

EMS Week is May 15-21

Silent night, tragic night

May 16, 2000

Last Friday night, on the eve of EMS Week, reporter Carmen Pauls joined La Ronge EMS staff on their night shift to see what it's really like on the front line....

At ten to seven, an ambulance pulls up in my driveway. Technically, La Ronge EMS staffers Moses McKenzie and Nancy Voss aren't on shift until 7 p.m., but they've both been in uniform since mid-afternoon — called in to work while EMTs Matthew Tatlow and Morley Hewison arrange to air medevac a patient from Southend.

First up: a quick stop to pick up a toothbrush for Voss, who's forgotten to pack it in her overnight bag. The emergency medical staff on night shift often catch a few winks at the base, and Voss hates having fuzzy teeth. While she's inside, McKenzie jokes with me, "So, you're going to help us scrape some guy off the sidewalk?" (If only he knew....)

By 7, we're driving through La Ronge's north residential area, listening to the radio, laughing over the silly comic spiel on the radio and one another's jokes. We stop at the La Ronge Health Centre to exchange ambulances with Hewison and Tatlow, and the EMTs chat about a barbecue and ball game they've planned for EMS Week before the day shift heads home to rest before their next 7 a.m. shift.

As we drive by a cluster of kids near the Uniplex, they gawk at us. "Some days, I'd swear to God people have never seen an ambulance before," remarks Voss. We stop at the Petro Canada bulk fuel station to fill up, and then head back to base to clean up the ambulance. McKenzie and Voss haul the used stretcher out, and quickly change the linen and fluff up the pillow before heading back into the ambulance to wipe off the floor. "You'd be amazed how much cleaning we do," Voss says.

Supper is at eight, and then it's back to base and upstairs to the EMTs' home away from home. It's a simple, homey little apartment — plants, a TV and VCR, a couple of stuffed chairs, a kitchen area (with a fridge containing mostly pop), a couple of small bedrooms and a bathroom.

Both Voss and McKenzie are getting a bit antsy: as McKenzie settles down to channel surf, he predicts that "we'll find something good to watch, and we'll get a call." Voss starts

pulling off her boots: "Okay, here it comes — as soon as I get my boots off... Ready, and...". The boots are off, but the only sound is the MBC bingo caller on Ch. 22.

Voss curls up in a flowered blanket, flipping through her scrapbook of La Ronge EMS photos and clippings, while McKenzie channel surfs. Their

hit by a truck — and they're waiting with a couple of first responders at the community's clinic.

It's a surreal feeling, sitting in the back of an ambulance in pitch black, occasional flashes of dull red light pulsing through the tinted windows. Gravel crashes constantly against the base of the ambulance, and by

Two first responders and the three youths are waiting for us. One of the first responders — hands me a sheet explaining the what they've done and who the youths are. All three boys had been drinking heavily before the accident, the sheet notes.

The youngest boy is a giggler, and he chatters constantly, in a mix of Cree and

must stink, to which Voss replies, "Yeah, I'm going to get drunk off the three of you."

Then we're on our way again, Voss in the back soothing and joking, giving the trio lemon-flavoured glycerine sticks, trying to get information on who they are and redoing the straps on the older boy's head block, which he keeps removing. "I know it's uncomfortable, I've been there," she says. "We're not trying to torture you."

As we arrive back at the La Ronge Health Centre, another call comes in: a hit-and-run out at Bell's Point. Voss grabs her radio and says they'll be able to head out in a couple of minutes, but the back-up crew takes the call instead. Voss and McKenzie then take the stretcher into the emergency room, the younger boys limping in behind them. One of the youths grabs the older boy's shoe off the pavement, where it has fallen. Once inside, he has to be guided toward the examining room: he's preoccupied with returning the shoe.

Then it's back out to the ambulance so that we can head out to assist the back-up crew at the accident scene. Lights and sirens blazing, we're already on the highway when Tatlow's voice comes on the radio: "Nancy, cancel that call." Could be a good sign, could be bad. Voss says as we head back — first to fill up with gas, then to the health centre. Back in the emergency room, we're clustered around the admitting desk when Tatlow comes on the air: "We have no patient. We are clear of this call." What he means is soon clarified: it's a DOA — dead on arrival.

Dawn is breaking as we reach base at 4:45 a.m. Tatlow is sitting in the ambulance bay, his curly red hair mussed. He answers a few questions, but he seems more shaken than he's letting on. "Well guys," he says eventually, "I could really use a heavy shot of grapefruit juice."

There's counselling available if he or any of the other EMTs need it, and a chance to debrief. Voss says as we head over to the La Ronge Motor Hotel to see about breakfast. We'll have to wait another hour — lukewarm coffee at the base in the meantime — but after some banter and a few EMT horror stories, and that grapefruit juice with bacon and eggs, Tatlow seems somewhat restored.

"Grin and bear it," he'd said earlier, and by 7:45 a.m. he's set to go again. Another shift lies ahead.



Photo by Carmen Pauls

La Ronge EMS staffers Nancy Voss and Moses McKenzie load a boy injured in an ATV/truck crash into their ambulance. (The boy's face has been erased to protect his identity.)

favourite shows are the ones about their own profession, like ER, Paramedics and the police show Third Watch, Voss says. Why? "We like to pick apart what they do wrong on TV."

By 12:30 a.m. we're still waiting. Voss is snoozing on the floor, and McKenzie has headed for bed. Suddenly there's a noise from the radio and I jolt up, but it was just a glitch — probably someone at dispatch keyed in a wrong code, Voss says. Awake now, she explains that many of their calls don't come until after the bars close. "They wait until they get home and then they go nuts.... We get a lot of our calls between 2 and 4 a.m.," she says.

We settle back down, but just 10 minutes later — at 1:15 a.m. — the radio goes off. With an air of quiet efficiency (and only a few yawns), Voss and McKenzie step out of the bedrooms, buttoning up their navy blue uniforms and tying up their boots.

Down we go to the bay, where the ambulance is revved, the bay doors opened, red lights (the "cherries") turned on, and we're on our way to a small community up north. There's been an ATV (all-terrain vehicle) accident — three youths, one with head injuries,

the time we hit the hilly road into the community, it feels like I'm travelling on a roller coaster in a jar of marbles.

The siren goes on only once, for a vehicle ahead of us, and the driver pulls to a stop at the top of a hill. Voss grumbles at first — they won't be able to see oncoming — but then says she shouldn't complain. "Some people don't stop — keep right

Many calls for the ambulance come after the bars close, says EMT-A Nancy Voss. "They wait until they get home and then they go nuts."

on going like they never heard you, never saw you," she says. "Sometimes we actually have to pick up the p.a. system and say, 'Move your vehicle to the right-hand side of the road.'"

When we arrive at the low building that serves as the clinic, McKenzie heads straight inside while Voss grabs her gear.

English. Their faces, hands and legs are covered with "road rash" — red welts and scrapes — and they carefully examine one another, then compare in the mirror. At one point, the middle boy stares at his ripped pant leg and declares, "Holy s*** — look at my pants, it's broken."

Voss goes first to the most injured youth, the one with head lacerations, who's lying on the grey examining table. She checks his head and neck, and asks him to move his toes (he doesn't). Eventually, McKenzie and Voss place the boy on a yellow spine board and the first responders help strap him on. The boy's head is then placed in an orange head block, and he is taken out to the waiting ambulance, where Voss settles him in and checks his blood pressure.

McKenzie eventually joins her, bringing with him baggage and the other two boys. The boys climb in back, and one of the first responders blows the younger one a kiss before the back door is shut tight.

The side door is still open, however, and chilly air blows in as McKenzie and Voss wrap the younger pair's injuries with gauze. One of the boys comments on how their breath