

RURAL FIRE DEPARTMENTS – the Rest of the Story
A series about the Yarnell Fire Department
by Sallie Foster

Part I

We Never Close [Yellow Sheet, February 7, 2002]

2001 was a busy year for the rural fire department located in Yarnell, Arizona. The Department responded to 161 emergency calls: 92 medical calls (which include vehicular accidents), 13 fire calls, 13 miscellaneous calls for such services as assistance with propane leaks, medical well being checks, treed cats, etc. and 43 mutual aid calls in Peeples Valley. 10 of the calls provided service to non-residents; the Department billed for these calls; i.e., no District taxpayer dollars were spent on non-resident calls.

Here is how a call to the fire department is initiated. When citizens in Yarnell and Peeples Valley place a 911 call, that call is received in the 911 Center in Prescott. The 911 Center determines the nature of the call and notifies the Sheriff and/or the dispatcher serving both the Yarnell and the Peeples Valley Fire Departments. The dispatcher then uses the Yarnell radio frequency, shared by the two departments, to call out emergency personnel.

Yarnell and Peeples Valley have an "*automatic response*" agreement for structure fires, which means that when the dispatcher calls out a structure fire, all fire fighting personnel in BOTH departments respond to the call - regardless of which community reports the fire.

For medical calls and all other types of fire calls Yarnell and Peeples Valley have a "*mutual aid*" agreement. This means that personnel for the fire district in which the emergency is located respond immediately; and personnel in the other fire district remain on standby, prepared to respond immediately if their assistance is needed. For example, if there is a medical emergency in Yarnell, all appropriate Yarnell staff respond immediately; Peeples Valley staff prepare to respond, listen to their radios for the duration of the call, and respond if Yarnell staff request assistance.

The two fire departments print a combined weekly schedule for the dispatcher and the department staff. It lists all the EMTs and some of the fire fighters that are on duty each day. In addition, the two departments have formed an "*Area HazMat Response Team*", a group of seven individuals with a variety of HazMat training and expertise. As in the case of a structure fire, this team responds immediately to HazMat incidents regardless of where the call originates.

In rural areas isolated by distance and natural barriers, maintaining fire and emergency medical protection can seem to be an overwhelming challenge. Here in Yarnell, willing people have stepped in to do their best for their neighbors. But above all it is the cooperative spirit between the Yarnell and Peeples Valley Fire Departments that guarantees help at your door, 24 hours a day.

Part II

Giving All We've Got [Yellow Sheet, February 21, 2002]

Yarnell is part of an Emergency Medical Services system that extends beyond, and supplements, local emergency medical care services provided for Yarnell patients. Yarnell Emergency Medical Services are provided to the Yarnell Community under the direction and license of the Emergency Care Physicians at Del Webb Hospital. Here, in detail, is how this system works.

Yarnell 'medics' call the Physician at Del Webb (also known as the YFD Base Hospital) during most medical calls to report the status of patients and to receive patient care instructions from the Emergency Physician on call.

Trauma patients are generally transported by helicopter to a trauma hospital in Phoenix. The decision to transport a patient by helicopter or ambulance is determined by the nature of the medical problem or type of vehicular or other accident, and is generally made in consultation with both Wickenburg Ambulance Staff and the Del Webb Physician on call. Patients transported by helicopter arrive at the hospital faster and can also be transported to the trauma or medical center best suited to treat their particular injury or medical emergency.

The Base Hospital also provides procedural and policy advice to the Department and to the District Board. The Base Hospital reviews paperwork for each emergency medical scene and, when appropriate, discusses improvements in service that the Department must or should implement. The District first contracted with Del Webb in 1998. At that time Del Webb required that Department volunteers "consent that for the period that a volunteer is scheduled, and for 24 hours prior, there will be no consumption of alcoholic beverages nor mind altering drugs." Del Webb's requirement is intended to reduce the liability exposure of both the Base Hospital and the Fire District (i.e., the taxpayers). This requirement also reduces the District's insurance costs. The Board established a policy reflecting the required commitment in 1998. In May of 2001, in accordance with Base Hospital recommendations, the District extended the policy to include drug testing.

The State of Arizona Department of Health Services (DHS) governs ambulance service areas and Wickenburg Ambulance holds the 'contract' for service to the Yarnell and Peoples Valley area. Like Yarnell, Wickenburg Ambulance personnel receive Medical Direction from Del Webb. Whenever possible Wickenburg Ambulance will transport patients to Yavapai Regional in Prescott. However, the area served by the Wickenburg Ambulance is very large and if there are other emergency calls in progress they are not always able to take the extra time required to go to Prescott. In addition, the VA hospital in Prescott does not accept emergency patients from the ambulance service; VA patients can be transported to Yavapai Regional and after they are stabilized may be transferred to the VA.

When an emergency call is placed, local volunteers appear on the scene's front lines. They are prepared to help, with courteous and personal attention. But the best emergency care requires more. Along with their equipment and skills, our volunteers bring the judgment, confidence, and recommendations of professionals from an accredited medical establishment. Despite Yarnell's physical distance from the usual sources of help, the gap is closed each time an EMT picks up the phone to enlist ready and available team support.

Part III

Your Fire Department's Commitment Is Solid [Yellow Sheet, March 21, 2002]

Firefighters anywhere need to be ready at a moment's notice to respond to emergencies. Training and experience prepare them to think and act fast. Yarnell Fire Department's staff is no different. Below is a brief summary of some of the work that has gone into our preparedness as your volunteer fire department - nine firefighters/EMTs, two dispatchers, and five reserves.

Several of us have extensive training and experience as both firefighters and EMTs, many in specialized areas. Three are certified as EMTs, which requires completion of a 3-credit hour EMT college course and passing a national certification exam. To *stay* certified in Arizona, EMTs must take classes every two years. Retaining National certification requires additional education over a two year period. One EMT has extensive prior experience with an ambulance service.

Some of us have extensive experience in other volunteer fire departments and are well trained and prepared to extinguish structure fires, including those in mobile homes. Other training and experience in the department includes: explosives, hydraulics, air operations, propane fires, emergency scene management, and hazardous materials. Some members hold certification from the State Fire Marshall's Office. With little rain on the horizon, a dry spring and summer will present unprecedented challenges that can be met by the several members holding wildland fire certification. And, for the first time in the 55-year history of the department, one of our members holds a Firefighter I/II certification. Finally, training sessions are held twice a month for all members of the department – training which maintains familiarity with local equipment and protocols, while increasing the department's knowledge and experience in specialized areas.

Although extinguishing a fire may take only minutes, each is different. For this reason months and even years go into preparation. Being a fire fighter is more than hauling a hose. It's judgment, quick thinking, and a spirit of single-minded cooperation. Firefighting takes knowledge about chemicals, crowds, the unpredictables in nature. As a team, we count on one another and you, in turn, can count on us. No other volunteer position carries the demands of the firefighter. As long as we are here for you, we will meet them.

Part IV

Innovation and the Indispensable Invisible [*Yellow Sheet, April 4, 2002*]

Fire and medical services in the Yarnell district are greatly enhanced by two groups of volunteers - the reserves and the incredible, indispensable, invisible dispatchers.

The **reserve program** gives Yarnell access to certified Firefighter I/II and EMTs from other Arizona communities; the reserves supplement the department's staff and sometimes substitute for local staff. Participating reserves retain their skills and certifications or gain additional experience needed to qualify for paid work in other fire departments in the state. Three reserves are certified Firefighters I/II and hold Wildland Firefighting certifications; two are currently enrolled in an EMT class; another is a nationally and Arizona certified EMT with extensive experience as a member of a Tucson ambulance crew and as a CPR and community first aid instructor for the American Red Cross. Reserves serve a 48 hour shift on an irregular basis, about one weekend a month; eventually, the department hopes to have one reserve on site every weekend. The reserves are housed at the firehouse; consequently, they help reduce the department's response time. The department is truly proud of this innovative, locally developed program.

Dispatchers, two in Yarnell and three in Peeples Valley, are the unseen but critical heroes of the two fire departments. The dispatcher on duty receives emergency calls for both Yarnell and Peeples Valley from the Prescott 911 center, radios out the alarm to local emergency staff, provides critical communication support such as calling for ambulance and/or helicopter services, and prepares incident documentation. Dispatchers are required to maintain constant access to the emergency phone and radio during the entire 24 to 48 hours they are on duty. They serve as a marvelous example of the incredible cooperation between Yarnell and Peeples Valley, with dispatch duties rotating weekly between the two Districts. Dispatchers are trained locally, meet regularly, and are provided with an extensive manual to assist them with their duties and responsibilities.

While the reserve program brings to us volunteers from other communities, there is always a need for local help, in all areas. In the case of dispatchers, they are friends and neighbors who, instead of responding directly at the scene, have chosen to serve the community from home. While their work may be unseen in the event of a fire or medical emergency, to those in the direct line of duty the person at the other end of the radio, the one whose voice sets the emergency team in motion - is indispensable. Being a dispatcher takes a certain amount of organization and the ability to communicate clearly, skills that many here possess. Perhaps **you** have wondered "How can I be of help?" If you would like to learn more about being a dispatcher, or about any of our volunteer positions, your fire department is a phone call away (427-6578 for non-emergency calls).

Part V:

Guaranteed to Work: the Rural Fire District Board [Yellow Sheet, April 18, 2002]

The Yarnell Fire District board members bring to their task a wealth of experience and knowledge in budgeting, auditing, employee compensation, and insurance. Their backgrounds include emergency medical and hospital management, and the operation of large equipment and computers as well.

Serving on an elected board is not an easy task. But, by its nature, the board of a volunteer rural fire district presents challenges all its own. While most unpaid government boards employ salaried staff to keep records and reports required by statute, prepare meeting materials, research topics and recommend decisions, volunteer fire districts have no such back-up. Board members themselves assume all duties.

Arizona State Statutes require fire district boards to hold monthly public meetings, appoint a fire chief, elect board officers, and prepare annual budgets. [Yavapai County sets the district tax rate based on the approved budget; the tax rate may not exceed \$3.00 per \$100 assessed valuation]. Other duties include purchasing, enforcing fire protection laws, contracting, establishing fees for non-residents, and hiring private legal counsel. Yavapai County fire districts may seek free legal advice from the county attorney, but the attorney is **not** required to represent them in contractual or litigation matters. As a matter of policy the county attorney seldom provides legal services to districts.

Fire district board members cannot serve as firefighters/EMTs for their department -- it is difficult to be the fire chief's boss and employee at the same time. However, board members may join neighboring fire departments and serve in their home district under mutual aid agreements. This practice, recommended by both the YFD insurance agent and attorney, allows all knowledgeable volunteers to serve the community during emergencies.

Do you have the time, experience, and a desire to serve your community in a responsible, meaningful fashion? If so, consider running for the board in the next general election. A five member board administers the Yarnell Fire District. Officials are elected for 4-year terms in the November general elections. Two board members were elected in November 2000 to serve 12/00 – 12/04; three seats are up for election in November 2002 to serve 12/02 – 12/06.

Part VI

You is Them: THE RURAL FIRE Department *[Yellow Sheet, May 2, 2002]*

Public services in unincorporated communities are only as plentiful and as sound as the individual residents in those communities choose to make them. The quality of life in Yarnell depends on those who live in the community (that's **you!**) volunteering at the Library, the Senior Center, the School, the Water Company, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Fire Department. Services in Yarnell are not provided by anonymous individuals, but are provided by people you meet and greet every day of the week at the Post Office, the Library, the local restaurants and other places of business, at the park, and in your neighborhood. **You**, your neighbors, and friends are responsible for the level and quality of services available in the community.

Emergency services are critical to you and your neighbors; **your** involvement could one day mean saving the life of your neighbor, or keeping a fire from destroying homes or businesses. The average age of YFD volunteers is estimated at 60, so don't let your age stop you from volunteering. If you are strong enough to trim shrubs and weed your yard you are strong enough to pull hose to help put out a fire, and you are certainly strong enough to help a neighbor with a medical emergency.

You can assist with emergency services in a variety of ways, for example: devote 24 hours once a week to answering the telephone from your home and serve as a Dispatcher; or, be a firefighter by attending training twice a month and responding when called to fire or medical emergencies; or, enroll in an EMT class at Yavapai Community College and qualify to provide emergency medical services; or, serve on the Fire District Board; or, raise funds or write grants to help the Department obtain equipment; or, volunteer to clean the work areas and/or wash the vehicles. Call the Fire Department at 427-6578 to schedule an appointment with the Fire Chief to discuss how your skills and abilities can be put to work serving the safety needs of the community.

In the aftermath of the September 11th tragedy President Bush told the citizens of the United States that one of the ways they can help the country weather the current 'storm' is to volunteer their services. Think about your skills and abilities and where you can best serve the Yarnell Community. When you do so I hope that you will give serious consideration to volunteering your time to provide emergency services. However, if not the Fire Department, volunteer **somewhere** in the community.