

# Night at the Fire Station

By Julia Yuen

It was 8.45 pm. I had just exchanged my IC for a visitor pass and was standing outside an air conditioned room with large glass windows. I opened the door, entered the room and glanced around. Unfamiliar faces greeted me. I smiled, though somewhat uneasily. It felt like the first day at school, where I didn't know anyone.

They were dressed in smart navy blue uniforms, laughing and joking with each other. I felt strangely out of place in my blue polo t-shirt and jeans. "Hi, I'm Julia. I'm a medical student," I said.

I was spending the night at Tampines Fire Station for my night ambulance run. It was part of our Emergency Medicine posting, to experience and learn from the Singapore Civil Defence Force

(SCDF) paramedics and medics about the management of patients in the emergency setting and witness how the patients were transported, in the shortest time possible, to the nearest hospital. I had been excited about tonight. I mean, how often do you get an opportunity to sit in an ambulance, or to experience an emergency situation firsthand or to sleep in a fire station overnight?

I was secretly hoping for some action tonight.

Then someone waved me over. It was Nas, the medic on duty. He introduced me to the rest of the team: Benny the paramedic, Michael the other medic and Che'lah the ambulance driver. Benny has been a paramedic for years and has a ton of experience, while Nas and Michael are

national servicemen serving their two years of national service as medics. They seemed a nice and friendly bunch, and I immediately felt more at ease.

Nas and Michael ran me through a quick introduction of the ambulance while they checked their equipment. I had never been inside an ambulance before, and was impressed by how such a small confined space could contain so much essential medical equipment. After they were done, we went back to the room. While flipping through my Emergency Medicine black book, I waited, waited and waited some more. It was nearing midnight but still there were no calls. I felt a tinge of disappointment. My secret hoping had seemed to have gone unanswered.

Che'lah handed me two blankets



Unsung heroes from the SCDF (L to R): Che'lah, Benny, Nas and Michael



and two pillows, and advised me to get some sleep while I could. The lights went off and everyone settled in to get some rest before the next call, which could happen at any time. With the unfamiliar surroundings, cold airconditioning, strange beeping sounds, a thin blanket separating me from the hard floor, and the excitement and anticipation of what was to come, sleep was the last thing on my mind. I sat up, still wide awake.

Then it came. The alarm went off, loud and blaring. I got a shock, but not from the alarm. Che'lah had sprung from his bed with such speed that I was startled by him instead. But no go, it was a false alarm. As the team settled back in, I thought to myself how tough it was to have to be on standby the whole night. A peaceful night's sleep was virtually impossible since they had to respond immediately to a call. Someone out there in the community needed their help urgently to get to the nearest hospital. A life was possibly at stake and every second counted.

It was not long before the alarm went off again. This time, it was for real. It was an elderly diabetic lady who had collapsed just outside her toilet. We were on the scene within minutes. The stretcher, Lifepak machine, oxygen cylinder and haversack with all the essentials were out and ready for use within seconds. The team, under Benny's directions, functioned like clockwork at the elderly lady's side. Her ABCs and vitals were assessed, an IV line inserted, blood pressure, oxygen saturation and hypocount recorded, and a history taken from her daughter. The elderly lady turned out to be hypoglycemic, so a dextrose infusion was started.

The elderly lady's HDB unit was on a floor without a lift landing. She was carried

off in the SCDF canvas. The stretcher had been left behind at the lift lobby. I offered to carry the Lifepak machine, but it weighed more than expected, and I struggled a little as I took the stairs to the nearest lift lobby. One could only wonder how these guys could handle an obese patient living on a floor with no lift landing. It was certainly no mean feat, especially when time was of the essence. En route to Changi General Hospital (CGH), ECG leads were placed on the elderly lady and her vitals were constantly monitored.

Sitting in a moving ambulance wasn't quite what I expected. I felt a bit sick but managed to keep my stomach contents in. Nas told me that the last medical student he had didn't do so well. He had such bad motion sickness that he vomited on arrival at the hospital. It certainly required some getting used to. It wasn't long before we arrived at CGH. The elderly lady was much better by then. She was conscious and talking.

The night went on and I witnessed two more calls, one of which I almost missed. I was in the washroom answering nature's call when the alarm went off. I went running for the ambulance because I did not want to miss out on the action. This second case was an elderly lady with symptomatic iron deficiency anaemia, and the third and last one was a young lady who was having hyperventilation. I was glad to know that all three of them were ultimately well.

It was soon 8.45 am. Time had literally flown by. I hadn't slept a wink. I wondered if anyone of them did. According to the team, it was a "good" night, with just three calls. I'm not sure if it was the adrenaline rush or simply the lack of sleep, I felt so tired although I hardly did anything. If last

night was a "good" night, how busy could a "bad" night get? I could only wonder.

This experience made me develop a newfound respect for the SCDF. Now, whenever I hear the siren of an ambulance or see an ambulance whizz by on the road with its flashing lights, it gives me a certain thrill and a buzz of excitement. It is not a mere adrenaline rush or a naive anticipation. Instead it comes with a comforting feeling, knowing that there are dependable and qualified medical personnel who are always on standby to respond immediately to a call for help from the community. A team which is equipped to handle emergencies and to deal with life threatening situations round the clock. A team which saves lives, and at this instant, possibly the very life of the person in the ambulance.

For their dedication and service to the community, we should indeed show our appreciation and extend our heartfelt thanks.

Kudos to the SCDF for a job so well done!!! **SMA**



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