



Against all odds

The Community Medical Services Story

By Paul Collings

South Africa's trucking community is no stranger to stories of horrific road accidents at Van Reenen's Pass on the N3 highway. The death toll over the last 42 years of truckers, motorists, passengers and pedestrians on this beautiful but treacherous mountain pass runs into the hundreds - a reality that is both tragic and unacceptable. But that grim statistic could be a lot worse, were it not for a remarkable team of volunteer paramedics and doctors who go by the name, Community Medical Services.

In the war against road traffic accidents on the N3 toll route, an array of rapid responders work to save the lives of accident victims every day of the year. While most are salaried paramedics, police officers and fire fighters stationed at Harrismith and Ladysmith, a small band of medically-trained volunteers has served alongside

these professionals, positioning itself at the top of Van Reenen's Pass over long weekends, Easter and the Festive Season to deliver critical medical treatment before the ambulances and fire trucks arrive. These are the members of

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A visionary with valour

42 years service

▲ Community Medical Services founder Philip Hull... 42 years saving lives at Van Reenen

Community Medical Services and they've been saving lives on that treacherous stretch of road for over 40 years, completely free of charge.

Four decades of valour at Van Reenen's

FleetWatch has a longstanding relationship with Community Medical Services (CMS) and its founder, Philip Hull, who is also the co-founder of The SA Road Safety Foundation. CMS is a free service to road users and the Road Safety Foundation is a non-profit section 21 company. This is an important point. The fact that Philip and his team receive no monetary reward

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First responders

▲ It's called the 'Golden Hour' where paramedics need to get to accident victims and stabilise their vital signs before the ambulances and other services arrive to take them to hospital for further care. CMS operates within that 'Golden Hour' and by being the first on the scene have, over the years, saved hundreds of lives that would otherwise have been lost in crashes. They are truly the Angels of Van Reenen.

Alone teddy bear... a poignant reminder of trauma and lives lost

from road users for their life-saving efforts is not only testimony to their altruism, but also a remarkable example of selfless valour – going where most fear to tread to clutch accident victims from the jaws of death.

While the CMS team members have regular day jobs and families to attend to, they sacrifice their holiday time to serve N3 travellers every year, and they've been doing it since 1984! Apart from a series of sponsored vehicles and a modest donation towards CMS overheads from the N3 Toll Concession (N3TC), the CMS members foot the bill for paramedic equipment,

medicines, fuel, food and lodgings during their stints at Van Reenen's Pass. All told, it's a story of unwavering commitment against almost impossible odds.

"We do it out of a passion for saving lives and promoting road safety, one person at a time," says Philip. "The value we get from our time at Van Reenen's is immeasurable and the gratitude we receive from the people we have assisted is what keeps us coming back every year."

Philip does not divulge accident statistics from CMS activities over the 42 years of saving accident victims at Van Reenen's Pass but

he does describe the physical and psychological impact of being the 'first responders' in often fatal accidents.

"At the lip of the escarpment, Van Reenen's Pass gets some heavy rainfall, mist, winds and snow. Wet roads and poor visibility are what nature often throws at us when we're at an accident scene. Stabilising the victims and ensuring scene safety with warning lights and traffic cones on the road with cars and trucks and buses rushing past us in the dead of night with mist, rain or snow up against their windscreens is harrowing to say the least. ▶ 4

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CMS Volunteers... over the years

▲ Philip Hull (left) and now retired super cop, Dave Steele, have enjoyed a close working relationship over many years.

► 3 “When we return to our base at the top of Van Reenen’s from a rescue operation, we all spend a moment or two in solitude to process the trauma. Knowing that we have been able to mitigate personal injury and limit the pain experienced by the people involved helps us to move forward with positivity. We have always managed to return to base without personal injury, which is a blessing, despite occasional damage to our vehicles.”

Swimming against the tide

When pushed for an average annual figure of accidents CMS attends to at Van Reenen’s Pass, Philip’s estimate is “a few dozen”.

“Sadly, the numbers of accidents we deal with at Van Reenen’s has increased over the years,” says Philip. “Ultimately, CMS’s priority is to save lives and the Road Safety Foundation’s mission is to promote safer driving. We leave the statistics to the traffic authorities.

“The rise in road accidents in this country is due primarily, in my opinion, to driver distractions, be they cell phones, in-car distractions, the consumption of



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Top right

▲ Lisa van Aswegen (left), still with Isuzu Trucks, and Janine Viljoen worked together as the 'Gril Team' bringing an extra dimension of compassion especially to children on crash scenes.

Braai Time

▲ Laughter over the braai helps to ease the trauma of dealing with often horrendous crash scenes.

Centre

▲ Barry Niemand, who works in the motor industry, has been volunteering with CMS for over 20 years. What a boykie!



▲ ► The former home-from-home safe haven for the CMS team until 2016, when the property was sold and the Help Centre was lost to the CMS team... a sad blow.

Van Reenen 'Help Centre'
Once a hub providing medical care and a base for the medical team for Van Reenen community, the Care Centre is now a gutted shell, empty shell.



alcohol and fatigue all play a role. Negligence through the lack of driver training, driver impatience on the road and negligence in the form of driving an unroadworthy vehicle simply exacerbate the problem.

"These issues however, are symptoms of a deeper systemic problem where, in certain cases, traffic authorities fail to uphold the traffic laws through the issue of invalid driver's licences, failure to impound unroadworthy vehicles - particularly trucks - failure to leverage the traffic control technologies already in place and failure to prosecute offenders appropriately," Philip explains.

What must feel like swimming against an overwhelming tide of malfeasance, Philip and his team are nothing if not tough. CMS has had to overcome significant setbacks that would have the average Good Samaritan never lending a helping hand again.

"Having a permanent base at Van Reenen's has always been crucial to our efforts - a storeroom for our gear, a couple of bedrooms and

Editor's Comment

FleetWatch has been involved with Community Medical Services for many years and I have had the privilege of spending time - on a number of occasions - with the team in the days when CMS was operating out of the Help Centre. It is heart-breaking to see how this centre - once a place of love and care for all - now stands empty and idle. Greed killed it. Here's a story: A young family arrived at the centre one day asking for Philip Hull. Philip said "That's me. How can I help you?" The young man then recalled a crash at the bottom of Van Reenen's Pass where Philip had treated a boy of about 5-years-old who had critical injuries before having him airlifted to hospital. "Yes, I recall that incident," said Philip. The young man got tears in his eyes and said: "That boy was me. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here. You saved my life and my family and I am here to thank you." WOW!



bathrooms for our male and female team members and a reception area for a Help Centre where CMS can engage with the public and the Van Reenen community," says Philip.

"We operated out of tents on a property shared by a Caltex service station on the N3 for the first few years. The landlord had generously given CMS a rent-free spot of land in an ideal location at the pinnacle of the Pass.

"It was challenging at the beginning, to say the least. In the late 1980s, we erected prefab rooms for our start-up Help Centre, which kept us warm in freezing snowstorms. Brick rooms and a kitchen replaced the prefabs, which allowed us to leave gear on site and travel lighter from our respective homes.

"The Help Centre became a medical care hub for the community of Van Reenen and for N3 travellers. Having the safety and security of the Help Centre allowed us to extend our efforts to helping stranded motorists reach their holiday destinations by ► 6

► 5 driving them there and to visit orphanages and schools in the Van Reenen area to offer medical treatment and hand out gifts to the local kids at Christmas,” says Philip.

Heroic resilience

The invaluable work done year-on-year by CMS was officially recognised by the Town of Ladysmith, awarding Philip and his team its Meritorious Award – “second only to receiving the Keys to the City,” says Philip.

The Help Centre cost in excess of R600 000 to build, which was met by CMS members. It was a home-from-home for Philip’s team until fate dealt CMS a nasty blow in 2016.

“The property was sold and the new owner, without negotiation, demanded a R9 500 monthly rental,” Philip says. “CMS couldn’t meet that figure and we were forced to move out of the Help Centre in 2016. Since then we’ve been operating out of local accommodations. Unfortunately, while our Help Centre building is still standing, it has been gutted with all the fittings and furniture vanishing – a disappointing situation to say the least.”

Today, CMS has two sponsored vehicles – a Peugeot 4x4 Land Trek and a Mahindra XUV 300. While the assistance of these vehicles is greatly appreciated by Philip and his team, the fact that they can be recalled at any time and cannot be retrofitted with adequate and secure emergency warning lighting and auxiliary equipment is limiting.

“Going forward, we’d like to be able to afford our own 4x4 that we can permanently equip with our medical equipment and emergency lighting,” he adds.

Since having to vacate its Help Centre eight years ago, Philip and his team have had to reduce the amount of time they spend each year at Van Reenen’s. This sad reality need not be. As it turns out, Philip believes the facility has been bought by an overseas buyer and is hopeful that CMS can negotiate with the new owner and resume using the Help Centre. □



A call for support

THE SA ROAD SAFETY Foundation adopted CMS (and its sister operation, Volunteer Rescue Team [VRT] based in Warden) but it has never made use of the funding avenues available to non-profit companies. But, as they say, there’s a first time for everything and CMS/VRT, under the auspices of the Road Safety Foundation would welcome support from organisations who can make use of the tax benefit, and who appreciate safer roads and this unique humanitarian initiative.

“The CMS team has always been in it for the simple joy of helping people when they need it most. Van Reenen’s Pass is where our hearts soar and we truly hope that CMS will continue to provide a positive impact in that exceptional part of South Africa,” Philip concludes. □

For further information on how you can get involved call Philip Hull or Patrick O’Leary fleetwatch@pixie.co.za



▲ CMS has on loan two temporary sponsored vehicles for their work – a Mahindra XUV 300 and a Peugeot 4 x 4 Land Trek.