

Start of the Paramedic Program

By Stephen S. Vogel, Fire Chief Retired

Before I was hired by Fire District 3, I worked as a Pierce County paramedic working out of the Emergency Room of St. Joseph Hospital in Tacoma. When not working, I was a volunteer (Lt.) firefighter from 1976 to 1982 with Kitsap County Fire District 4 in Suquamish, WA.

During the winter of 1981, I dropped off a resume at the Carlsborg fire station. This led to an invitation to test in the spring of 1982. This entailed several days of medical oral boards/written test conducted at Olympic Memorial Hospital. The testing was administered by the Emergency Room Physician David Chase, the County's first Medical Program Director for Paramedics. The process included a series of interviews with the Fire District's Commissioners, local citizens, and an interview board made up of contentious volunteer firefighters from throughout the District. After testing and interviews were completed, I was offered and accepted the job of Paramedic/Firefighter; starting date July 1, 1982.



1999 – Steve Vogel, Iris Marshal, Tom Lowe

My first day working, but not yet officially employed for the Fire District, was on June 1, 1982. I came to Sequim for a Monday morning new hire physical with Dr. Quincy Kitner. Not wanting to be late, my wife and I spent the night in our camper at the Sequim Bay State Park. I got up early that morning, walked to the edge of the park to an area that overlooked the Bay. I watched two beautiful bi-planes fly over my head - they were crossing Sequim bay when suddenly one of the planes struck a sailboat mast, plunging it into the Bay. I responded to the scene and assisted Paramedic Val Grant who was trying to resuscitate the Pilot who had succumbed from trauma from the crash and from a long recovery time (pilot had to be removed from inside the plane and divers took a lot of time getting to the scene) out of the water. I had a chance to meet Sequim Fire Chief Tom Lowe and other members of the Fire District. I was quite impressed with the department's teamwork and comradely that they had with each other.

After passing my medical physical, the Fire District required that I move to Sequim by July 1, 1982. Housing was extremely hard to find, it took several days to locate a house to rent. We (My Wife Tina, Son Kris, and I) located our first home at 379 Woodcock Rd., but the home would not be available to move into until after the first week in July. The Fire District let me park my pickup/camper outside the one bay headquarter fire station in Carlsborg during that first week.

It was quiet there with houses across the street on Smithfield drive and Matriotti's cattle roamed the fields across the street of Carlsborg Rd., which was very rural and beautiful. That first evening was quiet until just prior to 7 p.m. when cars started parking everywhere. Soon volunteers, community members, and news reporters filled the interior truck bay for an emotionally heated Fire Commissioner meeting. One of the volunteers and station chief for Carlsborg, Daly Richardson introduced himself, welcomed me to the Fire District and suggested that I should not attend the meeting as it shouldn't be my concern yet. Since I was new to the District and felt it would be better for me to avoid the complex issues concerning past District history, I took his advice and have appreciated his wisdom over the years. Sure enough, the meeting started and the yelling within the station could be heard all the way outside, as well as within my camper, a short time later a fist fight pursued in the parking lot.

There were several issues leading to this meeting but one which had a direct impact to the Paramedic program. I learn that District volunteers and some of the community citizens were not happy about how they felt deceived by voting for and passing the EMS Levy. They were lead to believe that equipment and vehicles were going to be purchased from the levy rather than Paramedics. The Commissioners, Fire Chief, and citizens from a subcommittee did plan to use the money to start the paramedic program but did not communicate their intentions clearly enough to the public and District's volunteer firefighters.

Also at the meeting the volunteers voiced their concerns of no confidence in Fire Chief Fred Barrett. I enjoyed working under Chief Barrett. He seemed progressive by virtue of his support of the new Emergency Medical Response system. The times were difficult and the volunteers were resistant to change, with many not wanting to be involved with medical responses. Though the majority only had basic first aid training, there were a few firefighters who were certified as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT).

The Paramedic program was well supported because the majority of the population living in the valley wanted an Advanced Life Support (ALS) program. The community was going through a transition of change from a dairy farm valley into a retirement community and there was little to no medical services available after 5 pm, unless one drove to the Emergency Room in Port Angeles.

There were two fire departments back then, Fire District 3 with 5 fire stations and the Sequim Fire Department with one fire station, which was independent from the Fire District. My First call was for a man having a heart attack at the Red Ranch Inn in downtown Sequim. Chief Barrett drove me to the scene, informed me to take over when we arrived. I grabbed my equipment, reported to the volunteers that were assisting the patient and I asked for a detailed patient report. They were courteous enough and gave me a good report but I had a strong sense something was definitely wrong by just looking on the faces of the Sequim volunteer firefighters. After the call was completed I made it my mission to meet with the Sequim volunteers. I quickly discovered that they did not invite me to their aid call and that this was within their jurisdiction. Understanding their concerns I was able to work with them and new friendships were eventually established.

Paramedic Aaron Espy was the senior Medic, hired to set up the paramedic program. He was hired three months earlier in April of 1982. He made it our mission to teach Sequim and all District members what a paramedic needed when providing Advance Life Support skills to a sick or injured patient.

Aaron Espy was the District's EMS Captain. Both he and I were assigned to 24 hour shifts, 7 days a week 365 days a year. We were given a week of vacation, which needed to be filled by another paramedic who was not on vacation. This meant that one of us worked every day of that week while the other was on vacation. On weekends we could utilize Paramedic Val Grant to help cover. Val had other employment obligations during the week with a full-time job working for Sherwood Manor and Sequim Ambulance.

This went on until June of 1984 when we finally hired Doug Sabin and Mike L'ami. The first two years were extremely stressful! We were never off duty; expected to be at work by 8:00 am and leave for home at 1700 –Monday thru Friday, this did not include the weekly drills on Tuesday night, monthly CPR classes, and EMT classes taught in the evenings. One paramedic would be first out for 24 hours and the second paramedic was to respond to any available calls when the first out medic was out on another call. We responded from our homes at night since there was not an adequate fire station to live in. There were a lot of structure fires, grass fires, motor vehicle accidents, and an abundance of suicides during the early 80's. As they compounded, they eventually began to bother me emotionally, given that all were self-inflicted and most were very young people.

The Fire District was made up of Fire Chief Fred Barrett, Assistant Chief Bob Spalinger, Firefighter Mechanic Roger Moeder, and Administrative Assistant Susie Tupper who eventually married Chief Spalinger. Each station was their own kingdom and each had their own volunteer Fire Chief. During Commissioner Meetings you may have all the Station Chiefs at a meeting giving a report what each station was doing and what supplies they needed. Commissioner meetings started at 7 pm and lasted sometimes till 11 pm.

Most stations drilled independent from each other and many of the volunteers would not respond to another station even if the emergency call was in the neighborhood where the volunteer was at. There was a lot of animosity, competition, and Pride between the stations. It wasn't until the paramedic program got started and required volunteers to come to the monthly Tuesday night EMS Drills. This training helped to break down barriers and helped to meld the volunteers together.

The volunteer firefighters became proficient in providing patient care during those early years. Patients and paramedics depended upon them since we had to respond from our homes. Volunteer proficiency was essential, given our travel distances and that arrival times were often slowed when roads conditions included ice and snow. Upon our arrival volunteers would have the basic patient information completed and would have begun filling out our patient reports; the first set of vital signs would have been taken and recorded; EKG pads were already placed on the patient; IV bags were spiked and hung; glucose sticks were performed and the patient was often gowned and placed on the gurney prior to our arrival. When we arrived a detailed report was given and we could begin administering the ALS procedures. All of this enabled transports to be expedited sooner. The system worked well.

The District had two aid cars, one new aid car in Diamond Point and a 1966 Dodge Panel Van used as an aid car, housed at the Dungeness fire station. There was no Jaws of Life within the District and only basic first-aid kits were on the fire trucks and in the aid vehicles. Since our program was new and the Fire District did not have the funds to support our medical equipment needs, we received financial support from the Sequim Dungeness Hospital Guild. The Guild is a non-profit consignment shop operated by ladies who volunteer countless hours to help raise money for local medical organizations and scholarships to students who were going into a medical profession.

District paramedics will always be thankful for the financial support they gave us. The Hospital Guild purchased us our first Medic Response vehicle, a Malibu Station Wagon. They also helped get us supplied with ALS heart monitors, oxygen tanks and regulators, advanced airway tools, and other medical equipment during the first year. For the next three decades, the Hospital Guild has continued to purchase medical equipment that has enabled the District to remain on the cutting edge of emergency medicine. We were often the first EMS agency in the nation using equipment like external cardiac pacers even before hospitals had them.



The first two years of the paramedic program was also the breaking point. Sometime around late spring of 1984 I was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome and was at the point of being emotionally drained and stressed. I sought professional psychological support. I did not and could not understand what or why I was on the emotional edge of breaking. As I approach Dr. Margret McHugh's office I met Aaron Espy coming out. We both looked at each other and said "You Too!". That was the turning point for a new change in the Paramedic Program.

Both Aaron and I approached the Fire Commissioners and gave them an ultimatum that they hire more paramedics now, or we will put the Paramedic program under the Hospital and respond out of the Sequim Medical Plaza. The Fire Commissioners looked at us and replied. "We were wondering when you were going to ask for help – go hire more Paramedics".

In 1984, Fire Chief Fred Barrett resigned and the Fire District offered Chief Tom Lowe the position of Fire Chief. Also that year, the District asked the City of Sequim if they were interested in merging their fire department into the Fire District. The merger initially started with a contract for services and within two-years, Sequim was merged into the Fire District. Chief Lowe was well respected by the City of Sequim, the volunteers in Sequim, and by volunteers within the Fire District. And because he was a respected community member, his leadership qualities stabilized the fire service within the Sequim Dungeness Valley.

Aaron Espy resigned in April of 1984 to take a fulltime Paramedic position with the Bremerton Fire Department. I was promoted to serve as the District's Captain/Medical Safety Officer. In 1984 I hired Mike L'ami, Doug Sabin, and continued to utilize Val Grant part time. In February, 1986 we hired our fourth full-time Paramedic John Wright. Giving us enough staffing to allow medics adequate time off to get rest and a break from work.

There were other challenges early on. One of the highlights in my career, and one which I feel very proud to have been an instrumental player, was to change the way we responded to emergencies within the county. The challenge was addressing! It was impossible to understand or use the existing (multiple) address systems. We had to deal with private, rural routes, and two previous attempts to re-address Clallam County. Both county address systems started and stopped within the Fire District's boundaries and were inefficient, fragmented, and unfinished.

I remember responding up Blue Mountain Rd. for a burn permit in 1984. I could not find the address we were looking for until I located a mailman who told me that homes on one side of the road were under one addressing system and the opposite side was a different system. He also explained that if a resident was addressed on a road and moved to another location on the same road, they were allowed to take their existing address and mail box with them to the new home.

Many of the Roads were addressed with one number like 186-K North Bagley Creek Road, the K designator may have been the first house on the road, followed by 186-M at the next house and then a 186-B for the next home etc. etc. The system had neither rhyme nor reason to the letters in how they were assigned to the numbers. If the postal system used up all the letters in the alphabet they would start all over with a new number such as 187 and work through A to Z again. When I asked one home owner how he came up with his letter attached with his house number, he replied that it was the first letter used to spell his last name. When a Dispatcher received an emergency call, they would occasionally dispatch us to the home just north of Mantles Corner, or across the street from Long Johns Corner, maybe a fire call at the Old Sequim Creamery.

This was great if one lived and grew up in the valley, but for me – it did not help! I responded by myself and I had to depend upon the volunteers who gave me directions to the scene by communicating on CB radio's tuned to channel 3. Many times volunteers responded down driveways to report the call was not at that home. In 1984 I requested that our Fire Commissioners approach the County Commissioners to re-address the county address system. Their request was not approved. In 1988, after losing my third patient because of the ridiculous address system, I took my concerns to the Clallam County EMS Council. Dave Hanna, Tom Schindler, and I were representative fire departments in Clallam County. Both Dave and Tom were first responders who experienced the same frustration as me.

We worked on developing a new addressing system, selling the idea as a 911 emergency response address system to the County Commissioners and to public. Through much pressure, the County Commissioners approved the new system as Ordinance 409, 1991. Soon the US Postal Service was in support and participated making the change to include new mailing addresses for them also. The Addressing started on February 1993.

The new addressing did not come without numerous scars from many irate home and business owners, who put up a fight based on not wanting to change their old inefficient address for a new one. This project took thousands of hours to implement and much of the work was done by local fire districts who located each home and then pounded in a steel post followed by a green reflective plaque. Several of the irate citizens vandalized our efforts early on by pulling up the post and throwing them into irrigation ditches and some were just destroyed. By 1996 we completed the new county wide address system that was well planned out and was developed to meet population and growth. I have to recognize Tom Schindler and Dave Hanna who helped make this project become a reality.

Clallam County Fire District #3 continues to grow and change, over the years we have progressed into an EMS system recognized throughout the United States. The following quotation came from Mike Smith who writes articles for numerous EMS nationally published magazines. Mike is also the Chair of the Emergency Services Program at Tacoma Community College.

“The working relationship between the folks at Sequim Fire Department and Olympic Ambulance should serve as a shining example of just what can be accomplished when providers treat each other with respect, courtesy and professionalism on a daily basis. In my 33 years in EMS, the performance of these two agencies and the people they employ is one of the most impressive I've had the privilege to be a part of. Their efforts produce an unswerving commitment to excellence in patient care and the people they serve. As EMS responders, we would all do well to emulate their outstanding work. June 2006 EMS, www.emsresponder.com”

To learn more about the history of Fire District 3 during my years of employment see the recorded news articles in the Electronic File Called: **“In the News”**.