

Civilian Dispatcher, Toronto 1973

Being a civilian dispatcher was amazing. The camaraderie between the officers and civilian dispatchers was incredible. It was hectic, scary at times, and frustrating because I could not do anything, but, dispatch the call... get back up if needed, etc. I wanted a piece of the real action, but, if this was as close as I could get, I was content.

We were part of an experiment. They had never had civilian dispatchers. We were not even part of the police association, but, paid dues "in good faith" that the experiment would be successful. Ironically, the police association was fighting to have civilian dispatchers removed because they were taking jobs that officers should have.

There were six desks-one for each district. A long trough ran down the centre of the room through which (hand written) call cards were transported to the appropriate desk. Each desk had an emergency bell and light to alert the sergeant and others that something was happening.

One desk had the least number of cars. As you worked successfully through the desks, eventually you would have the toughest- *six desk*. That desk was responsible for 200 vehicles. When they were changing the radio systems over, *six desk* had three different microphones and three different sets of speakers. By the time all of the cars cleared, it was time for breaks. Calls came in a flurry and it was critical to be able to think, talk, listen and write all at once... something my psychology course told me was impossible. I was so proud when I mastered *six desk*. It was hectic, but, definitely my favourite.

There were unusual call signs like, *crossing one*, *one tow*, and *spot check one*. Sometimes officers played pranks on dispatchers when it was slow on midnight shift. They made up call signs like, *wire tap one* requesting to talk with *wire tap two*. A novice would not realize that there was no such call sign as *wire tap one or two*, and would take the bait and there would be laughter on the airwaves as a dialogue between two officers took place.

Police vehicles did not have computers; in fact, one gigantic computer was housed in communications. It is hard to believe now, when a smart phone has as much memory and more speed than a computer from the seventies that took up a huge room, but, that is the way it was.

Messages were sent from division to division using a teletype. A teletype was like a huge, electric computer that was hooked into the phone system.

It was the early seventies. The computer system was quite sensitive to crashing. In fact, someone had found a name that would tie up the computer

and make it crash when an officer asked for a check on the name. At the best of times computer checks took a very long time. In some cases, officers in communications had to go through card files to do checks because the information was not on the computer.

One call, in particular still tugs at my heart. It was afternoon shift and I dispatched a car to a call about a child who had fallen from a balcony. The officers on the scene asked for roads to be blocked and to escort the ambulance to the hospital. The communications sergeant refused. The more vehicles involved with sirens and flashing lights, the greater the risk of a collision, he explained. I refused the officer's request.

Within minutes the emergency bell was sounding and it was for my desk. Before the call card got to me, the officer came on the air. The ambulance had been struck at an intersection. By his tone, I knew he blamed me and took silent responsibility for following orders. At that moment I was quickly analyzing whether this was the job for me.

A moment later, Bill, a communications officer, came to my desk.

He asked, "Did you cause that accident?"

I choked back tears and said yes. He demanded that I turn over my driver's license. Shocked, I asked him why.

His response, "Well if you caused that accident from here, you do not deserve to drive."

I told him that was ridiculous, I wasn't driving the ambulance or the car that struck it. He smiled and I relaxed. Within a few seconds the reality of the situation had come to light.

He turned, then looked back and said with a satisfied chuckle, "Now get back to work!"

That's the way it was in the radio room. There was so much support, so much respect and trust, it was incredible.

When we played 'bones' (a form of euchre played with dominoes because cards were banned in Toronto police stations back then) it did not matter whether you were a superintendent, a constable or a civilian. We were all equals in the break room, all open to be chastised by a frustrated partner or praised by a happy partner or opponent.

When someone had a call that was upsetting, reassurance was readily available.

Although I did not wear a *suit of blue*, being a civilian dispatcher made me feel part of a huge, important operation that helped people. If I could not be a police officer, I was happy with my role in communications.