

Fire Command!

guest editorial

"I don't want my ears burned"

by Burton A. Clark
Fire fighter (New Breed)
Laurel, Maryland

If there is one thing common to all fire departments in the world, it must be "bull sessions" between emergencies. During a recent session, I was defending the importance of an academic education for the fire fighter. Needless to say, I was alone in my opinion. The majority argued, "You don't need a college degree to ride on the back step." I countered with, "If we become more educated, maybe we'll kill fewer fire fighters."

The next statement I heard frightened me: "Fire fighters have to get killed; it's part of the job."

Do Fire Service personnel believe that being injured or killed is part of the job? Maybe we do, because the number of casualties keeps rising. Our military background may be partly to blame. In every battle there is an acceptable casualty level. What is the Fire Service's acceptable casualty level?

That which a society or group accepts is what it is likely to get. Polio became unacceptable; today it is almost non-existent. The commercial airline industry decided in the beginning that zero accidents would be the only acceptable level. That's why air travel is so safe. The Fire Service will stop being the most hazardous occupation only when we, its members, want it to.

Zero casualties won't come easily. We must become our own toughest critics. Everytime an accident occurs we must determine who or what is at fault. No one easily admits that he made a mistake, but that's how we learn.

Most of us have had our ears burned at least once. Why?

Does your helmet have ear flaps?
Were you taught to pull your ear flaps down?
Did you forget to pull your ear flaps down?
Did the ear flaps fail to protect you?
Why were you so close to the fire?
Fire fighters get burned; it's part of the job.

If your answer is the last one, your ears will get burned again. Whether it is your ears getting burned, or another fire fighter getting killed, it is someone or something's fault, not just a part of the job.

I know what some readers of this column will be thinking: "If you can't take it, Clark, you should get out of the Service." This attitude is one reason that we are Number One in hazardous occupations. As a member of the "new breed", I think zero is the only acceptable level of casualties.

This idea evolved during a "bull session". Maybe my whole theory is "bull". I hope not.