



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

They Died With Their Boots On

Somewhere back in the 1950's, there was a movie made about the United States Cavalry called "They Died with Their Boots On." As an avid follower of Saturday morning serials and anything starring John Wayne or Randolph Scott I recall going to see that movie. Some of the older generation may remember it. It is unlikely however that anybody below the age of 50 will.

I don't remember the specific plot. However, I do recall in the end a whole bunch of cavalry guys got wiped out by the Indians. The reason it happened is they did a whole bunch of stupid things.

In the movie all of those guys were heroes. Yes, they died with their boots on. But being dead is a very limited reward for recognition.

Recently, I got myself aligned with a system on the Internet that advises me of every line of duty death that occurs. And, it sure appears to be that firefighters are still dying with their boots on too. Not unlike the Cavalry soldiers of the last century they are sallying forth into battle sometimes poorly lead and sometimes drastically under estimating the situation. Now that I think about it the main theme of the movie that I referred to in the previous chapters was General George S. Custer. The fight was the Little Big Horn and Custer's Last Stand.

Can we really afford more last stands at the scene of fires? I have read all the literature I can get my hands on, on firefighter's safety. I have read as much line of duty death reports as I possibly can to understand the real reasons behind why we are killing firefighters. I have been to more than my fair share of firefighter funerals.

As I started working on this column I also thought about things that I have heard from some of my peers. Specifically one of them is Chief Charlie Rule. Chief Rule has devoted almost his entire career to asking tough questions. And one of the things I have heard him say from time to time is the fact that if we are going to be in a dangerous business we can't afford to be stupid. Some of you may have seen the bulletin board art that has a picture of John Wayne wearing a Marine Corps uniform. On that plaque it says, "combat is dangerous" the next line says, "it's even more dangerous if you're stupid."

Now I do not wish to take the position that everybody who has died in the line of duty has done something stupid. But I would like to offer up a couple of thoughts about why we as the fire professionals are not following up on these line of duty deaths in an appropriate fashion to prevent more of them from occurring in the future.



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I have developed an opinion that there are at least three major dimensions to the line of duty death phenomena. They are training and education, firefighter health and safety, and incident command.

You notice that one of things I didn't talk about was protective clothing. I think we have long used the pursuit of the ultimate protective clothing ensemble as an excuse for firefighter safety. I don't think it is working. I will readily admit that it is important that our protective clothing be state of the art. But let me share one antidote with you that demonstrate why the other three are more important.

One time I was the safety officer on a flammable liquid fire control school in Southern California. My job was to scan the line during the operations of a variety of LPG gas fired props to make sure that people were operating safely. I observed a Captain and his crew approaching one problem we called the "Redidare." It was an awesome fireball that put the participants as close to the real thing as possible.

I observed the company officer standing with his hand on the shoulder of two of his nozzle men pushing them toward the fireball but the nozzles were not turned on. The two nozzle men's heads were huddled close to the Captains chest and they were moving quite slowly. The Captain was struggling to make the firefighters advance one side shuffle at a time. I blew my safety whistle and shut down the line. Climbing down from the safety tower what was going through my mind was real simple. What in the world was that officer thinking of?

I walked up to young officer who was approximately 30-35 years old and asked him that same question. His answer was simple. "A salesman told me that these new turnout coats that we have will take up 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit - I was just trying to prove to my men that it would protect them." Yes, this individual was risking the health and safety of a couple of his firefighters because of a salesman's comment about how much protection was afforded by new technology.

As I continued the discussion I noticed one of the fireman as stoic as he was had tears running down his face. I inquired as to his problem. He stated his shoulder and back were hurting him something terrible. I asked him to remove the bright yellow coat with all of its luminescence and hand-stitched name on the back. What I found was a huge blister that ran from the top of his shoulder approximately 6 inches down the backside of his arm and 6 inches down his back. The blister had been created by radiant heat flux that had gone through the jacket all the way to his skin.

Granted that was only one incident. But I have seen time after time where firefighters have believed that all of the technology that we keep putting on to them is supposed to protect them as they go deeper and deeper into fires. They couldn't be further from the truth. All of this research work on protective clothing is supposed to be there as the final line of defense. Creating an ensemble that will survive the death of its wearer is a fruitless pursuit.



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Now I will go back to my point of view. It is difficult for me to understand why individuals will place such strong emphasis on the development of protective clothing and totally ignore the training and education that is required for the individual to wear. It is sort of like learning how to put on a scuba outfit and then throwing them in the deepest part of the ocean while asking them if they know how to swim. Unfortunately, many fire departments do not spend any time at all teaching their people basic survival skills. And I am not talking about diving headfirst out of windows. I am talking about understanding fire behavior. I am talking about understanding basic building construction. I'm talking about understanding the role of an incident management system. The number one strategy reducing the amount of the loss of life from firefighters on the scene of fires is training. You will note I restricted this to fires and other emergencies. There are going to be other casualties we will talk about later but on the fireground the greatest defense against casualties are individuals that know what they are getting into and know their limitations.

That leads to the number two observation: Firefighter health and safety is a primary consideration and the reduction of many of the deaths. Everybody dies sooner or later. Some people expedite the process by not taking care of themselves physically and even emotionally. They allow their health to deteriorate and then expect it to perform like an Olympic athlete when they are under a highly stressful set of circumstances. What malarkey.

Yet, it has been my personal experiences that when you introduce the concept of physical fitness to many firemen they either shun it or belittle it. I have seen fire chiefs attempt to get physical training into their fire department and face major uphill battles because someone is afraid they will be held accountable. I have seen fire departments that have had recruits come out of their basic academy as finely tuned as any athlete walking on to a competitive professional sports field has. Yet six months later after an over indulgence of fire house cooking and apathy on the training ground that same individual could barely get out of his way.

Now I am of the opinion that we cannot keep all of our firefighters in top physical condition throughout their entire life. But, we should do everything in our power to at least prevent the gradual degradation that comes about from lack of physical exercise and the adoption of poor lifestyles. I recently went on one fire watching a middle-aged fire captain huffing and puffing, his face bright red as he came out of a house fire. Sprawled on the lawn in front of the structure he opened up his \$350 turnout coat to reveal an anatomy more fitting for Santa Claus.

That leads to the third component of fire ground safety: Strong incident management. Now everyone is going to tell me that they have already got strong incident command systems in place. I see this as a reality in much of the fire service. But I am not talking about the theory. I am talking about the application. Incident managers must place a strong priority on fire ground safety. It starts at the top it



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doesn't start at the bottom. And this includes telling people they can't do things even when they want to.

At one fire in my career I ordered a group of individuals to get off a roof. The captain started an argument with me regarding the fact that he had almost finished the job and wanted to stay until it was done. The last individual who came off of that roof had to dive headfirst over the parapet onto the rungs of the ladder due to a structural collapse. If I would have allowed the company officer to have the luxury of his point of view prevailing over mine as incident commander we would have all been going to his funeral the following week.

Dying with your boots on may have been an honor in the 1800's in the aftermath of the civil war. In a contemporary world dying with your boots on is just another indication that the system failed. It failed catastrophically. Professional fire officers need to stick to their guns on these three issues. Train your firefighters to the highest possible level of knowledge regarding fire behavior; demand that everybody that is going to be on the fire ground is in reasonably good physical condition; and then run the fire ground as if you expect every single firefighter to become a victim.

None of this removes our responsibilities as fire professionals to do what we can to combat fire. Society is not paying us to stand on the outside of buildings and lob water through windows on insignificant events. It is not our intention that the concept of two in and two out means that we stand around idle when life is threatened.

However, society doesn't expect us to be kamikaze pilots either. Going deep down in the bowels of an empty building that is partially under demolition or unduly risking the lives of firefighters for a building that is essentially already lost is not part of the bargain. A fire professional knows the difference between the two.