

# The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

Leon Charpentier, EMT-P



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Top and below: Charpentier became an ECA in 1973 and never looked back. He went to paramedic school before paramedics were even certified at the Texas Department of Health. In October of 1978, he did what he thought he'd never do – start an ambulance service in Harker Heights.



## How did your career in EMS get started?

It all started in the late '60s when I went into the wrecker business. In those days wreckers were the only rescue services around. For years we used wreckers to pry cars apart to get the injured and trapped people out. Once in a while you had to do some patient care. In *October* of 1973 I heard about an ECA (emergency care attendant) course at the Temple Fire Department. I attended the course and became an ECA in *November* of 1973. I knew enough to almost be dangerous. I purchased a 10-ton porta-power, an air chisel, and various other tools to help people who were trapped in cars. In the summer

of 1975 I attended an EMT school at Central Texas College and in September of '75 I became an EMT. About this time I became so interested in extrication that the guys who were running Region 7 of the Texas Health Department and I made several trips to Austin and designed an eight-hour hands-on tools vehicle rescue course. For the next three years we travelled all over Texas teaching that course. When the Jaws of Life came out, we decided to do competitions with hands-on tools versus the Jaws of Life. In 1976 this course called "paramedic" became available through the Health Department and Scott and White hospital in Temple. I wanted to go to paramedic school. They said I didn't qualify

because you were required to work for an EMS service to fulfill the grant. So I joined Nolanville Volunteer Fire department to qualify and started paramedic school in January 1978. Twenty-three of us started the course, and all 23 of us finished. The whole course was taught by one man—Dr. Don Mackey. What a great instructor he was. He taught every hour and really made us learn. When we graduated in July of 1978 the State of Texas was not sure what to do with us since Texas didn't have paramedic certifications. So my first paramedic certificate says, of all things, Advanced Emergency Medical Technician. Go figure. Now there really is such a thing as Advanced Emergency Medical Technician. A month after I graduated from



*Charpentier estimates he's run about 30,000 9-1-1 calls in the 40 years he's been in EMS. He's also certified as an EMS advanced instructor, advanced coordinator, TCLEOSE instructor and fire service instructor.*

paramedic school, I did something I never thought I would do.

#### **Who did you work for?**

The City of Harker Heights came to me and said the city of Killeen would no longer provide our ambulance service. Then they said, we want you to start an ambulance service and go to work for the city. Also, you must be in operation by October 1, 1978. So it happened—they gave us an approved budget of \$50,000. We had to buy an ambulance, all the equipment, and staff it for the first fiscal year. That's where it all started. I'm pretty sure I worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for the first 10 years. For the first five years my partner was Don Smith, and for the rest of the five-plus years my partner was Scott Lindsley. In 1984 after legislation finally created the thing called "paramedic," I kept pace and updated my certification to EMT-Paramedic. In 1988 Harker Heights asked me to take over the fire department. So now I was in charge of two city departments. In 1991 I combined the two together to create Harker Heights Fire and EMS, which gave me additional crew members.

Over the years I also achieved master fire and master police certifications, and I got EMS Instructor,

Advanced Coordinator, TCLEOSE Instructor and Fire Service Instructor certifications as well.

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

The difference between EMS when I started and what it is today is like a completely different world. When we started there was no legislation, and so very few rules. "Protocols"? "Medical Director"? What's that? However, we were well trained and well critiqued by the physicians in all the emergency rooms. Looking back, I sure want to thank all the doctors at Darnall Army Hospital who took the time to keep on training us even though it wasn't part of their job.

#### **Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?**

There are so many things, moments, and calls that stand out over my career that it would be hard to choose something from the 30,000+ 9-1-1 calls that I have been on. Of course, there is the Luby's shooting. I was one of the first three officers who went in and did the triage. It was a very tragic time for the city of Killeen and all the families involved. For EMS it highlighted the stress we live with every day. That

incident led me to design a lecture on stress in EMS. The first time I gave the lecture was in Reno, Nevada, at the International Trauma Conference, where I also received the BTLIS Instructor of the Year award. That first speaking engagement caught on quick. All of a sudden I had ten more speaking engagements all over the country and Canada. I feel like I have helped many EMS personnel throughout the country learn how to handle stress.

Another thing that stands out—and really makes me proud—is the men and women of Harker Heights Fire and EMS being honored as EMS Providers of the Year at the 1998 Texas EMS Conference. Also, Harker Heights Fire and EMS was one of only three services in Texas to pilot the Comprehensive Clinical Management Program (CCMP). We went all the way through the self study and the site visit, and, because of everyone's great work, we did very well. I guess one more thing that stands out is that in 1994 the city asked me to step in and be the interim city manager for six months. Yes—that was a big job.

In 2006 I decided to retire with 28 years of service to Harker Heights. Still staying in EMS, I am now the CEO of Integrated Training Services, Inc., where we train students to be the best in EMS.