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Boot Camp for Fire Inspectors

I'm not exactly sure of the date. I know it was in the first two weeks of June of 1957. I arrived at San Diego, California at the airport. I, and a host of other naïve teenagers, was greeted as we came off the aircraft by a surly Sergeant who immediately informed us his nickname was "Pineapple," and he was from Hawaii. He also told us that if any of us were caught calling him that, we would live to regret it. It was my introduction to Marine Corps boot camp.

Within a very short timeframe, I had all of my possessions taken away from me, my hair was sheared down to what could only be referred to as a "buzz cut" and I was immediately introduced to such concepts as discipline, humility, barracks humor, and the uniform code of military justice.

It couldn't have been all bad, however, because to this day I can still recall my rifle serial number and my military I.D. faster than I can the bank balance in my checkbook.

Five years later I joined the Costa Mesa Fire Department. Introduction to that position was considerably different. I received my letter from the Fire Chief informing me that I had been accepted for a position on the department and it gave me a reporting date. The same letter also advised me to go to a uniform shop and buy a complete set of uniforms, including my own turnouts, fire helmet, and protective clothing. The amount exceeded my first month's salary. My first day on the job, I walked in the back of a firehouse and the klaxon horn in the apparatus room was loudly announcing a structure fire – although I didn't know it at the time. I went on my very first structure fire without even knowing the name of the individual standing beside me on the tailboard. I was just told to get on and hold on. (Tailboards - for those of you that are new to the fire service used to be the place where firefighters stood while responding to fires.)

Thank goodness we don't train firefighters that way anymore. The vast majority of fire departments in this country today have some form of an orientation for their new firefighters. That basic training usually includes a lot of essential information to provide for a safe working environment for the combat firefighter. But, as the need for better training of firefighters has unfolded, many organizations have returned to the boot camp concept with respect to their company officers and even their battalion chiefs. All one has to do is open up a program for many of the annual conferences and read some narrative about getting back to the basics that is needed to do the job on the fireground.

But - I have a question for you. Who is creating the boot camp for fire inspectors? Fire inspectors in a lot of organizations are still experiencing the same old "briar rabbit" mentality. They get thrown into the briar patch and hope that they will survive.



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There are just as many reasons to develop a boot camp approach for fire inspectors as any other position in the fire service. One of the best is the current emphasis upon risk management. The simple reason is that when a community fails to understand the basics of fire prevention the lack of action can create an environment in a community that creates a potential threat to the very firefighters they are supposed to be protected by those codes and ordinances. Perhaps it is time for us to bring the concept of a basic orientation program into the fire prevention bureau just like we've done for recruit firefighters.

I actually experimented with that concept a long time ago. When I was given the opportunity to create the full-time firefighting course in San Clemente in the early 1970's, I took a different approach. Our 12-week academy that was conducted for all of our entry-level people included a class on building code, the fire code, conducting fire inspections, customer service, and information on pre-emergency planning as it related to fire prevention. It was a short-term experiment because the fire department there eventually evolved into an entity that started relying on its new personnel coming from the local community college. Nonetheless, I recall that one of the interesting outputs of that original academy was that entry-level firefighters had a slightly different perspective on how fire prevention was there to support them.

But that was then and today is today. What about a boot camp for fire inspectors? If you take a look at most fire departments, the amount of training that goes into the fire inspectors is relatively limited. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult to even come up with an assessment of a standard approach used to select individuals that may be assigned into fire prevention bureaus. In the past, individuals have gone into bureaus because they have been injured in the line of duty and could not return to combat roles. That decision in a lot of cases resulted in bringing some good fireground experience into the bureau, but it was somewhat rendered ineffective by the fact that most combat firefighters didn't really enjoy being on a 40-hour workweek. Then, there is a trend in many communities to not hire firefighters as fire inspectors at all. The desire to civilianize many fire prevention bureaus has resulted in individuals coming into the bureau merely because they have a college education or have received training on code enforcement. Then there is a wide range of opportunities between those two. I, for example, actually went into the fire prevention bureau because the fire marshal was killed in an automobile accident and I was "thrown in the breach" by a fire chief who only knew that I had completed a class on fire prevention at the local community college.

If we took the time to review the practice of most fire departments with respect to providing on-going training for their fire prevention personnel it often lacking in depth or width. If you take a look at the training requirements for combat firefighters, there are lots of standards. One that is most often quoted has to do with the criterion that combat firefighters should receive about 250 hours of training before they ever go onto a fire company. And once they do, a minimum of two hours of training for every shift that they are on duty also occurs. Following the math of a 56-hour workweek, that should result in an



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average firefighter receiving somewhere in the neighborhood of 200 to 220 hours of re-occurring training per year. And that training is on top of their knowledge obtained in the recruit academy. It remains questionable as to whether or not that training actually occurs - but the principle is there. There is no assumption that a firefighter is remaining competent merely because they show up on the job. They receive a constant stream reoccurring training as a form of reinforcement.

But, how much time do we spend in training for our fire prevention bureaus? Some departments will respond to that by indicating that they send people away to school, i.e. annual conferences, fire prevention officers workshops, etc. Before going any further, I will admit that I believe that that is absolutely essential as a minimum. But, I would also ask that you contemplate the fact that not everybody takes part in that kind of a process. If it were true, then fire prevention conferences would be probably four times larger than they are. Reality is that only a small percentage of fire departments are investing a great deal in the annual reoccurring, on-going training and education of their fire prevention personnel.

So, let's go back to that idea of a boot camp. How long should it be? What subjects should be covered? Who should teach it? Who should attend? A lot of questions that have consequence inside of your own local firefighting agency could be answered in a short course like this.

And, let's also admit that there is a logistical problem here. The ratio of fire prevention personnel to fire suppression personnel is usually on a scale of one to many. It is not uncommon for an organization that has three or four fire companies to only have one fire inspector. To view the other end of the spectrum, there are many metropolitan firefighting agencies that may have as many fire prevention personnel as there are firefighters in smaller organizations. The logistical problem is in accumulating a sufficient number of people to make the boot camp concept make any sense.

My answer to that is to base it on a regional application. What would happen if once a year a county fire chiefs association held a workshop/seminar for all fire prevention personnel in an area in which they focused on the basics and demonstrated that there is a sufficient body of knowledge for fire prevention personnel that it needs to be reinforced?

This same process has been used in many areas to satisfy the recruit-training requirement at the county level in many areas. A smaller number of areas are currently using it for officer development. Why can't we create boot camps for fire inspectors on the same basis as our fire officers?

Well, if you could resolve that logistical problem, the second question we need to answer is what should be included. At the risk of over-simplification, I have five topics that I think should be part of the boot camp approach to making sure that fire inspectors are current and competent. They include the following:



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- A. Building Code
 - B. Fire Code
 - C. Fire Behavior
 - D. Fire Testing
 - E. Customer Relations and Community Feedback

You are probably saying to yourself that can't understand why you would need to retrain a person on the Building Code. Remember I said that the boot camp mentality is all about going back to basics. I don't know how long it's been since you've read the International Building Code, but it's not exactly light reading. And, it is a constantly evolving field of endeavor due to the fact that the Building Code also results in changes in technology in the building industry that's affecting the built environment in our communities. I believe that an eight-hour refresher on the Building Code every year for fire inspectors is one of the most important elements of maintaining a high-level of competency in the fire prevention bureau.

Of course, we would have to talk about the Fire Code. But, the Fire Code is a similar document to the Building Code. It is not a lot of fun to read. Moreover, the Fire Code has two components that are not always readily observable. The first is the spirit and intent of the code and the second is the letter of the code. There are an awful lot of people who know how to read codes that don't know how to interpret them. In further, there are people who read the codes so rigidly that they end up being unsuccessful in getting the spirit and intent accomplished. Yes, an eight-hour review every year of the Fire Code works even for the most experienced of fire inspectors.

Fire Behavior. I used to joke about this in conducting training for firefighters. It was in the form of a rhetorical question: Do buildings burn up or do they burn down? Both are expressions of the total loss of a building, but they seem mutually exclusive in downright contraindicative. So what is it about fire behavior that's so important for fire prevention people? The fire inspector needs to be more of an expert on fire behavior than almost anybody else in the organization except for an incident commander. The first two components that we talked about, i.e. building codes and fire codes create an environment in which fires are going to occur. Understanding and projecting fire behavior in that environment is an absolute essential skill and ability. An eight-hour day devoted to understanding the interaction between building construction materials and fire behavior is not something that should be taken for granted. To the contrary, I think it is one of the most dynamic aspects of fire protection.

Fire testing is something that is about as far removed from the real world as we can get. Yet, fire testing is exactly how we determine the elements of fire behavior in relationship to fire and building code requirements. There are a considerable number of individuals in the fire inspection community that will apply the results of a test without having any understanding of how the test is administered or even



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understanding what the strengths and weaknesses of the respective tests are. An eight-hour day devoted to testing protocols and relating them back to fire behavior couldn't be a waste of time.

And there's the question of customer relations and community feedback. Show me where most fire departments are really devoting a lot of time and attention to this topic. I'm not referencing in this particular topic the idea that fire inspectors have to be standing at a counter fielding complaints all day long, or that this is a feel-good component of dealing with people in the field. It is merely examining the harsh reality that everything that a fire inspector does costs somebody money. And, the relationship between how the fire inspector is able to sell and explain code requirements, then deal with the consequences of dissatisfied customers, is an essential part of making a fire prevention bureau an effective component of the fire protection delivery system.

So, there is a formula for a boot camp for fire inspectors. As a student of ongoing changes in the fire and building codes, and relating those to experiences reflected in our critiques and formal studies of firefighter injury and fatality, I believe that the administration of such a process could not help but benefit the fire service. I think it would create a better environment for firefighters that do the most dangerous job. I believe it would raise the level of professionalism of our fire prevention bureaus. I believe it would improve upon the fire services' interaction with the business and professional community. And, I think it would make the individuals within a fire prevention bureau see themselves in a different light.

You will note with this proposal that I didn't suggest that we go all the way back to that basic Marine Corps mentality of stripping them down to the bare essentials. In this respect, boot camp is really more like an officer's candidate school than it is one for novices. But, the theory remains the same.

Focusing on some of these essential fields of knowledge could not help but change human behavior. I, for example, can still remember how cool my head felt after the barber's clippers had removed all of my Brill Cream lubricated locks. It became a hairstyle that was so fashionable that I have continued with it to this day. However, today it is more a reflection of genetics than intent.