

Safety & The Warrior Spirit of Firefighting: A Dubious Juxtaposition?

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"Very simply, this publication describes the philosophy which distinguishes the U.S. Marine Corps. The thoughts contained here are not merely guidance for action in combat but a way of thinking." USMC Doctrine

I use this quote to kick things off because if you notice I hold the Marines in pretty high regard, not just because of their sharp uniforms or their devil dog moniker, but rather because they have a well established theory on how war should be fought, what the basis for warfighting is, and they never forget the basic unit of war fighting; that grunt on the ground with a gun. In the fire department, by way of contrast we have very little theory guiding what we do. Ours is a service of tradition based mimicry. We do it this way because our daddies did it that way and it worked for them. We also tend to forget that the basic unit of firefighting is that new guy on the ground with an 1 3/4" handline and he is fighting a war an enemy we never met.

The last few years has seen a rise in the safety consciousness of the fire service. We no longer ride on the back of fire trucks, we no longer ride at break neck speeds while not wearing seat belts, we wear traffic vests on the scene of automobile collisions, and the list goes on. One of the fundamental gripes I had about this whole safety thing initially was the line of reason that said, "... the job is dangerous and we accept that." Looking back I freely admit that I was missing a point.

Just because a job is dangerous does not mean that the people who do it should not take every chance to reduce the risks. A rifleman does not disregard cover just because being a Marine is dangerous. A sailor does not leave his life vest under his bed when the ship gets hit by a missile just because being on the water is dangerous enough. Again, I missed that point for a while but I think I got it now.

But I still have a problem with the common approaches to safety in the fire service.

Firefighting is still a hazardous profession. We are charged with doing everything we can to save people from the ravages of fire. In order to do this we must necessarily place ourselves into harm's way. We must accept this. If we fail to accept this then we have no mission. The question then becomes, "how do I juxtapose these apparently divergent objectives. How can I be safe and still go into burning buildings?"

The answer lies in doctrine, the USMC defines doctrine as, "... a way of thinking that forms the basis for harmonious actions and mutual understanding." The key phrases being harmonious actions and a way of thinking.

I don't like to hear that I have to wear a safety vest when operating on highway incidents when my apparatus drivers are not trained to effectively block traffic. I don't like to hear a safety speech when I am still running a three-person engine and a three-person ladder company. I don't like to hear about safety when a call for wires down or the third alarm activation in the same building in a three hour period requires a lights and sirens response. I don't like to be lectured about safety when fire grounds have little if any "harmonious action." I don't like to be lectured about safety when people around me are allowed to not follow the SOPs on fire calls and some of them don't even know the SOPs. I don't want to be lectured about safety when I hear command officers who react inappropriately to Maydays in charge of another fire two hours later.

What we do now is focus on the vests, focus on the 2-out, focus on the RIT, focus on the band aid while neglecting the arterial bleed.

Can safety and the firefighter mission co-exist? Absolutely!

But in order for safety and firefighting to obtain that level of harmony the marines talk about it is important that we stop taking band-aid approaches to safety. It is important that we start to take a serious look at human factors engineering, take a hard look at how emergency lights really affect civilian driver behavior, take a hard look at indoctrinating our people from day one on simple stuff like not exiting the cab on the traffic side of the apparatus when other options are available. It is time we ensure that are people are taking their assigned positions and not failing to ventilate or ladder the structure.

The modern firefighter is the last of a dying breed. It is the last civilian job where men and women engage in warrior like behavior against an impressive foe. It is the domain of asymmetrical threats and promised uncertainty. This modern day warrior can peacefully co-exist with *safety* if the following conditions are met:

- The pursuit of safety, while sacred in its own right, should never be allowed to interfere with the expeditious conduct of the mission.
- It must be accepted that there are situations where a firefighter death can be accepted as part of the job. These situations are arguably rare, once in a generation, events but to deny the possibility is to deny the basic premise of the mission.
- Safety is not a series of isolated mandates but rather a codified system of scientific, research supported, adaptable and scalable doctrinal ideologies that are woven into every fabric of the culture.

Until we can honestly say that these conditions are being met we are not only adversely affecting the mission we are also just paying lip service to safety.