

## **Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job**

### **OUR MISSION**

**By Rick Lasky**

For well over two hundred years our fire service has responded to just about every call for help and emergency imaginable, and we've responded to those requests without hesitation, attitude or complaint. And over the years those calls for help have grown. They have pushed us and prodded us into performing and handling situations that no one ever imagined the fire service handling. Our mission as a fire service years ago was a simple one; to put out fires. But throughout the years the public has grown to understand that a firefighter will and can do just about anything, especially when it comes to helping you, your family or your business. We started out fighting fires and it was soon realized that we could provide first aid. We started with basic first aid, Red Cross first responders and the like and then moved into the emergency medical technician field, which elevated the EMS platform just a little bit higher. And then paramedicine thanks a lot in part to that show "Emergency." You know the show with Squad 51 and L.A. County Firefighter Paramedics Johnny Gage and Roy Desoto. That particular show did more for the fire service and more so for the field of EMS than anyone could have imagined. The show won even more support from the public and brought a little more attention as to what we do. It was also probably one of the best recruiting tools that accidentally fell into our laps. I can't tell you how many firefighters I know that say that that show is the reason that they are in the fire service. And to top it all, Randy Mantooth who played firefighter paramedic Johnny Gage, has over the years become a big time fan of the fire service. His support for us has been nothing more than phenomenal. He has delivered keynote

speeches, made guest appearances, and has helped fire departments and fire associations with fund raising events. He's an awesome guy and the fire service is fortunate to have a "fan" in Hollywood as we do in Randy Mantooth. Shortly after our introduction to paramedicine, we began getting called to chemical spills and releases because no one else would respond or take care of them. Hazardous materials response procedures were developed and haven't we come a long way from washing it down the sewer, to a much more sophisticated and proactive approach to our response to these types of incidents. On the kidding side we refer to our Haz-Mat techs as our "mop'n glow guys." But anyone that's been around an incident involving hazardous materials knows that those are definitely the people you want to rely on when the ethyl methyl bad stuff ends up on the ground or in the air. Soon after that came dive and swift water rescue. Then we entered the specialized rescue field such as high and low angle rescue, confined space rescue (regarding confined space rescue, we were already one up on this one because of our background by now in hazardous materials) and trench rescue. There was a time when dirt was just dirt but now there are three different classes of soil, class a, b, and c, and we treat all of them like class c because of the engulfing hazard and everything else that is involved when you're dealing with unstable ground. We moved into collapse rescue and continued to hone our skills with auto extrication and found ourselves handling all types of rescues. And the advances that have been made in the area of technical rescue are absolutely amazing. This is mainly due to the fact that we have so many very talented people out there in the fire service and we know we can tap into their abilities and their talents. The end result is everyone benefits from it, both the public and the fire service. We became plumbers, electricians, roofers, building construction and flood experts and a

few years ago they turned us into hot water heater, stove and furnace repairmen, this in part to carbon monoxide detectors commonly referred to by dispatch as “Co2” alarms. Again some one called us and the fire service responded, often doing so with little or no training as was usually the case when they threw us another thing to handle. Specifically when we look at CO responses, we took this area like we do so many, researched it, refined it, trained for it and ended up with a standard that others have modeled after. And just when you thought it couldn’t get worse, along came weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Before September 11, 2001, we talked about it and in many fire departments we trained for it. We discussed way back then the idea of having to be trained and respond to an incident involving WMD and thought it was nuts. We’re never going to have to deal with something like this. That type of thing just happens overseas. We realized on September 11<sup>th</sup> just how vulnerable we are to acts of terrorism and that our way of life had to change both day to day as civilians and even more so in the fire service. Now once again we had taken on another area of responsibility. We are at the forefront of Homeland Security. Most of our departments manage their emergency management program. We’re the ones that have planned, prepared and responded to all major incidents and disasters. We’ve prepared our troops to march into the battle of homeland security issues and to handle everything from poison gases and substances to major incidents involving all sorts of terrorism. And what makes it tougher is we had to do it with little or no funding. We had to expand our programs and provide another service but without the money. One more time the fire service has been called upon to do something else outside of just fighting fires. Outside of what we always envisioned of being a firefighter. Firefighters continually ask, “How much more stuff are they going to give us,

they keep giving us more stuff to do?" I've got news for them, it's going to keep happening as long as the fire service is as talented and as full of as many special people as it is, they are going to continue to call us every time there is a new problem or challenge. You look at the fire service as a whole, you give them any problem whatsoever and they will come up with a solution. Firefighters truly are the jack-of-all-trades, but we are the masters of them all. You give them any challenge; they'll face it and overcome it. That is one of the most awesome things about the fire service is the fact that you could call a firefighter, call the fire department, present them with a problem and they will figure it out and work you through it. Remember Rubic's Cube? You give a citizen Rubic's Cube and they'll sit on the couch for weeks trying to get all of the colors matched up. Give it to a firefighter and what does he do? Peels off the stickers, puts them back in the right order, then throws it back to you and tells you to turn Jerry Springer back on. In fact I've never seen people enjoy those types of challenges, solving problems and helping people, more than those that are within the fire service. And it doesn't matter if you're a paid or volunteer firefighter; it's the same thing. We're there to help people. We're there to help your family. Simply put, our best day is their worst day. When you're at your worst and life has you down, when you've got something horrible going on, whether it's a fire, medical problem or some other type of disaster, we'll be there for you and help you. We'll do everything we can to make things better again. That's what the fire service is all about. The reality is, firefighters are talented and are the cream of the crop in society. But, it is also that aggressiveness in solving problems that can get us into trouble and in some instances, to a point where we lose a firefighter. We end up putting ourselves in a predicament or situation that we shouldn't

be in. We end up going a step too far. We are so use to helping people, we are so use to stepping forward when others won't and into the spotlight, into harm's way and helping our fellow man, that at times we take too many chances and we put our people in a position where they never should have been. Again, that being aggressive with a lot of the things we do is one of our biggest attributes but one that if taken too far can get us into trouble. But that's the nature of the beast in the fire service. It's not an excuse by no means but something we need to be aware of if we are ever going to control it. What we can do as fire service leaders and future leaders is to do everything possible, everything within our power to make sure that we protect our personnel, to protect our troops in every way fashionable. Whether it's protective clothing and assuring that they have the proper PPE, assuring that they have portable radios and that they work, assuring that they have the training needed to do their job, the support from the fire department administration or from the upper echelon, the proper apparatus, firehouses, tools and equipment and more than anything else the proper amount of personnel. Anything that will help them do their job better and safer. It's kind of funny, before September 11<sup>th</sup> you had so many politicians, city managers and in some cases fire chiefs, beating up the fire service about staffing issues, about NFPA 1710, saying "you don't need as many firefighters," "back in the old days we did it with a lot less people" and "it's just a push by the union" and a lot of other nonsense. But after September 11<sup>th</sup>, you didn't hear much out of them. Well let me back up just a little. You heard from them when they wanted to make an appearance with you or put their arm around you when the cameras were out or when they needed votes. They were the walls to climb and obstacles to overcome when it came to trying to increase staffing and obtain more funding. Their

feelings were we didn't need four people on a rig. No need. What amazes me is these are the same people that won't go golfing without a four-some. They'll call everybody they know trying to get a "fourth" but have no problem sending a two or three man company as a first-in company to a structure fire. Our fight for staffing has to be strong. We need to continuously fight not just for more people but also for better equipment, better portable radios, better training, better facilities and better apparatus for our troops. Now don't get me wrong, there are plenty of very good fire chiefs and some pretty good politicians. I'm just unloading on those that kind of woke up one day and found out they were a chief. There are a lot of fire departments out there that don't have the funding, for real, for more people and are fighting as we speak to keep what they have and not lose anything. And they're some pretty good departments. I'm referring to those that have the money and don't want to spend it on the fire department. They need to realize that all we want to do is make it safer for our troops. And for their comments about the unions, the fact of the matter is when you look at all of the great things that unions do, all the unions really want when it comes down to it is to assure that their members are safe and go home to their families. Pretty simple. And where are the politicians now? It makes you sad and angry to read about another firehouse closing or the layoffs of firefighters yet they find the money to pay themselves or take care of their pet projects. That's until the next "big one." Then they'll be asking where we were and why weren't we prepared and when it suits them, they'll be back out taking pictures with us and patting us on the back. Be careful of who's behind you and what they're doing while they're there. I would try to keep them in front of me. Our mission when you look at it is kind of split right down the middle. We're there to provide the best protection possible for those that we have

sworn to serve and provide a service to them that is second to none. That when you need us, when you have a problem no matter what it is, call us first. Even if it's out of our area of expertise, we'll find someone that can help you. I don't care if it's nothing more than they didn't get their newspaper delivered; we'll give them the phone number that they need to call. It has a lot to do with protecting our own and standing up for our profession. We really don't need private firms or contractors out there doing our job for us. We don't need to privatize everything or outsource as much as we can. There are way too many people out there waiting and hiding and trying to take things away from us. We need to fight to hang on to what we already have and continue to fight for what we don't, but need. Our mission also has been to be there to promote family values. Whether you have a decent budget or not, one simple answer as to how you accomplish this kind of stuff is by promoting family values. Treat people like family. Get your firefighters to treat the people they are responding to like they are family. Like that's their mom, dad, grandparent, or child. Like that's their home or business. If you can produce that kind of atmosphere, that kind of attitude, then all of the rest of it kind of falls into place. Your politicians will be happy. The boss will be happy. Your firefighters are going to enjoy the accolades for doing a good job and the thank you notes for going above and beyond the normal expectations of a firefighter. And most of the public, which we have sworn to serve and protect, are going to be grateful and thankful for the services we provide. That's our mission. It's simple. Our mission is to take care of people. We talk about the fire service family. We talk about our families at home; we can't fulfill our mission and meet our goals if we don't live by core values. And I'm talking about real life, doable, realistic, attainable core values. We have to have something that the entire group

believes in. We have to have something to stand by. We have to have something that people will see first hand that we stand for. Without core values we have no vision, no guiding principles. Without a vision we have no way of fulfilling our mission. Without any of this we're like a bunch of ducks wandering in a thunderstorm, kind of hoping what happens happens for the right reasons. We've learned over years and years of mistakes, failures and successes that we have to plan our strategy. We have to have a plan of what we're going to do and have a plan to back that plan up. They dialed 911 for us. We can't dial 912. We're it! Bottom-line, if we really wanted to simplify things and make it easy on everybody, our mission is to treat people like family. Take care of those around us. Our mission is very clear. To be there for people when they really need us.