

TRAVEL REPORT

MIAMI - DADE 2016

Thanks to some mutual friends from Palm Beach County Fire & Rescue we were able to get in contact with Miami Dade Fire Rescue's Fire Chief Downey to organize a training program. Just a couple of hours after our request we received a positive reply... It was August 2015 and planning was about to start.

MDFR is an agency that runs over 246 000 calls out of 65 stations. They have normal fire suppression units, marine units, air rescue, ARFF, USAR and numerous more special operations units. They protect and serve approx. 2.6 million residents + daily commuters.

Back in 2000 our organization was hosted by MDFR for another training program...it's kind of hard to get why it took us so long to come back...

Sunday, May 8th 2016:

Due to the Brussels terror attacks of 03/22 our departure day ritual was slightly different than other times. The Brussels Airport departure terminal was still closed, security checks resulted in many more and longer waiting lines, family and friends are not allowed to be on airport premises without a valid ticket. Therefore, the group gathered at the Zaventem city center, only 5 minutes away from the airport. It was just over 0700 am when everybody was present. Eric and Dirk gave them some last minute details, some paperwork,...and 5 more minutes to say goodbye to their loved ones.

All through the numerous security checkpoints the whole group checked in without any problems and before they knew they were enjoying a coffee and some breakfast near their the departure gate. We chose Delta Airlines this time due to the comfort in time and the attractive prices.

Delta flight 43 landed smoothly and without any significant problems at JFK around 0130 pm. Guiding a total party of 13 thru immigrations, baggage claim, customs, security and to a whole other terminal took some time but they managed to board their connecting flight to Miami in time.

Carl welcomed the entire group at Miami International Airport just over 0700 pm. He came in a couple of days ahead of the group to arrange last minute issues, the itinerary etc. The Miami group was reunited and the program was ready to kick off. We loaded up our 3 rental cars and set course for the La Quinta Inn near the airport. A very simple but clean hotel and only 5 minutes away from the MDFR HQ. We checked in, drank our welcome beers, took a quick shower and went to Denny's for dinner. Everyone was in bed by 1100 pm for some good night rest.

Monday, May 9th 2016:

Just a couple of hours of sleep was all we needed, everybody was up and awake way too early. Shower, breakfast and dressing up since we were awaited at MDFR HQ. We were welcomed by Chief Alvarez, our chaperon, and later by Fire Chief Downey. We did our introductions of the team and they introduced themselves and introduced us to Cuban coffee. The first presents were given and we went over the itinerary and the stations. Later we were introduced to the Staff.



Chief Alvarez gave the grand tour of HQ with the offices, the Miami Dade Emergency operations Center, Fire Dispatch,... We did some paperwork and got our personal keycards before we walked over to the training center. State of the Art training center with class rooms, gym, swimming pool,...and props for in-house fire training, outside fire training, shoring, confined space,...even to simulate ship fires!

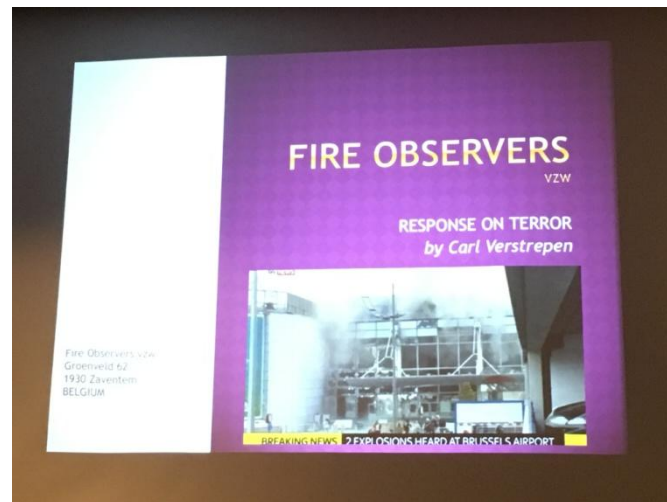
We took a short lunch break before heading out to the front side of HQ to pay our respect and to render salute to the fallen at the Firefighter's Memorial.



The cars split up. Dirk took his team to the North Division and their stations. Chief Alvarez, Eric and myself took our teams to the South and Central Divisions. We stopped at every station to get everybody introduced to our men.

Later that day we all gathered again at the Union Hall...a beautiful hall by the way! We were welcomed once again by Chief Downey and by the Union President, Mr. Blanco. The union threw a welcoming party for us with food and drinks. Approximately 100 firefighters, company officers, chiefs, administrative personnel, and others were present that night. It became a very fun evening with some good talks. The first helmets were exchanged and Chief Downey, Chief Alvarez and Mr. Blanco got some presents from Fire Observers vzw.

A few weeks before coming to Miami, Chief Downey asked me to give a presentation on the response to the recent terror attacks. A request I happily acknowledged and so this 1 hour presentation was given at the welcoming party. For the occasion even city of Miami firefighters and chiefs were invited. The presentation and pictures were very moving and shocking expressions on everybody's faces followed by questions.



Right after the party everybody went back to their stations for the first night. I got Station 24, home to the Venom Unit and Air Rescue South. I was welcomed once again by the crew, took a shower, made my bunk, got a few tests, tour of the aircraft and the equipment,... I also got my own gear like my helmet, flight suit and a gear bag. I was ready!

Tuesday, May 10th 2016:

0630 am, I get up and take a shower because I want to be up and ready to introduce myself to the next crew. Shift change here is at 0700 am. The new crew is all fun and games and they as well take me in like I'm one of their own. We all start talking about our careers, the emergency services in Belgium and of course HEMS and air rescue.

Last night was short...I was only in bed for 5 minutes when the tones went out. We were dispatched on a trauma alert, meaning ground units respond to the scene, air rescue was dispatched and a trauma center is put on alert as well. Two men started fighting with one victim ending up with abdominal stab wounds. Ground units took care of him by making the bleeding to stop, gave him

some O2, started IV and brought him to the helicopter. We monitored and transported him to a trauma center. By the time we were back we were 2 hours later on the clock.

Today Air Rescue North came in for a class. Both teams got a whole day of CRM class and in the meantime maintenance worked on ARN so ARS was watching countywide but there were no calls during the day.

After class we went to the helicopter and went over some equipment and procedures. Right after dinner the crew took me up for a flight. We did a part of the Glades all the way up north towards Miami International, flew over downtown Miami, Biscayne Bay, Miami Beach, Stiltsville, Coral Gables,... It was a nice view over this county with the setting sun. We got back, fueled up, did some more talks, shot some hoops,... They also showed me the NVG's they use and we started working with them on the airport. They mounted me some on my helmet and not that long time after we got a call. It was the first call of two that night where I was able to use NVG...what an enlightenment!

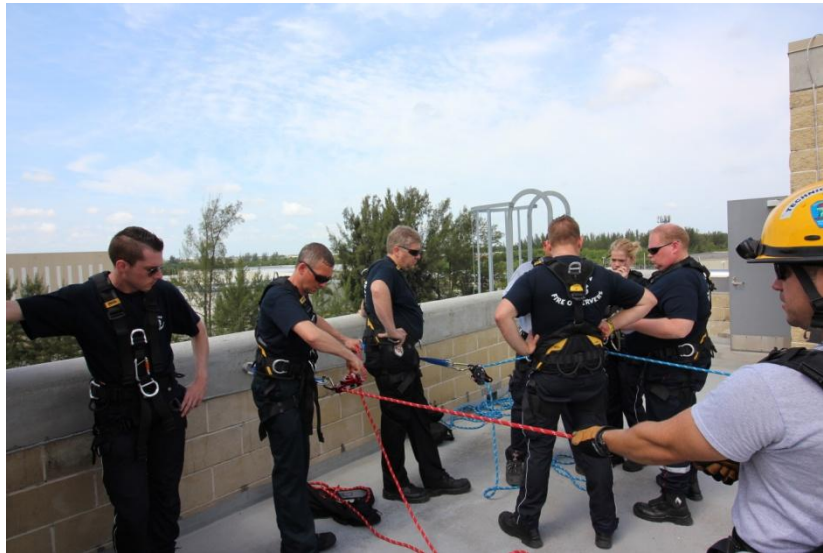


Wednesday, May 11th 2016:

Dirk was at # 54, Marino at # 26, Kiliaan at # 46. Eric and Bart were at # 2, Dieter at # 17, Vincent at # 3 and Philippe at # 29. For the South Division I was at # 24, Thomas at # 43, Leen and David at # 36, Stefan at # 9 and Tim at # 57. All of them were talking with a lot of enthusiasm when we met at HQ at 0800 am. The big one didn't happen yet but everybody got their fair share of calls.

Spec Ops was waiting for us at the training center. For the morning our team was split up, one team got shoring class while the other got rope class. After 90 minutes we swapped. Very nice equipment for the shoring class...the team showed us a couple of things but after a while it was our time to do something so we grabbed the tools and started working on some collapse shoring.

For the rope class we climbed the 6 story drill tower where we went over a couple of basic rope principles and the equipment for this drill. We set up the anchors and the rope system and managed to bring a 160 lbs dummy over the railing to lower him to ground floor.



After lunch we went into a class room where we first got some more presents from the Fire Chief. After that we got a class/presentation on high rise incidents. Everything including regulations, sprinklers, ICS, and pump operations came to discussion in this very interesting class.

Around 0430 pm we left the training center and went back to our halls.

Thursday, May 12th 2016:

We gathered around 0800 am at the USAR training site. Trucks were out there, equipment and some 15 USAR members. We were welcomed by the Captain and Chief who gave us some more info on USAR, FEMA, FL TF 1, the missions,... Very interesting with countless differences regarding to our Belgian USAR units. Once the presentation was done we went outside on the pile where a demonstration with search dogs was given. Right after it was our time to get the tools in hand and to put ourselves to work. Drills, saws, cameras... they were all used to make entry to a sewage drain where our victim was trapped. It took some time but we were able to get their before lunch.



After lunch we took a 40 minute ride South towards Homestead Air Reserve Base. It's an AFB where the US&R FL TF 1 warehouse is located. It's like a big Bass Pro with hundreds of boxes, rescue equipment, medical equipment, boats, waverunners, trucks... This is also the RV point for all members during deployment before they leave on a mission by car or by plane.

Around 0330 pm the day schedule was finished and everybody was able to return to their stations.

Friday, May 13th 2016:

Another great day was about to start! The morning was filled with a visit to Station 24. Coffee, donuts and bagels before we got a tour of the station. The venom unit is housed here so we were able to walk in those offices next to different kind of snakes, venomous and non-venomous. Later we walked thru the Air Rescue offices, the air rescue maintenance facility and the ready room. The Captain did a walk around of one of the helicopters and talked more about their operations, the procedures, he showed us their equipment they use for medical emergencies, fires, rescues, hoist operations...



A couple of minutes later one aircraft started up and took off to come back a few moments later. The crew gave a demonstration of a sick person on an airboat somewhere in the glades. They lowered a medic down who gave the patient some medical attention, once the stokes basket was lowered they winched it back up again with the patient inside and the medic hanging right next to it.



And then something wonderful happened....the group was split up in 3 teams...and the crew took team after team up in the air for a 10 minute flight. Nothing but happy faces!



Lunch at a Cuban restaurant before heading all the way up to the Port of Miami. The fireboat and her crew was ready to welcome us and to take us out for a ride. First the crew showed us the boat and the equipment and talked a little bit about the procedures and their kind of calls. 30 Minutes later we left the dock and navigated past wonderful yachts, majestic cruises, along downtown Miami towards Key Biscayne and Stiltsville.

At one point we docked and met up with a smaller MDRF vessel, time to head back out with two boats...and one helicopter. Air Rescue South came back to do a couple of fly by's and a hoist evolution on a moving fireboat. Some great skills and professionalism by the helicopter crew and the

fireboat crew! On the way back to port some monitors were put to work flowing 1000's gallons of water up in the air...and back down all over the group.



We caught some traffic on the way back to our stations but everybody was back at their stations right on time for a shower, clean gear and dinner.

Saturday, May 14th 2016:

A day off today that started at the Bayside Marina for some drinks and lunch. Then we drove to Little Havana and walked around for a while, looking for that good Cuban cigar but we ended up with some mojito's at Ball & Chain. In the late afternoon we drove over the Causeway to Miami Beach. The group split with some heading for the beach, some for some Lincoln Mall shopping and others for some drinks and clubbing on Ocean Drive. We ended another good day around 1000 pm and went back to our stations.

Sunday, May 15th 2016:

Our final 24 with MDRF, last day in the stations. ARS got a few calls during the day but we also did some training on base and up in the air. This week was very interesting to me and I learned quite a few things. We had some very serious calls but also just from having conversations with crews, classes, videos, training,...that's a good experience and free knowledge to take home.

For saying thank you to the crews for having me here and the wonderful hospitality they showed me I made some good ole' spaghetti Bolognese, a mixed salad, garlic bread and we topped dinner off with some ice cream. Chief Alvarez was also invited to join for dinner. He made his round during the

afternoon to all stations that housed some Belgians. Every Fire Observer received a certificate of achievement and a MDRF Major Campaign Award bar.

It was a fun night with lots of laughter and pictures.

Monday, May 16th 2016:

Our time with MDRF came to an end. Time to swap those last t-shirts, patches, coins, hats and helmets. All duty uniforms were stowed deep in our luggage while shorts and t-shirts came out! We all met at Station 29 to drive towards the Everglades from there. We went to Gatorpark for a 30 minute airboat ride and also sat down in an alligator wrestling show. Went to an Indian casino for an all you can eat lunch buffet and then we set course for Highway 1, all the way down to Key West.

We stayed at the Banana Bay Resort where we claimed our rooms and enjoyed a few beers and some pool time. We chose Conch Republic Seafood Company for dinner and walked by the marina back towards Duval Street to call it a day.

Most of us were pretty tired after last week in Miami but a few were still on for some more drinks and fun at Duval.

Tuesday, May 17th 2016:

A wonderful night without a single tone to get us out of bed! Breakfast was ok and good enough to get us on the road. We drove by the Little White House, Hemmingway's House, Fort Zachary Taylor and went to the 90 Mile Marker buoy for the traditional pictures!



Our main activity for today was out on the water. We rented 14 jet ski's for a 3 hour tour around the island. Unfortunately the wind was a little bit too high on the Oceanside of the island so we all stayed gulf side for some speeding, racing, acro,....pure fun!!!!

Went back to the hotel for a shower and then back to Duval for dinner at the Hard Rock. Mallory Square during sunset was also very fun and...enlightening. The day was finished with some more drinks in a couple of bars.

Wednesday, May 18th 2016:

We left our hotel around 1000 am and stopped 2 minutes later...at the Key West Fire Department HQ for some t-shirts and stuff. A quick walk in and out because we had a couple of hours of driving to do, all the way up to Delray Beach. As soon as we reached Florida City the sky turned black, thunder and lightning and pouring down rain! Even up in Delray it was still raining so thanks to some good friends we were able to stay dry by the transport they arranged for us from our Hyatt hotel to a local bar and restaurant. Thanks to Chief De Jesus, Chief Green and the members of Delray Beach Fire & Rescue.



Some good friends from Delray threw a party for the Belgians! We got a goodie bag from the Chamber of Commerce and some goodies from DBFR. Smoke Restaurant served a very good free BBQ meal and chilled drinks, the Palm Beach County Fire & Rescue Pipes and Drums came to play a few tunes, numerous people came out to welcome the Belgian group and to enjoy some down time with us.



John Fischer and Jon Ferguson planned it all out and they did a good job! Always fun to be in Delray and this night some of our group got the spark to return next year for the St Patrick's Day Parade.



Thursday, May 19th 2016:

Up for the last long drive... Delray Beach – Orlando – Cocoa Beach. Approximately 3 hours before we arrived in Orlando to do some shopping at the Vineland Outlet Shopping Center, a Bass Pro on International Drive and the Millenia Mall.

Our home away from home for the last 3 nights was the Wakulla Suites in Cocoa Beach. We claimed 5 apartments at 40 feet from the beach! Went to Publix for some drinks and food for the next couple of days before we had dinner at Outback on Merritt Island.

Some of us went to bed right after but others went for some more drinks in a bar or at the beach.

Friday, May 20th 2016:

A full day of SeaWorld Orlando where we met Papa John and Sweetie, our American parents! The group split up and enjoyed the park all day long. Back in Cocoa around 0730 pm, good for some Italian fine dining followed with some drinks and watching the lightning over the ocean.



Saturday, May 21st 2016:

A beautiful 0630 am sunrise, coffee and breakfast...good to start our last full day in the States. Filled this day with some American space history with a visit to Kennedy Space Center.

Since it was our last night the whole group enjoyed a nice big BBQ dinner outside, on the wooden deck at the beach. Dinner, laughter, pictures, drinks....good times!



Sunday, May 22nd 2016:

All good things come to an end and that ain't any different for this journey. A story that began 2 weeks ago is now about to come to an end. Left Cocoa and fueled up the rental cars to drop 'em off at the airport in Orlando. We boarded our Delta flight towards NYC with a connection to Brussels approximately 3 hours later.

We arrived in Belgium safe and sound the next morning. Time to say our goodbyes and return home to our loved ones.



This program was a success! MDR pulled all hoses on this one and the people involved with our group were awesome! Thanks to them it was a wonderful program.

As for our group...all great people that lived and travelled along for 15 days. All different characters but it turned out to be good times for everybody. Thank you!

VERSTREPEN Carl

Special thanks to Ms. Sharon Banwell.