



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Kamikaze Captains and Banzai Firefighters

Firefighter safety is one of the number one issues facing the fire service today. Does anyone disagree with that? Now, let's move on to a more complicated question. Just exactly how do we assure firefighter safety? Is it through writing of standards? Is it by creating minimum staffing requirements? Is it through training?

In all probability, all of these components make for a safer firefighter. But, there are no guarantees. One of the ways we can prove there are no guarantees is to listen to the salutations and the descriptions that are frequently given to individuals for heroism awards in the fire service. I can recall once sitting in an audience listening to the master of ceremonies describe the conduct of an individual who was receiving a valor award. The individual entered a burning building without breathing apparatus, noting in the situation that "he did not have enough time" to put on breathing apparatus. He went in without having a charged hoseline. The individual abandoned his partner and went off to conduct a search on his own. The individual almost became a combat casualty as a result of being trapped with the victim. Yet, they did manage to escape and they were being rewarded for such behavior by being called a hero.

A fire chief sitting alongside of me leaned over and in something slightly louder than a whisper stated, "If somebody would have done that within my fire department and didn't save the baby he'd be going through disciplinary proceedings."

Therein lies the dilemma for the future of the fire service. We are in a dangerous occupation. We like to recognize the heroism and the courage of the individuals involved in fire combat. Yet, we cannot tolerate unsafe behavior on the fire ground. Moreover, if a firefighter is injured or killed in the line of duty, it becomes a huge financial liability to the authority having jurisdiction.

Recently we have seen the proliferation of organizations designed to create safety on the fire ground. There has been a considerable amount of ink spilled on the singular issue of the amount of staffing that is required at the scene. If there is any one issue that seems to be polarizing the fire service today it is safety.

Is there a common ground? Is there anything that labor and management can agree on that creates a safer place for firefighters to function under emergency conditions? Is this like one of these ancient Greek mythological puzzles for which there is no answer?

I would like to make a suggestion. I suggest we take a reality check as to what is the nature of the fire services business. I'm not talking about those things that appear on our mission statements. I'm talking about the cold, hard reality of why people need fire protection. In my opinion, what fire protection is aimed at doing is to save lives when we can, and to protect property. There are some very subtle things



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about that statement. Saving lives means that we have to go in harm's way. Protecting property merely means that if we can move it out of harm's way there is a certain amount of property loss we will take for granted.

What this version means to me is that firefighters often have to risk their lives to save the lives of other human beings but there is absolutely no single reason in the world to risk the life of a firefighter to protect a piece of property. Wow! What a contradiction in achievements. How do we know if a life is not endangered when we arrive at a piece of burning property?

Of course, there are obvious clues. Whenever we are told by occupants that someone is still inside the building, firefighters have been known to throw all caution to the wind in an attempt to save that individual. The corollary to that is that I have had personal experiences with individuals telling us that there are occupants in the building and yet when it was all said and done there was no one. The occupants that were reportedly trapped had left by another exit and, in some cases; they weren't even in the building to begin with.

The reality is that when we arrive at the scene of an emergency, the number of personnel on a piece of fire apparatus translates into the number of activities that can occur concurrently. If you have one person on the fire truck and there is someone trapped in the building, they may well risk their life to try and save them. There are case records where individuals have lost their lives making such attempts. If you have two people on a fire apparatus, perhaps one can mount an attack to try and slow the fire down while the other one attempts the rescue. Or, both of them can devote their attention to trying to stop the fire and thereby rescue the person keeping the fire from getting to them. As you add each individual to the staffing configuration of a piece of fire apparatus, you allow more functions to occur simultaneously.

Therein comes the other problem. Staffing costs money. When we take into consideration the shift schedules and costs of providing those levels of protection, we often find many of our communities are unwilling or incapable of paying for those staffing levels. While this can be highly argumentative in an individual context, there is one thing that is inescapable.

The one irrefutable fact is that the element of time is the determining factor on the survivability of people trapped within buildings. A highly equipped piece of fire apparatus arriving too late in the fire scenario is too little, too late. Digressing back for a moment to the issue of property savings, it is also clear that there is one thing that is almost always there as a backdrop for potential property loss; the insurance system. One of the basic assumptions of the insurance industry is that they are going to lose a certain amount of property every year. They plan for it. They place large sums of money in reserve to assure that their profits are assured after they pay out their losses.



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Is it appropriate for a fire officer to expose the lives of firefighters with a potential loss to the community in terms of life insurance, long-term medical benefits to save a building that will actually be paid for by the insurance industry if it is completely consumed? Interesting rhetorical question. The reality is that any fire department that stands in the street and lets a building burn to the ground and fails to enter it in an attempt to control the fire will have absolutely no public credibility after a certain period of time.

So, reality tells us that the fire service is walking a very thin line. On the one hand we have lives to save and we must go in harm's way. On the other side of the wire, we have property to protect and we cannot protect it unless we penetrate to the seat of the fire as quickly as possible to keep losses to an absolute minimum. Safety is somewhere in between.

As I contemplated putting this article together, I couldn't help but think of one other industry that is very similar in context - the airline industry. They, too, have their quarrels over issues of staffing. They, too, have a mission of saving lives and property by the prevention of airplanes going down unnecessarily. They do have professional standards to adhere to.

Are there lessons to be learned from the airline profession? In another column, I once wrote about the behavior of Captain Al Hanes in the controlling of an aircraft that had suffered an extremely severe mid-air emergency. In that article, I talked about the training of the officers and the command presence that occurred under stress. I also mentioned that I'd heard Captain Hanes make his presentation at a training officers' workshop. When he completed his presentation he received a standing ovation from the attendees. The man was a true professional.

So, we are facing a situation where the fire service needs to look itself in the mirror. Are we truly being honest with ourselves when we make the safety issue overly simplistic by trying to have Band-Aid solutions? Shouldn't we be extremely careful to not condone behaviors that result in arbitrary and unnecessary exposures to combat firefighters?

If we go back to that ceremony in which we congratulated one firefighter for being a hero when he broke every rule in the book, perhaps we can find a clue to our own vulnerability. We like the reputation of being the hero. Heroism is what captures headlines. Heroism is what makes the public support alive. Well, the real issue is what do we need more - safety or image? The answer is that we can no longer afford the proliferation of combat casualties - that we must lose our enthusiasm for heroism that violates the basic principles of fire ground safety. If we wish to retain the concept of true hero, we must base our reward and recognition system on a more limited set of criteria.

Specifically what I have in mind is I honestly believe we should be rewarding firefighters for what they perform on the job as much as we should reward them for what they perform off the job. I know of



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several incidents where off duty firefighters have been forced into circumstances where they risked their lives without adequate protective clothing, without adequate emergency operation equipment, and yet they still pursued a course of action to save another human's life at the risk of their own. That to me is true heroism.

I believe the heroes of the fire service should also include those individuals who take courageous actions to deal with overall fire protection issues that have nothing to do with the fire ground. I know of several chief officers who, at the risk of their entire career, have taken on issues that were important for the community. Seldom do these type of individuals ever receive recognition for the type of quiet courage it takes to stand up for your principles and values. Yet, these are every bit a demonstration of courage as rushing into a burning building.

In years to come, there will still be firefighters who risk their lives without regard for following fire ground safety procedures. There will probably be firefighters killed in the line of duty who follow every safety principle but get caught up in circumstances beyond their control. For the credibility of the fire service, we need to do everything we possibly can to assure that those we lose in combat are lost because of the craziness of this industry and not because of the craziness of the individuals we send to the scene of emergencies.