

## HEALTH &amp; WELL-BEING

STEVE HEASLIP/  
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Nearly 70 percent of calls to the Harwich Fire Department in 2006 were not to fight fires, but to provide emergency medical care. EMTs (Emergency Medical Technicians) Tom Gould, left, and Rob Sanders are two of the Harwich EMTs who provided those services.



# ER ON WHEELS

## A shift with the Harwich Fire Department

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

**T**om Gould and Rob Sanders may have wanted to be firemen when they grew up, but these two members of the Harwich Fire Department spend more time delivering pre-hospital medical care than they do fighting fires.

In 2006, nearly 70 percent of all calls to the department were for emergency medical services, 2,694 out of a total of 3,880 for all causes, from fires to false alarms and everything in between. Each of the 35 members of the Harwich crew is an EMT (emergency

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### About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.

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medical technician). More than half – including Gould and Sanders – are paramedics, the most highly trained level of EMT.

Paramedics are certified in Advanced Life Support (ALS), life-saving techniques that put them on a par with the ER staff at most hospitals in the country. On top of a minimum of 1,050 hours of initial training, mandatory two-year recertification requires a 48-hour refresher course, an additional 25 hours of continuing education to keep up with developments in the field, two days of Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS) training, drills in the latest CPR techniques, and two hospital-based interactive sessions led by a physician.

On the strength of this ongoing training and following guidelines established by the American College of Surgeons, paramedics diagnose and perform first-line treatment for medical emergencies ranging from heart attack to shock and trauma. They insert breathing tubes, start intravenous lines, administer a wide range of medications, and initiate many of the life-saving procedures that will con-

tinue after they deliver their patient to the hospital.

"We're actually an extension of the ER," says Sanders, a 48-year-old Cape Cod native. Before joining the department in 1986, he was a flight medic and firefighter in the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve. He says he first "got the bug for public service" working as a ranger at Nickerson State Park while in college.

Public service runs in his family: his mother and sister chose nursing; his uncle was a firefighter; and he has cousins who are either firefighters or police officers. His wife is an ER nurse at Tobey Hospital, and the oldest of his three stepchildren is at the fire academy and has just completed his EMT training.

When paramedic training came to the Cape in 1975, it was the first in Massachusetts and one of the first in the nation. Long before he became Harwich Fire Chief, firefighter William Flynn was one of the earliest graduates of the program.

Still a certified paramedic, Flynn was named chief in July 2007, after 32 years in the department. Originally from Yonkers, N.Y., the 50-year-old father of two is married to a nurse at

Cape Cod Hospital.

Firefighting and emergency medicine may seem like strange bedfellows, but Flynn explains that the geography of the Cape combined with scarce funding and short staffing make it both a necessary alliance and a logical one. "You already had a group that was very action- and emergency-oriented, so who better to merge [EMS] with than a bunch of firefighters?"

When someone on the Cape dials 911, a phone rings at CMED (Centralized Medical Emergency Dispatch) at the Otis Fire Headquarters. CMED assigns the call to the nearest available vehicle. If the caller is in Harwich, one of the department's ambulances will respond. That is, unless they're all out on one of the dozen or more runs they make each day. That's when the Mutual Aid system swings into action.

All towns on the Cape cover for each other. "Because of the geography of the Cape," says Sanders, "we work with each other on a daily basis. It works very, very smoothly. We all train together – firefighting school, EMS classes – so it's seamless." He adds: "Some days we'll spend our whole shift in other towns, and other towns will be here."

In 2006, Harwich was involved in 188 Mutual Aid calls – they gave 120 and received 68. "It's crucial," says Flynn. "No fire department on Cape Cod has the staff to handle all the calls that occur in a day."

What does it look like inside this "ER on wheels"? Tom Gould joined Flynn and Sanders in giving a tour of what they call the "truck." The 34-year-old father of two is soft-spoken and just about as calm as you'd hope someone entrusted with your life would be. Still, he shares in the lighthearted banter and the easy camaraderie of the firehouse brotherhood. A self-proclaimed washashore, Gould came to the Cape 14 years ago. He's from a military family, so he grew up "all over the place."

The back of the truck is tight and tidy. Standing in the narrow space between the adjustable gurney and the cushioned bench that runs along the opposite wall, an average-size adult could touch both walls with outstretched arms. The entire cabin is jam-packed with equipment. Close at hand is the portable "first-in" bag, with oxygen, tools for taking vital signs, and first-line medications, such as nitro-

PLEASE SEE **WHEELS**, PAGE 46

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# Wheels

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glycerine for heart attacks and epinephrine for life-threatening allergic reactions. A red metal toolbox holds medications for later use. Above the gurney, glass-fronted cabinets are filled with first-aid supplies, bandages and dressings, icepacks, IV set-ups, and the like. Tucked away in wall cabinets and drawers under the bench are zippered bags and backpacks filled with supplies and equipment for specialized needs – an OB kit for delivering babies, a pediatric bag with a color-coded system that matches a child's size to the appropriate procedures and doses of medications, an airway kit for inserting breathing tubes, trauma bags, splints, backboards—“everything we need for what we run into up here,” says Flynn. “And we get calls for everything under the sun,” Gould adds.

Within easy reach are the two-way radio and the fat white binder that holds the protocols, page after page of step-by-step procedures for every imaginable situation. “This is our bible,” Sanders says. Each page starts off with “standing orders,” what

paramedics can do based on their own knowledge, experience, and judgment; below are what Sanders calls the “Mother, may I?” steps, which require a physician's OK.

Pride of place goes to the high-tech LifePak 12 defibrillator/monitor. It's no bigger than a laptop computer but, according to Sanders, “The capabilities of this machine are exactly the same as what's in the ER.” Not only can it display the electrical activity of the heart (EKG) on its screen, it measures blood pressure, levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood, and can act as a pacemaker and defibrillator, delivering a low-voltage electrical shock to bring a racing or erratic heartbeat back to normal.

Each of Harwich's four ALS-equipped vehicles – three ambulances and one fire truck – has one. The \$20,000 devices get a lot of use. “We see a lot of cardiac emergencies,” says Flynn, because of the large number of older people in Harwich and the Cape as a whole. Thanks to the LifePak 12 and radio communication with the hospital, paramedics can stabilize the patient en route and make sure the cardiac team is standing by when the

ambulance arrives.

But it's not all heart attacks. Falls and flu, car and boat accidents, strokes and seizures, asthma attacks and diabetic coma are among the many life-threatening situations the department responds to. Surprisingly, the busiest time of year is not summer, but the dead of winter, when flu and cold weather take their toll. “In the summer, there's more traffic, more people, more congestion, it's a nightmare driving, but our run volume isn't that different,” says Sanders. What's different is that their patients tend to be younger and the problems are more likely to be injury than illness.

For the public, an emergency call may seem disorganized and scary, but these seasoned medical professionals think of it as “controlled chaos.”

“For the person who's having the event, it probably is chaotic,” Gould acknowledges, “but for us it's a matter of going through an orderly set of steps so we can figure out what's going on and treat it accordingly. Are they breathing? What's their blood pressure? What's their heart rate? Are they having an allergic reaction? Is it severe? We have a method to our

madness.”

Part of that method is to spend as little time on the scene as possible. “The patient should be in the truck and the wheels rolling in 10 minutes,” says Sanders. They do most of their work on the way to the hospital.

If necessary, there's room in the ambulance for a family member, be it an anxious parent with an injured child or a spouse whose loved one is critically ill. “There are two patients in that call, and we recognize that,” Gould says. “Most of the people in this department have roots in this community. We're talking about our neighbors here. Quite often we know the person.” And he means that literally.

In August 2006, Gould and his very pregnant wife were in the back of an ambulance threading its way along the single-lane stretch of the Mid-Cape Highway. When it was clear they wouldn't make it to the hospital in time, Gould followed standing orders. Just after midnight, somewhere between exits 8 and 9, he brought his daughter Lily into this world.



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