



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Turning Over in the Grave

Who amongst you has not heard of the one paragraph statement by Fire Chief Ed Croker about what it is like being a fireman? I have heard it read at graduation ceremonies for rookie firefighters. I have seen it printed on the inner pages of programs for fire chief appointments, and I myself have used it as a direct quote in my book, *Going for Gold*. Ed Croker was a tough guy. He was a tough firefighter. He was among the best of his generation. Here is his quote:

"I have no ambition in this world but one, and that is to be a fireman. The position may, in the eyes of some, appear to be a lowly one; but we who know the work which a fireman has to do believe that his is a noble calling. There is an adage which says that, "Nothing can be destroyed except by fire." We strive to preserve from destruction the wealth of the world, which is the product of the industry of men, necessary for the comfort of both the rich and the poor. We are defenders from fires of the art which has beautified the world, the product of the genius of men and the means of refinement of mankind. But, above all, our proudest endeavor is to save lives of men – the work of God Himself. Under the impulse of such thoughts, the nobility of the occupation thrills us and stimulates us to deeds of daring, even at the supreme sacrifice. Such considerations may not strike the average mind, but they are sufficient to fill to the limit our ambition in life and to make us serve the general purpose of human society."

*-Edward Croker, Fire Chief
City of New York*

As well all know somebody who had been an active fire chief around the turn of the century is very unlikely to be part of the dialogue today. Yet I have used the very words spoken by Chief Croker recently in response to a statement that was given to me by a beleaguered fire marshal.

In actuality the fire marshal did not contact me directly but through an intermediary who sent me a copy of a memo. In that memo the fire marshal was asking for help to solve a problem for his local firefighters who were doing everything they could to stop the development of a sprinkler ordinance because somehow or other they felt that it was destroying job security.

Chief Croker must have turned over in his grave when he heard that statement. It had to have been disturbing to him for the very simple reason that when he was alive he was one of the best firefighters in this country and also one of the strongest advocates of built in fire protection technology. You see he was spurred on by the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in which hundreds of young women perished do to a lack of adequate fire protection devices in place to prevent them from burning or being forced to jump to their deaths. While he was equally capable of pounding his fist on the desk to obtain resources to do



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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the job of a fire department he was equally fervent in his desire to make his community as safe as possible.

Crocker is not alive today, but his spirit still is in the FDNY. I recently had an opportunity to read a book called First In, Last Out by John Salka. Chief Salka is another one of those born in the USA type fire chiefs who is not the least bit afraid to take on a controversy or a conflagration with equal enthusiasm.

In his book he makes the following quote:

“What very few people know is that Chief Crocker almost lost his job when he started taking on the Politicians in the great City of New York demanding that some of the more critical buildings in the town be given sprinkle protection in order for his courageous firefighters to be able to even have a fighting chance of doing their job. In many ways he was successful. In many ways he was a failure.

He was successful in that the City of New York for many years did pay very close attention to fire codes in buildings and there were changes that resulted in built in technology being used more in New York because of his efforts. He was a failure in that he wasn't able to do everything. But then again who is.”

Going back to my comments to the very frustrated fire marshal, I told him that there is nothing he is going to be able to do to change the mind of people who do not understand what fire protection is all about in the first place. You see protecting our community is not about our jobs and us; it is about lives and property. When I entered this business forty years ago there were fewer firefighters then there are on the face of the earth today. I had actively been involved in the sprinkling of large numbers of single family dwellings, apartment houses, and commercial buildings and yet at the same time I hired literally hundreds of firefighters and given them assignments that deal with responding to the emergency needs of my communities.

I cannot believe that anybody who calls themselves a professional in the field of fire protection believes that eliminating sprinkler systems somehow or other results in job security. It is actually almost the opposite. Any community that doesn't see the wisdom of putting sprinkler systems in place probably doesn't understand the wisdom of why they need a fire station in a specific location nor do they clearly understand what an effective response force is nor do they have any sense of perspective on the training and education needs of their firefighters. In short any community that would ignore the use of built in fire protection logic is probably going to be immune to dealing with any logic whatsoever.

I have heard all of these same arguments myself. One of the reasons I think these arguments are even made is that there is no single philosophy or doctrine of loyalty in the fire community with respect to



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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our mission. Whenever decisions in fire protection boil down to personal preference or worse yet, self interest, and then it is very difficult to argue them. It is just too emotional. In my response to the fire marshal I questioned in my mind whether anybody who would make a statement of that nature has never been on a very serious fatal fire. Moreover, I wonder if they have ever been on a multi-fatality fire. No one who has ever had that experience is going to walk away by saying “gee we would only save more people if we would have just had ten more guys on duty tonight”. It is not that simple. Take a look at what happened in the fires in Rhode Island. Take a look at what happened at the Beverly Hills Supper Club. Take a look at what happened at the Ponet Square Fire in Los Angeles.

I will be the first among you to argue the fact that we need an effective response force on-duty in order to cope with a wide array of emergencies and risk levels that exist in our communities. I am not now nor have ever been in favor of reducing staffing levels based upon the existence of built in fire protection devices. I have made statements and will continue to make statements that when you are balancing out a fire protection delivery system you need to control your hazards as much you possibly can so that your use of taxpayers’ money is as cost effective as possible. I think that that is a doctrine that the fire service benefits from.

But if you have ever been on one of those multiple fatal fires and if you have ever had to remove a person who is badly burned but still alive because you couldn’t get there fast enough to save them, then you have to understand the balance that this is all about. In another column and in several speeches I have told the story of how I got involved in sprinkler protection because of the death of a thirteen year old girl in a multi story apartment house at three o’clock one morning. I don’t want to repeat the whole store because it is too lengthy but it actually boiled down to the fact that as a Battalion Chief the previous week I had gone on a huge fire in a fiber glass factory that was confined basically to a drum as a result of a major discharge of sprinkler heads. It was then followed up by this three o’clock in the morning structure fire in which a thirteen year old girl died leaving claw marks on the inside of a wall because she could not escape a fire that came out of her living room.

Further in my response to the fire marshal I was reminded that this sort of discussion reminds me of the old cliché “yes Virginia, there is a Santa Clause!” If someone believes in Santa Clause then they understand the spirit and intent of what Christmas is all about. But if they don’t believe in Santa Clause nothing will ever get them to understand the impact of the concept. I would like to replace it with “yes, Fire Marshal, there is a fire service after sprinklers”. I believe that and I believe that there is ample evidence that others believe it.

In preparing my response to this I did have a conversation with a couple of folks about their perceptions about why anybody would feel that way. It was pointed out to me that sometimes people just don’t know what they don’t know. That beleaguered fire marshal should know that the statements being made by the uniformed is not necessarily a justification for changing his personal philosophy.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Those who believe in sprinklers should continue to fight the good fight. The courage of a person's conviction is often much more an indication of their ability to be a hero than the mere act of doing something physical in a spontaneous fashion. I had a conversation once with a friend of mine who was a bon-a-fide war hero. His comment to me was that hero's and combat are people who got very angry and got very lucky at the same time.

So it is possible for a group of firefighters to show up at a hearing in which you are contemplating sprinkler ordinances. It is also possible that they will do things that will distract from the sprinkler ordinance by claiming that it has some impact on them personally. That argument is intellectually bankrupt.

If you asked me, what I want to be on the fire ground is the best trained, most highly competent, capable, caring individuals that I can get my hands on. I believe they have all the right in the world to ask for and seek the benefits and the rewards for putting their lives on the line every single solitary day. However, I do not believe that it is appropriate for any person who has made that commitment to community life and property to denigrate and disgrace a proven tool in the arsenal of fire protection.

Chief Croker, if you are watching this from afar, please understand that the utterances of the uniformed do not drown out the message that you sent 100 years ago.