

Watching the watchers

8/21/98

By Neal Ross

*On the night and morning of Aug. 11-12, Index-Tribune reporter Neal Ross participated in the Sonoma Fire Department's ride-along program, shadowing a typical five-person crew – four paid and one volunteer firefighter– through the duration of a typical 13-1/2 hour nightshift. The following are selected excerpts from his notebook.*

• 6 p.m.: Arriving at the Patten Street fire station, I am met by volunteer firefighter Jason Breaw, who gives me a brief tour of the downstairs offices and upstairs quarters: kitchen, living room, classroom, bathroom and five-bed dorm. The upstairs is decorated in early/modern firehouse, including a framed “Backdraft” poster in the dorm.

Breaw explains that the department's 19 volunteers and 12 paid firefighters make up three rotating shifts which – along with the part-time firefighter or “sleeper” program – allows the station to be staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. He adds that the volunteers vary their time commitment, working between one to four (or more) shifts each month before trundling off to their regular day-jobs.

I stash my sleeping bag on one of the beds and we go downstairs to see the fire engines.

• 6:25: Central dispatch in Santa Rosa calls us to respond to a “possible stroke victim” on Newcomb Street. Breaw, assistant fire Chief Steve Marler and I jump into the smaller fire engine (#3782) and speed down Broadway. The woman, who turned 86 yesterday, was having her dinner when she “passed out,” according to her daughter.

• 6:30: Firefighter/paramedics Mike Menefee and John Greenslade have arrived in the department's ambulance, having just finished up a medical call on Lovall Valley Road. Menefee and Greenslade's manner is simultaneously friendly, reassuring and professional as they measure blood pressure and ask the woman her name, age, and other questions to establish her mental state. Listening to them, one would think they're simply passing the time of day. She proceeds to flirt with Menefee as she's bundled into a gurney.

• 6:47: En route to Sonoma Valley Hospital in the ambulance, the paramedics radio ahead to the emergency room detailing the patient's condition when they arrived at her house as well as during time of transport. This trip is the ambulance's fourth today, so far.

• 6:56: The woman, resting comfortably in an emergency room bed, has been joined by her daughter and a friend. Menefee stays with her, chatting, until she's settled. (In a little alcove off the emergency room corridor, hospital staff have constructed a “Rogue's Gallery” of Valley paramedic/EMT photos.)

• 7:36: Back at the station. Marler refills an oxygen bottle from the earlier call.

Firefighter/paramedic Susan Singleton and Capt. Alan Jones, the last two members of that night's shift, have also arrived; Singleton having helped a woman who wandered into the station earlier feeling depressed and unable to reach her therapist. Marler explains that although that's not the department's regular beat, “we're here to help people.” She is eventually taken to a mental-health facility near Santa Rosa.

• 7:51: Marler leaves, and a discussion ensues upstairs concerning the evening meal. Generally, the crew cooks for themselves, but the lateness of the hour and busyness of the day necessitates drastic measures. A call is placed to a Plaza pizza restaurant. Greenslade declines, feasting instead on his wife's leftover chicken parmigiana and cheesecake.

- 7:59: Breaw, Singleton and Greenslade discuss various aspects of the fire/medical service, including the relative merits of having males or females as respondents; the crews' consensus is that victims will often cooperate better with women than men. Their banter has the relaxed but tightly-knit playfulness of people whose job it is to put their lives on the line at an unpredictable moment's notice.
- 8:04: Singleton consults a Magic 8-Ball to see if the evening will be busy. "Yes, definitely," the oracle responds. Menefee completes the four-part forms required for hospital transfers.
- 8:26: Off to pick up the pizza in engine 3782 with Singleton driving. The engine is taken in case a call comes in. She maneuvers the huge machine into narrow, between-building driveways like it was a Volkswagen Beetle.
- 8:43: Back at the station again, munching pizza (except for Greenslade, who's filling out more forms), the talk turns to my assignment. I say that I'm trying to capture a typical night with the Sonoma Fire Department. Good-natured laughter erupts. "There's nothing typical about it," says Greenslade. "That's what makes it typical," rejoins Breaw. "No two nights are the same."
- 9:16: As the shift's volunteer firefighter, Breaw is on wastebasket duty; the department doesn't have a custodial service, so the task of tidying-up falls to the volunteers.
- 9:22: Sirens wailing and lights flashing, we are en route to a vehicle fire on Andrieux Street near Fifth Street West, in the "big engine" (#3781). Cars scatter from our path. In front of a house, neighbors are attempting to extinguish flames through the a car's closed hood with a garden hose. A fire hose is connected to 3781, the car's hood is popped, and the flames are quickly doused. Reports are made, names are taken, hoses are rolled up and it's back to quarters.
- 11:06: A dog belonging to the woman who wandered in earlier is rescued from the woman's car, parked across the street. Water is poured in a bowl for the frisky fellow, whose owner is on her way to pick him up despite that he's fallen in love with Singleton.
- 11:35: Sleeping arrangements: Breaw, Singleton, Menefee and I share the dorm; Greenslade is in the classroom; Jones stretches out in the living room. "I'm a famous snorer," he explains.
- 11:41: His head having literally just hit the pillow, Menefee – as one of the ambulance crew – is dispatched for a vehicle accident (rollover, trapped occupant) on Stage Gulch Road by the dump. He and Greenslade pull on their turnouts and we leap into the ambulance and zip down the road.
- 11:50: We have been cancelled just before arriving on the scene. Three CHP units have the situation under control; the driver, a young woman, is shaken but fine as she stands next to her rolled-on-its-side car. Menefee says such things, while not common, aren't that unusual.
- 3:25 a.m.: Off to a motel at the city's western edge, where a 58-year-old man says he broke his hand in the shower "four hours ago." The ambulance and engine 3782 both attend, Greenslade later explaining that's standard procedure for all 911 calls in case "extra manpower" is needed. Menefee's manner, as before, is friendly and assured – no mean feat at this hour. We transport the man in the ambulance to the hospital; the on-shift doctor is dozing, and Menefee and Greenslade exchange pleasantries with the nurses in the otherwise quiet emergency room.
- 3:54: We leave to join engine 3782 at a well-appointed home on Chase Street, where a 99-year-old man is having difficulty breathing. He seems almost apologetic for having

had to trouble the paramedics; as his wife passes through the corridor leading from their bedroom, she beams at the crew. “So kind,” she says, smiling, as her husband is bundled into the gurney.

- 4:11: Busy night! Engine 3782 leaves Chase Street and arrives at a retirement home on Oregon Street for a woman with stomach problems; apparently it’s been four days since she’d gone to the bathroom. The woman, like the Chase Street man, is also apologetic. “I hate to do this, but I didn’t know what else to do,” she said. Paramedic Sean Tingley, who – along with Pam Ferrell – has arrived in an ambulance from the Valley of the Moon fire station, reassures her. “That’s what we’re here for,” he says.
- 4:27: Back in quarters, we sleep until 7:15.
- 7:30: Shift over... and another day begins.