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Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Engine 22, Division A, of San Diego, from left, Melissa Cleary, Robyn Benincasa, Joi Evans and April Lallo.

On Engine 22, It's Women Who Answer the Bell

By SARAH KERSHAW

SAN DIEGO, Jan. 17 — When the crew from Fire Engine Company 22 raced off at 7:50 a.m. the other day for the first call of their 24-hour shift, a woman reporting chest pains, their big red rig was primed for action but missing a typical feature: a man.

The four members of Engine 22, Division A, a captain, an engineer, a firefighter-paramedic and a firefighter, protect the Point Loma neighborhood of San Diego, an affluent peninsula on the Pacific Ocean. They are one of the few crews in the nation made up entirely of women, winding up together last October, as the captain, Joi Evans, said, because of "the way the cards fell."

Together they work, cook, shop, train and sleep in small dorm rooms in the station house, around the clock for 10 days a month, at a time when women are making some inroads

into the fire service nationwide but are still only a sliver of the front line in one of the most physically grueling and male-dominated professions. With women accounting for about 8 percent of the 880 uniformed firefighters assigned to its station houses, compared with the national average of 2.5 percent, the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, which has

a female assistant chief, is considered one of the best departments for women to work, according to Women in the Fire Service, an advocacy group based in Madison, Wis.

With an even higher number of women, Minneapolis had its first female fire chief sworn in a year ago, and 17 percent of its 380 uniformed firefighters are women, the department says.

On the other end of the spectrum, in the New York City Fire Department, the nation's largest and long considered by critics to be a backwater for women in firefighting, only 36 of the 11,430 uniformed firefighters are female, according to the department's latest figures.

"We're seeing the most progressive fire departments really doing a good job," said Terese M. Floren, executive director of Women in the

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