



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Staff Rides

In the movie Patton, there was a scene where the general asked to be taken to the scene of a former battlefield. The general felt he had been there before. One might consider that to be an advanced case of déjà vu or just wishful thinking. In the case of Patton, he took several of his officers with him to visit the battle that had involved the Roman empire 2000 years prior. Even if you do not believe in reincarnation, there are different ways to value in the experience of being able to stand on hallowed ground and learn lessons from the review process.

The concept is not found as much in the in the annals of academia but in the real world of practicality. The military has recognized for many years that fighting and refighting battles over and over again have taught lessons of survival to subsequent generations. Or, the exact opposite has occurred. Trying to fight an new battle using an old technique has often resulted in death and destruction on battlefields. The most meaningful things that can come out lessons from the past is not how to do it the same way, but rather we have to figure out what is the new way that you might be forced to use to reduce loss.

Over the last couple of years, this phenomenon has started to pick up in the fire service. What I am talking about most specifically is the idea of visiting the sites of major fire events with a group of individuals and reliving the experience. Those participating in the type of this event may have an opportunity for both storytelling and lesson learning to go on simultaneously.

Over the last couple of years I have had several opportunities to engage in this type of activity. One of them however brought home to me in a very graphic way. I was recently asked to participate in a staff ride in an area in California that is primed to be the next spot of a major disaster.

Because I don't want to point fingers at too many specifics in this column, I will not name the county, or the location. Instead I will identify the process to see if it might apply to some of you. The idea of conducting a staff ride was based upon a scenario where one of the senior members of the local fire department was retiring. Leaving with him was a huge institutional memory. This individual was born and raised in the same county and was a firefighter at a very early age. He had been involved in almost all of the major operations during his entire lifetime. He was more or less a walking textbook on what is likely to happen the next time around.

Working in cooperation with other staff members of the department, the staff ride was established to visit the sites of fires that were started as early as the 1920s and as late as the 1990s. The experience expanded the mindset of what could be learned far beyond just reading about it. Comments and observations by this senior fire officer that some of the fire behavior that he had been studying goes harkened back to details form over 2,000 years ago. He, of course, was talking about the use of the



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study of growth rings in trees and how that often fire has been part of a natural part of our phenomena for centuries.

I have also heard of people visiting the sites of major structural fires. Personally, I have gone back to look at structures that had a profound impact on our industry such as the Pioneer Hotel, the Winnecoff and others.

The use of the staff ride concept is actually a step in the right direction of preparing for the future. You might want to try it for the very simple reason that it may well have a significant long range impact on your own knowledge base.

For starters, who should be conducting this staff ride event? In my opinion we should center on some of this attention on the senior members of the department. Just because somebody retires from the fire service doesn't mean that their memory is wiped clean. To the contrary, some of the old timers can often reflect upon facts and figures and phenomena from 50 years ago better than what we can remember from the last weekend. There were a couple of steps that made the staff ride more meaningful.

Step number one was to develop an agenda for the event. You don't just go to the site and stand around and wonder what happened. Do your homework. Develop a description of the area to be studied. Go on the Internet. Read some history books about the topic if they are available.

Step two is to then define a set of questions that are appropriate for the discussion. To be meaningful these questions should not be superficial things such as date and time but rather causes and consequences.

Step number three is to go onsite and be treated the experience as a personal event rather than a class. Those that go along with these staff rides should make it their mission to ferret out the lessons to be learned themselves before they even get in the vehicle to go. You should rely on the primary person to tell some of the details but rather you should be able to ask the right questions to bring the detail out of that person.

Step four is to keep copious notes as you participate in the process. I was delighted to find out after several of the staff rides that I have participated in that I was able to go out and gain additional information on the internet, in various libraries and to identify other parties that had knowledge regarding the event.

The last component that I would encourage in staff ride- alongs is that you don't make the group too large. A group of six to ten people is just the right amount to be able to use two vehicles and to carry on



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conversation where everyone can have a chance to participate. Taking a school bus trip of 45 to 60 people probably belongs at the level of grade school. But, on the other hand, going on a staff ride with just one other person seems like a waste of time. 6 to 8 is a nice number to manage.

At this point you have two choices. The first is to encourage the creation of a staff ride along on your own because you know someone who did something in the past and they carry those thoughts with those who remain behind. The second is to pursue opportunities to deal with people who are doing this kind of process and make yourself a participant. I will almost guarantee you that you will obtain a sense of confidence in what you know. In my opinion, this is the epitome of adult learning. I used to joke with my firefighters that every time something goes bad on the fire ground, it is not that we are being tested – but rather we are taking the final exam!