

The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

Lee Richardson, LP



Lee Richardson, standing at right, began his career in EMS in 1984 as a dispatcher in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. He got interested in becoming a firefighter in high school.

What was your first day on the job in EMS?

I started as a dispatcher on the night shift for Mid-Cities Ambulance in December of 1984. I was finished with EMT class but not certified yet, so I couldn't ride the truck.

Which services have you worked for over the years?

I've worked as a volunteer for Plumlee EMS in Weatherford; and for CareFlite when they had 9-1-1 contracts in Rockwall County, Henderson County and Grand Prairie; Wise County EMS in Bridgeport; Harlingen EMS; City of Terrell EMS; FirstFlight in Abilene; Big Spring Fire

Department; Duncanville Fire Department; CareStar in Odessa; and South Taylor EMS (volunteer) on days off from Duncanville.

Why did you get into EMS?

When I was in high school, I was interested in being a firefighter. I met a man, Kurt Harris, at the Weatherford Fire Department. One thing led to another and I got hooked up with some folks from Plumlee EMS and started going to classes and volunteering on the ambulance. I guess you could say it "got in my blood," and I set in motion my plan to become a paramedic. That happened in 1985.

How has the field changed since you've been in it?

This is like opening a can of worms! When I started, EMTs were putting in EOAs and using MAST pants, paramedics were doing stuff like intracardiac injections of epinephrine. We were taking the state test every two years and then it changed to every four years, so the stress was on every time so you didn't lose your job by failing the test. Paramedics were not that common, especially in the rural areas. When I was in Wise County you literally had "ambulance drivers" —ladies who were nurse's aides until there was a call and then they basically drove you there and drove you back. The paramedic did everything, so you either "sank or swam." You got *very* good at your advanced skills out of pure necessity. You also had the opportunity to do all sorts of stuff that you would never get to do today. The paramedics took care of patients in the ER until the doc got there from home; we were the respiratory therapists and X-ray techs after five o'clock. We were taught skills such as central line placement and suturing and that was the only back-up docs had. The other big issue was that there were no first responders to help you on the scene — the fire department didn't even go to MVCs unless they were called. In contrast, the big cities were not as lucky. They had to ask for medical

control's permission to start IVs, defibrillate, intubate and give meds. I feel fortunate that I "cut my teeth" in the rural environment. Some of the stuff we did back in the day that was looked upon as rogue is actually commonplace now. I think that overall EMS is in a better state than when I started, but it has been a wild ride. Some of the positive things I have seen have been prehospital 12-leads, waveform capnography and RSI. On the negative side...politics! Enough said.

Was there a particular moment or call that stands out?

Probably the most memorable call I went on was a construction worker who was building an above-ground water tower on Lake Bridgeport. He was struck on the head by a falling circular saw, which caused him to fall off of his scaffold. We had recently completed our first EMT class for the Bridgeport VFD and, as luck would have it, some of them had just finished rope rescue class at A&M two weeks before

this call. We climbed up a ladder and then rappelled down into the bottom of this 50- or 60-foot tall water tower. We assessed the patient, who had an unstable pelvic fracture, tib/fib fractures and chest injuries. We stabilized his injuries with splints, MAST pants, oxygen and IVs, immobilized him in the Stokes basket. We used a crane that was on the construction site to lift the patient and me out of the tank. Once I cleared the tank walls, I could see forever, it seemed like. It was a breathtaking sight but not near as calming as the CareFlite helicopter and crew waiting for us on the ground.

What was your favorite part of your career in EMS?

I would say that hands down it is the relationships that I have had the privilege of having throughout my almost 25 years in EMS. Most of the people I call friends I would not have if I had picked a different career. These are people considered leaders in EMS such as Karen Yates, Bill Gardner, Ed Racht, Gary Cheek, Roy Yamada, Gene Gandy,

Bob Simonson, Gary Moseley, Bryan Bledsoe, David Dunafan, Mike Ryan, Gene Weatherall, Jeff Beeson, Joe Brewer and many, many more. Not only have I had the fortune of knowing these great folks but I have also had the privilege of being an EMS instructor and mentor to so many people along the way. My hope would be that my EMS career reaches farther than I could ever imagine through the friendships forged over the years.

Have you or someone you know been in EMS for 20 years or more? Texas EMS Magazine wants to hear from you! We'd like to publish these profiles in the magazine and then upload them to a spot on our website that will be dedicated to a first-person history of EMS. For information, write Kelly Harrell at kelly.harrell@dshs.state.tx.us. And don't forget – we need photos, too!