

# CHIEF'S CLIPBOARD

## The badge

Why do some people carry a badge and others merely carry a title?

Basically, there are only two kinds of people who still carry badges to designate their position—police officers and firefighters.

Over the years, I have spoken at firefighter recruit academy graduations and promotional ceremonies. I have witnessed the pinning on of many badges. It is a proud moment for the graduates and for the promoted individuals.

But, it is much more than a proud moment; it is an acceptance of responsibility and the acquisition of a long tradition of service.

The badge is not just a piece of metal. It is a symbol that carries several hundred years of heritage and obligation. Unfortunately, many people have lost sight of this. Their perception of the badge focuses on attaining the position, rather than fulfilling the associated responsibility.

Recently, I spoke with a firefighter who asked why all of the components are scrambled and what each of them means. Many firefighters wear a badge but don't understand its significance.

Perhaps it is time to take a look at what the badge is, what it means and why it is as important now as it was almost one thousand years ago.

To fully understand the impact of a shield-shaped badge, we must go back to its origin. When civilization began to organize into groups that were for or against various activities or philosophies, people developed flags and banners to signify their cause or allegiance. Often, these flags and banners were carried in front of a marching military organization as an indication of loyalty to a particular group.

Undoubtedly, the first banners were crude, but, they certainly were symbolic. They might have been nothing more than a stick with threads of colored textile or perhaps were made with an animal fur suspended from the cross arm of the flag staff.



*By Ronny Coleman*

As weaponry grew more sophisticated, individual warriors took to carrying devices, called shields, which provided them with some physical protection.

Also, symbols of various fighting units were emblazoned on the front of the shield, so troops could distinguish friend or foe in battle.

Beginning with the Crusades, two organizations used symbols that stood for something other than to differentiate between enemies. The first was the Order of St. John of Hospitalers. Their symbol was a red cross. The other group was referred to as the Knights of Malta. The symbol that was a part of their uniform was a Maltese cross.

These two symbols not only stood for loyalty, but they also meant that these two organizations made it a part of their mission to assist people who had been killed or injured in combat situations.

The Order of St. John of Hospitalers and its red cross was responsible for the creation of many early hospitals. The Order of the Knights of Malta quickly became associated with those who went out of their way to engage in courageous acts to save people who were endangered from the infamous "Greek fire."

The shield also was used for a more gruesome purpose. It was common for a person killed in combat to be carried from the battlefield on his shield. Often knights

who died in combat were buried with their shields. If they survived the wound and were able to return to battle or to lead a normal life, they were rewarded with additional symbols, which signified bravery, and placed these symbols on their shields.

The most common symbols were crossed weapons. When a weapon was crossed, it meant the symbol was earned in battle. For example, crossed swords or battle axes signified the person used that particular weapon in warfare. The weapon standing alone indicated merely intent. If it was crossed, it indicated performance.

There is a long span between the Crusaders and their often violent quest for the Holy Grail and a modern firefighter, standing at attention, being pinned with a badge by a fire chief. Yet, there is a trail of heritage that connects the early humanitarians to the contemporary fire service.

The Maltese cross was adopted by the fire service because it represented humanitarian acts. As time progressed, firefighters in the 16th and 17th centuries incorporated the Maltese cross and other symbolism into an armband that indicated their occupation. Early U.S. firefighters wore a large pattern on the chest of their shirts. These patterns were cut in the shape of a shield and had the name of the member's fire department embroidered across the shield.

Other examples of heraldry in the fire service is the "Firefighter's Cluster," which is a scramble of axes, nozzles, fire hose and other devices used by firefighters. This is an extension of the notion that a person had to use these weapons in battle to earn the privilege of wearing them.

If you look at some of the badges, they have a device that looks like a long pole with a ball at the end that has a flame shooting out of the top of the ball. This mechanism was a precursor to the red light and siren on the top of fire apparatus. The pole was carried by a young man, who was called a vamp. It was the vamp's job to run in front of volunteer firefighters shouting a

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warning and carrying a torch, so people would know that a piece of fire apparatus was soon to follow. That symbol remains on our badge as an indication of our willingness to risk our lives in response, as well as on the fireground.

Most badges have a continuous circle that resembles an unbroken rope or chain. This illustrates dedication and commitment to duty.

Also appearing on some badges is an animal, usually a phoenix. The phoenix is used as a symbol of rebirth after fire. According to the myth, as the phoenix would grow old, it would build a nest out of a pile of sticks and start it on fire. After the nest was consumed by the flames and the ashes cooled, a small worm would emerge from the ashes. This worm would go through a series of metamorphoses until it became the beautiful bird once again. This process would occur repeatedly, constantly renewing the phoenix to its youthful beauty.

Another commonly used device in the design of badges is placing something on the badge that indicates what rank the person who wears it holds within the organization. Some firefighters have a scramble that indicates they operate the tools. Drivers often are given a symbol that resembles a piece of apparatus. It is common for company officers to have trumpets on their badges and for chiefs to have crossed trumpets.

Why do firefighters wear silver badges and chiefs wear gold? The answer is found in society's view of each material. Gold is supposed to be a reward. It is used in the fire service as a clear indication of a level of achievement. Some people who have achieved high positions in the fire service wear badges that are not only made of gold, but decorated with precious stones.

The badge is not just a sign of graduation; it's a symbol of commitment with a rich history. The shield that was once used to protect an individual in battle now symbolizes of the responsibility of contemporary firefighters—to place themselves between an emerging catastrophe so lives and property can be saved. No matter what its title, shape, size or design, it remains a part of the uniform to remind us of our obligation. □