

# The car written off,

It is often the case that emergency services are taken for granted by the general public, but as someone at the receiving end, David Russell\* is full of praise for the emergency services in Canberra. He expressed his thanks to ACT Region's Rescue Squad and other ACT emergency workers through the pages of *The Canberra Times*.

IT was 6.30am when I hit the tree, the Falcon was travelling fast. It was a write-off.

The crash is a blank in my memory: no squeal of tyres, no wrestling the steering wheel, no impact. Where was I? I could see nothing, only blackness. But I could hear and feel. What was that dripping sound like my bathroom tap?

What was the sickly taste filling my mouth, nose and throat?

Why was my clothing soaked?

The realisation came clinically, outside myself: it's my blood.

I could not move, there was no pain, but I was numbingly cold, there was no sense of time. Then come the petrol fumes and the rising fear. Now I had no doubt where I was, don't let me burn.

Suddenly out of the darkness came a voice I shall remember until I die: strong, kind, calm, caring. Tears fill my eyes when I think of it now. Then, I knew instinctively that my life was in the hands of this man from the Rescue Squad. What he did in the next few minutes would determine whether I lived or died.

I was to see none of this, however. Tiredness and weakness were pushing me under again. Weeks later I learned of the 40 minutes they took to cut me from the wreckage.

I never felt the steady hands which lifted me on to a stretcher, attached me to lifesaving equipment and placed me in an ambulance. I neither saw nor heard as it sped to Woden Valley Hospital.

In casualty, I was oblivious of briskly efficient people who removed my blood-soaked clothes and set about assessing my injuries. Broken limbs everywhere: pelvis, hip, vertebrae, ankles, feet, arms, ribs. My face was a mass of blood, the central half loose and broken, nose smashed, cheek sliced open. The lungs struggled to function, taking in blood rapidly.

I am glad I was unconscious when the doctors descended on me to pump the blood from my lungs, to treat my broken bones with plaster and pins and to force tubes down my throat so I could breathe while the lungs repaired themselves. I missed the moments when they feared my aorta was severed. I was spared sensation as the plastic surgeon brilliantly rebuilt my blackened, grotesque face. Soon, their work superbly done, I was "serious but stable".

Unconsciousness and pethidine protected me from pain and panic. They also brought total confusion when finally I awoke.

The intensive care unit for the next 10 days was a shadowy place populated alternately by gentle,



tender nurses – the reality – and terrifying, distorted images – the drug-induced hallucinations.

Yet no matter how crazy and frightened I was at these times, I returned to the sane world to find smiling, infinitely patient young women reassuring me with quiet words and soft hands. They seemed to treat me so specially that it was only much later that it occurred to me: they do this around the clock, every day of the year.

Gradually, between the hallucinations, I came back to life, I saw with admiration the sadness of staff at the death of a patient, though it must have been common enough in intensive care.

I accepted with gratitude their

# the driver not quite



pausing for a whispered conversation in the dead of night when I suddenly awoke from a technicolor nightmare. I felt shame when I saw the sensitivity of a young wardensman – barely older than my teenage sons – who as a matter of course showed more real feeling to other people than I had mustered in more than twice his years. I was impressed by the absence of self-importance in the senior doctor who likened his intensive-care unit to a submarine, a survival cave in an alien environment, whose prime task was to enable a speedy return to familiar surrounding where the real healing process could begin. Soon I was ready to move to the orthopedic ward, I began to realise what major trauma can do to the psyche as well as the body when

moving from one floor to another became a highly stressful event.

As the strong drugs were replaced by simple painkillers I came to understand just how much damage I had done to myself. Every part of my body ached and breathing was difficult and painful, even with supplementary oxygen. The euphoria I had experienced at what I saw as "cheating the grim reaper" gave way to despair as it dawned on me that the road to recovery would be long, painful and fraught with difficulties and setbacks. Emotionally, I was a wreck and tears came often and without warning.

Once more the hospital staff carried me through this dark depressing period.

The indignities of helplessness

and immobilisation – bedpans, commodes, inability to clean myself unassisted – were handled so sensitively. Awareness of my weakness and pain was blended skilfully with encouragement to take the first hesitant steps towards recovery.

I squirmed in embarrassment at the demanding, outrageous behaviour of some fellow patients and marvelled at the capacity of nurses to not only tolerate it, but to dispense the same generous treatment despite it. I never ceased to be amazed that the person I saw exhausted and hollow-eyed as she finished her shift at 10pm could often be cheerfully getting me to the shower at 7am the next day, and I wondered how many of us could do this regularly.

Six weeks after I entered hospital, my son took me home. Many months of rehabilitation lay ahead. Six months after the accident, recovery is far from complete. It may never be, the person I was has gone for ever. Psychological scars remain.

Yet though the costs of major road-accident trauma are painfully obvious to me, there are positives, too. I shall remember always the dedicated people – rescuers, ambulance officers, doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and counsellors – who gave me a second shot at life.

I reflect on their working conditions and material rewards relative to those of so many who receive so much more for so much less and I wonder about a society which so often undervalues them.

When next Canberra's army of compulsive complainers takes aim at the ACT's health and emergency services, when they insult people who are giving so much, they will get no support from me. ■

\* David Russell is a pseudonym