**Earning the Badge**

By Tim J. Cain

When a young man or woman expresses an interest in becoming a police professional and asks me “What do I have to do to become a police officer?”, I usually respond with a description of the ILEA basic course curriculum, and inevitably I include a few comments on the mental toughness necessary to succeed the rigorous fifteen weeks.

The neophytes are unprepared to grasp the larger question of “What must I do to earn the badge?”; that is a very, very different question.

Many, and perhaps most, LEOs believe that the badge is earned by simply completing the basic ILEA course and receiving the certificate issued by the Law Enforcement Training Board. The physical training at ILEA is second only to that received in military service. The academic instruction rivals any paralegal school. The tactics taught prepare the student to perform police functions. The survivor is, without question, a police officer; but she/he must still ‘earn the badge’. Let me explain.

Police officers enforce the criminal laws; they serve the interests of justice. But the law is a beautiful, complex, jealous, unforgiving, and fickle lover. We swear our fervent and undying devotion to the law. We toil every day in her service, trying to please her. We risk life and limb for her, praying only that we gain a small amount of acceptance from her. She demands nothing but the absolute best from each of us.

Yet she is indifferent to us as individuals and cares little for our trials and tribulations. It is easy to believe we are beneath the notice of the law, that is unless we transgress; then she is swift and sadistic in our punishment. Indeed, she allows no room for error. She takes the best we have to offer and discards us when we have outlived our usefulness to her. We may protest “Last week I caught a serial killer and yesterday I saved the life of a child!” but her only response is “Yes, but what have you done for me today?”

We have no ‘right’ to be a police officer. I’ve read the Constitution a few times and haven’t found any such right mentioned. It is a *privilege* to be a police officer; a *privilege* to serve the interests of justice. The distinction is more than just semantics. A right is inherent in citizenship and cannot be taken away, but a privilege must be earned and maintained lest it be removed.

We are police officers but in the service of the law we must earn our badge *every day*.

With each duty shift we must work to earn the awesome and terrible power and authority bestowed upon us by society. Each action we take must justify the faith that our department and the people we serve have in us. We must exhibit all the characteristics and traits that the public admires in order to protect the rule of law every time we are called upon to serve.

And if we have led a virtuous life and managed a successful career as a law enforcement officer, we can shed the weight of the badge, both physical and psychological weight. Only then will the law smile upon us and thank us for a job well done.

[Author’s Note: Please do not think me prejudiced or callous in the use of the feminine styling of the law; it is done only for educational and artistic purposes.]