Humor is the life’s blood of the fire service. It brings crews together, it provides a release from stress and anxiety, and it passes the time during long, slow shifts. It’s as if firefighters have a built-in mechanism that allows them to find humor in any situation. It’s a necessity. The harsh reality confronted on the job gets to anyone after a while. Humor acts as a relief valve, letting the pressures of the job escape. It has a cleansing affect and allows each person a reprieve from the daily drama of EMS.

Firefighters find humor in each other. They prey on each other, digging beneath the surfaces of their macho exteriors to find anything resembling a weakness or insecurity. Once discovered, it is pounced on. Ridicule is a staple around the fire station and one quickly develops a thick skin. If not, you either crumble under the pressure or become alienated. It’s sink or swim.

Rookies are immediately tested. They enter their new assignment timid and apprehensive and are immediately challenged in an attempt to single out anyone who exhibits a shred of sensitivity. Sensitivity is a killer. You must either refuse to let the harassment get to you or develop the skills of a seasoned actor. To reveal frustration or contempt is to open the door to a career of abuse. You have to roll with the punches.

Like all rookies, I was tested during my first months. In my case, it took a bit longer for the harassment to begin. Being a female, they were a
bit more cautious, discerning what they thought they could get away with, making sure I wouldn’t scream sexual harassment. Once they saw that I could take whatever they doled out and could dish it out in equal measure, the game was on.

The first incident happened late one night. I had gone to bed with the hopes of catching a few hours sleep, when I was called to the phone. I stumbled through the dark dorm, picking up the phone and wondering who could possibly be calling so late. It was no one. They had coated the receiver with shaving cream and called me from another line, just so I could smear the side of my head and be forced to drag myself into the bathroom to clean up. I took it in stride as remnants of the foam bubbled in my ear throughout the night.

The incidents that followed were as benign if not as annoying. I quickly learned that if you left your uniform shirt lying around the station, they would soak it in water and place it in the freezer. They presented me with my frozen shirt in a formal ceremony involving the entire station. I kept close tabs on my shirt from then on. They rigged laughing boxes under the toilet seat so that when I sat down, I had to relieve myself to the accompaniment of giggles. They lined my helmet with tinfoil smeared with motor oil so that when I donned my helmet, it resulted in hair that would put Elvis Presley to shame. It went on and on. I never let them see my annoyance. I good-naturedly laughed as I cleaned up whatever had been the focus of their latest prank. But paybacks followed and I reveled in my revenge.

I was raised in a family that thrived on laughter. That was what drew me to the fire service. The humor around the station was welcoming and familiar. I knew immediately that the fire service was for me. So prior to my first assignment at OFD, I was well versed in the art of pranks. I honed my skills at the fire academy.

I was the only female in my academy class, but that didn’t stop me from partaking in the harassment typical of daily life at the academy. I would scheme with the best of them, always looking for an opportunity to tease or play tricks on my fellow students. It was on a hot afternoon heading back from lunch that I came upon a dead black snake lying in the grass
near the training tower: a perfect opportunity. I quickly grabbed the snake, concealing it behind me as I made my way back to the tower.

The fire academy, like the fire service, is a paramilitary organization. They teach you the fundamentals of rank and order and you are expected to conduct yourself appropriately. You address your superiors according to rank and follow orders without question; daily life resembles boot camp. Following breaks, we would line up in formation, standing beside our gear, which was carefully laid out and ready to don. We would stand at attention as our instructors laid out the afternoon’s drills. We would then assemble our gear and report to our assigned exercise.

I knew the routine. I knew the instructors would be standing in a line in front of us, looking us over with mock disgust as they barked out training assignments. They would then stand back and frown as we scrambled among our gear, always moving too slowly to suit them. The trick to boot camp is to not draw attention to yourself. That’s why I chose to coil the snake under a particularly serious classmate’s helmet. Most of my classmates had seen me hide the snake, so they stood back, trying to conceal their laughter. As the cadet reached down and snatched his helmet from the ground, he noticed the large black snake coiled beneath it, ready to pounce. He shrieked like a schoolgirl, tossing his helmet high into the air, scattering his gear on the concrete. The helmet crashed to the ground, accompanied by the boisterous laughter of the class. The instructors responded with feigned disgust, berating the student, who took it in stride, shaking his head in embarrassment, his face burning with shame. The instructors never suspected me.

Pranks at the fire station took many forms. One of our district chiefs made the mistake of leaving his boat parked behind one of the stations while he went on vacation. It only took about a day for the boat to be relocated to the side of the road, a bright red For Sale sign attached to it. It was listed at a bargain price with the chief’s phone number in bold print. He received many calls.

One of our rookies was informed that, since he was low man on the totem pole, during an EMS class to practice spinal immobilization skills he would play the “victim” and be immobilized on a long backboard. Once
strapped down and unable to move, the rookie was quickly deposited in the dumpster out back as his crewmates stood by, laughing and taking pictures.

Our station had a balcony that overlooked the front drive. It was tradition for each rookie to be lured outside at some point, only to have a bucket of water dumped on his head. I somehow escaped this particular prank.

Beds were constantly rigged to antagonize the occupant. IV setups were concealed in the ceiling so that they slowly dripped onto the individual as he slept. Beds were filled with powder so that when the person got up in the night to respond to a call, he was blanketed in white. And my favorite prank: underwear would be placed on the outside of bunker pants, which are kept assembled over the boots for rapid donning. The pants are pushed down around the ankles of the boots, which concealed the underwear until the owner pulled up his pants to secure the suspenders. By then, the truck would be pulling away from the station. The unwitting victim had no choice but to jump on board sporting his undergarments on the outside of his gear. The truly demented pranksters would use women’s underwear.

But humor was a binding force among crews. It was part of the institution, like responding to calls or training. It came with the territory. The smarter ones accepted it, adapted, and learned from their experiences. What went around always came around and the traditions continue to this day.