

Interview with Chief P. Michael Freeman
Los Angeles County Fire Department

P. Michael Freeman – PMF

Caption: When you started as fire chief, what did you think would be your biggest challenge?

Caption: Chief P. Michael Freeman. Los Angeles County Fire Department.

PMF: Well, 20 years ago, I thought my biggest challenge would be learning the department because it's a very large department and at that time we probably served 45 cities. The other challenge was to get acquainted with the personnel in the department so that they would be able to follow me. I thought that it was important to be the leader, even by position – in the Fire Chief's position – is important for the personnel to have some idea of who's seeking to lead them.

Caption: What was your biggest misconception when you started as chief?

PMF: My biggest misconception was two-fold. One, I had been told that it was such a political job, and it was not in the sense of what I thought politics would mean. Fortunately, in these 20 years that I've been here, I don't feel that I've ever been under any external political pressure, if you will, to do the correct thing for public safety. And I think that says a lot for the elected officials, certainly our County Board of Supervisors and now the 58 cities that we protect and the elected officials in those cities. I think the other misconception that I had was I came here, very fortunately, from being an Assistant Fire Chief in Dallas, Texas. I was not a Fire Chief, had never been a Fire Chief. And privately, and candidly, I was very much lacking in confidence for my readiness in this job. But I found that, much to the credit of my former boss in Dallas, then Fire Chief Dodd Miller, and the City Management Team of Dallas that I really had been prepared and trained to do the job of Fire Chief much better than I thought I had.

Caption: How has the fire service progressed during your time as chief?

PMF: I think, again my perspective is heavily influenced by the west coast but also I do have contact across the nation, I think the fire service has really improved on the professional communication within the fire service. And when I say "professional", I mean as distinguished from radio communication, wireless communication. But Fire Chiefs and fire departments, fire organizations, working with one another across the nation, talking with one another, going through the various chief organizations, and fire labor. I think fire labor and fire management in the last two decades is communicating with one another much more effectively than we have in the past and I see a more unified front to the various challenges and problems that we faced in the fire service. Another area that has really changed has to do with the recognition of the importance of

firefighter health and wellness and obviously firefighters are very much like athletes; if they're not physically able to do the job or, in a sense, to play the game, they can't perform. And there's been so much done in the realm of being sure that our firefighters are healthy and that they're well and, of course, this adds to the longevity of their life. And then, thirdly, I think is just the communication in the radio, the wireless communication, data and voice communication. There's been so much done across the country and we all recognize here with major fires on the west coast but certainly disasters, like the unfortunate 9/11 disasters in Washington, D.C. and New York City, is the need for good, interoperable communication where police and fire/emergency medical services, in many cases public works, can talk to one another seamlessly, on demand, in an emergency. And that's interoperable communication. There's a lot to be done there, but much has been done.

Caption: Where would you like to see more progress made?

PMF: Well, I'd like to see, certainly here within the Los Angeles region, more advances made in achieving true interoperable wireless communication. There's a major project underway here in this greater Los Angeles region that is going to take us there. I think the other thing that we are all facing is how to maintain service levels, how to maintain effective, quick response times to emergencies while operating with smaller budgets and trying to find new and different ways of providing that service and, of course, the emphasis on preventing emergencies, whether they'd be health emergencies, whether they'd be accidents, or whether they'd be fires so that we can, some way, maintain that service level with shrinking budgets.

Caption: How does the International Association of Fire Chiefs assist fire chiefs with terrorism response?

PMF: The Terrorism Committee of the International Association of Fire Chiefs evolved through many years and after the Sarin gas attack in Tokyo, Japan, the first attack on the World Trade Center and, of course, the Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City, those were all wake up calls and the Committee, I believe, had a major role through the IAFC working with the various administrations at the time. The IAFC and the committee were able to impress upon our federal counterparts the importance of one point of contact within the federal government. And essentially, with all the criticisms and all the opinions about the Department of Homeland Security, that did become the point of contact and that was a major step forward in my opinion. Additionally within the fire service, the Terrorism Committee did a lot of, you know, very innovative work to try to develop a checklist and guide for firefighters, and Fire Chiefs, and fire departments so that there is – there almost is – almost a cookbook, if you will, of how a fire department can and should prepare for acts of terrorism, from the very early stages of identifying threats and risk, trying to prevent it, to responding and then recovering from those types of attacks. And it's a big job. The checklist and guide is a wonderful tool, but it takes a lot of time to get it completed, and I think that's the message that all the fire chiefs understand is truly being prepared for homeland security and a terrorist attack in their community takes a of work, a lot of coordination with our counterparts in law enforcement. And the Terrorism Committee continues to work to keep the fire services' role clear and in high priority with our federal counterparts and its

administrations that change – that’s always an on-going challenge. And then continue to work through the IAFC to be a representative of voice of the fire service across this nation in matters regarding homeland security.

Caption: How has NIIMS affected LA County’s coordinated response to large scale incidents?

PMF: Well, NIIMS has reinforced something that the fire services have come, I think in the last 25 years, to see the importance of and that is good, standardized incident command. But with the onset of NIIMS and its connectivity to availability of grant funds, it has really, in my observation, brought the law enforcement disciplines more into the realm of incident command. So, much of what law enforcement does is on a smaller scale compared to what a firefighter does. By comparison, a working structure fire, in a fire department, requires the response of multiple engine and truck companies, command officers, and so forth. That’s a...that’s a major operation with maybe 30 or 40 personnel. When you think about law enforcement, in comparison, a lot of what they do in protecting us is one or two officers here or there, once in a while, with a barricaded suspect, it does become a larger operation. So we have worked real closely with our law enforcement counterparts to show them how incident management is so important on these large scale incidents and here in California and here certainly in Los Angeles, our law enforcement counterparts and public works and other responders that come in with us all use the same incident management system, the same terminology. It really has enhanced our ability to work together not only well and on friendly, collaborative terms, but also more efficiently.

Caption: How do you work with state and local elected leaders about fiscal concerns?

PMF: Really, our effort to preserve funding is a matter of communication first and foremost. That is to inform elective officials, both local and state, and sometimes federal, informing them of what it is that firefighters and paramedics do and just how important that service is and then, secondly, how we’re funded and then how a reduction in funding does impact that service. Secondly, I think that it’s important that a fire department, a fire agency, do the very best that they can to reduce cost, to look really close at expenditures and try to cut back on costs that are maybe not emergency related or maybe, in some respects, be considered not essential costs. We have to demonstrate that we are fiscally efficient and then I think it’s much easier to draw the connection between funding, or the loss of funding, and the impact on emergency service.

Caption: How difficult has it been to navigate political landscapes both internally and externally?

PMF: Well, it.... Navigating the different interest groups and the elected officials and so forth first and foremost takes an awareness that it’s important to consider them as stakeholders. That means they do have an interest and/or an impact, real or potential, on our funding, on our ability to operate. And once we identify the stakeholder groups, then it’s a matter of developing the message and then reaching out to them, informing them of what it is we’re doing and what we need in terms of funding and if it’s internal.

Even our bargaining units, our labor representations and so forth that I have found over the years that even though we disagree on a number of issues that it's much better to recognize them as stakeholders, to include them in on challenges we are facing as much as possible, include them in on the decision options that we're considering. Ultimately, the Fire Chief and his or her command staff have to make the policy decisions, but it's important to have our stakeholders around the table so that they know what is going into these decisions and to at least recognize that they're not arbitrary, they're not made with some self-serving purpose but the driving purpose is to continue providing the service to the public we're sworn to protect. So, identification of stakeholders, communicating with them, and keeping them informed as we move forward. Doesn't mean the road won't have its bumps and its curves, but it'll be a smoother road.

Caption: What would you like to see change, in the aftermath of the Station Fire?

PMF: Well obviously, LA County Fire Department lost two of our, you know, gallant firefighters in that fire and they were doing their most trying to protect their home base, their fire camp. And that fire was...it was the largest fire, 160,000 acres, the largest fire in the history of Los Angeles County. In terms of the loss of the two firefighters, I wish I could say it was the first time we had lost two firefighters in a woodland fire. However, it is not the case. But what we want to take from that fire is to learn if there's anything that we can do different to better suppress fires in the earlier stages and to...to try to be sure we're supporting all firefighters, whether they're our personnel, or personnel from all over the state all over the country, which was the case on the Station Fire, it's to support them with the best, most up-to-date information about fire behavior, what is going on with that fire. The Station Fire was unlike many of the news-breaking fires we have here in southern California because it was not wind driven; it was not a Santa Ana type of fire. Had it been, given where the fire started, it probably would have been over in a day or two because the Santa Ana winds would have pushed it right down into the populated community. Probably would have seen a lot greater structural damage loss than we did, but the fire would have essentially run out of fuel because the wind would have pushed it into the neighborhoods. As it turned out, this fire was not a wind driven fire; it was a topography and fuel driven fire and we have very high temperatures. And given the heavy fuel and the drought that was in play, we saw tremendous fire growth and progression, which developed a lot of these pyrocumulus clouds over the fire, which created very extreme fire down below. And that was a big factor in the loss of the life of our two firefighters.

PMF: I think that, going back to the fire however, this was a fire that occurred in the Angeles National Forest and we worked extremely well with our counterparts in the forest and the forest firefighters and Chief Officers. We respond with them, we...we fight fire with them all of the time. They have different policies, which come from their hierarchy in Washington, D.C., than our policies. And we know what our differences are. By contrast, in...on the forest, helicopter pilots are not allowed to fly at nighttime, where in the county of Los Angeles our pilots are trained and able to fly at night in firefighting operations if the pilot feels it's safe to do so. That's a big difference. That's a contrast that, in my opinion, limits the Forest Service in their ability to fight fire at night time,

which sometimes is the best time to try and deal with those kinds of fires. Secondly, in terms of...of...of brush clearance, in the forest, brush clearance is...is limited to thirty feet from the structure, whereas in our jurisdiction, brush clearance is required in the high hazard areas to be 200 feet from the structure. Well, a structure with only a 30 foot clearance span makes it very more difficult to protect in a fire situation, even without a wind driven fire threatening the structure. So that's a difference that we would like to see changed is a structure in high hazard areas – a high hazard area – whether it's in the forest or whether it's in a incorporated city or in a unincorporated area of the county. We understand that the Forest Service is under these policies because their job is to preserve the habitat, preserve the forest. But when a fire breaks out, the need to suppress that fire, the need for firefighters to operate safely requires, in my opinion, more symmetry between our policies and U.S. Forest Service policies. And so we've made recommendations to our Board of Supervisors here in the county and those recommendations have been forwarded to the Department of Agriculture asking them to consider some policy changes so that we are able to operate seamlessly together in the policy realm as we do in the operational area.

Caption: How has the LA County Urban Search and Rescue Team evolved over the years?

PMF: Urban Search and Rescue in Los Angeles County was something that caught my interest when I first came here back in 1989 because this is earthquake country. And having lived here as a youngster, in my early years, I remember a few earthquakes and we've had some since I've been here. Unfortunately, when an earthquake occurs, quite often that means collapse. And what we've learned through the years is that when things collapse, even though it may appear to be a total pancaking of a structure, that there are voids underneath that pancaking where people can survive. So it was a division of some personnel in this department really needed to do more, in terms of urban search and rescue. So early on after I came here I was supportive of that and we started to build toward that end. Somewhere in the first several years, the concept of a full scale Urban Search and Rescue Task Force got legs; the Federal Emergency Management Agency started to support those. And here in the state of California, there were not...not one or two, but actually eight of those USAR Task Forces sprang up across the state. So we've evolved and come from, you know, a few people, 20, 30, all the way up. Now we're at 70 person, 72 person task forces with all types of equipment and tools and training and expertise. And now, in the United States, there are 28 of those teams. So it has really grown from a local realization of a need to become a statewide and a nationwide program. And it's something of which we're extremely proud and we're very fortunate because our personnel in the county of Los Angeles Fire Department, those who want to be specially trained and want to volunteer their forces for these positions do so on their own. We support them with their training; we have them go to the training on their own time. Once they're certified, then they're available, they're rostered for their team. But it's...it is a credit that my professional opinion to those individuals, each and every one of them, because they have stepped up and said, "I want to do this and I want to do it badly enough that I'm going to go through this extra training and so forth. So, we're one of eight teams here in the state of California, one of 28 nationwide, and we're one of two nationwide that are certified and in a position to

respond at the request of the State Department when and if there is a need for an international response.

Caption: What was your greatest accomplishment or your department and for your citizens?

PMF: Well that's an interesting question. In terms of greatest accomplishment, there have been a lot of accomplishments. And being the Fire Chief of Los Angeles County, it's a privilege, it's something I still can't really believe, you know, that I'm doing this. Then I can believe because you look around and anything we have accomplished is a tribute to this organization and the people outside this organization that have been mentors, been supportive of what we've tried to do. But I think that probably among the greatest, I'll say one of the greatest things we accomplished, happened back in 1997 when, due to some fiscal constraints and some other developments, we actually, with the support of the Board of Supervisors, went to the public and asked them if they would consider voting a special tax in, a special tax that would apply to them as property owners, to help fund the County of Los Angeles Fire Department. And it was a great accomplishment because, although it required a two-thirds majority vote and we did garner 77 percent, yes, upon that election ballot measure, is it...what it also did was it enabled us to, in a very compressed time frame, tell the story of the County of Los Angeles Fire Department, all that we do, all that we provide in terms of emergency services, and really the efficiencies with which we provide those services. It is...it's just remarkable. You look at almost every one of our firefighting personnel and they wear multiple hats; they're all EMTs, they're all firefighters, many of them are paramedics, many of them are USAR trained and certified, and on and on and on. And so we were able to tell our story and that has to be one of the...one of the most significant accomplishments we've made as organization because it has enabled us to continue service delivery, even in these hard times right now. And because that special tax is actually levied at a varying amount year to year and that enables us to continue service when maybe our property tax revenue drops as it has here recently. So I would say that's certainly one of the most significant things that we accomplished and the reason I cite that is not because I'm so much of an administrator or bureaucrat, but because of the fact that that life stream of funding allows us to continue to do the myriad of things we do as a fire department.

Caption: What was your greatest accomplishment for the fire service?

PMF: Well, as far as the U.S. Fire Service, I think that's.... I think of myself as just, you know, one of a cast of hundreds of thousands in the fire service. And I think in terms of that, probably two things, that is with the training and with the involvement of the LA County Fire Personnel, and the USAR teams, and the State Department activities, and the many other things that we do in terms of firefighter safety, working with the IAFF. I would say the sharing of our personnel, in nationwide endeavors and efforts is a great accomplishment. And I'd say the other accomplishment is truly the work that was done through the terrorism community, making the fire service a real partner with the federal government, and a real moving force at the table as this country tried to react and prepare better for acts of terrorism, and then, of course, including the checklist and guideline for Fire Chiefs, so that's a document available to any Fire Chief in any

department. And there is an outreach, by the way, of that checklist and guide going over to law enforcement, so they're actually looking at a similar checklist for themselves. And of course it's so important that we do continue to interact with our co-disciplines – law enforcement, emergency service work that's not in the fire service, and of course public works and our many other responders and emergency managers and such.

Caption: What advice would you give to those who aspire to be fire chief?

PMF: Well, my advice would be several things. Number one: Just based on my own experience, don't get caught up with the so called or apparent prestige position. I think it's important that the Fire Chief remember that he or she really represents the men and women out there, you know, where the rubber meets the road. I take a lot of pride in the fact that I was a firefighter. I still think of myself as a firefighter and I've never forgotten that. It's been a long time since I've worked a full shift in the station, but I was attracted to this profession because I wanted to fight fire. I still like to do that, but I see that my role is to try to ensure the men and women out there who are doing it day in, day out have what they need. So, remember where one came from and the fact that the Fire Chief is here to take care of the public through the great work that the men and women in the...in the field do in their service providing. The other thing is...is...is don't be so caught up with the political. I had the opportunity to work for a veteran politician, Kenny Hahn, here in the county of Los Angeles and had the opportunity to talk with him about philosophy, and a Fire Chief may sometimes be tempted or pressured to do things a certain way because of pressure, external pressure, and it can be from one area or the other. I think it's very, very important that Fire Chiefs stay in tune with what is best for public safety, what is best for fire protection and hold on to those principles and do a good job in selling that, selling the importance of the service, and document it with good statistics and if the statistical data does not support, you know, what's being put forward, then go with the data that is there. In other words, be honest, be forthright, but hold to the principles to what the fire service is...is here to do. The other...the other advice is that there will be times where, because of someone that sets policy for the fire department, will mandate tough decisions, may actually mandate that there be cuts, there be reductions. And we all have bosses. And at a point in time, we have to carry out those tough directives and at that point it's important to be able to look oneself in the eye and say, "I have done my very best to tell and sell the story of the fire service and if the funding's just not there, then do the best job in trying to do the same level of service with less. And that's where it's tough. And there may be times when those hard decisions require us to make those reductions. I know at times Fire Chiefs will resign, you know, as opposed to do that. And that may be the better thing, in their mind, to do it but I think that the Fire Chief that's worth their...their rank, if you will, is a Fire Chief that will lead in the good times as well as the tough times. And sometimes the tough times mean we have to leave even when we know it goes against what we know is best for public safety. So, be honest, be upfront and forward, sell and tell the story of the fire service, and don't forget that we come from the fire service, we are firefighters who have the job of administering the organization, but don't forget where we come from.