

FIT FOR DUTY

By: Michael Krueger, NSCA-CPT

I am a personal trainer for a combination fire department that understands the value of investing in the health, fitness and wellbeing of their firefighters, and has taken steps to be in the forefront in this area. It has been an interesting experience; it is unlike anything I have ever done before.

My experience with emergency response stems from my service in the U. S. Coast Guard. I am very proud of my service and I can't think of any other national organization that has the history of service to those in need that compares with the Coast Guard. In an average day, the U.S. Coast Guard will save 15 lives, assist 114 people in distress, protect \$4.9 million in property, interdict 26 illegal immigrants at sea, conduct 82 search and rescue operations, seize \$12.4 million worth of illegal drugs, conduct 122 security boardings, 202 law-enforcement boardings, guide 2,557 ships in and out of ports, all done with a force of only 40,699 active duty personnel, and do it without a single fatality. Their mission has a national defense aspect as well as law enforcement and emergency rescue services, making them a unique organization compared to any other, either civilian and military. I believe their professionalism, dedication, and discipline are unmatched by anyone, anywhere.

Part of my CG experience was on a 41 foot rescue/patrol boat with a crew of four – very much like a team assigned to crew an engine company or ladder truck. We had to depend on the training and fitness of each crew member. Everyone had a job to do and we never questioned whether or not he was up to the task; we knew he was. Whether it was search and rescue, law enforcement, a simple safety inspection or any of the other varied duties the Coast Guard performs every day, operational readiness and professionalism were always at the front and center. Training was a constant activity. It could have been tedious except that the reasons we trained so much was always on our minds: we might need the skills we were practicing at any time, and someone's life may be at stake, so we took it seriously.

Physically it could be a demanding job; handling tow lines, maintaining aids to navigation, moving from one boat to another, helping victims of boating accidents all while traversing the wet heaving decks. To go into this environment with less than optimal fitness would be sheer folly. All of this activity was normally done without injury or incident; in fact I don't recall a time when some one was unable to perform our duties due to an injury, much less a line of duty death. Fitness for duty went far beyond simple physical fitness, but knowing that the crew was able to perform physically just made everything else easier.

I brought those traditions and expectations with me when I came on board as a fitness trainer with the fire service. I expected the same level of commitment to leadership, training, fitness and operational readiness that I had come to know in the Coast Guard. What I found were individual fire firefighters of extraordinary character and good intentions, working in an environment that doesn't do all it could to encourage, foster and reward that level of dedication. This very culture has made it difficult for them to perform up to the highest levels, and in some ways has made the high injury and mortality rates among firefighters more likely.

Combination departments are generally found in suburbs, small cities and rural areas. They have a higher average age and higher rates of mortality than career departments. Members die from cardio vascular disease, both acute and chronic at an alarming rate. Unfortunately they are not alone; the career departments account for an unsettling high number of heart attacks as well. Cardio vascular fitness is not what it should be among firefighters. While many might enjoy a work out in the weight room (though from my observation not a very structured work out), fewer are willing to put in the time to improve their heart and lungs with appropriate endurance exercise. Twenty minutes three times per week is all it takes to show improvement, yet not many are willing to do even that minimum amount.

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The number two cause of death is trauma, but more often than not it is caused by motor vehicle collisions rather incidents on the fire line. Volunteers frequently respond from their home or place of employment, rather than from the stations, so when called to duty they travel in their personally owned vehicles. Some statistics show that they are often exceeding the speed limit at the time of the collision and nearly a quarter of them were not wearing seatbelts. Considering the number of automobile crashes they have seen, such behavior is baffling.

Second to the privately owned vehicle crashes comes tanker collisions; more firefighters are killed in tanker crashes than in engines and ladders combined. For obvious reasons tankers are used more extensively in rural areas due to the lack of hydrants or other sources of water, so volunteers are more likely to be killed in these crashes. The reason for this would seem to be a combination failure of training and individual responsibility, with the greater failure falling on the individual.

So let's talk about these causes of death. The thread that connects them all is that they are preventable. These aren't accidents; they are failures of communication, training, risk management, operational oversight and in some cases leadership. The fire service hasn't yet done enough to create an environment where these incidents are viewed as systemic problems that need to be addressed on a national basis, preferring instead to see them as isolated incidents that happen somewhere else. On the local level, fixes are often implemented but this doesn't address the larger issue with the fire service as a whole. It also seems that some fire fighters see these incidents as inevitable, an attitude that needs to change.

The Coast Guard has a massive and varied mission, and it is interesting to understand how that mission is carried out. Training, safety and professionalism permeate everything it does, and nothing less than excellence is acceptable on any level. A successful mission is defined as when the job is done and everyone is back safely. When you consider all the equipment they use, including small boats, ice breakers, buoy tenders, harbor tugs, high endurance cutters, helicopters and fixed wing aircraft,

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not to mention fire arms, it is amazing that there aren't more mistakes, and therefore more injuries and fatalities. They certainly have the opportunity. But that is where leadership, accountability, education and expectations of superior performance come into play. If a casualty does happen, a major investigation takes place; responsibility is assigned, accountability accepted, and changes are made. This isn't to suggest that the fire service does not respond in kind when a casualty occurs, but because of the lack of national standards and a central administration, too often the hard learned lessons of one department aren't benefiting others.

The death of a firefighter is a terrible tragedy and no service provides a memorial as heartfelt and striking as the fire service. Forever burned into our memory are the images following the 9-11 disaster; the bravery and self-sacrifice that was displayed on that day served as an inspiration to the entire nation. We can still see the memorials, the proliferation of FDNY caps and tee-shirts; we can still hear the words and feel the pain and deep emotions of the survivors. But what else did we see that day?

According to several reports, what we saw were the tragic results from a breakdown of communications, and of service departments working at odds with each others' efforts because of a lack of coordinated training and operational resources. So much was happening so fast that we saw firefighters forgetting safety procedures, dashing into collapsing buildings, perhaps because they were caught up in the chaos and excitement of the moment. Their leaders were unable to communicate with them, to slow them down, to allow the training that they have had to take effect. This was a recipe for disaster, and that is exactly what we got. I know there was no way that anyone could have trained to respond to anything as horrific as what happened on that day; that is true. But what must be remembered is that every call could be a horrific disaster on a local level and that training and readiness must be in direct proportion to that possibility.

Operational readiness is not dependent on the size of a department or the geographic area that it may serve. Readiness is the ability to respond to whatever is encountered in a professional and disciplined way. Every firefighter must be a professional whether or

not he or she has chosen it as a full time career. It is the responsibility of the community to ensure that the training, equipment and resources that are needed to perform the duties that are mandated are available to those who need them. It is the personal responsibility of those who are on the line to be able to use that equipment without a moment's hesitation, and to have trained in such a way as to be able to perform their duties flawlessly. Readiness is also the ability to assess a situation and make the determination that if you are not trained, qualified or equipped to respond, then don't. It is the most difficult decision to make, but professionalism, accountability and responsibility demand that it be made. Engagement at all costs may be too costly.

Combination departments present a unique set of problems and opportunities. The problems are often presented in the same form as the opportunities: that is the people themselves. The men and women who take time from their lives to be on these departments deserve the best that is available, and in return they should be willing to give their best efforts as well. They need training and guidance, often times above and beyond what a career department might need. They can not live and breathe the fire service, but they are always willing to put their life on hold in service to their community, and that level of professionalism and dedication is what makes these departments so valuable.

The physical fitness of firefighters is an area that I have evaluated; and test results and observations certainly do validate the conclusions that the injury and mortality statistics indicate. Many firefighters are not in average, much less optimal physical condition. They reflect our society as a whole and that is not a good thing. Cardio vascular fitness, muscular strength, muscular endurance and proper nutrition are the hallmarks of physical health and fitness. Unfortunately the majority fall short in most if not all categories. Many departments have exercise rooms on site and give all the members an opportunity to exercise; many make the personal choice not to take advantage of this. Some are providing trainers on site to provide education and direction, and still many do not avail themselves of these opportunities. The ability to influence the nutrition of firefighters while eating at the station is often not seized upon. Having a

nutritionist or dietitian come and teach about healthy cooking and eating would go a long way towards showing how much importance is placed on the department members and their health. Once participation in fitness and nutrition programs among the personnel reaches critical mass, then peer pressure kicks in and the entire culture of a department begins to change - for the better. But first we have to get enough members participating.

For the average American, a lack of fitness translates into high health insurance costs, multiple prescription drugs and a life of lowered physical performance. For a firefighter it can translate into death; death for the individual, for their fellow crew members and for the very people that they are there to serve. If one member of a crew goes down it will seriously affect the ability of the entire crew to perform the job they have been called on to do. All the equipment and training is for nothing if the individual isn't capable of putting them to use, and the individual is the most important piece of "equipment" that a department has.

Enforcing a mandatory level of fitness would be one way to improve all areas of operational readiness of the fire service. When an individual knows that they are at optimal physical condition and that those in the truck or on the fire line are also at their peak of condition, it not only removes one variable from the on scene equation, but it enhances the pride and professionalism exhibited by the entire department. Some service members feel that mandatory standards aren't a good direction to go. Unfortunately, voluntary programs haven't produced the overall positive results that would indicate that they are going to be effective any time soon. Perhaps that might change with time, but we don't have the time to wait.

I haven't included a direct statistical analysis regarding fatalities and injuries in the USCG with the fire service because it is a difficult comparison. The USCG is a smaller service with all career personnel, the average age is younger, and the mission is different. The fire service has so many combination departments and areas of operation that it would get very confusing, and perhaps the conclusions might not be particularly

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meaningful. That being said, the death and injury rates that the fire service has are unacceptable no matter the staffing, location, mission, size or type of the department and something needs to be done to change the direction it has been heading and continues to go.

It is time to stop allowing inertia to prevent doing that which we know must be done. The acceptance of average and below average levels of fitness needs to be addressed on all levels, national and departmental, and the individual level as well. Each and every member, no matter the status or rank, must realize that it is in their best interest, not to mention the best interests of the department and the community, to take their health and fitness seriously. The fire service also needs consistent national standards backed up by accountability and discipline.

Everyone needs to understand that they are not being punished, put down or singled out for the physical condition they are now in. Personnel are the most valuable asset the department has and it is time that they are treated that way. The value of their health and fitness is on par with the readiness and maintenance of any tanker, ladder truck or engine, and must be maintained and safeguarded in much the same way. The common goal of ensuring that everyone will have the opportunity to be in the best physical condition possible is for the benefit of the individual as well as for the department and the community in which they serve.

If the fire service will engage and encourage all those who want to make it greater, and give every opportunity for each and every member to be the best example of a firefighter possible, then next year we may see those mortality figures fall, and the memorials will become a less frequent occurrence.

About the Author

Michael Krueger is a National Strength and Conditioning Association Certified Personal Trainer. He trains individuals and small groups in various settings, working with all ages and abilities. One of his current activities is as trainer for a combination fire department. He served honorably in the United States Coast Guard.

About the Symposium

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