

## **SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO'S PARAMEDIC PROGRAM**

By Jacquelyne Kiouss

The origin of providing advanced life support care in the field dates back to the Korean War and MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) units. During the Vietnam War medics were flown to the scene saving many lives. But it was the "out-of-hospital" care program (mobile units staffed by physicians responding from hospitals) popular in Western Europe in the early 1960s that led to the paramedic program in this country.

Los Angeles Fire Department was one of the first department's in the country to have a paramedic program. In the summer of 1972, SSF fireman Tony Pini went to Los Angeles to study their program. Pini wrote a feasibility study that was quickly shelved by the new fire chief. "Congratulations on your excellent report... There are no plans at present to develop such a program."

End of story? That was March 1, 1973. As the year progressed starting a paramedic program was gaining momentum. Due to the popularity of the TV show *Emergency!* the number of medical calls steadily increased. Previously the only medical-type requests the department responded to were resuscitator calls.

It is always hard to break with tradition and introduce such dramatic change. South San Francisco's firefighting roots date back to 1892 when one hose cart and half a dozen volunteers provided fire protection. Other than the development of better firefighting equipment and first aid training, the traditional role of firemen changed little over the next half century.

But *Emergency!* changed all that. Within weeks of its premiere in September 1971 the popular TV show had captivated the nation as well as the imaginations of many in the department.

By the fall of 1973, Fire Chief Toellner had begun talks with city leaders and the county health department. In the spring of 1974 the department began an internal recruitment. Fourteen firemen applied; 10 were selected. The 10 paramedic candidates spent June and July at Skyline College receiving their emergency medical technician certifications. In August, they began classes at Stanford University studying basic anatomy, physiology, cardiology, and pharmacology. In early October, they started their 3-month internships in Southern California.

Just seven months after they were selected to participate in the program, all 10 received their paramedic certifications in February 1975. The department began providing paramedic service on March 18 - an amazing accomplishment in such a short period of time.

But the excitement was tempered when it became clear that acceptance from the conservative medical community would have to be earned. In 1975, emergency medicine was in its infancy. Doctors didn't understand how paramedics performed in the field and felt uneasy making decisions on treatment based on the observations of paramedics whose skill level they didn't entirely trust.

As tensions between Kaiser doctors (Kaiser served as the base hospital) and paramedics mounted, Chief Toellner appointed Capt. Russ Lee to mediate the situation. Months of meetings and discussions brought both sides together and ride-a-longs showed emergency room staff the difficulties of treating patients under less than ideal conditions. The program was back on track; by the end of the first year, the county health department proclaimed our program a success.