

## **A Granted Privilege: Serving Knights in Not-So-Shiny Armor**

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In Medieval times Knights wore heavy, but shining armor. These mounted warriors fought each other with swords and lances. They carried shields and wore heavy armor to protect them. Knights were known to be brave and virtuous, fearless in battle and generous to other people.

At first, Knights were landowners who owed allegiance to a lord - king, a prince or a nobleman. The lords protected the landowners from bandits and robbers. In return, the landowners agreed to fight against the lord's enemies. Gradually the custom developed that the landowner's youngest son would serve in his father's place in the nobleman's army. He first had to prove himself in horsemanship and in the use of the sword. Contests were held in which the young men fought against each other in mock battles.

If a young man proved he was a good fighter, he was knighted. To be knighted, a young man swore to obey certain rules. He was to serve God, be honorable and serviceable to people. He was expected to be courteous and helpful to women. It was a special honor for a Knight to be sent on a dangerous mission.

There is a modern-day Knight whose armor is not so shiny. He wears a wide-brimmed hat, a coat with big buckles and reflective stripes, and a big pair of ugly boots. In his 50 plus pounds of clothing and gear, his high-tech shield, his modern suit of armor, he doesn't look quite as dashing as the medieval Knight, but to someone who is in danger, he is superhero and guardian angel. The modern-day Knight is the ordinary man or woman who is ready to roll at a moments notice when there is a tragic fire, critical incident, or a mass disaster. This modern-day Knight is the firefighter!

The firefighter today has much in common with the Knight of medieval times. The modern firefighter is a dedicated professional, paid or volunteer, who undergoes rigorous training week after week. Firefighting, unlike many professions, requires on-going training. Like the young man wanting to be a Knight had to first prove himself by learning and practicing the necessary skills of battle, the would-be firefighter has to prove himself by going through a recruit school or fire academy of rigorous study, training and practical skills testing. Finishing recruit school or the fire academy, however, doesn't mean a firefighter is through with his training. On the contrary, the firefighter's training continues on an almost daily basis for as long as he remains in the fire service, regardless of the rank he may ascend to. He is constantly learning, improving skills, practicing hundreds of different scenarios of potentially dangerous incidents he is likely to encounter as a firefighter.

The modern-day Knight is a special person. He/she has a special personality, uses special equipment, has special training and faces special situations. On an almost daily basis, this modern-day Knight is intimately involved in situations that few others ever see in a lifetime. This Knight has one of the most stressful jobs in the world today. He/she lives and works in a rapidly changing environment. On any given day the firefighter may experience long periods of boredom suddenly disrupted by the call for help in an environment that includes high noise levels, hazardous materials, and repeated exposure to dangerous situations involving serious injury, traumatic death, suicide, mass disaster, tragic fire, multiple vehicle accidents, airplane crashes, drowning, and a hundred and one other critical incidents.

Most of these modern-day Knights have personalities that differ from the average person on the street. They are usually very hard on themselves. They demand nothing less than perfection from themselves and become quite frustrated when they encounter failure. They are generally very detailed and task oriented individuals. They are quick decision makers, have a strong need to be in control, and exhibit an extreme sense of dedication to their jobs and to each other.

In today's fire service you will find dedicated teamwork that supersedes almost any other profession in the world. In today's not-so-shiny armor you will find the unflinching heroic spirit of the medieval Knight, displaying extreme dedication to work, often at the expense of family, and their own health and well being. Like the knighthood of medieval times, a special brotherhood exists within the fire service. Firefighters are part of a tight-knit family. They work as a team. Their very lives are dependent upon teamwork. They not only train and work together; they live together, eat together, sleep together, watch TV together and work out together. They are a true brotherhood in every sense of the word.

As fire chaplains, we have one of the most unique opportunities for ministry afforded any minister today. The fire chaplaincy is a multi-faceted ministry. It is a ministry of granted privilege. We are granted the privilege of being a chaplain, first, by God, then by appointment of the chief of our department and by invitation of the individual firefighter.

We must never forget that we are chaplains by granted privilege. We must earn the privilege by our presence, our example, our sincerity and by our commitment to strict confidentiality. First and foremost, our ministry is a ministry of presence. To "be there" is the most important function of the chaplain. Many times we will find ourselves standing by with nothing to do. We may, at times, feel like a fifth wheel, like we are ignored, unappreciated and even unwanted. But, believe you me, when everything goes down hill and the worst happens, we are the *one* these Knights look to for a sense of calm and hope in the face of crisis.

We must always remember that we are servants. We are there to listen, to share with, to encourage, to refer, to be a spiritual model. We, in a sense, represent God's presence in an otherwise hopeless human situation. The fire chaplaincy is dedicated to serving others in emergency situations and is the spiritual bridge in times of crisis. It is truly a privilege to serve these modern-day Knights in not-so-shiny armor as they go repeatedly into harms way to serve their fellow man. Thank God often, thank your chief, and thank the firefighters of your department for granting you the privilege of being their chaplain.

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