

Beyond the Call

By Paramedic William Kanoff

Beyond the call. That phrase will mean different things to different people. To some, it will mean cleaning up and getting back in service. To others, it will mean following up on some of their patients to see how they are doing. Depending on the nature of the call, some might be compelled to cry while others take to the bottle to help cope.

On the surface, we can all be tough when the need arises. But underneath, we are all still human. If any provider ever tells you that they never got emotional, or upset about a call, they are either lying, or are too new to the career and have yet to respond to any calls.

I became an EMT in 1977. Throughout the past forty-two years, I have welcomed new life into this world, and I have seen life exit. Unfortunately, more of the latter than of the former. Some of those lost were of natural causes, many were of a more violent nature. I have seen the joy on a new mother's face as I handed her new baby to her for the first time, and I have seen the anguish of a parent when I told them that their child was gone. I've experienced the high of getting ROSC and seeing that patient walk out of the hospital, and I have experienced the low of fighting to save a life that was taken too soon. And I have had the pleasure of learning from some of the best in the business.

I have been verbally and physically assaulted. Shot at, spit at, cursed at, peed on, puked on and even pooped on. I have survived being injured and even survived a helicopter crash. The key being, that beyond the call, beyond all of that, I survived, and I kept coming back for more.

Why you may ask. Well, I'm still trying to figure that out. If you look around at many EMS organizations, there are very few lifers. Many use EMS as a stepping stone to other careers in healthcare. Many don't last past five years. Of those that do, many become complacent and just go through the motions, day in and day out, just trying to survive. Others of us are hoping that we can still make a difference.

An instructor once told me that we, EMS, fire and police, are "bad day" people. People don't call us when they are having a good day. They only call when they are having bad ones. While their crisis might not seem that bad to us, it is bad to them. We respond to help others in need. Over time, that stress can wear you down. Who takes care of us, beyond the call, when we are having a bad day?

I have lost several colleagues over the years to suicide. While we will never know the true root cause, we must consider that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), played a role. We are experts at diagnosing this in our patients, people we just met. But we are poor at diagnosing it in our coworkers, people we spend many waking hours with. And we never want to admit that we may be suffering from it ourselves. My wife swears that I have PTSD. Of course, like a good paramedic, I swear that I don't.

In my experience, there tends to be more bad days in EMS than good ones. Beyond the call, we need to look at our people and recognize that they may be hurting. They may deny it, but if we can recognize the signs and symptoms, we may be able to prevent a loss.

I once pulled a teenage girl's body out of a car in order to reach her friend who was still alive. I placed her on a backboard on the ground. Before I could cover her body, the next in ambulance arrived and went to work on her. I told them to stop, that she was gone. The EMT looked at me with tears in his eyes and said; "This is my daughter." I will never forget that moment. I went home that night and hugged my

kids tightly as I cried. Big tuff paramedic, firefighter and former green beret, crying on his children's shoulders. Beyond the call.

Beyond the call, know that it is okay to cry, to experience sorrow, pain, anguish, and anger. These are natural reactions to bad events. Do not be ashamed to show emotion. My wife has seen me cry, seen me upset, angry and in pain. She has been by my side for the past thirty-one years and has been my biggest supporter and I love her dearly for it.

If you remain in EMS long enough, you will learn that there are ghosts in your head that will haunt you from time to time, causing nightmares. While you will never get rid of them, you can control them, but it is up to you to do so. There is help if you need it. Don't be ashamed to seek it out. We don't need to add anymore names to the statistics.

Beyond the call, regardless of the outcome, life goes on. Take care of yourself so that you can care for others. Support your partners, talk to your significant others, share your stories. Don't bottle up your emotions. You are tough, but you are not invincible. As an EMS professional, you are unique, you are special, and you are needed beyond the call.