

LIFE. DEATH. SUCCESS. FAILURE.

Lessons for America's Hometown Warriors

F. R. (Chief Taco) Montes de Oca

The following is a culmination of tips, reminders and experiences gathered over five decades of working with some of the finest, (and bravest) men and women in emergency services. My thanks to them for their trust, comradeship and contributions.

This collection is intended to help those who lead men and women and those navigating the oftentimes treacherous geography of a community's landscape.

The source for this collection is rooted in many late-night coffee-fueled firehouse discussions, articles, teachers, mentors and friends.

WHO IS CHIEF TACO?

I am a former firefighter, paramedic, emergency manager and fire chief serving in all-hazard fire and emergency services departments in Florida, Ohio and North Carolina. I received the nickname “Taco” from my first chief and mentor, Harold W. Mayo who after interviewing me for my first firefighting job stated, I can’t pronounce Montes de Oca, so I’ll just call you Taco.”



A full-page background image featuring the dark silhouette of a Saguaro cactus against a dramatic sky at sunset or sunrise. The sky is filled with clouds, some of which are illuminated from below, creating a warm orange and yellow glow. The cactus has several arms reaching upwards. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of smaller bushes and the base of the cactus. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

LIFE

What you do is noble.
Respect it.

Don't sweat the small stuff.

Show up to work knowing full well
you and your partner may die.

Life is not fair. Get over it.

Pay it forward.

If you're not the lead dog,
the scenery never changes.

Respect your uniform.

Unless critically important, don't waste time and energy on those things you can't change or control.

Spend time with your loved ones.

If the American flag hanging from your unit is dirty or tattered change it and respectfully retire the old one.

The toes you step on during your rise
to the top may be attached to the butt
you have to kiss on your way down.

Question everything...politely.

Read something new every day.

Learn how to lose...with class.

Learn from everyone.

Be proud of the heritage you
represent and pass it on.

Before agreeing to be on a SWAT Medic team,
know all your legal rights and protections before
you shoot or kill someone.

Don't criticize without offering an alternative.

Don't idolize superiors – respect them.

Your safety is your responsibility.

You become what you see,
listen to and read.

Writing that quick, “down-and-dirty” last report at the end of your shift may save you time, and get you to your part-time job on time, but may also get you fired when the opposing attorney rips you a new one on the witness stand.

Be kind and gracious.

Once you post it on social
media, remains there forever.

Remember: you are helping people
during their darkest times.

The world owes you nothing.

INCIDENT COMMAND



Don't go into battle without
considering your exit strategy.

Most strategies are based on
the Rule of 3's:

- 1) What do I have?
- 2) Where is it going?
- 3) What do I need?

If you have time to deploy a primary line,
you have time to deploy a backup line.

The public's love for you is like art; they don't always know what you do, but they like it when they see it.

Sometimes we don't extinguish the fire. It
runs out of stuff to burn. Take the credit.
You will need it some day.

When operating in or around traffic, always wear your ANSI-approved hi-vis tear-away vest...day and night.

The IC usually has the most experienced eyes on the fireground. Respect it.

Too many rekindles on your watch may cause
your career dissipation light to blink.

Know the first three things you will do immediately following a LODD.

Don't let arrogance get you killed...or fragged.

Overaggressive, small-picture officers sometime risk firefighter's lives for worthless property.

Poor communication and poor
coordination go hand-in-hand.

If the concept of situational awareness is unfamiliar or new, learn it, train it, use it.

If the roof has self-ventilated, think risk versus benefit before ordering crews up.

When operating at open or closed special events know all ingress and egress points.

ICs set a positive example by wearing their PPE.

Ensure your troops have mastered the fundamentals and constantly review them.

Exude confidence...not arrogance.

When operating at open or closed events know the evac and mayday signals. If no evac or mayday signals exist, your action plan is faulty.

True command presence builds
confidence in your troops and bosses.

Teach the public Stop the Bleed® and Hands-only CPR. It could save your life...and others.

Emergency incidents are often no more than controlled chaos. If you forget this people may die.

During complex incidents, continuously
maintain your (SA) orientation.

Minimally-trained firefighters possess just enough knowledge and skill to get themselves (or someone else) injured or killed. Train beyond-the-basics voraciously.

Know the strengths and weaknesses
of the 5 building classifications.

During extreme events, communicating bluntly is often necessary.

If you feel an officer is untrustworthy...trust
your gut. Be cautious.

The better your SOPs are, and the more you comply with them, the less you will have to make decisions on-the-fly, which leads to premature failure...and lawsuits.

Learn the telltale signs of human trafficking. You could save a life.

Know how to properly and safely
report suspected human trafficking.

Never enter a potential crowd surge zone unless absolutely necessary.

Protect dead comrades (and their family's) reputation.

Unless necessary, don't explain
your reasons for a command.

Even after doing everything right, you
still may lose. Get over it...that's life.

Face-to-face communications is far superior to radio transmissions.

You can transmit subtle body language to communicate control...or utter confusion.

Always conduct a hotwash...no matter how brief the call.



LEADERSHIP

Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.

It.
At.
Bat.
Ball.
Balloon.

As a new leader, tell everyone what you expect of them and *listen* to what they expect of you.

Respect is earned.

Doing the “right thing” won’t
get you points with everyone.

Respect everyone.

Using your rank as leverage will bite you.

Crisis creates leaders.

Find or develop a daily routine that works.

You are replaceable.

To develop your team, lead less...
support more.

Develop the heart of a servant.

Be humble, but not a doormat.

Under promise and over deliver.
People will think you're a genius.

No one can make you feel inferior
without your consent.

Listen to junior staff. They aren't
encumbered by harmful tradition...yet.

Insecure leaders micromanage.

Secure leaders lead.

Accept and enforce organizational
values...or change them.

You were hired to make change.
Do it...with caution.

Employees know when their leaders are
lying...answer candidly and honestly.

Create (or recreate) the vision collaboratively.

Surround yourself with those smarter than you.

Meetings without goals are useless...avoid them.

Never settle for “just enough”.

If a decision or choice significantly affects your future, find a 1st, 2nd and 3rd in order of consequence...if time permits.

Blaming others instead of taking responsibility is a sign of weakness...and can be a career killer.

Invest heavily in training.

Unless the situation is complex or unique, if it's on fire, don't overthink it.

You can only control two things:
Your thoughts and your actions.

Take thoughtful action to
address employee complaints.

Reduce your stress before your
heart goes on vacation.

Try to find an “aha” moment every day.

An opinion is sometimes rejected
because of how it is expressed.

Be brutally honest with yourself.

Aim to make a positive influence on someone everyday.

Being controversial is not the same as forward thinking.

Learn basic military bearing: Standing at
Attention and a Proper Hand Salute.

Make time to celebrate your achievements.

Learn from your failures.

As chief executive you have a shelf life.

Your career is not your life.

Unless deliberately or maliciously
conducted, don't punish failure.

Know your department's history
and teach it to your newbies.

Possess integrity.
Demand it of your people.

Remember: You are only renting the bugles.

Assign them to training for their passion, not because it's
their last stop before retiring.

ISOs should be assigned because of their knowledge and qualifications, not because they've been there the longest.

Before sending a controversial “effective immediately” memo, remember there are more of them than you with 24 hours in a day to make you look petty or foolish.

Everything ends...enjoy your time.

SAFETY



Get a regular mental health checkup.

Advocate for an annual department-funded physical including cancer and mental health checkup.

If you step off the rig with empty hands,
consider yourself a spectator.

Regularly, take note of your partner's mental health.

The first time you fail to follow procedures on a “squirrel call”, it will turn out to be a significant emotional event.

20-minute burn-time notifications are often inaccurate.

Society is getting angrier. Be prepared.

Wear protective clothing only when necessary
to limit exposure to carcinogens.

If you don't care about your own personal safety, keep in mind that your supervisors will have to write difficult reports when you get yourself injured or killed.

Don't wear dirty or contaminated hoods...they are a leading cause of neck and thyroid cancer(s).

Don't buy or wear used ballistic equipment.

Before stepping off the ladder onto a parapet, verify the distance to the roof.

When operating an emergency vehicle, never move until all passengers are onboard, properly seated and properly wearing seatbelts.

Civilian traffic is not paying attention to you. Many are impaired or texting.

Know, train and practice a MAYDAY mnemonic.

Smiling people who approach you at an emergency scene should make you more observant.

When entering a GSW scene, look for the weapon(s).

You are not invincible...always wear appropriate PPE. Your family deserves it.

If the IC is running...try to keep up.

During civil unrest and fast-moving disasters,
damaging a direct exit route is acceptable.

Take a shower within one hour of exposure and shower before leaving the station after shift.

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Secure all equipment in your rig.
In a rollover it can be deadly.

Freelancing kills firefighters.

Walk around the perimeter not across the roof.

Practice applying your personal tourniquet on yourself.
Left and right-handed.

Stand to the side when knocking on doors.

Always be aware of all people in
the room when treating a patient.

When treating multiple GSW victims, don't assume you know which one is the aggressor.

Life is short. Enjoy it.

THANK YOU!

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