



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Car 54 Where Are You?

The actor Fred Gwynn who later made his name synonymous with the Munster's once starred in a comedy about law enforcement. It was called "Car 54 – Where Are You?" The title was more rhetorical because the comedic scenes that made up the series usually didn't have anything to with being lost – but rather being confused.

A more modern day version of that could be "Engine 6 – Where Are You?" Going back and stealing a page out of the TV comedy the way the question was posed was always over a radio and the answer was always given back by radio. It required someone to ask and someone to answer. If we look at our radio codes that we used to use before we went to clear text some of our radio codes had to do with location. The idea of keeping track of where fire apparatus is located is evolving because the location of apparatus and its availability is becoming more and more of a scarce resource.

Reaching back into the pages of the early history books our original means of keeping track was pretty primitive. When an apparatus was in a fire station there was a watch desk. A firefighter sat at that watch desk keeping track of all of the events that occurred in the fire station. According to some of the historical logs that I personally possess the watch desk was staffed in some fire departments 24-hours a day. This meant that one or more firefighters sometimes had to stay awake all night long just to keep track of what was happening. During that same era once a fire station was put into a state of alarm the only other way that the dispatch center knew where the fire truck was depended upon the company officer finding a local fire alarm box and tapping a code back to the dispatch center.

Today's fire service is so incredibly dynamic that a primitive method such as that is inefficient and inadequate. We need something a little more technologically sophisticated. And the answer to that is found in a combination of a telephone and a GPS locator.

Before we explore that technology we ought to talk a little bit about controlling our most critical asset – firefighting apparatus and the staffs that ride on them. More and more we are finding that fire companies are an increasingly expensive commodity. Knowing where they are and redeploying them on a dynamic basis – especially in those departments that have a heavy commitment to emergency medical services is no longer a hypothetical question. It is a reality.

One of the solutions that are being offered to assist in this area is referred to as automatic vehicle location. Sometimes referred to by its acronym AVL this is essentially nothing more than a system of keeping track of where the apparatus is on the ground so that the dispatch center has the ability to determine where units are when they are deployed. AVL is not exactly a fire service phenomenon. To the contrary, business and industry has been using automatic vehicle location for a long time. As a



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matter of fact one of the earliest applications that I witnessed on this was on garbage trucks. The system is relatively unsophisticated in the sense that it is automatic. By having a device on a vehicle that transmits its location back to the emergency communication center the closet unit to an incident can often be determined and this is important to shave off seconds and sometimes even minutes off a response.

This is especially true in very high workload scenarios in which second and even third due fire companies are often deployed when in fact other companies might be closer by.

Then there is the curious phenomenon of assembling a bunch of fire trucks and sending them off on a major emergency operation. While this may appear to be a predominantly western United States phenomenon more and more fire departments are being mobilized to provide mutual aid away from the city. If we think we lose track of fire trucks within our own jurisdiction you can imagine the confusion that occurs when they go outside of radio range.

Now back to the potential solution. What prompted my curiosity in this arena was essentially Martha Stewart. As some of you may recall when Martha Stewart was incarcerated and then released one of the big topics of discussion was the fact that she had to wear a locator to keep track of her presence. After listening to several news broadcasts associated with this I took the time to give a call to the vendor that was located locally. Upon visiting that office I was given an opportunity to see how this technology has revolutionized the concept of locating and tracking individuals who are in violation of the criminal justice system.

The device I was able to acquire from them resembles a cell phone. The design is relatively straightforward. It utilizes a receiver mounted on the back of a cell phone to interrogate multiple satellites in the sky to triangulate on the location where the phone is. The fact that it is a cell phone means that it can do one of several things. In the first place there is a location on the phone where you can actually push a button and it will tell you exactly what your geographical coordinates are at the time you are making the phone transmission. That information can be entered in records and logs. Then, of course, the user would be able to make a telephone call back to whatever pre-configured number would be interested in vehicles location and voice to voice communications can transpire. Secondly somebody who has that number can call that number up and interrogate the user of the phone to determine the location. So in a sense there are three different ways that this phone can be used to pinpoint the location of an individual.

Utilizing the built in capacity of the telephone there are several features. Among these is the idea that you can collect data points by identifying a specific location and then storing those data points as part of a file retained by the phone.



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So probably the most interesting part was being able to look at the company website and track the vehicle without even having to bother the individual who is on the apparatus. The device sends a signal back via the telephone line to a server, which locates a dot on a map approximately every minute. The interval can be set at different rates, i.e., fifteen minutes or even a half an hour. But the user doesn't have to do anything. It is all done automatically. The person who is interested in the location of the vehicle has to do very little to find it out.

Calling up the unit on a website then entering a user code and password, the communications center can not only see where this vehicle has been but has the ability to pick a specific time interval and then capture that information on a JPEG file which can be downloaded and printed out.

As I was preparing this article, I could almost hear the complaints and concerns that are likely to emerge from firefighters. It is 1984ish. It is big brother in the sky. And, in some ways they might be right. But there is a bigger agenda at stake here than whether or not someone is keeping track of you personally. A fire station is a multi-million dollar asset to the taxpayer. It is hard for me to say that keeping track of a fire truck and its utilization for emergency operations is less important than keeping track of a garbage truck, which does nothing but go out, and follow a pretty regular route and make deposits at the end of the day.

I believe that a good argument can be made for the fact that keeping track of responding resources is a primary obligation of a communications center. Moreover, being able to reproduce and describe how that deployment has played out on the ground may be more important to operations analyses than we have ever been lead to believe. Many fire departments are struggling with things such as response time. This device would allow it to be fairly easy to evaluate a location to a location with regard to actual driving time if the time interval was set within a window of tolerance of say 5 seconds.

In the business of fire and emergency services, fifteen seconds is a lot of heartbeats or a lot of flame spread. A minute can seem like a lifetime. A first in engine that arrives within an early time interval is much more valuable than fifteen engines arriving to observe the building being burned to the ground. It is my belief that it is in our best interest to acquire this technology into our fire trucks and into our operational analysis to be more and more response to the question of: does response timer really make a difference?

For further information on this concept feel free to contact the vendor.