

# The Royal Order of Condor

By Danny S. Sorensen,  
Salt Lake City Fire Department

I began my career with the Salt Lake City Fire Department in January of 1985. Near the end of our eight-week recruit school, the twelve of us recruits loaded into the Dolly Madison (a big-windowed shuttle bus) for a tour of the city's fire stations. At one of the stations (probably Station 5) there was an ugly, ratty old bird sitting atop the TV in the kitchen. Its coat-hanger wire feet clutched a perch made of an eighteen-inch-long dowel, supported on a vertical post that resembled a foot-long section of a wooden mop handle, which was stuck into a lead-filled one-quart metal can.

We asked the training lieutenants what the odd bird was all about and were told that it was the Condor. They said that anytime anyone screwed up big time — like wrecking a rig, or breaking something (policy or equipment) — the Condor would be



Jay Dyal Photo

*The Condor, in all of its beauty,  
standing by until the next worthy  
"fowl-up."*

sent to the "fowl-ups" by the crew who currently held it. The bird was delivered along with a poem or story describing why the crew was deserving of having the ignominious bird roost in their station. The stories were compiled in a book that traveled with the Condor. To have the Condor displayed at your station was a disgrace, and sending it on its way was an event eagerly sought after.

Over the next seventeen years or so, the Condor moved from nest to nest bringing shame to those who received it, and glory to those who sent it. Over the years I was involved in two of those stories: The Door Crashers at Station 15, and The Kiddy Wavers of Station 5 — although I was not the cause of either of those incidents.

The last entry made in the 'Condor Book' was about an incident during the 2002 Olympics. This entry indicated that the bird had been sent to Tony Bickmore for fueling up a loaner Pierce engine with gasoline rather than diesel. After that, the Condor just seemed to vanish. Rumors began floating about that the Condor had been sent to a taxidermist to be freshened up. Inquiries as to when it would be returned were usually responded to with, "It will be ready in two weeks."

This went on for the next four years. Frustrated by the long absence of the bird, I decided that to get a straight answer I would have to go to the source. I contacted the person, who reportedly had sent the Condor to a taxidermist. This person confirmed that he had done so, but after nearly five years, our feathered friend had not yet been returned.

## Meeting the Condor's Maker

Along with getting the Condor back, I wanted to know where the Condor had come from. Who had made it? When? And why? While talking to Battalion Chief Mike Andrew about it, he said that a retired firefighter living in the Avenues, Nick Nichols, had probably done the artwork for the Condor crest. Battalion Chief Andrew got an address for me, and a few days later I went to visit Nick with my crew on Truck 2-C.

Nichols came to the door and I introduced myself and the crew. I told him we were trying to learn the history of the Condor and asked, "Do you know where it came from?" He said, "I should

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Jay Dyal Photo

*Retired firefighter Nick Nichols, the Condor's creator, accepts recognition for his creation at a ceremony to rededicate the Condor.*

say so. I made it!" Nichols invited us into his home where he, and his wife Donna, spent the next thirty minutes telling us how the Condor had come about.

In about 1968, the crew at Station 9 left someone at a fire and the chief had to bring him back to the station. "Boogie" Brown at Station 6 wrote a taunting letter and taped it and a feather to a wooden dowel, then delivered it to Station 9. Part of the letter read, "... the Condor is looking at you!" The crew at Station 9 hung the perch over the TV.

A short time later Station 12 had an accident in which they backed a rig into a new demonstration truck. Gordie Evans, the captain at 9's, wrote a letter and sent it and the perch to Station 12. The crew at 12's hung up the perch, and then began talking about what a neat idea this was. Someone suggested that they make a bird and send it around whenever anyone committed a faux pas.



Nick Nichols Jr. Photo

*Nick at work rebuilding the infamous "Condor."*

Nichols, being a very talented artist, made the Condor out of Styrofoam and feathers. Joe Cope made the stand using the original perch, a length of a handle from the station mop, and a spray gun container commandeered from the paint shop, which he filled with lead.

The crew figured they should have an official letterhead to record the sto-

ries on, and this new program was dubbed the "Royal Order of Condor." Nichols researched heraldry, and then designed and airbrushed a beautiful crest full of symbolism that related to the fire department and the purpose of the Condor. To get the letterhead printed up, Marv Parkinson, who worked a side-job at a printer, sneaked the job in the back door. He made up the four-color plates, printed off a ream or so, and sneaked it out the way it came in — through the back door.

The crew took their idea to then Department Chief Walker and received his enthusiastic approval. Thus the Condor began a legacy that ran into its fourth decade before its untimely disappearance.

### Restoring the Bird and the Tradition

After making some inquiries I was given the name of the taxidermist, a firefighter with another de-



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Contributed by Nick Nichols

*A younger Nick Nichols with his original creation.*

partment, who had reportedly received the Condor nearly five years ago. I called and told him who I was and that I was calling about the Condor. I explained how important this tradition was to us and that the bird had been absent far too long. I made arrangements to meet him at his station on November 1, 2006 and he returned the head and the perch — all that remained of the original bird. The body and wings had been tossed in the trash long ago.

We had been researching ways to have the Condor rebuilt and were actually hoping that Nichols would take on the challenge. With the original head in hand, we visited Nichols to show him what was left of his handiwork. He was thrilled to see the head in such good condition, only missing a few small areas of papier-mache. Rick Black asked Nick, "Would you have any interest in making us a new Condor?" Nick responded that he would certainly be willing to give it a try. We left the head with Nick, ecstatic that the new Condor would be made by the creator of the original. Several weeks later we were able to take him the original perch.

On New Year's Eve 2006 we received a call at the station that the Condor was ready to fly. We went to Nichol's late that morning and were greeted with this wonderful, ugly, beautiful bird — the symbol that represents our human fallibility, our

pendant for committing errors and then trying to make the best of it.

On January 9, we presented the new Condor to the SLCFD firefighters at a short ceremony at Station 1. Nichols, now in his eighties and whose SLCFD career spanned the years from 1951 to 1982, was there to tell us how it all began. He told us how surprised he was when we showed up at his home asking about the Condor, thinking it had probably faded away years ago. He was also thrilled to know that what had started as a joke with his own crews nearly forty years ago, has become a tradition so important that firefighters will not let it die.

Nick Nichols' artwork has graced the pages of the SLCFD training manuals for decades and it has been an honor to get to know him. It was also an honor to recognize him for his part in creating, and then recreating, the symbol that epitomizes our human foibles, the "Condor"— a symbol that lets us laugh at our mistakes while making the best of them.

I think Captain Mike Tucker summed it up, "... many times a 'butt kicking' wasn't needed because the bird said enough; management let it 'tune up' the guilty offender. It also gave us a good laugh at ourselves."

Personally, I love the tradition of the Condor, but I don't want it coming to me!

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