

UNDER THE HEADSET: A DAY IN THE LIFE

How to recover from "Newbie-itis"

By Matt Schreiner

Editor's Note: This is the third in a series of fictionalized stories about a woman embarking on a career in public safety communications. The story is fictional, but the circumstances are real for many employed in the industry.

Grace looked down into her coffee cup. She was having coffee with her friend, Mark Perkins, an officer with the Taggart County Sheriff's Office and the main reason she was now in training to be a public safety telecommunicator at the county ECC. He had told her about the opportunity several months ago when she was a waitress at the very diner in which they were now sitting. She had passed the entry exam, got through phone training and was now being trained at the fire desk.

"I don't know, Mark, sometimes I just feel like I don't belong. I mean, there's lots of unfriendly people there, and after the hot air balloon incident, I don't blame them!" She was referring to an incident last week in which she inadvertently dispatched the incorrect alarm level to a mass-casualty incident in

the county involving several hot air balloons crashing into high-tension power lines.

Mark took a drink from his cup. "Look," he said, "yes, that was a mistake, maybe even a pretty bad one. But it was immediately corrected, and for the rest of the incident you did what was needed. I know because I was one of

the first people on the scene. I guarantee you that just about everyone at the fire desk has made similar mistakes at some time or other."

"I bet Tom Malfant hasn't." She was referring to a veteran fire telecommunicator with 15 years of experience as a telecommunicator and more as volunteer firefighter. "I think he hates me."

"Tom's a good guy. I've known him since he got his start. I seriously doubt that he hates you; you need to understand that these folks have high standards, and they expect excellence. They have to; people's lives and property are on the line every time they take action. I know you'll learn to be the same."

"Yeah, but do they have to be so mean?" she asked, looking back into her coffee cup.