someone has allowed them to get away with it under training. The best example I can give of this is standing up in a super heated atmosphere. I know of at least two cases in which individuals found themselves in a confrontational situation in a fire in which they immediately stood up and placed themselves in absolute jeopardy fully compromising everything they had been told about staying low and moving out of the way.

Upon examination it was determined that in many cases these individuals stood up because that is exactly what they were allowed to do during training fires in which only smoke bombs were being used.

Hackworth says practice doesn't make perfect. He says that practice makes permanent. Therefore, the military analogy is that if we are going to keep our people safe we have to treat every scenario as if it were real and that there are no "wooden guns" and artificiality aspects to our training environment.

Perhaps the last analogy to use between the fire service and the military is the manner in which we approach the battle. The concept of incident command systems was not invented by the fire service. If you look very carefully at the legacy of the process that lead to the creation of incident command within the fire service you will find that it has strong ties back to the military. The people that planned the invasion of Europe had a very similar model. As a matter of fact in my archives I have quotations from Sir Ira Massey-Shaw talking about the use of the incident command system clear back in the 1880's. The fire service sometimes acts as if we just invented ICS as a result of major catastrophic fires. The truth is that it was invented by others a long time ago and we just finally figured out that it would work for us.

The lesson to be learned from this is to pay close attention to how the military has evolved their method of managing the battleground. But if we are still concerned about the span of control, chain of command and all the other principles of organizational structure on the the battle field of the future we should be copying the military model of identifying components of it having to do with technology, data collection, intelligence, and other components that are much more sophisticated than our use of the incident command system as merely a management model.



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On the scene of the largest fires that we generally do a fabulous job of putting together that incident command system. However what we do not have is the technology transfer in the fire service that the military has been utilizing to become smarter and smarter in coping with the battlefield.

So far in this article I have more or less alluded to the fact that while we call ourselves paramilitary we still don't have quite that order and discipline that the military has. On the other hand maybe it is also true that the military could learn from the fire service. A lesson that I would like to see the military adopt is that of prevention as opposed to reaction. Because as we all realize whenever wars are fought people are lost. It is interesting that while we remember our forefather's admonition that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure sometimes we forget that lesson ourselves. Our military might has grown over the last 250 years because we faced against some of the world's most malevolent administrations. Likewise the fire service has developed a tremendous amount of combat capability because we faced the harsh reality that fire is an unrelenting enemy of society too.

So the military metaphor may have its place in the fire service. We should continue to adopt those things from the men and women of the military so that the men and women of the fire service can perform their jobs more adequately, more safely and more effectively in the future.