



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## THE BADGE

Some people have titles that designate their occupation. Terms such as doctor, lawyer, dentist, and accountant clearly indicate what a person does for a living. Others have titles that are ranks and they carry a badge. Why do some people carry a badge and other merely carry at title?

Several years ago, there was a famous show on television called “Dragnet”. Sergeant Joe Friday with his characteristic monotone style let everyone know he was a cop – and he carried a badge. Some of you may even remember that it was badge #714. Basically, however, there are only two groups of people who still carry badges to designate their position in the professional world – police officers and firefighters.

Over the last couple of years, I have had many opportunities to speak at recruit academy graduations and/or promotional ceremonies for firefighters and to witness the pinning on many of these badges. It is a proud moment for the graduates or the promoted individual. In actuality, it is much more than being a proud moment. It is also an acceptance of responsibility and the acquisition of a long tradition of service.

The badge is not merely a piece of metal. It is a symbol, an icon that carries with it several thousand years of heritage and obligation. Unfortunately, many of the individuals in our society today have lost sight of why the shield has become part of our profession. Their acceptance of it focuses, in many cases, upon the attainment of the position as opposed to what the badge is, what it means, and why it is as important in a modern setting as it once was in its incipient phase.

In order to fully understand the impact of a shield, we have to go back to its origin. Several thousand years ago, our civilization began to organize itself into groups that were for or against various activities or philosophies. In order to show who was on what side they developed flags and banners. Often these flags and banners were carried in front of a marching military organization as an indication of loyalty of that particular group. Undoubtedly, the first signs that were used for this purpose were probably very crude but in almost all cases were symbolic.

It might have been nothing more than a stick with threads of colored textile or perhaps even animal fur suspended from the cross arm of the flag staff. The symbol that was used by the respective group, however, was used to tell friend from foe. Later, as adversarial relationships grew stronger and the weaponry grew more sophisticated, individual warriors took to carrying a device to protect themselves against weapons. They were called shields. Often the symbol of the organization was then emblazoned on the front of the shield so that the troops could distinguish themselves in time of battle. Notably, most individuals in the early days were right handed, therefore the shield was carried on the left arm leaving the right hand free to wield some other form of weapon.



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Beginning with the Crusades, there were two organizations whose symbols began to stand for something other than merely the difference between friend and foe. The first of these was the Order of St. John of Hospitaliers. Their symbol was a red cross emblazoned on the shield. The second group was referred to as the Knights of Malta. The symbol that was a part of their uniform was a Maltese Cross.

The thing that distinguished these two orders was that they not only stood for the loyalty to the organization and their quest for a religious conquering, they also stood for the fact that these two organizations made it part of their mission to assist people who had been killed or injured in combat situations. The Order of St. John of Hospitaliers and their red cross were responsible for the creation of many of the early hospitals. The Order of the Knights of Malta quickly became associated with those who went out of their way to engage in courageous acts to save people who were endangered from the infamous "Greek Fire".

In addition, the shield was used for another more gruesome purpose. It was not uncommon for a person who was killed in the line of combat to be carried from the field of battle on their own shield. Often, the knight who suffered in combat was buried with his shield. If they survived the wound and were able to either return to battle or at least back to a useful life in civilization, they were often rewarded with additional symbols that they were then allowed to place on their shield.

One of the most common symbols was the use of crossed weapons. In the language of heraldry, any time a weapon was crossed, it meant that it had been earned in combat. For example, crossed swords meant that a person had actually gone into battle. Crossed battle axes meant that the person had used the weapon in warfare. The weapon standing alone merely indicated intent. If it was crossed it indicated a performance.

Well, there is the long quantum leap from the crusaders storming the castles in their quest for the Holy Grail and a modern firefighter standing at a rostrum being pinned with a badge by a fire chief. Yet, there is a trail of heritage that goes from those early humanitarians up to and including the contemporary fire service.

The Maltese Cross was adopted by the fire service because it stood for humanitarian purposes. In a book entitled, "The Fire Service and Its emblems", several other forms of crosses were displayed, including the Nowee-Patta. This cross, a version of the Maltese Cross, was also utilized by early fire departments to indicate their dedication to humanitarian purposes. The early firefighters in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, in almost all cases, indicated their occupational orientation by the use of some form of device that was worn on their left arm. In some cases, it took the form of an arm band in the shape of a particular organizational symbol or, as was more commonly practiced in the United States, early volunteer firemen wore a large pattern that was on the chest of their shirts. These patterns were often cut in the shape of a shield with the name of their respective fire company embroidered across the shield.



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Other examples of heraldry have been included in this concept. For example, the concept of the “Firefighter’s Cluster” which is essentially a scramble of axes, nozzles, fire hose, and other devices, was an extension of the concept that a person had used these in a combat situation in order to earn them. I recently talked with a firefighter who asked why all the components are in the scramble and what each of them stands for. There are many firefighters who wear a badge on their chest that contains a device which has long since lost its definition in the fire service. If you look at some of the badges, they have a device that looks very similar to a long pole with a ball on the end of it. It looks like a flame is coming out of the top of the ball.

This particular mechanism was carried by early fire departments as a precursor to the red light that is employed on the top of our apparatus. This ball was carried by a young man called a vamp whose job it was to run in front of the volunteer fire department shouting a warning and carrying a torch so that people would know that a piece of fire apparatus was soon to follow. Today, we have red lights and sophisticated electronic sirens to attempt to warn people to get out of our way. In those days it was a two footed, fleet of foot juvenile who accomplished that purpose. The symbol remained as part of our badge as an indication of our willingness to risk our lives in response as well as risk our lives in firefighting.

There are many symbolic aspects of the shield that also come from the heraldry field. For example, most badges have a continuous circle of some kind of edge to the badge that looks either like a rope or a chain. Not unlike a ring, it is unbroken and it goes from one part of the badge all the way around to the other side. The purpose behind this was symbolically to illustrate dedication and commitment to duty – an unbroken ring meaning loyalty and an unbroken loop meaning loyalty.

Atop many shields there is either an animal figure or a symbol such as crossed nozzles and a firefighter’s helmet. Some departments have crowned their badges with unusual animals, i.e., the Los Angeles County Fire Department has the California gold state bear. Many badges have what appears to be an eagle or a phoenix atop the badge.

The phoenix was used in many early badges as a symbol of the sign of rebirth after a fire. In early mythology, the phoenix bird supposedly lived for 1,000 years. According to the myth, as the animal grew aged and bedraggled, it would eventually build a nest out of a pile of sticks and then ignite its own domicile. After it was completely consumed by the flames and the ashes would cool, a small worm would emerge from the ashes and then go through a series of metamorphosis until it achieved the image of a beautiful bird once again. The myth stated this process would occur over and over again, constantly renewing the phoenix to its youthful-like beauty.

As an aside, we often lose track of the fact that fire once had a strongly religious significance. The word ignite is actually an Anglo version for the Indian word Igni who was the Indian god of fire.



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Another commonly used device in the design of badges is to place some indication on the badge of the position that the individual holds. It is not uncommon for a firefighter to have the “scramble” indicating they are the ones who uses the tools. Apparatus operators are often given some kind of symbol that looks like a piece of fire apparatus. In one of the photographs that goes with this article the badge from the late 1800s from the Dalles, Oregon shows an old steamer. This was a contemporary piece of technology at the time this person wore the badge. Therefore, the steamer was symbolic of his responsibilities. It is not uncommon for a company officer to have a trumpet and for a chief officer to have crossed trumpets.

The question raised from time to time is why do firefighters wear silver badges and chief officers wear gold? The answer is found in a simple definition as the concept that society has on the value of a respective material. Gold is supposed to be a reward. It has been used in the fire service as a clear indication of a level of achievement. It is not uncommon for individuals who have achieved high levels of positions in the fire service to have badges that were not only made of gold but bedecked with various types of jewelry and precious stones.

One of the more interesting badges in my personal collection is one which I found in a junk shop in Laguna Beach. While riffling through a book store one day, I found a badge wrapped in a leather billfold stuck in with a box of old books that was being discarded. When I unwrapped the badge, I was surprised to see it was identified as Surgeon #1 on the Los Angeles City Fire Department. According to L.A. Fire Department officials, this badge was once worn by a physician in the San Fernando Valley who was not an official firefighter, but rather a fire buff who provided so many services to the fire department that he was recognized as being the official surgeon of the organization.

There you have it. That is a brief review of what that piece of metal is that we ceremoniously attach to our jacket or shirt after we have completed a period of time in training. It's not a sign of graduation; it is a symbol of commitment. That shield that was once used to protect an individual from the onslaught of weaponry is symbolic of the responsibility that a contemporary firefighter has of placing themselves between an emerging catastrophe and those lives and property that can be saved. No matter what its title, shape, size or design it remains as part of the uniform to remind us of our obligation, not as a symbol of authority to act.

I can recall a couple of years ago when there was quite a bit of discussion about eliminating the use of uniforms in the fire service. As a matter of fact, many departments will recall when there was such an attempt to downgrade badges, etc., that many individuals discontinued wearing the uniforms.

Personally, I can see both sides of the issue. We have been trying to change our image. Perhaps we'd like to be known more like doctors, lawyers, and CPAs. On the other hand, if I reflect back on the tradition and heritage of the shield, perhaps there is a balance point that needs to be achieved. We'll know in 200 years. If firefighters continue to wear the shield, perhaps form will follow function. While those of us who become casualties in the war against fire will not be carried off the field on the shield, it



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is true that wearing the shield is what places us in danger. Let us hope that the fire service of the future is as proud of their performance as the fire service of the past and present were of their role and responsibility in society.