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***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Dying Breed

The History Channel recently had a real good series on recently about the end of the Samurai. The Samurai was a special breed of warrior that existed in the country of Japan for hundreds of years. Unfortunately the Samurai who had a highly developed code of ethics eventually were rendered obsolete as the world changed around it. Their guidance called the Boshido Code was one of duty and honor but eventually it fell by the wayside as the Samurai were replaced by modern warfare. Tom Cruise also starred in a commercial movie on the same topic.

Interestingly Japan after they got rid of the Samurai became an extremely militant state. It eventually resulted in the Japanese military machinery still needing large numbers of soldiers but the Samurai was no longer part of the makeup. Yet, the modern army took upon itself the images of the Samurai including the symbolic use of the code of honor and two swords carried by the soldiers of old.

Some Samurai chose to evolve into soldiers but a vast majority of them died and the breed became extinct.

I can't help but wonder once in a while as to whether or not we have a similar phenomenon taking place in the field of fire prevention. The last of the old time fire prevention people seems to be disappearing and the new breed does not appear to have the same background or philosophical approach. The real question is whether that is good or bad. As you complete this article perhaps you will come to your own conclusion. Frankly, in my mind the jury is still out.

What I am referring to is the fact that the firefighting fire prevention officer is becoming a thing of the past. What I mean by firefighting fire prevention officer is a person who has spent time in the operations side of the department eventually taking on responsibility for the fire marshal's job in a fire department. It is getting harder and harder to find someone who is even remotely interested in taking on that responsibility. Moreover even those that do take it on seemingly are interested only as a stepping-stone and not necessarily as a culmination of their career.

It hasn't always been that way. I can recall fire marshals in the early part of my career that was like the Samurai of the past. They were highly motivated, ethical combat warriors who had chosen at some point in their career to adopt a higher calling; fire prevention. The model that comes to my mind most quickly was a gentleman named Howard Boyd. It is unlikely that many of the contemporary fire service will remember Howard but those that do can probably relate to my observation. He was a gentlemanly but very aggressively, enabled fire marshal. I believe he was from Nashville Tennessee.



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

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You couldn't have blown Howard out of the job being Fire Marshal with dynamite. It was his life. It was like a religion to him. His ethics were shaped by his exposure to a lifetime of trying to solve fire problems in a part of the world where fire can be a devastating total for many years. In a word then he was a firefighter's fire marshal.

I contrast that today with the problems we are having in two particular arenas. The first of these is trying to get suppression people to take on the job of being a fire marshal. The second is in trying to get fire marshal's positions filled from the ranks when you do external recruiting. In both cases the number of firefighting fire marshals is beginning to dissipate. And I am not saying that there aren't people who want to be fire marshal. The truth is that there is a replacement type of fire prevention warrior that is emerging from the hiring practices of many fire departments and it is the civilian fire marshal. This is where we get to the question of whether it is good or bad.

I can actually understand why some of the suppression people don't want the job. In the first place going from an operations slot into a staff job as a fire marshal in many cases is a severe financial impact. Moreover it changes the quality of life. Those individuals who do make that choice often suffer financial reversals and it certainly has an impact on their family and friends. Yet when we lose the firefighting fire marshal, what we lose is the depth of understanding of what it is that fire prevention truly does in the community. Like the Samurai of old the firefighting fire marshal has had to unsheathe that sword to go to work and knows how important it is to keep the sword in the sheath.

On the other hand being a fire marshal is becoming an increasingly technological challenging occupation. Maybe the sword is not the weapon of choice any more. For example one of the real reasons why the Samurai were eventually eradicated was their refusal to accept modern technology. Swords against cannon and rifle are a lopsided battle. The fire marshal of today in many cases has to use a toolbox that is totally foreign to the operations side of the fire service. The fact that a fire marshal must be knowledgeable of a wide variety of codes, ordinances, regulations, statutes and legal processes is drastically different from incident command and fire ground operations.

What I mean by civilian fire marshal is not that the person is totally unfamiliar with the fire service. Many fire departments are finding that in order to encourage the right level of professional development they have to go someone who has a different type of training and education and certification. The emphasis is on engineering aspects as opposed to real world experience. In other words, in order to fully understand how to prevent fire and how to create a fire safe environment the fire marshal may or may not have ever seen that actual set of circumstances on the fire ground anymore.

In the fire service we have this concept called a career ladder. The implication is that you must stand on different rungs as you climb your way up to being a fire chief. It is interesting to me that we have



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

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created a parallel career ladder for people in fire prevention without really evaluating what that really can ultimately mean to the fire chief. If in fact a person may become the second most powerful person in a fire organization without ever having any combat experience how far is that of a reach from that same person assuming responsibility for the overall fire department? Here in lies one of the issues that we ought to be talking about philosophically.

In private conversations with individuals about this phenomenon they have advised me that most people have advised me that they don't think a civilian will ever be in charge of a fire department. Yet, all I have to do is look at the military model and realize that in this country we put civilians in charge of our military operations. For example, does the name Donald Rumsfeld mean anything to you? That is the nature of the democratic society. My projection is that if we continue to disregard the positive aspects of fire combat personnel serving as fire marshals we may eventually strengthen the position that fire departments should be put under the command of control with people with more technical knowledge and a limited fire combat experience.

This is where the argument gets real intense. There are people that disagree with this. One school of thought is that we should run people through the fire marshals job whether they are technically competent or not merely to give them some degree of background before they actually become a fire chief. That was considered to be a legitimate strategy in the past. Those that come from this school of thought are of the mind-set that they must have a technically competent person at the deputy fire marshal at the fire inspector level in order to make this process succeed. And that is true. Nothing could be worse for a combat officer than to be given a fire prevention bureau and held accountable for all of the issues of liability and fire prevention and having no one to be able to give you adequate advice. I think this is a perfectly legitimate strategy in many ways. What it requires, however is that whoever moves into that position have a clear understanding of their own limitations. I have observed fire combat individuals who move into fire marshaling jobs in which they attempt to bring that same "incident commander" mentality into very complex decision making processes and find themselves in trouble.

Please don't feel that that is a slam against the incident commander approach but rather a warning. On the fire ground we are often responding to rapidly changing sets of circumstances in which we make decisions and then make continued follow-up on that decision until we bring a problem to a halt. It is not the same environment in a fire prevention bureau. You must make really sure that you have the right kind of authority and fact finding behind the decision-making processes with regard to imposing requirements on developers and the business community. There is an expectation of a fire marshal that is significantly different than that of an incident commander.



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

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That expectation is that a fire marshal is consistent, fair and accurate as decisions are made you might say to yourself that that is not necessarily different than the role of an incident commander but I believe there are significant differences.

Among those significant differences is the fact that a decision made in a code enforcement environment is driven by legal requirements and restraints that are not imposed upon an incident commander. If fire ground commanders had to have as many sets of rules and regulations on what they could or could not do at the scene of an emergency as a fire marshal you would probably take a lot longer to put out a lot of fires. These are technical differences. Yet they are technical differences that also have an unusual impact. Almost everything that a fire marshal imposes upon a building has a cost factor to it, which will be resisted if not outright avoided by developers and property owners. Moreover, these technical requirements change from time to time and are layered in their implication.

By the latter what I am referring to is the fact that a local set of codes and ordinances may be impacted by a state set of regulations and those impacts may have to be integrated with federal regulations. It is a kaleidoscope that is further complicated by the fact that almost all fire codes are on a revision cycle that forces them to be different over time. As the old saying goes there is no rest for the wicked.

In other real significant difference with the fire marshal is that almost every decision they make is a matter of public record. It is subject to a considerable amount of scrutiny by others who have the ability to not only evaluate those decisions but to appeal them to a higher level of authority. For the most part incident commanders are used to making a decision and never having to explain it to hardly anyone. Whereas fire marshals often make decisions and then have to be prepared to defend that decision against those who oppose it or those who have the ability to overturn it. The mindset of being able to struggle with this degree of ambiguity is drastically different than the command and control mentality we exercise on the fire ground.

The last significant difference that I would state exists is the difference between the customers and clientele of operations and prevention. Almost everybody is really glad to see the emergency operations force show up at the scene of an event. That is not necessarily true when the fire prevention people show up at a meeting. In the case of operations an emergency is usually in progress and so clear in the minds of those that are experiencing it that they have a high level of toleration for any action taken by the fire department. Whereas, in the fire prevention environment the emergency is a future consideration if not outright object of pure speculation. The average person who is taking a case of code compliance before a fire marshal is emotionally convinced that we are being arbitrary and capricious in opposing any requirement much less the one that they are being required to fulfill. There is very little gratitude in the relationship between the fire marshal and his clientele in comparison to the incident commander and that customer base.



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

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The last most significant difference is in the form of reward or reinforcement of a job well done. For the most part, the work being done by people in fire prevention has very few short-term rewards. You don't see many high fives around the plan check table. Almost all of the rewards that accrue to people in fire prevention are accumulations of circumstances that make for a fire safe community. Yet those things hardly ever produce any gratification at all. Compare that to how intense the morale gets in a firehouse after a major working fire. Therefore, the types of individuals that select this kind of work for career satisfaction must have a high level of personal self-confidence and esteem.

All of this sort of comes together in the idea that a person who aspires to be a fire marshal is a different breed of cat. They are more of an exotic species than even the fire service recognizes. I don't believe all good firefighters have the ability to make that transition. However, I do believe that most good fire marshals have a clear understanding of their responsibility back to their fellow firefighters in suppression. If we lose that edge as more and more fire marshals emerge from the fire prevention engineering side then I think we will have lost a very important element in preserving the profession as a whole.