

I Was a Maverick

Very early on, I toed the PFD line one hundred percent. If a rookie was to be accepted into the culture, there was no other option. However, our formal rules were simple. They fit on a single page of typing paper with room to spare. Of course, a minimal list of rules allowed for a somewhat wide range of possible behaviors, but we all knew what the parameters of proper behavior were, whether written, oral, or implied.

Seldom did anyone stray from that standard.

In the late seventies, the routine of life in the stations was well established. Most captains did not want to entertain any new-fangled ideas or suggestions of something new or different. Take note, the majority of our nine captains were old-guard firemen and most had been volunteers back in the days before the Plano Fire Department was chartered.

As we were leaving the 1970's, our little town literally exploded with growth. That growth, of course, mandated more firemen, more stations, and more change. The first new station in our boom era was Station 4, up north at Spring Creek and Round Rock. That was probably 1980. Then, three years later, came Station 5 out on the western frontier and situated on the venerable Farm-to-Market Road, 544. After that, we built Station 6 up in the north central part of town, followed by Station 7 way out in the northwestern city limits. Stations 4, 5, 6, and 7 were all up and running prior to 1990. Each of those new stations called for the promotions of captains, lieutenants, and drivers, plus nine new hires for entry level firefighters. As a result, from the earliest years of the growth explosion, the new young whippersnapper officers outnumbered the old captains.

When Station 5 was opened, I was promoted to Lieutenant and was awarded custody of the famed Engine 10, the only engine that was sent on every fire and other serious major emergencies. It was at that point when I gained the latitude to do things the *Joe Fred way*. And believe me, I did a lot of things differently than the old way. Bear in mind, though, that everything I did was legal, ethical, and done in the name of progress and better service. Some of my changes and ideas were considered radical but were not specifically *verboden* in our rules or SOP's. For instance, playing sports while on duty is a prime example. As I best recall, almost everything I did is now common practice in the PFR.

Upon my promotion, I rode seat on E10 out of Central Station under the famous and very popular Captain Jimmy Bell. That was an excellent assignment. After a few months, though, the big chiefs decided the public would be better served if the roving E10 and crew were based in a house closer to the geographic center of town. Thus, Engine 10 was formally moved to Station 2. I landed on C-shift and got to work for Captain Jack Pryor. Like Captain Bell, Pryor was very well-liked and respected by the troops. Without doubt,

Jack was one of the new avant-garde captains and he tolerated my maverick attitude quite well. Of course, he was my age and thought along the same lines as I did. As I recall, under Pryor's leadership, we built a volleyball court behind the station. Thereafter, we played volleyball almost every shift. When the clock struck 1700 hours, we were in shorts, tee shirts, and tennis shoes. It was then and there that I learned it could be painful to be on the opposing front line when Captain Jack leapt high and spiked the ball over the net. More than one firefighter, including me, got embarrassed when that high-speed ball ricocheted off our heads as Pryor scored another point.

I took the volleyball idea a little further and began to routinely take my crew out to one of the school system's athletic fields. There, we took advantage of their well-made and maintained cinder track. I was a very serious runner at the time and took great delight in being able to exercise while getting paid for it. I continued in that vein after I got promoted to Captain and was moved to Station 5. That was a little slice of fireman's heaven, as well. Way out there, so far from headquarters, we seldom saw a chief officer in our fiefdom.

While at Station 5, I led the charge on another groundbreaker, *watching television during the day*. Formerly, other than an exemption for the news at noon, we firemen did not fire up the old telly until 5 pm. Personally, I didn't see the any real advantage or benefit in that practice. But, of course, it wouldn't be cool if we were sitting around on our asses watching Jeopardy or Jerry Springer when there was work to be done. Accordingly, I got into the habit of determining what I wanted done on any given day and would post that info on the whiteboard in the kitchen area. As far as I know, that was a first, too. I told the troops that once the list of objectives was completed, they were free to do whatever they wanted. Of course, that was limited to anything within reason and appropriate for a fire station environment.

In those days, the things I am writing about in this post were simply unheard of. But they all made sense, and we still got our jobs done and were the happier for it. Like *the contented cows of Carnation's dairy fame*, our product was better because we went about our jobs in a fun environment.

Ask any Baby Boomer about Carnation's contented cows and he will know what I mean.