Learning to Lead

In all cases, the initiative and judgment of the Officer are of great importance.

—OFD COMMAND PROCEDURES

By far the most advantageous aspect of working in administration was access to specialized training. Suddenly I was being sent to the most prestigious training conferences and programs in the country.

The National Fire Academy (NFA) was created in 1974 in conjunction with the U.S. Fire Administration. In 1971, President Nixon brought together a group of experts to address the growing problem of fire in the United States and to identify means of improving the training of firefighters. The group, known as the National Commission of Fire Prevention and Control, produced the landmark publication *America Burning*, which recommended the establishment of a national academy for firefighters. This academy would provide specialized training in arson investigation, incident command, and emergency scene management and would be free of charge. The government would cover the cost of the courses.
Let Burn

The NFA and the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) are located in the small town of Emmitsburg, Maryland, about twelve miles south of the famous battleground, Gettysburg. The town of Emmitsburg was founded in 1785 when Samuel Emmit deeded thirty-five acres of land to his son William. The NFA and the EMI are located on a beautiful campus that once housed Saint Joseph College, the first parochial school for girls in the United States. Founded in 1809 by Elizabeth Seton, the school closed in 1973 due to diminished enrollment and was purchased in 1979 by the U.S. government to house the Academy and Institute.

The campus, known collectively as the National Emergency Training Center, is located amid the rolling hills of northern Maryland. Flanked by fields of corn to the west and fragrant forests to the east, the historic red-brick buildings spread out atop a rich, green landscape. A few modern buildings serve as admissions and administration, and the dorms are immaculate structures that consist of private rooms and baths that house students during the two-week courses.

Courses provide intensive training in specialized areas of fire administration and emergency scene management. My first course was entitled Control of Fire Department Operations at Natural and Man-made Disasters. I arrived for my training late in the afternoon on a Sunday in late spring. I stood in line inside the admissions hall, the only female among a roomful of men from fire departments all over the country. After receiving our dorm keys and a map of the campus, we headed for our rooms to unpack and settle in.

I had heard about the NFA long before I applied for the course. Attending the Academy was a prestigious event in a fire officer’s career, one that typically singled a person out as ambitious and upwardly mobile. There is a lengthy application process followed by months of waiting. I applied without mentioning it to anyone, worried I might not make it in on my first attempt. So to be roaming the vast campus was a thrill to me. I felt my career was on track and I was doing everything possible to hone my skills in incident command and emergency scene management.

The course involved classroom lecture and simulated emergency incident management. There were about thirty students in the class, most of
them officers from departments of various sizes from around the country. The material was fast-paced and we were thrown into command scenarios almost immediately. During these scenarios, we would role-play various positions within the command structure, each responsible for certain aspects of scene management.

Emergency scene management involves a single incident commander overseeing various “sectors” within the command structure. These sectors can include medical, fire, and extrication, each overseen by an officer responsible for the activities within the sector. For example, the medical sector would oversee the treatment, “packaging,” and transportation of patients at an emergency scene. Each sector reports to the incident commander. This ensures fluidity of scene management and reduces the chance of any one commander becoming overwhelmed.

Each student got the opportunity to act in various sector roles and the scenarios changed daily. The scenarios included high-rise fires, large hazardous materials spills, natural disasters, and mass casualty incidents. The final day of class consisted of a “major incident” conjured up within the satanic minds of our instructors. Each student was assigned a position within the command structure and we all worked in concert to mitigate the event.

To be on that beautiful campus, with the singular responsibility of attending class each day and studying each night, was what I had longed for. In addition to the coursework, being able to discuss tactics with members of departments from different parts of the country was educational and enlightening. The students represented departments from varying backgrounds, some urban, some very rural. Each department faced its own set of challenges. For some, it was limited manpower and equipment; for others, it was the environment. The departments ranged from Puerto Rico to Alaska. The social interaction at the academy was as enriching as the classroom.

My year in the Training Division provided numerous educational opportunities. I attended the NFA twice, the second time completing the course Emergency Medical Services Special Operations. At the Emergency Management Institute I completed IEMC/All Hazards Preparedness and Response, a course that brought together community-wide representatives to learn how to handle large-scale emergencies. At the University of
Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute I completed the National Fire Service Staff and Command Course. I also attended local training, including Terrorism Operational Planning in Orlando and Command School ’99 in Daytona, Florida.

These courses, in addition to my AS in fire science and my master’s in public administration, taught me how to approach emergency incidents in a thoughtful, methodical manner. It taught me how to manage resources, anticipate the needs of command, and to keep my cool when all hell is breaking loose around me. As in my fire science courses, the national curriculum reinforced the concept of risk versus gain. Over many decades of research, it was becoming apparent that firefighters had to improve the way they approached fire, replacing the “rush in” mentality with one that was more contemplative and one that weighed the potential gains versus the level of risk to personnel.

At OFD, this change in tactics was not immediately embraced. The traditional mentality of the department meant a commitment to aggressive, interior attacks: the red meat of firefighting. In most cases, these aggressive attacks were highly productive, locating victims expediently, bringing fires under control quickly, and minimizing property damage. But I had been on the department long enough to witness the overzealous interior attacks that put personnel at risk for the sake of structures that were either cleared of victims or already significantly destroyed.

Much of this was related to the mentality inherent to firefighting. The teasing and horseplay characteristic of the fire department environment tends to morph into a form of peer pressure when it comes to job performance. Those seen as cautious or solicitous tend to be regarded as outside the norm of traditional, aggressive firefighting. Many young firefighters who lack education, experience, or both, tend to develop tunnel vision when it comes to attacking fire. They disregard the scene as a whole, focusing only on getting “water on the fire.” The primary objective to good tactical training is learning to take in the entire scene, to foresee events before they occur, especially those that endanger crews and hamper the objectives of scene management.
The year I spent in the Training Division and the tactical training I received at the NFA, EMI, and command conferences across the country instilled in me the essential objective of weighing risk versus gain at emergency incidents. These lessons, in addition to ten years on the job and the recent close call I experienced at the basement fire, imparted in me the requisite restraint a tactical commander should possess when sending personnel into hazardous situations. Ironically, it was this approach to tactics, acquired through training sponsored and encouraged by OFD, that would lead me to confront the reckless tactics I witnessed while fighting what would be the last fire of my career.