



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Rommel; I Read Your Book

In the movie Patton, there was a scene that contained a great sound bite. Actor George C. Scott, as Patton, in the aftermath of a tank battle in North Africa shouts out; “Rommel! I read your book”. The reference was to a book authored by General Erwin Rommel on warfare¹. General Rommel was a student and writer on warfare. Having served in WW I from 1914 to 1917 and had written a book on his approach to tactical operations based on that experience. Patton apparently read it and learned a lot from it.

In celebrating his victory, Patton paid homage to a phenomenon that often gets minimized in the flush of victory and that is the role the planning and preparation plays in improving performance under stress. You probably know of the fire service version. It is called “pre-incident planning”.

The NFPA Standard for this topic is 1620. Perhaps you have read it. More importantly, I wonder if your department is practicing its recommendation. If you are not, there is a possibility that your department could contribute to a future on- the- job- injury, or at the very worst, a LODD. In that last sentence, I used the word possibility and contribute on purpose. They are hedge words. You could go for years and years and not engage in any pre-fire planning efforts and never see a catastrophic event that results in a casualty.

Then again, it could happen tonight.

The objective of this column is to convince you to make a commitment to improve your department’s use of preplanning processes and techniques as part of your department’s overall safety program. The 1620 Standard “provides criteria for evaluating the protection, construction, and operational features of specific occupancies to develop a pre-incident plan that should be used by responding personnel to manage fires and other emergencies in such occupancies using the available resources. “

Chapters 1 through Chapter 10 of this document provide general information, philosophies, and principles that might or might not be applicable to all occupancies. But that is not the point. What occupancies should you be looking into right now? Do you have any abandoned buildings? Do you have any overcrowded public assemblies? Do you have any buildings with a past record of having fires? The Standard notes that The Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ) should determine the level of planning appropriate for the jurisdiction and the property being pre-planned. And that means this is a discretionary decision for someone to make. That someone is you.

¹ Rommel, Field Marshal Erwin, Attacks,



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In Chapter 11 through Chapter 20 of 1620 the document provides information addressing special or unique characteristics of specific occupancy classifications. Have you conducted an inventory about your special risks or not?

What prompted this column is a series of observations made when visiting fire officials and their departments in which I have noted the they have discontinued pre-fire planning or have not invested in it in the first place. One of the things that prompted those conversations was based upon the contention that a large number of fire departments have discontinued both company inspections and preplanning activities due to increased involvement in EMS activity. Both of these activities are time consuming and are easy to defer. That doesn't make it right. Some departments are allowing a general malaise to fall over the operation folks because we are experiencing bad economic times. Neither excuse is adequate.

Concurrent with those observations has been a parallel recognition that many fire agencies are actually seeing a general reduction in the number of working fires. This doesn't mean we aren't having fires. We are. What appears to be happening is that the frequency of fires, compared to EMS calls continues to place more emphasis on EMS than fire readiness. That doesn't make it right either.

Philosophically, I would agree that we are merely responding to the reality of what our communities are asking for. In many ways we are responding to a demand that is likely to increase in the future. That is all the more reason that formal preplanning processes should be part of your department's strategic goals and objectives. A difference between the past and the present might be the concept of prioritization. Everything doesn't need to be preplanned. Acceptance of the idea that preplanning is part of the departmental salary program should lead to a department using its risk assessment process to identify "targets" that deserve a pre-plan visit.

In a column like this we don't have the time to talk about the specifics. Go to NFPA Standard 1620 for that type of information. Then look to see that your department is carrying out the function in some fashion. What I am advocating here is that a concentrated effort needs to be made to do it now. Emphasis from the top down needs to be made obvious. It needs to be a priority discussion at the operation level about firefighter safety. Can you really afford to not be prepared for these special risks and hazards in your town?

If your department is already doing what I am suggesting, take this column as validation of what you are doing. If your department is doing nothing on preplanning, I would hope that you be a little introspective and look carefully at where preplanning could be of value. Then act on it. Use the tool box provided by the NFPA Standard. Review and consider using pre-incident programs created by others on abandoned buildings. Create your own system.



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Whatever you chose to do; do something. Someday, sometime you might be able to say after a serious fire, in which there were no casualties that “you read the book” that allowed your firefighters to go home when their shift ended.