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## Heroes or Villains?

Story and Photos by Michael Heller



*"If people don't know about us, they may think of us as being kind of 'cowboy-ish,' but that's just the way we've always been—we're always aggressive, and try to be really thorough and get the job done. We don't like to waste any time."*

—Kentland Fire Department Deputy Chief Tony "T-2" Kelleher

It's the sudden transition that kills you. One minute I was sound asleep—out cold—and the next I was up and out of the covers, sitting on the side of the bed, flailing about for my eyeglasses, which I had carefully set inside my shoes. Loud tones were sounding—first a loud, yelping tone, then another solid tone, then another, then another and then yet another, followed by a report of a structure fire coming over the loudspeaker. Someone flew by me, and in my half-conscious stupor I made the decision to give up trying to put my shoes on. *"Gotta make the truck!"* Taking advantage of the fact that my bed was closest to the door, I dashed out onto the apparatus bay floor clad only in my socks. I made the quick left to jump into the back of Tower 33, when I suddenly remembered, *"Damn! My cameras!"* Spinning 180 degrees, I ran full-tilt boogie past the back of the rig toward the reserve engine in the back of the bay with my camera equipment sitting on its front bumper. As I rounded the back end of the rig I crashed head-on into someone else booking to make the truck, but there was no time for "excuse-mes" or "sorrays,"—only, *"Gotta get a move on!"* Two steps in front of the engine I stepped smack into the center of a puddle of water that had leaked out from an old tank, soaking my sock up to the ankle. *"Son of a ..."* I grabbed my gear, then gave it all I had back toward the truck. As I ran I heard the last of four doors slam; the apparatus bay door was up, the motor was gunning and as I reached for the door handle in a last-ditch effort to get on, the rig started pulling away. *"Wait! Wait!!"* I yelled, but to no avail. I could only watch as Tower 33, lights flashing and sirens wailing, turned right off the ramp onto Landover Road and sped off into the night. Cussing up a storm, I stood there in the February cold of the open apparatus bay door—until I came to my senses enough to close it, finally resigning myself to the fact that I had missed the call and that there was really nothing left to do but change out of my wet sock and go back to bed.

As I turned to go, I saw Jake, the firehouse dog, standing in the middle of the empty apparatus bay floor, looking at me. *"Welcome to Kentland, my friend,"* he seemed to say.

The next morning, Tower 33's driver, Tony "Pinky" Veith, was unapologetic. "Either you're on or I leave without you," he said to me, smiling. It struck me at the time as odd that he would make getting out of the barn a higher priority than making sure he had a full crew on board, but then that was what I was there for, to learn as much as I could about the Kentland Volunteer Fire Department—the sometimes famous, sometimes infamous and by many accounts controversial fire service organization in Prince George's County, Md.—that boasts of being the busiest volunteer fire department in the entire country. Noted far and wide for their extremely aggressive attitude toward firefighting—they have been labeled at times "cavalier" when being kind, and "maverick" when not. Some even go so far as to question Kentland's fire service ethics, wondering aloud, how aggressive is too aggressive? Is it possible to take the concept of volunteering and wanting to proudly serve your community too far?

### ROOTS RUN DEEP

Kentland is fairly unique in that it takes the age-old model of the volunteer fire service—of donating personal time to one's community—to its limits. Instead of the traditional practice of members responding to the fire station (or directly to the scene) in their personal vehicles, some of the members actually *live* at the firehouse in 24 dormitory-style rooms, while others, who don't technically live there, spend enough time there to make the difference negligible. The residents of the firehouse—many of whom are full-time paid firefighters in neighboring departments in Washington, D.C., or Montgomery County—are given free living quarters in exchange for volunteering their time (a minimum of four days or four nights a week) as firefighters with Kentland. It's a system that strikes one initially as coming dangerously close to violating the traditional mores of the volunteer fire service. After all, isn't living at the fire station about the same as being paid-on-call? Except one needs to remember that their members are *not* being paid; they are spending the majority of their entire off-duty lives serving Kentland of their own volition, free of charge. Their dedication, in fact, is one of the most impressive things about the Kentland VFD. While there are 24 living quarters, there are at least 40 more firefighters who come by the station to volunteer their time on a regular basis. If a resident decides to move out of the firehouse, there is no shortage of members waiting in line to move in, with the incumbent usually being the firefighter with the most experience and/or seniority.



Another unique concept in place in Kentland is that of *associate membership*. Based ostensibly on the need to take advantage of as many offers for help as possible, the KFD has made available a category of membership that only requires one to volunteer 24 hours a month. Again, it strikes one at first as an odd way to do things, but there's an inherent beauty in this as well. Having associate members opens up the pool of potential members to include a radius far wider than would normally be seen in most departments. In doing so, the Kentland leadership is able to be that much choosier about who they take on as members. And from what they say, due to Kentland's notoriety, there's never a shortage of firefighters coming by the station, wanting to join—an average of five to 10 per month who end up going through a review process.

"We get a lot of what we call 'T-shirt members,'" says Deputy Chief Tony 'T-2'

Kelleher. "They show up, they join, they get a shirt and say 'I want to be a part of this place' and then we never see them again.

"Anyone can join, but we'll do background checks, and we'll make sure he's a good guy. We want all our guys to be decent people that want to give and not just take, and want [them] to be here for the place and not just themselves."

Chief Kelleher's quote, especially the line about "... here for the place and not just themselves," runs straight to the core of what the operating philosophy of the Kentland Fire Department is all about: total dedication to the craft of firefighting. It's *all about* putting out the fire as quickly and efficiently as possible.

This philosophy has its roots in the history of the department, which illustrates how this concept got started. Kentland is a young fire department by most standards, not even 55 years old. It had its beginnings in 1951, when two local residents of the then-still-rural community, Bob Baeschlin and John Wilding, felt the current fire protection for the area wasn't adequate to safeguard their families, so one night they gathered together with 10 neighbors and decided to form a new fire department. Although each new fire department in Prince George's County gets assigned the next proceeding number from the last established department, Baeschlin fought for No. 33 to be the department's designation, even though Station 32 was taken in front of the county council. Thirty-three was the number of Baeschlin's favorite football player, Sammy Ball, who played for the Washington Redskins (the team coincidentally now playing in Landover, just down the street from today's firehouse).

What is most impressive about the formation of the Kentland FD, however, is that Baeschlin and fellow volunteer Steve Yuhasz actually mortgaged their houses so they could afford to pay for their first piece of apparatus, a 1941 World War II surplus Ford pumper. A few years later, after funds raised for the construction of a new fire station were used up, several more members mortgaged their homes so that the department could afford a new \$50,000 1953 Seagrave. The self-sacrifice and dedication of the members back then created a value system within the department that to this day is adhered to with a fervor that almost approaches religion: "*Always do whatever is necessary to get a fire truck, with firemen ready to do a job, to the fireground.*"

One day during my visit, I questioned Chief Kelleher about this philosophy. "Kentland was always a really strong department," he says, "and had a lot of money from the '50s up until the '80s and even early '90s. So it had money, and money of course attracts people. The people in the neighborhood who started this fire department put a lot of heart, effort and hard work into making it into what this place was back then. What's happened since is that [the tradition has] always been passed on really well. The tradition has been passed on every three or four years, when other people come in and out of here, and it's never been taken away. New guys will come in and we'll be hard on them. It's not to be hard on them just to be assholes, it's to be hard on them so as to instill that you have to have heart to be here, and you have to have pride.

"This place is No. 1, and some [other] things in your life kind of go on hold for a little bit. Nobody ever sacrifices their life so much for this place that they lose things—nobody ever loses houses or anything like that—but sometimes instead of going out with a friend they'll stay here, or you might have to break a date with your girlfriend once in awhile. It's just that kind of mentality that's been instilled.

"There's plenty of people that come here that don't make it and that's probably why. They'll come here to try the place out because of how many runs we go

to and they want to be a part of it, but they just don't have what it takes. I don't mean they don't have it physically, they just don't have the heart to put their total selves into it enough to where they're dedicated. That's just how it's always been. It's been handed down year after year from one chief to the next to the next. The chief of this place has always had a strong hand; he's always been the guy who sets the precedents of how everything goes, right down through the officers."

### **ON THE RUN**

From the start, Kentland was a busy fire station, averaging 500 calls a year, a number that grew continually as the population multiplied to the point where it is today. Many have questioned Kentland's run stats, suggesting they may be padded, but despite its claim of being the "busiest volunteer fire department in the country," that title really isn't the point. Those who dwell on it are choosing to split hairs. Is it the busiest department *not including* EMS runs? The busiest engine company as opposed to truck company? The busiest in one year but not the next? The point is really moot. Anyone who checks the statistics columns on the department's Web site ([www.kentland33.com](http://www.kentland33.com)) will see they make a phenomenal number of runs each year—an average of 7,500 or so for the past three years—and they have just cause for laying claim to the "busiest volunteer department" title. I certainly couldn't argue otherwise; during my five-day stay I took in a total of 128 runs, including three structure fires and two MVAs with entrapments.

Their location has a lot to do with the call volume. Located on Landover Road in Landover, Md., Kentland Station 33 is responsible for protecting a large, socio-economically depressed suburb of Washington, D.C., that happens to include FedEx Field (home of the Redskins) and the Capital Beltway (Route 495) in its response district, which it shares with Kentland Station 46 in Largo, Md. One of 45 fire stations that serve Prince George's County, Kentland 33 is one of the very few companies left in the county that is still 100 percent volunteer—an important point that, combined with the fact that they are extremely busy, also contributes to the department's collective outlook as a fire service, and which also provides insight into many of the reasons why they do things the way that they do.

Competition among volunteer fire departments is as old as firefighting itself. It is in fact, how many fire departments, including the FDNY, were born. Everyone will agree that a little competition can be a good thing, as it can provide the motivation to try harder in order to be better than the next guy. In Prince George's County, however, there exists an environment that some say promotes this competition to an unusual—and perhaps unsafe—degree.

"There're several volunteer organizations within the county that are relatively aggressive," says Randy Koonsley, chief of the neighboring Bladensburg Fire Department. "Within the makeup of the county—in the combination systems—unfortunately, although there are a number of volunteer organizations operating and some of them just don't have a whole lot of volunteers. So, predominantly what you have is career-staffed apparatus coming out of them.

"Those that *are* predominantly volunteer are where you see more of the competition. I think the stronger competition is among the stronger volunteer organizations that are left in the county, and that's why the rivalry is probably higher between us and Kentland; because we're two of the strongest volunteer organizations.

Dedication to the craft of firefighting notwithstanding, this element of competition with other neighboring fire departments has gone so far as to influence Kentland's operating procedures on the fireground. One example has

to do with hose lays and the positioning of their apparatus at the scene. Rather than spec out their engines with standard mid-mount crosslays for their attack lines—there are none—Engines 331 and 332 are equipped with two hose “bins” that are built into the left and right portions of the front bumpers of the rigs that each hold 150 feet of attack line, each carefully arranged into two 50-foot horseshoe rolls and one 50-foot doughnut roll for each compartment. The fact that the attack lines are front-bumper-mounted enables the rig operator to arrive on the scene and point the front of the rig directly at the exposure A-side of the building, while at the same time leaving the area directly in front of the building clear for the first-due truck. Once positioned, firefighters can then run to the front of the engine, grab the hoses from either side of the bumper and flake out the two horseshoe rolls as they run up to the front door. Upon arrival at the front door, they now have two lines ready—primary and back-up—with at least 50 feet each still in doughnut rolls that they can then flake out and use to make entry into the building. As you can see, the emphasis here is, and always has been, on speed—and getting to the fire and extinguishing it *first*.



This attitude doesn't always sit well with some of the other companies that Kentland runs in with, to the point where some serious animosities have developed. From my perspective this would be a cause for concern, but when I mentioned this to Chief Kelleher, he seemed relatively unfazed and seemed to take the whole issue in stride.

“As far as the ‘volunteer’ aspect goes, a lot of the companies around us probably don't like us and get mad at some of the things we do, just because we're aggressive, we're fast and we get out the door in a couple of seconds,” he says. “Some of them aren't ‘about it’ [don't share the same philosophy] the same way, so sometimes we'll get there before them, or we'll be able to run a line faster than they can, and it pisses them off. Usually they get over it, though. There's never any bickering to the point where they won't help us out.

“We've had an incident with a company's two first-dues away from here, where one of their firefighters went down, and three of our firefighters and another guy were able to pull him out with no hard feelings, just because of what we do every day. When it comes down to doing the job, we still get it done.

“Now, of course, there're career guys around us too and they probably don't like us for other reasons—like, because we're a volunteer company taking jobs from them just like you'd hear in other parts of the country. But, a lot of times when you go talk to these people around us, the volunteer companies, the other chiefs or paid people of other companies, they always respect us to our face, and if anything needs to be done they'll call for us. Now, what they say behind our backs or what they put on these forums on the internet, that might be totally different. But as far as them not liking us, I think that there are definitely some people that don't like us, but at the same time they know that if they call for



us we're going to help them out and they can count on us. There's animosity, I can definitely say that, and there's definitely competition, and some give us more competition than others. And the ones that do give us competition, they'd probably rather not see us do what we do every day."

This "competition" came to a very public head just days after my visit, when four departments responded to a house fire in Landover Hills. A Kentland firefighter was videotaped in a tirade, shouting profanities and pushing a firefighter from Bladensburg after its rig inadvertently parked on a Kentland hose and disrupted water flow. He has since been dismissed from the department. Even more serious, though, are allegations of what went on off-camera, where a "brawl" was reported between firefighters inside the structure. Two Landover Hills career firefighters sustained first- and second-degree burns and claim their air tanks were intentionally shut off and they had protective gear ripped off by Kentland firefighters who were "battling" them to put out the fire first.

"In all my years in the fire service, I have never seen so much on-the-scene violence in the workplace, unprofessionalism and [disobedience] from other firefighters," Captain John O'Brien, one of the burn victims, wrote in a report that appeared on a local television station's Web site, [www.wusa9.com](http://www.wusa9.com). "How can we do our jobs when we have to look over our shoulders and worry about someone shutting off our air supply, ripping off our face pieces and helmets and other unsafe acts?"

Officials from Kentland offered the department's full cooperation as the incident was investigated but were not able to comment any further publicly. After the investigation, county officials recommended that the state's attorney file criminal charges against three Kentland firefighters, including charges of assault, reckless endangerment and hindering a fire department operation. This incident was the latest, and most serious, in a saga of clashes between Kentland and neighboring departments where the KFD has been accused of crossing the line.

"My position on it is that I think the only reason that there's bad blood between them and other fire departments is because of them," says Chief Koonsley. "I think it's because of their actions, and because of their 'we're better than everybody else' attitude. That's what causes it, because that spills over onto the fireground.

"We normally work well with them, [but] I just think that they've just gotten beyond their means, and the attitudes have gotten out of control. The 'cowboy' attitude is going to kill somebody."

Since Kentland also runs in with some combination and paid departments, I approached local IAFF Union President Jim Brinkley to see how he weighed in on the issue. His response was more reflective, in a sense blaming the wrongs of "the system" as opposed to Kentland itself.

"No one's ever questioned their ability on the fireground," he says, "or their willingness to go in and their ability to put out a fire and handle the situation. But at some point you have to question the aggressiveness. One of the things I've always used when talking about companies that respond the way they do—whether career or volunteer, it doesn't really matter—is that aggressiveness without purpose is destructive. It's like a company that's third-in on a gas leak; really, how are you going to effect change? How aggressive do you really need to be there? It's not really that important for you to beat everybody into the scene. Their aggressiveness seems to be without purpose a lot of times and the situation doesn't dictate the amount of aggressiveness

that they put forth.

“They pride themselves on beating other people in and taking their fires, but I think the fire service as a whole needs to change their culture and way of thinking. Beating somebody in and getting the fire is a tradition that was born many years ago, dealing with insurance companies paying companies to put out fires. That’s a tradition that’s outlived its usefulness. Really, our pride should be in the ability to show up, do your assigned task and everybody go home safely, not who gets there and gets to the fire first.”

#### **SOUND THE ALL-CLEAR**

As my time riding with Kentland drew to a close, I realized that I was leaving with very mixed emotions. On one hand, I had spent time responding to alarms side-by-side with truly—and this is not a plug, or kissing butt for the sake of photojournalism—some of the best technical firefighters I have ever seen. The members of Kentland are without doubt enormously dedicated to serving their community and being the best firefighters that they possibly can be. Any other fire department in this country should be so lucky as to have even a small portion of the spirit, pride, self-sacrifice and dedication toward firefighting that I witnessed there. On the other hand, however, maybe only a small portion of that spirit would be for the best.

It occurred to me, after everything, that maybe all that the members of Kentland are looking for, just like everyone else, is some recognition and understanding of the work that they do. Shortly before I left, I asked Chief Kelleher if there was any one thing he wanted our readers to know about Kentland.

“I wish more people knew what we do here,” he says. “Sometimes it’s good to keep people guessing, but I think that there are so many people that don’t realize what we do. We publicize ourselves very well on the internet and I think that’s why we have some of the recognition that we do.

“It’s just that a lot of other people still don’t realize what we do. They see us as being aggressive, and trying to be there first. That’s not because we’re playing a game, it’s just because that’s what this place is built on. It’s built on being the best, and it’s built on serving the people around us as best we can.”

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