

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

**What September 11<sup>th</sup> did to us and for us**

**by Rick Lasky**

Words cannot describe the loss we all felt and suffered on September 11, 2001. An absolutely horrible chain of events that left us in a state of shock and sadness. And with hearts hurting we tried to figure out what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. We worked hard to hold everything together and to hold on to our family, our fire service family. Many in the fire service struggled between feelings of sadness and anger. And about the time you started to get a handle on the whole sadness thing, you'd think about friends that are no longer with us and get ticked off all over again.

### **The Public Outcry and Support**

The public has always held the fire service in a very high regard. When kids are asked about heroes or role models you are always assured that firefighters will be mentioned. There is that feeling of trust that the public has with us and that's when handling an emergency and when not. They hire fighters for odd jobs and for many other services and when asked by a friend, how was so and so at building your addition, they say, "great, you know he's a firefighter" so it goes without saying that our loss was felt well beyond our brothers and sisters but by the public as well. And the support from the public was phenomenal. They consoled us, fed us, and donated money to assist the families of those we had lost. Churches, schools, civic organizations, whole communities, were there for us. All of us!

### **A Wake Up Call**

Never in our wildest dreams or nightmares, did we ever imagine such an event that resulted in such a great loss. That kind of thing just didn't happen in America. I mean

attacking us like they did back at Pearl Harbor. The truth is, a *few* saw it coming, *many* never believed it could happen here, and now *everyone* knows it did and could someday happen again. It was a wake up call for us all. Retired General Norman Schwartzkopf said it best when he said “For decades we’ve had those two big oceans to protect us, but today technology has taken that away from us. We’re as vulnerable as ever.” He also added that we got so comfortable that some of our past administrations cut funding to the Armed Forces and hurt the very programs that help us defend our country. Boy does that sound familiar to us in the fire service.

Before September 11<sup>th</sup>, many of us tried to push for programs and classes for our personnel that taught and informed them about Anthrax, Small Pox and in general various weapons of mass destruction. Most that were trying to do this were laughed at or told there isn’t any need. Now, finally, at least we have the classes and training for the most part, on how to handle these types of emergencies. What is kind of amazing is after the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, you couldn’t swing a dead cat around the room without hitting an expert in terrorism or weapons of mass destruction. My question is where were they before September 11<sup>th</sup>? Now don’t get me wrong, there are many who are very talented, knowledgeable and experienced in this area and they are doing a great job getting us to where we need to be, but a whole lot of others came out of the shadows when they heard the money train coming.

### **The Funding is Here; Well Some of It**

There’s not a fire department anywhere in this country that has a limitless budget, at least we haven’t met them yet. One just overflowing with funding and just looking for a

way on how to spend it. The hard cold reality is, that most of us are trying to rub two nickels together to make a quarter. We're fighting off budget cuts while all along trying to get funding for areas that need it. Usually those little insignificant things like protective clothing, SCBAs, radios, tools , training and oh yes, for the paid departments that unbelievable, unreasonable request of actually wanting to pay your people a decent salary so that they can put food on the table.

For years a variety of folks have tried to get us the funding we need and to protect us. For a long time volunteer firefighting organizations, the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and editors like Bill Manning, have fought to protect us. This time though they had the ammunition to go after some big stuff and they did. But as hard as they worked and as hard as so many others tried, we did "ok," but not great. Many fire departments did and still fund programs that tax their budgets or provoke other areas to be cut so they can fund the "new stuff." A lot of the new grants and funds are there if you know where to look for it, but even with that you have to play or fight the political game of who needs it, who needs it more and why. The bad news is, it's not enough. The good news is it's more than what we had before. And through it all I often remind myself when I question the length of time it takes to get a grant approved and then spend the money, that instead of waiting months to get it, we've actually been waiting decades. Think about it. I often ask myself, think back before September 11<sup>th</sup>; how long did it take back then? Enough said! So a couple of months more doesn't bother me.

## **Good Politician – Bad Politician**

When we talk about the bad and the good that can come out of a crisis, you can't help but get to this one. We discussed in an earlier issue, that before September 11<sup>th</sup>, so many political types fought us on funding and on our battle to add more personnel. Fought us hard. Then September 11<sup>th</sup> hit, BAM, they were gone. Well sort of. A lot of them lined up to take photos with us, put their arms around us, and promised they would do whatever they could to get us the funds we need to be better prepared. Now on the one side, many did come through for us and we are doing much better. The rest though, kind of slipped back to where they were before 9/11 but they'll be back. When there's an election or the next time we get hit and they line up next to us again for another photo opportunity, we'll hear from them. Then as time slips by they'll demand to know why we weren't prepared, they'll start pointing fingers (always away from themselves) and we'll remind them about the whole funding thing and then they'll say it's coming (the funding) and we'll be right back in it again just going around in circles.

## **Just Like the Stop Sign**

Just as it seems we never put the stop sign up at that dangerous intersection until a kid gets hit, we never seem to get the funding or make the changes until one of our own gets hit. Whether it's on the fireground or where ever, often, and at times way to often we are reactive rather than proactive when it comes to our own needs. This time we have a bigger platform to yell from and we shouldn't stop screaming for the things we need to protect our people and ultimately the public until we get them. Every time I think about the friends I've lost on September 11<sup>th</sup> as well as before it and after it, I try to look for ways to not let them go in vain. We talked many times about how those that have left us

will always be with us and helping us and that they will teaching us and helping us to go home each day. That's if we'll let them! I tend to look at it, as their deaths will never have been in vain in my mind. For what they gave us was the ability to protect our people better and to be honest, a list of good things so long that we can't describe it all in this article. We did lose them and it hurt but they are helping us more than ever right now. Again, if we're willing to let them help. Their loss has helped us to realize several things. Their loss has helped us to emphasize that we have to make a difference while we can. To build our own legacy, to mentor, to invoke change, to take care of each other better, train better, fight for better equipment and staffing, to remember who's at home waiting, and that each and every day, each hour, minute and second is a gift and to not waste it. Not waste it hurting each other or on a bad mood. The hugs feel better than ever. You hear firefighters calling each other brother and sister more. Keep it up because it will be gone before you know it. After September 11<sup>th</sup> Bill Manning wrote an editorial called "They are alive in you." They are, keep them there. Remember what they did for us and what every brother and sister that has gone before has done for us. We owe it to them and to all of us as well. Never forgetting means never forgetting.

You know, with all the bad that happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, it's hard to see some of the good that came from it. Don't let our brothers and sisters go in vain. Remember the "Stop sign." Make a difference, seize the moment. We are a little bit better. Thanks brothers! Be safe.