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## On Engine 22, It's Women Who Answer the Bell

By SARAH KERSHAW

SAN DIEGO, Jan. 17 - When the crew from Fire Engine Company 22 raced off at 7:50 a.m. the other day for the first call of their 24-hour shift, a woman reporting chest pains, their big red rig was primed for action but missing a typical feature: a man.

The four members of Engine 22, Division A, a captain, an engineer, a firefighter-paramedic and a firefighter, protect the Point Loma neighborhood of San Diego, an affluent peninsula on the Pacific Ocean. They are one of the few crews in the nation made up entirely of women, winding up together last October, as the captain, Joi Evans, said, because of "the way the cards fell."

Together they work, cook, shop, train and sleep in small dorm rooms in the station house, around the clock for 10 days a month, at a time when women are making some inroads into the fire service nationwide but are still only a sliver of the front line in one of the most physically grueling and male-dominated professions. With women accounting for about 8 percent of the 880 uniformed firefighters assigned to its station houses, compared with the national average of 2.5 percent, the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, which has a female assistant chief, is considered one of the best departments for women to work, according to Women in the Fire Service, an advocacy group based in Madison, Wis.

With an even higher number of women, Minneapolis had its first female fire chief sworn in a year ago, and 17 percent of its 380 uniformed firefighters are women, the department says.

On the other end of the spectrum, in the New York City Fire Department, the nation's largest and long considered by critics to be a backwater for women in firefighting, only 36 of the 11,430 uniformed firefighters are female, according to the department's latest figures.

"We're seeing the most progressive fire departments really doing a good job," said Terese M. Floren, executive director of Women in the Fire Service, who became one of the nation's first female firefighters when she started her career in Ohio in the 1970's. "But the rest of the fire service needs to get up to that mark, because they are not there. And when you are no longer an anomaly, no longer a token, no longer turning somebody's head, then you will have arrived."

Women have made greater gains in San Diego than in many other cities, officials said, partly because of a 1974 consent decree that required the fire department to recruit women and minorities. The 10-year decree came after a lawsuit filed by five women who said they were wrongly fired in the last weeks of their academy training in the early 1970's.

For the women of Engine 22, life in the station house on Catalina Boulevard and out on the streets of Point Loma is distinctly different now than it was before each of them worked with an all-woman crew.

Three have served almost two decades in San Diego and other cities. Each was, for many of those years, the only woman in a fire crew, at a time when they did not dare shower in the station house, when, their bladders bursting, they ran to restrooms at coffee shops or a florist, when they had to tailor their uniforms at the waist and chest, when they put up with snide remarks, pranks, hazing or worse from their male colleagues.

"I could have written a book," said April Lallo, 41, the firefighter-paramedic, who worked for the Los Angeles Fire Department for five years and in Orange County for nine. Ms. Lallo left the fire service to become a stockbroker but returned to the profession in San Diego after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks because, she said, "My heart is really in this job."

"If you speak out," Ms. Lallo said, "it really hurts you to go on because then guys look at you and they're afraid of you. I don't want that. I can't change things here, or in the fire service, but I feel like I can influence them by being positive, coming in and just showing them we don't have an agenda, we're here to work with you."

The engineer, Melissa Cleary, 47, who maintains and drives the fire engine and has worked for the department here for 16 years, said she felt that as a female firefighter working with men, "You can't mess up."

"The thing about the four of us being together," Ms. Cleary said, "is we can make mistakes and we can laugh at one another and you don't have to feel like you're never going to hear the end of it."

"What if you need help with something?" she added. "I would never ask a man to help me with something."

After the 7:50 a.m. call, the crew members prepared breakfast in the kitchen at the small station house, offering Ms. Lallo, who is on a diet, oatmeal and other healthy alternatives to the cinnamon buns in the oven.

They teased Captain Evans, who is 47 and bears a striking resemblance to Martha Stewart, saying she was super-tidy and obsessed with decorating. They call her Martha Senior, though they make sure to tell her that she looks more like Ms. Stewart's daughter than like her sister. Ms. Cleary, who has run 33 marathons and rides a Harley, is known as Martha Junior because she does most of the cooking.

Among the four, there is deep trust, unconditional support and, of course, the freedom to talk about waxing, constipation and the "Oprah bra." (Ms. Lallo said that after seeing a show on bras, she rushed to Nordstrom to buy one that actually fit.)

After breakfast, the crew members went out on what they called a Code 9, an hour of exercise consisting of jogging and strength training at a park on Shelter Island. As they jogged in their department-issue T-shirts and shorts, their radios attached to their hips, an elderly man asked, "Are you cold, ladies?"

Ms. Cleary said no.

"I could light a fire," the man replied, and the crew members laughed.

As they left the park and climbed back into the fire engine, setting out to shop for lunch and dinner, a young man asked if he could be photographed with them.

"Did you just graduate?" he asked.

Under her breath, Ms. Lallo said, "Yeah, like 20 years ago."

Robyn Benincasa, 39, the firefighter, said: "Just graduating from the academy? That's a new one."

The crew is also often noticed by women, who think - especially when the women are in full bunker gear and helmets - that the rig may be loaded with hunky male firefighters. On several occasions, the crew members said, women have approached the rig and lifted their shirts.

The rest of the day was fairly quiet and included a training session in which the women practiced rappelling down cliffs above the ocean. They went out on five calls in 24 hours, four of them medical emergencies and one from someone who was locked out of his car. The lock-out call came at 7:30 p.m., just as Captain Evans was grilling chicken for a Caesar salad and Ms. Lallo was making whole-wheat croutons.

About 85 percent of the crew's calls are health related, the firefighters said, as many fire departments have merged paramedic and firefighter operations. Here in California, with a fast-growing population of immigrants and others without health insurance, the crew often feels like "the doctor's office," Ms. Benincasa said.

The crew members described exposure to diseases like AIDS on medical calls or getting killed by a car on the freeway responding to an accident as the biggest dangers of the job. But Ms. Benincasa, a top adventure sports racer, said her scariest moment came not while firefighting, but while swimming in Class IV rapids in Tibet.

The four members of the crew helped fight the harrowing wildfires that ravaged Southern California in 2003, but none reported having a near-death experience or a dramatic rescue from a flaming building in their years on the job.

Even so, just carrying 75 pounds of gear on their backs as they fight fires has inflicted many injuries, they said. The San Diego Fire-Rescue Department responded to 320 structure fires - buildings, homes or businesses - in the last fiscal year, and 43 since Jan. 1.

There is a much higher percentage of female police officers and paramedics than professional firefighters. The physical demands are cited as one reason more women are not in the fire service. In addition, the 24-hour shifts make it difficult for some women to find child care.

The other fields in public safety also opened to women sooner because firefighters, unlike paramedics and police officers, traditionally lived full time, fraternity-style, in the station houses. The presence of women in the other professions has also helped draw more women to them.

As night fell here and the crew members finished dinner, they chatted about the day and their personal lives. All but Ms. Lallo, a single mother raising a 2-year-old girl she adopted as an infant, are dating San Diego firefighters.

After dinner it was time for "stretch and skate," meaning a light yoga-style workout and, on this night, watching the figure skating championships.

The season premiere of "24," however, one of Ms. Lallo's favorite shows, was on television, so she holed up in her dorm room while the other three began the stretching.

Captain Evans was concerned that Ms. Lallo might be lonely, so Ms. Cleary said over the loudspeaker: "Stretch and '24.' Stretch and '24' in the bullpen," referring to the station's main office, and Ms. Lallo joined in the stretching.

Soon, the crew members went to sleep, roused later, at 4:45 a.m., by a call about a sick elderly man who had fallen out of his bed. By about 7:30 a.m., the next crew, Division B - four men - arrived at the station house to relieve Division A.

In this station house, male firefighters contend with friendly pranks by the women. Though many men in the fire service are known as excellent chefs, Ms. Cleary had pasted a strip of yellow police tape across Division B's refrigerator: "Danger: Men Cooking."