

# EMS vocation unpredictable, heartwarming,

By George James Georgas

Paramedics answering an emergency call coolly wait before railroad tracks for a seemingly never-ending train to pass.

A seizure-struck epileptic in a Cayce bar is being watched by friends, who might wonder what is keeping the ambulance. They might find the paramedics' predicament less than the typical storybook rescue.

Jerry Fowler and Howard Burgess work for the state Emergency Medical Services in Lexington County. Each becomes companion and comforter to his respective patient.

Fowler recognized the epileptic from a previous emergency. The man had again been drinking after failing to take his medication for three days. The 29-year-old paramedic

assuaged the stretcher-supported patient as he lay prone in the back of the EMS unit. He told him he'd be fine, but warned him to more carefully consider his condition in the future.

Burgess, his grizzled and bespectacled cohort, said he got into emergency services because he wasn't cut out for a 9-to-5 job. He said he's done it for four years, though many paramedics don't last that long.

"There's a high rate of attrition in this business. With this job, you never know what's going to happen," Burgess said.

Fowler, a self-described rookie, agreed. "After a particularly rough day, it's usually hard to go home and talk about it with the family. Over the year, I've had some problems with some things."

After a patient is picked up,

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**Howard Burgess**  
Lexington County paramedic

Fowler said they test his vital signs and call in information to the hospital while en route. This radio call prepares emergency room physicians to initiate the proper procedure.

After taking the epileptic to the Lexington County Hospital, Fowler and Burgess drove the multi-colored, modified van back to the fire station where they said they were overdue for a meal.

Burgess said sometimes they might go a whole day without food. "If it's a busy day, you might not even have time to think about eating. One time, I

went from eight in the morning 'til midnight without eating."

The Lexington Fire Station affords them some domestic comfort. Furnished with plush couches and seats, a television set, stereo system and a beverage bar, the station distances them from the exhaustive rigors of ambulance-driving. But they must also use this time in between dispatches to write up reports on all emergency calls answered.

Other professionals in the station included off-duty policemen and a support emergency medical technician.

Fowler said the tense occupations these men share has nurtured a strong camaraderie. He and Burgess likewise worked amicably, dividing labors and splitting driving time.

After an hour respite in the fire station, they received another call. For this one, they had to use a map to find the specific site of the reported car accident. Though some people believe EMS drivers throw caution with the tailgating wind, Burgess said it's important to

"Safety is the name of the game. We try to make this job as risk-free as possible. If we do something to wreck this unit, then that'll just mean another one will have to be called and slow the process," he said.

The scene of the latest dispatch was a desolate road

where a 16-year-old had struck a tree. The groggy teenager refused a trip to the hospital, and the paramedics had to wait until his mother arrived and consented to have him taken.

"We were caught between a rock and a hard place," Burgess said. It's one of those times where there are legal implications. (The youth) is not legal and we need parental consent."

The boy's hesitation was short-lived, and he received the same emotional reinforcement as the more serious epilepsy patient. Fowler touched various areas of the body to check for injury, and gently explained to him that the imminent siren was simply for speed purposes and didn't mean he was seriously injured.

Edited by Eleanor A. Smith