

Firefighters, hurt feelings aside, say they're all on same team

Fire brotherhood not restrained by borders

Comments

December 9, 2009

BY NEIL STEINBERG Sun-Times Columnist
Opening shot

Building yourself up by belittling the other guy is a constant in human nature. Those who live on the mountaintops sneer at the timid souls farming the valleys, while valley-dwellers mock the buffoons hopping around rocky crags with goats. The Spartans slur the Athenians as effete; the Athenians dismiss the Spartans as brutes.

In Chicago, the big split -- after race, of course -- is city vs. suburbs. Chicago, with its big-city swagger, gazes beyond its borders and sees haystacks, shopping malls and Barney Fife. The suburbs, meanwhile, look at the city and see grime, crime and Al Capone.

These perceptions are not universally held, of course, but often harbored and sometimes even expressed, though what is felt in the heart is not what is said in private, and what is said in private doesn't always go down well in public.

'I would put my life in their hands'

When I set out to write about fighting a fire, my goals were to: 1.) convey the process accurately; 2.) not burn the guys I was talking to, since they seemed like good guys, and 3.) keep the media-shy Fire Department happy so it would let me do more stories about firefighting.

While I succeeded with No. 1, as far as I know, I failed at Nos. 2 and 3 by relaying the firefighters' comments about city vs. suburban techniques: that Chicago firefighters go in and attack fires, while suburban departments stand back and pour water on from outside.

These seemed like significant observations -- that's why I passed them along -- both sincerely held and reflecting the alpha-male, ribbing manner of firefighters. I never imagined it might cause dismay.

But it did. Big time. I heard from Chicago's top brass and from lots of suburban firefighters. While I don't often give the column over to letters, their thoughts were sincere enough, valid enough and (police officers, take note) polite enough that I feel they deserve sharing.

One last thought: While the suburban firefighters were quick to call the comments untrue and insulting, none seemed surprised to hear them. Just the opposite. "Chicago has and always will think they are better than everyone else for whatever reason," wrote one 15-year suburban firefighter.

Which leads me to suspect that the real problem is not that this attitude appeared in my column. The real issue, I believe, is that, true or not, some percentage of city firefighters believe it.

From Battalion Chief Larry Karp, Bensenville Fire Department:

"Most of the suburban firefighters take great pride in our aggressive, interior firefighting techniques, regardless of what the Chicago firefighters may think. We do not stand outside and allow a building to burn down as the Chicago firefighters are suggesting in your story.

"There is a big difference between us and Chicago Fire Department when it comes to getting firefighters to the scene. On a report of a fire, Chicago pulls up with an initial assignment of about 16 firefighters and five officers, one of them a chief officer. When I pull up to the same type of fire, I have eight firefighters, a lieutenant and myself. I like to think we can be just as successful in extinguishing a fire even though we don't have the resources of a 4,800-member department."

From Bob Hayes, Oak Forest Fire Department:

"I am one of those suburban firefighters that was mentioned in your article, and I am also a paid and trained professional to the exact same level and standards as any Chicago fireman [so I] find it very arrogant that they think they are God. . . .

"[These] comments about the Chicago way of doing things and how aggressive they are at putting out fires is an insult to all of the firefighters in the area. I have worked and fought many fires with my suburban brothers, and I can assure you that not one of us has ever shown up to a fire and said right off the bat let's hit this fire from the outside and not go in. I have entered many buildings and have done the same thing as our Chicago brothers many times.

"I have also had the chance to see in person just how the mindset of some Chicago guys are on big fires and I can say this: When they are called to come help in the suburbs they have an attitude when they get there of, 'OK, we are here, and we will show you how this is going to be done,' and they make jerks of themselves doing it.

"Last time I checked, all firefighters are equal, and some may be better than others at times. We are all trained and pretty good at what we do, including the surround-and-drown suburban guys."

From Robert S. Hoff, First Deputy Fire Commissioner, Chicago Fire Department:

"The majority of Chicago firefighters, from the top on down, consider the city and the suburbs as all one family. We learn from them, and they learn from us, constantly working and training together. The only difference is the name on the patches.

"There are tremendous firefighters outside the Chicago Fire Department, and I've worked and trained with many of them. I would put my life in their hands. They are great, aggressive, knowledgeable people. I personally apologize for ignorant comments that were made by members of the Chicago Fire Department because it does not reflect the true meaning of being a brother or sister in the fire service."

Chicago FBI: Owner of Former Suburban Car Dealership Arrested

From eNews Park Forest

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The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Chicago Sun-Times.

chgomike wrote:

nitwit wrote: Put all fireman on 8hr shifts and swing the shifts. Oh what a great idea! Firemen presently work 2112 hours a year, including time off. No 'paid vacations'....it's all time due. 8 hour shifts would reduce those hours to 2080. Then add in at least 2 weeks vacation and those hours drop to 2000. 1960 with 3 weeks off a year. What a bargain, the city would have to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to hire more firemen to make up all the hours.....just so you can 'stick it to them'. Oh, plus the city would have to hire janitorial services just like New York City did when they switched to 10-14 shifts. Hmmm, add 2 or 3 personal days and other time off that professional 40 hour a week jobs get and the costs skyrocket. Plus the problem of training and drilling at night. Oh, and HUGE overtime bills, like NYC, because you can't just stop a fire, stop giving someone CPR, or stop pulling someone out of a crunched car to change shifts. Firemen work 24 hour shifts for the last 120 years for a reason. It would be nice to have a normal sleeping schedule though.

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kathy b wrote:

Thanks Neil Steinberg. You are a jerk and look at the can of worms you opened up. You are always stirring the pot with your garbage. ALL Firefighter's are exceptional at what they do, whether in the City or the suburbs. They are the best of the best. Too bad the guys you chose to interview are not included in that description.

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justajob wrote:

The reason this has caused so much stir and ignited such a firestorm is because some idiot journalist like Neil Steinberg is allowed to publish something as stupid as that article with quotes from three of the biggest hand jobs on the job who have no idea what ANY fireman really does and then he stirs the pot further with his "hurt feelings" b.s. Neil Steinberg is a joke and shouldn't even be allowed to have a column in that crappy newspaper he works for. No wonder newspapers are going broke. Who would pay 2 cents for a Sun Times. And by the way, Chicago has a great fire department, and so do most of the suburbs. All the other stuff on here is bs

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allknowing wrote:

I have two stories to tell, one of the CFD and one of MCFD (Michigan City, IN). Eighteen years ago, my wife, myself and our landlords were burned out of a two flat on Chicago's Northwest side. CFD firefighters went in and extinguished the fire in time for much of the building and contents to be saved. Yes, they did a lot of damage but every wall they opened up was scorched inside. They knew the fire and where it raged. I believe this bravery and skill have not changed in the years since. Fast forward to just this past weekend. My wife and I found ourselves in Michigan City and came across an active house fire that was quickly becoming a biggie. We stopped to watch the action just as MCFD was coming on the scene with what seemed to be a small contingent (one engine and one aerial ladder. They, too, went immediately into the house and brought the fire under control in minutes, before it could spread to houses closely placed on either side. They also had to

contend with a back door blocked by a refrigerator (truly a stupid place for a major appliance). While Michigan City is definitely not a Chicago suburb, I think it fair to compare them to a suburban department. Suburban or city, these people live for the thrill of the fight. But their goals are preservation of life and property and they willingly accept great risk to their very lives every single time that bell rings. And they take great pride in what they do. This is true regardless of what department they call home.

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smcc wrote:

I would have to agree with First Deputy Fire Commissioner Hoff. I have had the opportunity to train with him in our city and I beleive that we all walked away learning from each other. As for minimum manning, I think that all of us would love to have a minimum of 4 on an engine and 5 on a ladder truck but the reality is that most of us go out the door with only 3 on each.

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cinder6 wrote:

I'm sorry this had to happen. The feelings obviously permeate some of the CFD ranks and that's unfortunate. However, for the most part the guys at CFD have been and are standup individuals who don't let municipal borders give any credence to their judgement of the guys from the 'burbs. Its unfortunate that Neil Dteinberg decided to give a podium to a minority of absent-minded and ignorant firemen. As for what nitwit wrote...you're an idiot. You have know comprehension on how much additional cost that would add to already over-extended budgets! Firemen everywhere are being laid off from what was a secure living, that should make you happy enough...jerk.

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assistant chief keith lenderman wrote:

It seems like all the readers missed the point. He said the way they attack a fire will not push it!!!! Over twenty years ago they proved you cannot push fire with proper hose technique. Read "Transitional Fire Attack" in Novembers Fire Engineering.

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lydell wrote:

It's always reassuring to see the Zero-to-Wounded Capacity of all involved. Humanity: we harrumph, therefore we are.

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noway wrote:

Dear "filth "Lighten up Francis. You've just gone an proved what a loudmouth DB you are.

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whr do u find sympathy wrote:

They said they were sorry. Im sure they regret how they sounded. The real issue here is that no fire rig should show up with just 3 ff's at a fire. Minimum manning is what we should be demanding from our elected officials. One other thing, the wining and piling on by some of the suburban ff,s. I don't think you would last one day in a city fire house kitchen with your thin skin.

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