



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Horseshoes and Hand Grenades

It has been said that the only two games in which getting close allows you to score points is in horseshoes and hand grenades. I would submit in the modern fire service that we can add a third, weapons of mass destruction. MW'D's form a perfect trifecta with steel horseshoes, metal fragments and the power of explosives to create increasing levels of damage and destruction. A leaner in a game of horseshoes might make the difference of who wins and who loses but a near miss with a hand grenade can still result in casualties. Even a proximity hit in weapons of mass destruction can be a success for the person who pulled the trigger.

What got me to thinking about this here today was a discussion of our concern about the line of duty death profile in the United States. Ever since 911 the focus has shifted considerably. One idea that has gained our attention is the notion that a line of duty death phenomenon in the fire service is a worthwhile goal for improvement. I find it hard to believe that there is anybody out there that would disagree with that contention. But, line of duty death has spawned another phenomenon. That is the Near Miss Reporting System. That project did not emerge out of any specific fire death, but rather was taken from the idea that the aviation industry has embraced for so long. That concept is simply that close calls will sometimes tell you more about your next tragic accident than any other single event.

Recognizing that we have a severe if not almost monumental challenge in the fire service to overcome line of duty deaths perhaps we should be applying this same line of logic to the FVOA. This acronym stands for the Fire Victims of America. At the time that I am preparing this document we are approaching the end of a calendar year in which we will again publish the number of firefighters that die in the line of duty. Simultaneously we will be publishing information on the number of victims who have succumbed to fires. My math might not be entirely perfect but I strongly suspect that the ratio is going to be about 30-1. In other words out of about 100 firefighters who are victims of responding to and fighting a fire, there are some 3,000 to 3,500 civilians that fall victim to fire.

With complete deference to the work being done by the National Fallen Firefighter Memorial, where is the memorial for the fallen fire victims? The answer is that there are scattered locations throughout this entire United States in which one can read bronze plaques on stone cairns that describe the names of these obscure victims over time. I have personally seen some of them and have photographed them for my slide collection. There is one in Hinkley. There is one in Peshtigo. There could well be one in your neighborhood.

But, other than the continuous goal of America Burning and the perpetuation of fire prevention by fire prevention advocates in this country, nobody really memorializes the loss of life that is some 30 times



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greater than those who lost their lives in combat. And the one big difference between our loses and the civilian losses is the idea that firefighters lose their lives from a variety of threats such as vehicular accidents, heart attacks, cancerous growths and other items. A fire victim fall as a result of two things: heat or smoke. It's a nasty way to die.

Please don't think that I am comparing one against the other. To the contrary. I am recognizing the fact that while that ratio does exist, it is the manifestation of a level of commitment of the fire service. It is not a conflict between the two. Granted, I am convinced that if we were able to reduce the number of firefighter fatalities down to a minimal number (and I dare anybody to tell me what that number is other than zero) we should also be able to do something about reducing the loss of life to fire to those we protect to an absolute minimum (and I am not sure what that number is either, but zero is probably unachievable).

What this does point out however, is the fact that we are really not doing a very good job of analyzing the near misses with fire victims. Let's go back to the logic of why the near miss reporting system came into existence. There was recognition that many tragic situations that occur in the fire service were a hairs- breadth away in a previous incident located somewhere else. The concept of near miss reporting is to learn as much as you possibly can from incidents so that you can prevent that circumstance from occurring sometime in the future.

Where this column is going is the very idea that I believe that we do not do an adequate job on a national basis of really thoroughly evaluating structure fires and the mitigation strategies that could be saving lives. Granted we have a national fire information reporting system (NFIRS). And, it is a voluntary system that is totally inadequate when it comes to be able to represent 100% of the data that we could or should have available for policy developers to review. I wonder what would happen if we were to create a piece of legislation that would mandate that every single fire department in this country provide a comprehensive report anytime there is a structure fire in which two events occur. The first of these would be the analysis of any structure fire that occurs in which residents of that occupancy were literally home at the time the event occurs and were subsequently either self evacuated or rescued by firefighters. The second of these would be the evaluation of any structure fire in which there is a civilian injury or fatality.

As you can probably see by this limitation this would eliminate a certain number of structure fires from further description and analysis. I am not sure we really care about fires in unoccupied buildings, unless someone went in there for the wrong reason and never came out. Personally, I think we've killed way too many firefighters in buildings that are unoccupied and subsequently not worth sacrificing the life of a firefighter.



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What I am interested in determining is what are the basic factors that determine the survivability of parties when a fire occurs when people are in those buildings? Granted, one can research many websites in the American Fire Service and find information on such things as the activation of smoke detectors, the discussion of the role of a residential sprinklers and the success of the operation Life Safety program. But this is sort of like the tip of the iceberg.

When a structure fire occurs and people survive it we need to know a lot more than our current body of knowledge. For example, where is the information on the level of knowledge of those occupants? Did they do the right thing? Were they knowledgeable of the circumstances? What lead up to their ability to survive? If a fire was treated at the same level as a homicide nobody would pack up their gear and go back home until all the facts that were brought into evidence had been clearly indicated.

It is a reality that most fire departments hate paperwork. What I am suggesting here is more paperwork. But, if I were going to sacrifice anything in the development of this policy I would say that I am not really too concerned about fires that occurred in buildings in which there was nobody there. Granted they might be important for purposes of tactics and strategy but they really don't have much to do with public policy.

What I am suggesting is that anytime there is an actual exposure to a fire inside of a building and people get out of it – or in some tragic cases suffer fatalities from it we need to know more. We need that level of information to go beyond point of origin and determination of cause. We need to explore everything from economic factors, educational factors, technological assessment and so forth. The American Fire Service knows very little about its basic problem of what is killing people while it simultaneously continues to add to the inventory of codes and ordinances trying to accomplish that.

That is where we go back to the concept of the sort of near miss reporting system. Here is a question for you. If we kill 3,500 people every year as fire victims how many more are fire injuries? I know that information exists in somebody's database but I never hear anybody talk about it. I am sure that the National Burn Foundation has some of that data, but where is it being used in local, regional or national policy discussions?

What about the collective impact of burn injuries and the long term cost of care for burn victims? My suspicions are that it has a huge fiscal impact on our economy. Yet, it is as obscure as the number of people in which airbags are activated and saved their lives.

You will note that I strongly support that another criterion for this evaluation is that we need to know more about the conditions when firefighters are injured. I am not particularly concerned about the need for additional effort in investigating fires in which firefighters are fatalities because I think there has been significant improvements in that arena. Driven by the National Institute of Occupational Safety



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and Health and a strong support by the IAFF and IAFC more and more attention is being attracted to the events in which firefighters are victims of fires. Let's look at the near misses in a stronger fashion

What is equally important are those incidents that result in debilitating injuries that force firefighters into early retirement and drive up the cost of providing the level of protection in a community. If we accumulated what is actually being paid out in the way of burn institutions and then what is being paid out in retirement benefits, you might be surprised to find that this is also a huge fiscal impact.

In another article, I once characterized our nation's fire deaths as the crashing of a Boeing 747 on a monthly basis. If that was actually occurring, the aviation industry they would throw everything they possibly could at eliminating that problem. It is by no mistake that the aviation industry has discovered that by the examination of near misses with pilots they have had a huge impact on the safety of the passengers.

In the field of throwing horseshoes if you get anywhere near that steel stake you are going to have scored a few points. However, if you hit a ringer, more often than not you get to win. With hand grenades, if you throw enough of them at your adversary there is a possibility that you could slow them down but you may not always keep them from doing harm. Weapons of mass destruction are so non discriminatory in their consequence that their use often results in an unexpected consequence. The same thing could be said for our targeting what we are trying to do to reduce the loss of Americans lives and property. We have to be able to hit that target more often than not. We can't come up with draconian measures that develop adversarial relationships and we can't follow a budgetary policy in which we demand that everything the fire service wants it gets. The answer is somewhere in between.

And, if we can't solve the problem on a national level, at an absolute minimum we should be taking a much more focused approach on a local level. Ask yourself how thoroughly you are evaluating your near misses in a structural fire scenario when people do escape a working fire. If you only had one last year you probably didn't have much to learn from. But if you are running on several hundred per year there is a remote possibility that you may be missing some of the lessons that we need to incorporate in future code changes and public education messages. Those lessons need to be bundled up, carried forward to the region, the state and then hopefully emerge as justification for what we need to be doing in our national effort for fire and building codes. To do anything less, means we are not respecting the victims of fire by the same margin that we are respecting those who lose their lives in the quest for the elimination of fire loss.