

PA FIRE POLICE

Appearances of Fire Police Officers

By Tony Riccardi - PA State Fire Academy Approved Fire Police Instructor

In this month's column, we will cover a topic that will, most likely, offend many readers. This is unfortunate but, should the truth be hidden just because some folks may get offended? The topic we have chosen to address concerns the appearance of many fire police officers when they respond for duty. As a fire and fire police instructor, the opportunity presents itself to travel throughout the Commonwealth to present these programs. There have been many incidents where we have observed fire police officers conducting traffic control or other related activities that have given rise to the concerns to be addressed in this article.

We have never encountered a fire police officer who has not adamantly agreed they want to be treated as a professional and, want to be respected in their role at an emergency scene. It is one thing to desire something, it is quite another to actually do something to achieve that desire. The many fire police officers we have discussed this with seem to feel that both professionalism and respect should come automatically since their role is clearly defined under the law. Wow! How is that achieved? Doesn't a certain amount of responsibility fall on the fire police officer to bring that about?

Everyone should realize that respect must be earned it does not come automatically to anyone, a well known fact. What fire police officers must accept is that 96 percent of your effectiveness is directly related to your appearance.

Consider that only thirteen states have fire police officers. Many out-of-state drivers, accustomed to seeing a fully dressed police officer in their communities, now observe several people engaged in traffic control or other related activities, all dressed differently, directing traffic differently, and expecting everyone to comply with their orders and/or directions. In a previous column we addressed

the issue of PA Vehicle Code, Section 3102, which, when paraphrased, states that no one is required to obey an individual, during traffic control that is not appropriately attired. That is an indisputable fact and fire police officers must realize and accept it since the law does not permit an individual to disregard the law simply because they don't agree with it.

The law clearly defines proper attire. If you look in PennDot Vehicle Code Regulations Title 67, Section 101, it states that fire police are required to wear an "official hat". What is an official hat? It is defined as a hat normally worn with a uniform. Since your title is fire police, it follows that a police type hat should be worn. Many fire police complain because

Continued on Page 78

FIRE POLICE *from Page 76*

their fire company insists on purchasing and requiring they wear a baseball hat. The attitude apparently is, if the fire company declares this is the hat to wear then that is what you wear! The fire company determines what hat you will wear goes the decree from fire company officials. We have scoured the law sufficiently to observe that nowhere in the law is the fire department given this authority. If it is in your bylaws, State law supersedes any bylaw. Obviously, the real intent to purchase baseball caps is because they are cheaper. Well, yes they are cheaper but it also cheapens the authority of the fire police officer. However, we cannot ignore the fact that fire police simply prefer to wear this type hat. If that is the case, you have no real ground to stand on in defending your right to be respected. Your very appearance is telling people they don't have to obey you (Section 3102). While not true in the past, police type caps may now be purchased through Firemen's Relief funds

However, it is not only the hat that detracts from your authority, how you are dressed also contributes. We all enjoy creature comforts but what fire chief will permit a firefighter to enter a burning building unless he/she is fully attired in bunker gear, helmet, SCBA, etc. The reason we have chosen this subject this month is based on the many observations where fire police are dressed in all manner of attire. Some wearing shorts, jeans, improper footwear, all different styles of hats, and most importantly, three or four fire police at the same incident, all dressed differently. What many folks don't seem to know is that only thirteen of the fifty states have fire police officers. The other thirty-seven use some other form of enforcement at emergency scenes. So imagine an out-of-state driver, whose state does not have fire police, accustomed to seeing a fully dressed police officer, now observe several people, all dressed differently, and not wearing a uniform, giving directions that they normally see police officers perform. Yes, your appearance is extremely critical and the treatment you receive, many times, is based on this fact.