



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Ruffles and Flourishes

If you have ever been at an event where the President of the United States was present you have likely heard a very specific piece of music being played. In some cases, if you have been in the presence of other major political dignitaries, such as Vice Presidents or Senators, it may have been played also. I am talking about a musical fanfare called “ruffles and flourishes”. Ruffles and flourishes is a series of musical notes that are done in a repetitive fashion to announce the arrival of somebody very important. Ruffles are played on drums. Flourishes are played on bugles. For example when the President appears he gets four ruffles and four flourishes before we hear the notes of “Hail to the Chief”. Everybody else gets less than the four when they are announced.

It is a tradition in the diplomatic world that, in many ways we have emulated in the fire service.

I am referencing the idea that we have now adopted bagpipes as our entry ceremonial music. It is our form of ruffles and flourish. But, then again, so has law enforcement. And, there are many military organizations that have employed bagpipes to be the opening sounds of an event in which important people are joined together to talk about important matters.

I am not a piper myself. However, I know quite a few people who are. Some of them have shared with me information over the years about the creation of their pipe bands that I find very interesting. One of the bands actually made me an honorary member and I am proud to wear the scarf that was given to me on that occasion.

But that is not why I am writing about bagpipes right now. If you go back to the first paragraph where I talk about ruffles and flourishes, it is a sound that once people grow accustomed to it becomes part of the tradition of that world. Bagpipes are rapidly becoming part of the tradition in the fire service, yet very few people in the fire service really know much about them other than what they see when the colors are presented and a rousing song like “Scotland the Brave” is played. And how many times have we bowed our heads to “Amazing Grace” at a funeral

In addition, I have received numerous phone calls from people asking me why bagpipes are even used in the fire service in the first place. How did we begin to adopt them? It might be appropriate to relate to the fact that bagpipes have been around for literally thousands of years. Musical instruments that consisted of bag of animal skin have been documented as far back as the beginning of the Roman Empire. By the way – wasn't the Roman Empire is what gave us many of the original traditions of the fire service? Semper vigilans!



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

And according to one archeologist in England there is evidence that the Romans brought them there when they occupied the country. Could there be a genetic acceptance of us firefighters that goes back a millennia?

But, more simply stated bagpipes don't really belong to the fire service they have been adopted by the fire service. The concept of a pipe band in many cases is more based upon its relationship with acts of courage and the modern day symbology of the military. The reality is that bagpipes were played a long time before Scotland adopted them also. Supposedly, the Scots borrowed them from the Irish. The military has embraced the idea of a particular type of musical instrument that is setting the tone for many events.

What prompted this column was an event that I recently attended based upon the graduation of a recruit academy. The event also included a promotional badge pinning ceremony. It was in my home town of Elk Grove. The city is protected by the Cosumnes Fire District. Having been a training officer in the early part of my career I attend almost every recruit graduation that occurs in my near proximity, as a constant reminder of the importance of that step in the beginning of a fire service career. My recent experience in Cosumnes motivated me to write this column for the very simple reason that the event seemingly captured the best of our past and provided a projection of our potential future. It started with pomp and circumstance!

What I am referring specifically was the idea that the badge pinning ceremony, the swearing in, including the oath of office and the symbology of our traditional aspects of the fire service were mingled with the pomp and circumstance of the bagpipe band, and then appropriately linked to the needs of this community in the present and for the future. In essence this ceremony celebrated every aspect from the ancient past to the immediate future.

I won't dwell on all of what the officers and staff at Cosumnes Fire Department did to make this a special occasion, but I would like to focus on a couple of "traditions" that they seemingly have incorporated that were new to me.

For example, one of the things that they did in their recruit academy is they give each individual firefighter his own personal firefighter axe.

When the recruit is given the axe it is crude, and unpolished, just as if it was taken off the rack yesterday.

During the five months that the recruits are going through the academy they are expected to take that axe and turn it into a object of beauty. In other words, they have received an axe handle that is



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

essentially wood and varnish with a metal head that is pitted and scared and they are expected to turn it into something that would be attractive enough to hang on a wall.

This particular ceremony included a lot of things that I have seen in other locations. But, the creation of the axe from a rough product to a finished one I felt was particularly symbolic. In an era of electronics, EMS and the pursuit of excellence the firefighters axe is still somewhat symbolic of the nature of this profession. It is a simple tool that is called upon to be used for extraordinary purposes.

Much of the ceremony that evening was standard for what I would consider to be recruit academies. It included an invocation, flag salute, video tape of the training program they went through, the giving and receiving of awards and the badge pinning ceremony. However, I don't want to let it go unsaid that that degree of pomp and circumstance displayed by this department can be taken for granted. It does not exist in all firefighting agencies. In some fire departments when the recruits receive their initial orientation the only welcoming they get is being dropped in front of the firehouse.

Many fire departments do not understand that the sense of self image and the acceptance of the moral aspects of this job begin with the establishment of traditions at the outset of a person's career. But, the firehouse is where our culture starts, evolves and sometimes trips us up. One of the other great ideas I picked up from this department was that they had taken a fire bell from an older piece of apparatus and mounted it on top of the drill tower. If individuals did something they were not supposed to do during the academy – or if an entire team did something it wasn't supposed to do, they were given the opportunity to run the stairs to the top and ring the bell. Every time that bell sounded it was a constant reminder of why it is important to take responsibility for your own actions. The idea was to avoid having to run up and ring that bell. In the recruit academy ringing that bell brought attention to failure.

However, that symbology was replaced at the end of the recruit academy. The Academy Commander required each recruit firefighter that walked off the stage to ring the bell for one last time as an indication of their rights of passage.

And that is where I was actually going with this column. Rights of passage. Periodically I hear from my contemporaries about their dismay, frustration and even anger about the current generation of firefighters. There is a form of denigration from one generation to another that somehow the new kids just don't seem to get it nor do they want to believe in the traditions of the fire service.

After watching that ceremony at CFD I would find it hard to believe that anyone could have walked off that stage feeling indifferent, ambivalent or disappointed in the choices they have made in life up until that point. That includes the recruit firefighters as well as those who are accepting promotional opportunities. Bagpipes, Bells, polished to a chrome like finish fire axes- These are symbols of a profession with a healthy dose of respect.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

So what happens between that event and a couple of years later? You see I don't believe that fire chiefs and retired firefighters are disappointed with the upcoming generation because of their failure to follow in our foot paths. I believe that it is because our footpath and the firehouse are drastically different than those that are celebrating at those graduation ceremonies. And we don't often share the same perspectives on the way things are supposed to be.

Who is negative at a graduation? Who is negative at the time of promotion? Who is cynical and critical of the organization at an event of that nature? The answer is pretty simply; usually nobody.

Granted there might be people sitting in the audience with their arms folded across their chest grouching that something didn't go right but the overall perception of people in attendance at these events is that they are happy to be there. It is just too bad that we can't carry that sense of enjoyment back into the firehouse and sustain it.

I maintain a collection of stories about what I refer to as "cultural anomalies". A cultural anomaly is something that goes on in a fire department that results in a totally negative image to the external world. You know what kind of thing I am talking about. Firefighters being drunk on duty. Firefighters using or stealing drugs while they are on duty. Physical violence between firefighters. Racial or gender discrimination in the firehouse that results in a blemish on the department. Dishonesty. Theft. I could go on with a list as long as my arm regarding the things that human beings can do to bring shame and disgrace upon their organization.

I have never seen one of those events brought up at a recruit graduation nor have I ever seen them mentioned at a badge pinning ceremony. They always happen somewhere in between.

Last but not least. I have also gone to a lot of retirements. I have stood alongside individuals that I have watched their careers since the day they entered as a probie to the day they retired as a Five Trumpet Chief. There is a long gap in between those events. I have heard those cultural anomalies be fodder for roasts at retirement. Sometimes with humor, sometimes with hostility. But, interestingly enough a fire person's career is getting shorter and shorter as various benefits have been brought forth to sustain the fire service. I am of the opinion that within a couple of more years a twenty year fire service career is going to be someone who has a lot of longevity.

What has that got to do with ruffles and flourishes? Well as I examined the circumstances of that recruit academy and related it to retirements I felt that there needs to be a stronger nexus between the traditions of both to make sure that there is nothing but a positive consequence of individual's life time choice of becoming a firefighter. Those plaques and awards that we receive upon retirement need to be reflected in tiny acts that have been polished to perfection. We all start off as rough tools and hopefully end up as a polished implement.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Those departments that take the time to develop the tradition of recruit academy graduations spend the time to hold badge pinning ceremonies in which people celebrate a renewal or reacceptance of their role in the fire department and those that place a very positive aspect on retirement are helping to preserve the culture of our business.

Preserving and protecting leads to the perpetuation of the strongest values being possessed. Improving and innovating new traditions sustains that culture in the future. We should do both with pride and our organizations will be better because of it.