

MARTINA O'LEARY spoke to one of Dublin's fire fighters and found out about this varied and difficult job.

YOU COULD be on the way to a road accident. Or going to an overdose. Or picking up a night-time drunk. You just never know what you'll end up doing when you start a shift with the fire service, according to Damien Guilfoyle, Dublin based fire-fighter and IMPACT branch representative.

We're all familiar with the traditional fire-fighting role, but there's so much more to the job than this. For instance, it's reassuring to know that if a Dublin fire engine arrives to help you, there's a crew of fully trained paramedics on board. Dublin is one of just a few cities across Europe – and the only one in Ireland – where every fire fighter is also a trained paramedic.

“All the Dublin ambulances have a 12-lead defibrillator on board. We can read the ECG, anticipate a heart attack and respond accordingly. We can bring the person to a unit that will deal with it. Within an hour they could be having surgery,” says Damien.

The fire-fighters also administer drugs. “When the paramedics turn up at a scene, we can do as much as a doctor can do in that situation. We are saving more lives and pushing the boundaries out all the time,” he says.

Scary

Then there's the business of fires. “I'm not saying it's not scary. It is when you go into a building and there are people in it, and there's screaming and it's chaos. But we all know our specific role and we get on with it. You just go and do what you have to do.

“When the paramedics turn up at a scene, we can do as much as a doctor can do in that situation.”

“When you go into a fire you can't see anything, not even your hand in front of you. You stick to the wall and search. If you stick to the wall you'll eventually find your way out the other side or find your way back if it is too dangerous,” says Damien.

Is he brave? “You might think it is brave but we are so well trained. You know what you are doing,” he says matter-of-factly. One depressing aspect of the job is the growing number of attacks on fire crews. “Violence has always been a problem but it seems to be getting worse. A lot of our guys have been attacked and abused on the ambulance. The fire engine has been stoned.

“People don't see what we see. There's a huge drug problem in Dublin. You could be on the ambulance and you don't know what you are dealing with. You don't know what people are taking and some are out of their minds on drugs and can become very violent. The Garda are there to back you up if you need them. We're there to help people. We don't take sides and it can get very dangerous out there. You have to be very careful,” he says.

There are 220 fire stations across the country, including full-time professional fire fighters and retained part-time staff. Cities and larger urban areas are serviced by full-time fire fighters who work in shifts to provide a 24-hour on-call service. The national service is managed by local authorities with 30 fire services operated by 37 fire authorities.

It's a difficult and responsible job where a good sense of humour helps. “We're always bouncing off one another. You come back from a job and you could have seen things that no one else will see. A cot-death, somebody under a car or

In the heat of the moment



FAIRVIEW FIRECREW: Ger O'Donoghue, Damien Guilfoyle and Ger Ryan. In engine: Damien Chaney and Mark Finnerty.

burnt to death, and you have to deal with that. The worst incident was a car crash involving a fire engine where one of the crew died. It was an awful experience. We came back and we talked it through amongst ourselves. There was no counselling back then.” These days counsellors are available to help.

Growing

The service is evolving to meet the developing needs of a growing capital city. For instance, Fairview station, where Damien is based, is responsible for fire safety in the Dublin port tunnel.

Damien Guilfoyle.

A year before the tunnel opened in 2006 a number of crews went to Switzerland to be trained in tunnel fire fighting.

“It's a different type of fire fighting to anything we've done before. A fire in a tunnel can be extremely dangerous. You could have tankers, lorries and cars. That was another danger we had to deal with. We have been called out to minor incidents but, thank god, there has been no major incident. It's not something we want to see,” says Damien.

For all the difficulties and dangers, you don't meet many fire fighters who aren't fully committed to the professional job they do.

“Most people are running away from the fire, and we are running towards it. But that's what we're paid and trained to do. It's a difficult job, but it's a great job. It's very rewarding. Sometimes we don't have a good outcome. But when you have a good outcome, saving someone's life, it's a great thing.” ●

