



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Reviewing our Legacy

We often use the term paramilitary when describing the fire service. But as I have engaged different generations in the discussion of that term, there is a gap in understanding what is really meant by it. The word paramilitary is an adjective which means it is used to further define another word. In our case, the fire service is described as being paramilitary. If you look up the definition, you will find that paramilitary means similar to or modeled on the military but not belonging to it. Or, it can mean that organization is assisting official military forces: organized and staffed by civilians to provide support for the regular military services. I guess that definition might even apply to organizations that do not engage in dangerous work. The last definition cites using military techniques such as using military weapons and tactics to fight within a country against the official ruling power.

Which of these definitions best fits the fire service?

My belief is that the term paramilitary was first introduced over 2000 years ago. Students of fire history will recall that some of the first organized efforts were fire protection in the community were created by the Roman Empire. Augustus, in about 6 A.D. created the Vigiles. They were organized along military lines. Unfortunately the early practice of operating fire service in a military fashion fell into disuse during the dark ages and when it reemerged as a function of society it had more community like structure than the military. One does not have to look much past Benjamin Franklin to see that early American fire departments were very much driven by ethnicity, economic issues and the social fabric of the community. In the 1700's, fire protection was a function of the citizenry, with little affinity with the military. When did all that begin to change?

I believe that the answer is found in the Civil War. That is the reason for my writing this column for a special event will occur this year. This is the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg and there is a fire service story to be told regarding that event.

A statue stands in Excelsior field in Gettysburg Pennsylvania that all firefighters should know about. There are two young men standing shoulder to shoulder. One is in a uniform of a Union infantryman. The other is in the uniform of a volunteer firefighter. The soldier carries a musket; an instrument of death. The firefighter carries a speaking trumpet; a symbol of authority. At the base of the statute are plaques that identify this monument is being dedicated to the 173rd Infantry Regiment. The Regiment was an organization made up of volunteer firefighters from that famous city on the Hudson.

The monument was placed in its current position in the year 1892. That was long after the war was over. What we need to do is to look at that series of events and recognize that the Civil War did have a profound impact on the organizational structure of the fire service in its aftermath.



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Right after the Civil War almost all of the major metropolitan communities in the United States began to hire full-time firefighters. Many of these individuals were veterans of the Civil War. We were also entering the industrial age. The technology of the fire service was becoming much more sophisticated. I have reviewed photographs, prints, documents, and other sources of information I am convinced that prior to the Civil War, the social fabric was its most predominant characteristic. There are stories of politicians who rose to power as the head of volunteer organizations. There are stories of volunteer fire departments that restricted membership to specific ethnic and economic groups resulting in severe conflict when an actual fire occurred. When did the fire service start looking more like the military? I suggest right after the war.

Let's examine a few of the characteristics of the fire service after the war. Prior to the war the person who is in charge of a volunteer fire company was often called the foreman. After the war we see the use of the ranks of lieutenant, captain and then chief engineer. Fire companies operated almost totally independent of one another prior to the war. When the paid fire services took over, they reformed the volunteer companies into battalions.

The steamers that were coming into service required a specific type of driver. Almost anyone could drive a team of horses down the street under ordinary conditions, but it took a very special type of Teamster to handle a brace of horses at a full gallop under a variety of weather conditions. It was dangerous to be careening down the street with tons of steel and a boiler following you as you were attempting to negotiate traffic. Who was a more natural selection for that opportunity than former artillerymen?

One of the more colorful stories of the war was the legend of the fire Zouaves. One of the groups was led by Col. Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth. Unfortunately Col. Ellsworth was to be killed in a confrontation Alexander Virginia. Cries to avenge his death were part of the fabric of the rhetoric that emerged during the war.

As the veterans return home from the war they brought their uniforms and their pride back into the firehouse. The statue referred to earlier as been visited by many students of the National Fire Academy. There is another statue in Gettysburg that reflects another firefighter/warrior group. It was known as the 52nd Pennsylvania. I have researched extensively trying to find out the number of firefighters who were engaged in the combat operation but I have been unsuccessful in getting a specific number.

Research has taken me into many museums where I have observed the transition from the colorful; almost peacock like costume of the volunteer prior to the Civil War and the subtlety of the uniforms that emerged after the war. When we use the term paramilitary we can go back to the original definition. We are modeled after the military but we are not part of. That has not prohibited many of our firefighters from being among those who will go to war to protect the nation's interests. As I write this column, I



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know for a fact that there are many firefighters serving in Afghanistan, Iraq and other far-flung locations around the globe. The term "firefighters in peace – soldiers in war" personifies the paramilitary aspects of our profession.

In July 2013 there will be a massive event in Gettysburg. It is the 150th year of the anniversary of the battle. I'm assured that there are no veterans of that conflict alive who will to be there to shake our hands and congratulate us on having evolved into the modern fire service. That does not prevent us from taking a few moments and looking to our past. We should never doubt that that one of the reasons why we do subscribe to the paramilitary concept is that neither soldiers nor firefighters fear going into harm's way to protect their community.