

Retirement and “Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear!”
By Michel J. Lindsay

Yes, “Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear!” is how many recently retired and about-to-retire officers recall their careers. War stories and close calls are what typically make up the conversations at any reunion. Remembering exciting or stressful calls in one’s career is just human nature. Not surprisingly, I fell into this same mindset recently when I was preparing a speech for a public safety event.

After rewriting my speech for the umpteenth time, I realized that these war stories did not really reflect how I wanted to summarize my career. After a little more thought, I saw it. Plain as could be. Service! That is how I really wanted to be remembered.

I suspect that other veteran officers, if forced to think about it, would not want to be remembered just for these high stress incidents either, even though these incidents nearly always make for great storytelling. A career in law enforcement is a pretty special thing. For most, it goes deeper than the close calls. It may even come close to the way we define a profession. Improving the community, creating a safer society and helping others are just a few of these ideals.

The public safety event I was about to attend also made me think about those who had given their lives in the service of their communities and how much expertise was lost every time we lose an officer. As striking as this is, it then occurred to me that this is also true every time someone retires.

My generation of law enforcement and the generation just after mine were witness to the greatest professionalization of this occupation that has occurred in world history. Those officers hired in the 1950s generally had to meet very few standards to get the job. They had very little or no training. And, they were not generally career officers because politics played a huge role in longevity. All of this began to change in the 1960s.

By the 1970s, nearly every state had mandated a basic training program. The 1980s and 1990s marked one advance after another, spurred not only by technology but by a Supreme Court that thought police officers should be well trained. Suddenly 9-11 occurred, and the Supreme Court was not so willing to interfere with law enforcement practices. The pendulum is now beginning to swing back.

We have now arrived at the time when it may be necessary for law enforcement to make its next big push towards further professionalization. But, will new officers who have entered the ranks since 9-11 have the background to think this task important? Do they have the perspective? Will they possess the drive? They will if this ethic is enshrined, communicated and practiced!

Perhaps this is my generation’s last unfulfilled responsibility. We veteran officers now have an opportunity. Maybe this is how our generation should best be remembered.

One area in which my generation has accomplished great things is in recognizing the service of others. This has not always been the case. I remember walking down the sidewalk in a college town when I was in the military during the Viet Nam era and having a group of passing girls taunt, “GI Doggie”. War monger and baby killer were favorite terms on college campuses in those days.

Today, I see GIs being honored for their service even during an unpopular war. I see motorcycle riders still flying MIA flags. I attend events like the American Veterans Travelling Tribute Wall and see veterans, mostly from my generation, manning the displays.

But how do we pass along this philosophy to the next generation? Conveying an ethic or attitude is not so easy. New officers will always strive to become proficient in the latest tactical skills. They will seek out information on new equipment, and they will be receptive to annual training in the action subjects like EVO or firearms. These subjects should certainly be part of any professionalization effort, but new officers need only small nudges to accomplish these.

Most would agree that tactical skills are only a part of the professional fabric. It is those more difficult areas that will make the difference. So what are these areas and how should we address them? Here are a few of my ideas.

Annual Legal Updates. This area is so critical to mindset; I cannot stress it enough. The case law approach to legal training in Indiana infuses so much more than just being able to recite a principle in a Supreme Court opinion. The other portions of a legal opinion are typically way more revealing than the bare-bones decision. The philosophies indoctrinated through the case study method lay the foundation. They illustrate the why.

Over the years, I have noted the legal training approaches in other states and have taught in other states, and I can say without reservation that our efforts on emphasizing rationales and generic legal standards in addition to the “black letter law” have to a large degree kept Indiana’s officers out of trouble.

In addition to examining new case law, I would also suggest that a portion of each year’s legal training be focused on a specific area like Miranda, Exigent Circumstances or the Carroll Rule and that this area be examined in depth. This, again, reinforces foundational philosophies.

Report Writing. As hated as this subject is, it is the backbone of all other skills. What good is precise execution of difficult tactics if it sounds as if the officer bungled his or her way through the entire situation when the judge or defense attorney reads the report? How does an officer justify his actions for those close calls if that officer cannot communicate his good intentions, moral justifications or legal foundations?

In those situations in which advanced tactical training actually saves an officer from serious injury, the time and expense for such training can easily be justified. The reality is, however, that these situations are relatively rare. In all other situations, was it worth spending the money for EVO, firearms, or defensive tactics training if subsequent reports continually imply that the officers ignore these techniques?

By showcasing how well officers perform in difficult circumstances, good reports instill many of those nebulous ideals inherent in a profession. If an officer is indoctrinated that a report must adequately cover all critical issues such as a justification for a use of force or a rationalization for continuing a dangerous pursuit or any other hot-button issue, then an officer is not going to want to write a report against his own best interest! People just do not like to tell on themselves.

The fact that an officer knows that his supervisor is going to *require* a complete report for all of the important issues in a case will eventually modify that officer's behavior to conform to department standards (or it will provide the documentation for that officer's termination).

Police work is unique in that officers at the bottom typically exercise the most discretion. How can an administrator effectively supervise subordinates in this type of organization? One could argue that the best way is to make the officer be his or her own supervisor.

Adoption of Professionalism as a Departmental Goal. When a department's reputation is damaged or its professional status is questioned, most administrators initially consider presenting some type of "corrective" training, often in ethics, to salvage what is left of a tarnished image. This is a pretty safe bet for administrators because we as a nation have accepted the idea that training and education can cure nearly anything. We in training, however, know that this is not so.

The real reason for such embarrassing incidents is usually much deeper, and determining what the true causes are is often very difficult. Of course, some of these problems can be addressed by roll call or in-service training. These are usually the superficial triggering events. Real change, however, typically relies on tweaking subtle, underlying issues.

So, the next question is how do we veteran officers start to address these more difficult questions? And in the short run, how do we pass along a philosophy for constantly improving in areas that are not so popular so that the next generation will continue this process when it is time for us to pass the baton?

When we talk about professionalism, most veteran officers have never really thought about what constitutes a profession or what distinguishes a profession from an ordinary job, occupation, skill or craft. How can we say we have arrived as a profession or are in the process of moving in that direction if we do not even know what the elements of a profession are?

Obviously, we need to think about these in some detail before we can begin planning any strategy. I will now suggest two additional ideas to help get this process started. These two ideas are, nevertheless, only a beginning. So much more can and should be addressed.

Mentoring. Regardless of whether an administration is willing to buy-in to these ideas or not, veteran officers can accomplish much on an individual level. One such way is through mentoring.

The fact is, unfortunately, that mentors must attach themselves to new officers. New officers do not generally seek out veterans to become mentors. This, again, is simply human nature. Most new officers return to the department from the academy wanting to show how competent they are and how much they have learned at the academy. Left to their own, new officers will generally develop cliques with other new officers.

FTOs can certainly be job skill instructors, but mentors are more. Mentors are associates in life.

Becoming More Aware of Our Hoosier Law Enforcement History and Passing This History Along. Most new officers believe that electronic devices like small portable radios, cameras and in-car computers have been a part of law enforcement for a long time. They think that we have always had a requirement for basic training and that the ability to revoke someone's law enforcement certificate for misbehavior

has always been there. Sometimes I think they assume that Miranda Warnings were actually part of the Magna Charta.

War stories are great here, and they are fun to tell. Perspective in a profession is critical. Veteran officers have this perspective. Many veteran officers remember carrying a sap or blackjack and a portable radio the size and weight of a large brick. Those not lucky enough to have a portable radio often had to rely on a series of call boxes along a walking beat. Most had to buy their own 38 caliber service weapon. Many veterans remember that no in-service training OF ANY KIND was required for Indiana officers before 1993 and that officers could not be decertified—no matter what the criminal violation—until 2005. New officers know none of this. They need to know how recent many of these advancements are.

The above suggestions are two areas in which veteran officers can have an impact, even without administrative support. Having examined these rather straight forward suggestions, it is now time to begin thinking deeper.

Discernment . As mentioned above, the ability to focus on particular problems in a department will take a little more thought. Study what elements you think are necessary for creating a true profession. There is no generally accepted ethic or stone tablet hidden in a musty back room of an old cathedral or museum identifying the elements of a profession, nor is there agreement between professions on what these elements are. This is up to you. You must ask, what makes a profession, a profession? Once you decide on this, you can then decide on the one or two areas that are lacking in your department and go after them. Every department is a little different.

Many times, even these more difficult issues can be addressed directly by veteran officers on a personal level. A buy-in from the administration is wonderful, but not usually necessary. Service, commitment, integrity and honesty are virtues usually demonstrated, exercised and taught best on an individual level. Attitude is best mentored, and discipline is best imposed by peers. The most influential man who ever lived demonstrated conclusively that the most important things in life can be taught and accomplished one-on-one and one-at-a-time. Veteran officers can do the same.

Some conclusions.

Many veteran officers still possess a passion for the job although they often times have difficulty expressing exactly why. How will people remember you? How do you want to be remembered? Will the new generation have the drive to advance this profession or will it slip into an age of stagnation?

Perhaps answering these important questions is the last big assignment for those of us who are twenty, thirty and forty year veterans. Perhaps these last few years can be the most rewarding.

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Refereneeces:

For philosophy and procedure - Judges 2:6-10