

After blazing the trail, two come through with flying colours

A feminine touch to fire-fighting

By Jonathan Hill

FIRE-FIGHTING will gain a touch of "caution" and "level-headedness" next week when the first two women to pass through training school report for duty, fire chiefs said yesterday.

For the past six months Kwok Lai-shan, 25, and Wu Lai-fong, 24, have run, carried and written their way through an exhausting course for which many fail to even qualify.

Ms Kwok, a former Correctional Services Department officer and Ms Wu, previously a secondary school teacher, will be the first women in Hong Kong to help fight blazes and cut victims from car wrecks.

They were among 67 hopefuls who applied for the traditionally male posts following a move last spring by the Fire Services Department to throw open its recruitment for operational duty to both sexes.

Female applicants must weigh at least 116 pounds (52.66 kilograms) and, like their male counterparts, must stand a minimum of 5 ft 6ins (1.68 metres) tall.

But unlike police officers, the applicants must be able to operate without visual aids — essential when smoke and water are constantly encountered at the scene of an emergency, fire officials said.

The two women, who said both their families and friends supported their career move, had to lug 50 pounds of breathing apparatus up a 20-floor building, watch gruesome footage of disaster scenes and view pictures of charred bodies as part of their stint at the Fire Services Training School in Pat Heung.

Apparently unperturbed, Ms Kwok, who has a boyfriend overseas, said: "I think this is good preparation before I come across this (for real)."

They are allowed, as are the men, to seek assistance when carrying the 160-pound "casualty" away from the scene of a fire, also part of the course.

Loo Wing-lam, the school's commandant, insisted yesterday

that the women had exactly the same training requirements as men and would receive no special treatment in the field.

The women had taken about three months to reach the same point of physical fitness as the men, but had cooler heads and took a more cautious approach under pressure, Mr Loo said.

Ng Chan-leung, 26, a fellow

probationary station officer, said the women were clearly struggling at first, but he praised them for carrying out after-hours exercises to keep up with the class.

The male response to the policy shift had been positive, it was claimed, and Mr Loo believed more women would come forward for the post, which offers a starting salary of \$16,710 a month.

However, despite the dozens of applications last year, only one had applied since 1 January. Fire officers say the men's sentiments will not be seen until the women begin working alongside them.

The two women and the eight male recruits will need to work for another two and a half years before they are confirmed as station officers.