

CASE STUDY

CRAIG HARTWIG

AMBULANCE OFFICER - VOLUNTEER



How did you get started with St John?

I spent six years in the Territorial's as an Army medic and always had an interest in all things medical. There was a shortage of volunteers and I was shoulder tapped because I had previous knowledge and experience. I'm currently in my third year as a frontline volunteer.

What appeals to you about the role?

I'm a 'people' person and always wanted to do something to help people, also volunteering is a balance from my day job, where I am often on my own.

Hokitika is a small town, so you end up getting involved in things, I'm lucky being self-employed, so I can drop tools and go on a call. My clients understand and the only person it affects is me.

What national qualifications are you doing?

I'm about to do my road time for the National Certificate in Ambulance [Patient Care and Transport] [Level 4]. It's a combination of block courses, internal assessment and exams and the road time. The different ways of being tested helps, when you're working through your logbook you're assessed on how you run things. You're tested all the way through and this relates back to what you've learnt.

The block courses are good – the group feedback helps and you get to bounce ideas around.

As a volunteer it becomes harder, because you're not doing it all the time there's a lot of information to keep up with. So you have to spend time studying for your qualification - you have to dedicate yourself to it.

What has come out of the training for you?

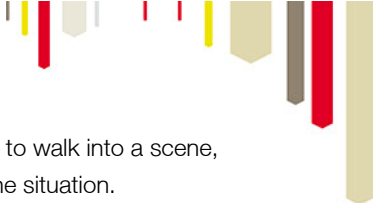
It's helped me develop a more in-depth awareness of how the human body works, giving me a more detailed understanding of what is going on. For example drug reactions, how the drug reacts and how I can act by recognising the signs and symptoms.

It gives you a better ability to deal with patient as we can read the symptoms and understand the treatment rather than just delivering it.

What makes a good ambulance officer?

You need to want to help people and have an understanding/sympathetic nature.

It also helps to have the ability to communicate across a broad range of cultural and age groups as this affects how you approach a scene. You have to be aware of the cultural elements, what you can and can't do.



It's important to be able to cope with the stress and know you can't go in all guns blazing. You have to walk into a scene, assess it and get on with it. Be calm, cool and collected – because if you don't, you're not helping the situation.

You need discretion. You can't talk about anything outside St John, this is particularly difficult in a small community as you can't even correct people if what they say is wrong – you have to have patient permission.

What is the biggest challenge you have faced as an ambulance officer?

Learning. I'm a hands-on person, not a sit down take a test person, so sitting still in the classroom is a big challenge for me. But you're continually learning, so if you put time aside, even when you've finished a qualification, it will help you to keep on top of things

Also establishing and keeping good relationships in-house. We have staff meetings so we have an avenue to make sure the team is working as well as it should. If there are any conflicts you have to be able to get over it, you take the feedback on board and make sure you don't do that again. Being a team player is a must, particularly in a small town you have to learn how to put your personal stuff aside – the patient first, that's the job.

What advice would you give anyone interested in becoming an ambulance officer?

Be aware the job is 80-90% not lights and sirens. We're there to help sick people - there's a lot of picking up and dropping off.

To be a volunteer is unique and possibly one of the hardest groups to belong to as everyone expects the same as they would from professionals. The public see the uniform and it holds a lot of respect, so there's a responsibility to live up to.

If you're worried about the worst case scenario, there's support available. We can talk to the team manager, there's peer support, the option of grief counselling and you can always talk among the team. St John are good at saying let's talk about it – there are lots of staff available and they will always follow up.

What's the best part of the job?

Working with a small group of people who have the same interest – they want to help other people. We all have different personalities but we have that one thing in common.

Also the opportunities you're given for learning and training. Every six weeks I spend a weekend in Christchurch to get more experience in terms of the number of jobs I go to in a shift and the variety of calls we get. As a volunteer, you have a lot of information to hold onto so it's good to look for opportunities to practice.

The public has a lot of respect for the uniform and in smaller areas you get very personal with the patients, they will open up to you – people feel really safe with us. And there's the people who say thank you, the team get letters thanking them for their professionalism. We've even been thanked in the birth announcements – and that's really special.

How has being an ambulance officer affected the rest of your life?

I'm 100%, and this is a lifestyle choice that I enjoy. I'm one of those people who's always first to put my hand up, and I see being a volunteer as a way to be involved. One thing have to do is keep those relationships strong outside the organisation and I've had to work harder on those.

Also I've learnt to cope, death is a fact of life, there are tragic situations and this is where you change your focus to supporting and dealing with those who have been left behind.