

PALM BEACH COUNTY, FL 2011

Wednesday, October 5th 2011:

Brussels Airport...0700 am: 16 Fire Observers gather at the departure terminal for their trip to the States. It's the third journey this year for the Fire Observers, after the successful training programs at Shreveport, LA and New Orleans, LA earlier this year. This time, we chose to go to Palm Beach County, FL. This area is covered by a little over 1,000 firefighters, 49 fire stations and a fleet of 250 vehicles. Palm Beach County is one of the largest counties east of the Mississippi River; the surface is approx. 2,386.33 square miles and the run statistics for 2011 staged at more than 105,000 emergencies of all kinds.

Almost everybody was right on time, so check in started pretty quick. The first group picture, our last goodbyes to friends and families and off we went, thru the border control area. Before boarding our UA961 flight to Newark, some of the group decided to grab a coffee and some breakfast at Starbucks.



The B777 aircraft taxied and left off right on time with an 8 hour flight looking at us. We had a schedule of some movies, administration, breakfast, a drink and more movies, while Belgium, The Netherlands, the UK, Ireland and Canada slipped underneath us.

We had a very smooth touchdown at Newark. Since we've had only a little over an hour to get to our connecting flight, we hurried up to get thru immigrations, to reclaim our luggage and to get thru customs. We tried to get on our connecting flight but were short on time so we were rebooked on the next flight, leaving hours later. The only thing was that only 15 of us were rebooked on a later flight; the 16th guy, Henri, got thru on the very last minute so he was on the first plane to Fort Lauderdale all alone. Since we had some time to kill, we had something to eat and claimed a few seats at a bar. A couple of hours later, we were

welcomed at Fort Lauderdale International by Henri. We got our luggage, went to the rental car agency to get our bus and two minivans. 30 minutes later, we were driving on I95 Southbound, heading to Miami Beach.



Our chosen place was the Indian Creek Hotel in Miami Beach. Everyone went to their rooms, took a shower and one hour later we were looking for some food. Due to some previous visits, Carl knew a good Cuban restaurant, Puerto Sagua at 7th and Collins. This is a very simple place but great dishes for a good price. After dinner, we walked over to Ocean Drive to see the neon lights of the hotels and clubs, the special cars and bikes and the beautiful women. Around midnight, everybody hit the sheets for some well needed sleep.

Thursday, October 5th 2011:

We all met at breakfast. Nothing fancy, just some coffee and some pastry...good to get the day started. Around 0900 am, we took off for the airboat tour at the Everglades; we toured thru the rivers of grass and to the alligators. We saw a couple of them but nothing over 5 feet. On the other hand, we saw beautiful birds...



For lunch we stopped at the Indian Casino. The first buffet of many.... On our way back to the hotel, we drove thru the streets of Coral Gables, made a stop at The Biltmore Hotel and The Venetian Pool and went over the bridge to Key Biscayne to get a good view of downtown Miami. We drove thru the Marina District, over the General McArthur Causeway via the Star Islands to our hotel at Indian Creek to get our luggage back. We drove off, had some traffic but arrived 40 minutes later at our hotel in Boca Raton.

We still had some time before dinner so the most of us met at the pool bar of our Plaza hotel. Some people started talking to us, the guys with the funny language. Around 0800 pm, we left for dinner at an Outback Steakhouse at Delray Beach, followed by a quick visit to a Target before we headed back to the hotel.

Friday, October 7th 2011:

We had breakfast, loaded up, and headed for 405 Pike Road, West Palm Beach. We meet Chief Peters at the Palm Beach County Fire – Rescue Headquarters and the Battalion and District Chiefs of our assigned Battalions. They gave a little presentation of the PBCFR and we from Belgium gave a presentation about the Fire Observers organization. They gave us a tour thru the HQ. Thru the offices, the driving simulators, prevention offices, the video section, training division, the gym,... All in a huge, beautiful, modern facility built only a couple of years ago.



All Chiefs and Fire Observers had lunch at a Golden Corral before being assigned to several stations. I dropped off Danny and Steven at #36, Yves at #34 and drove myself to #30.

Station 30 at Wellington is quite unique. It houses an engine and a rescue but only three firefighters... Depending on the call, the crew responds with the rescue or the engine. However, between 0800 am and 0800 pm, three firefighters from Station 27 relocate with their rescue to Station 30. I'm being introduced by Chief Peterson, Chief of Special Ops. The crews show me around the stations and the units and since they knew I was coming, they counted me in for dinner, awesome Mexican dish, and got me a bed and a closet.

Some 15 minutes after I've arrived, the tones go out for the rescue and a few seconds later I'm on route to a medical call. That first night, thru dinner and several conversations, I went out three times, all medical emergencies.

Saturday, October 8th 2011:

Shift change at 0730 am, the guys love me because we haven't had a call the whole night. Alright, the new crew begins: new introductions, shower, apparatus check and breakfast. During the day, we tie runs, conversations, lunch and dinner together.

Sunday, October 9th 2011:

Some heavy thunderstorms hit the north side of the county pretty hard. The news speaks about loose electrical wires, trees...even a stranded yacht. We had a few calls that night at Station 30. Except for medical calls, we've had one fire alarm which turned out to be nothing.

Chief Peters scheduled a day of tourism today. We pick up all of our guys and drive to Station 19, the Special Ops station of the North Battalion where Eric has been assigned to.



We make a stop at the beaches of Jupiter as well as the lighthouse before heading to Duffy's. Duffy's is a sports and grill bar where all people meet on a Sunday. Several Chiefs have dinner with us. Dinner, which was offered by the Union by the way, was very good and amusing. We all got back to our stations to get some more runs...still no fire though...



Monday, October 10th 2011:

This was a full day of ride along. That means 'bout 10 EMS runs for me at Station 30. We were also dispatched for a house fire. Engine 30 and Rescue 27 were first due and first on scene. A bad cook and some smoke turned out to be the call; Engine 30 extinguished a few small flames and cancelled all other incoming units. During the night Monday – Tuesday, I'll have 5 runs after midnight...

Tuesday, October 11th 2011:

All Fire Observers met at HQ around 0900 am. After a coffee, we split up the group for a visit to the Emergency Operations Center and the Traumahawk.

911-calls in Florida are received by the Sheriff's department which means we only find EMS and fire dispatchers at the EOC. There're 10 people permanently on the floor, 2 of them do fire dispatch, 4 do EMS dispatch and the other 4 are call takers. The shift commander shows us the facility and gives all necessary info regarding the duties of the EOC.



PBCFR runs two Sikorsky – trauma helicopters. One is staffed with a pilot and two medics/nurses, 24/7. The other one is staffed by two pilots and two medics/nurses from noon 'til midnight. They fly an average of 3 missions per day. The aircrafts are equipment of the Florida Health Care Department but the crew is on the PBCFR's payroll.

The Director welcomes and presents us to the crew. We get a tour of the facility, get more info regarding the duties of the unit, the helicopters... During our visit, one helo takes off for an inter-facility transport of a neuro-patient from Gainesville to Palm Beach County. Before going back to HQ for the afternoon program, we get a few slices of pizza for lunch.

At the HQ, Station 34 gives us an extrication demo, followed by some gas fires. We also get a chance to drive a few engines around the Fire Academy. Just before we head back to our stations, a Union representative distributes some Traumahawk Tee's and lets us know that the dinner at Duffy's earlier this week, was offered by the Union.

Wednesday, October 12th 2011:

Thanks to Chief Anderson, I've got the chance to fly with Eagle 1 last night. He tried to get me on the Traumahawk but that wasn't possible so he got me on the helicopter of the Sheriff's department. Kind of different but very interesting!

This unit flies three Bell 412 helicopters and a Cessna 172. They're all operated by two pilots/tactical officers. Right on time, I reported for duty with my pilot Vasile. He showed me the facility and the aircrafts. I got a safety briefing, a seat and a headset and a couple of minutes later we were airborne above Palm Beach County. We patrolled the skies and flew over my station. During our flight, we got two missions to deal with. NVG's were put on, the nightvision and the IR camera were pointed on the targets. After a 90 minute flight, we flew back to the airport for some fuel and coffee. A little later, the scramble bell sounded again for a new mission. The crew was on from 0700 pm 'til 0700 am but I left at 0500 am.

Back in the station, I caught two hours of extra sleep before picking up the guys to bring them to HQ for a meeting with the Fire Chief. Chief Jerauld interrupted the Staff Meeting he was in and presented us to the staff members. Some kind words and presents were exchanged before having a group shot. We were obligated to pass by the video section again for an order of training videos and a bunch of pictures. Before leaving HQ, we took another group shot with the Chief in front of the Firefighter's Memorial.



We then headed for West Palm Beach International Airport to visit the airport fire department. This unit is also operated by PBCFR. The fire hall is called “House of the Dragons” since the crash tenders are call signed Dragons. The house has approx. 12 firefighters on shift, and responds to all kind of fire, technical, medical and aircraft emergencies within the boundaries of the airport and ½ Miles out. They run 6 crash tenders, an Engine/Rescue, a utility vehicle, a Chief’s car and a MCA truck. The group gets a tour of the station and gets more info regarding the unit’s duties, work, procedures, apparatus, equipment... They also take out a Dragon to demonstrate the piercing nozzle. A couple of minutes later, all Fire Observers mount the crash tenders and engine and the convoy rolls out on the taxiway towards the ARFF training site. At the end of the airport, a fuselage of a Boeing aircraft is used for training purposes. It’s amazing to see how the convoy moves along the runway and takes its position near the “downed” airplane. We spray some water and before heading back to the station, we need to drive the Dragons over the off-road track.



After lunch, the group is split up. 8 Fire Observers will go East toward Station 73 at Belle Glades where they are going to take us out on Lake Okeechobee with a PBCFR’s airboat. The other 8 Fire Observers head back to their stations for ride along.

The airboat seats three people, which means a pilot and three Fire Observers. Gerry, Philippe and Jef are the first ones to board and a little later, they take off towards Lake Okeechobee. Since the ride takes about 50 minutes, Chief Peters takes us to the nearby town of Pahokee where we meet with the local firefighters at a bar along the lake. 30 Minutes later, we head back to Belle Glades to pick up the guys at the airboat but little did we know...

They planned to go out on the lake towards a treehouse. When it was almost time to return, the engine start failed...dead battery, so our guys were stuck at the lake and needed help. After 20 minutes and several start-up attempts, the motor fired up again and the pilot brought back our guys safe and sound. Since the mechanic issues, we decided to skip the other rides for today and head back to our stations.



Thursday, October 13th 2011:

Last full day with the PBCFR. Morning meeting at Station 23 from where we all drove towards the shops and the maintenance facility. This is a huge building operated by the PBCFR for all repairs, paint jobs, maintenance...off their +250 pieces of apparatus. A little over 40 spare units were also housed here at the facility. The logistic department runs a warehouse like...a combined Home Depot, Walmart, car dealer shop.... If you need anything like gloves, Lifepacks, bandaids, hoses, toilet waist paper, brooms, buckets, screwdrivers ...you'll find it here! Man, this place is huge! We can't buy clothing at this place, that's why we go to the uniform shop. We buy bags, shirts, tee's, jackets, hats... We also needed to say HI at the Local 2928 Union. They gave us some shirts earlier this week and bought us dinner too. We were welcomed by the Vice-President and the Communications Director. In March, the biggest St. Patrick's Day parade of Florida is held here. We are invited to attend this parade as special guests... Some of us start to think about it and are already sure of coming back on March 17th 2012.

We all head towards the Wellington Green Mall for lunch. 1 Hour later, some of us stay a little bit longer for some shopping, others head back to their station for the last night.

Everyone spends the night different; some go out for drinks, some go out on an outdoor activity... some by ice cream for their crews and some cook for their crews. As for example ribs, potato salad, coleslaw and corn on the cobb Belgian style at Station 30.

Friday, October 14th 2011:

Gathering everyone at Station 33 around 0830 am for our departure. Last handshakes, pictures, conversations, souvenirs and off we go, on our way for the touristic week!

The PBFCR has a special gift for Paul, a white PBFCR chiefs helmet.



After a 40 minute drive Northbound on the I95, we stopped at a Cracker Barrel, a country store/restaurant, for breakfast. Around 0100 pm, we arrive at the Kennedy Space Center Visitors Complex. We all pass security check without any problems and board the bus for the facility tour immediately. The bus takes us down the observation tower as we drive by the huge vehicle assembly building, launch control center, the famous countdown clock and the crawler-transporter track. At the observation tower, we first see a movie regarding the space shuttle launch platform before heading up the 60 feet tall observation gantry. A beautiful bird's-eye view over Kennedy Space Center, with launch platforms 39A & 39B in particular. Since the space shuttle program has come to an end earlier this year, one tower is completely torn down while the other still stands but reconfigured to a rocket launch

platform. The second ride brings us to the Apollo/Saturn V building. In this building we can follow the launch of Apollo XI in the Launch Control Room, we can see a huge Saturn V rocket in the main hall, we see footage on the lunar landing, the race into space and the race to the moon.



By the time we get back at the Visitor Complex, we get into the Shuttle Launch Experience and a mock-up of a shuttle. We also pay tribute to the fallen astronauts at the US Astronaut Hall of Fame and we walk thru the Rocket Garden. By the time everybody gets his stuff in the souvenir shop, it's time to direct ourselves to the hotel. For this night, we chose a Best Western located near the Atlantic Ocean in Cocoa Beach. We claim our rooms, get in our swimsuits and all go to the beach, the pool or...the bar at the pool. Burgers and chicken wings at Hooters for dinner, and a few drinks at the Cocoa Beach Pier to call it a day.



Saturday, October 15th 2011;

I woke up around 0630 am, put on shorts, a tee and flip-flops. I poured some freshly made coffee in a cup and headed towards the beach to go see the sunrise. It was very peaceful and quiet and it was just great to be there. After a while, some more Belgian firefighters were up and awake and joined me for the sunrise.



A shower, some breakfast and email checking before we loaded up the cars and set for our next destination. A lot of bikers were seen on the roads going to Daytona Beach, all to attend the Biketoberfest. We got off I95 at New Smyrna and headed the most Eastern point possible...the beach! Paid a few bucks at the booth and drove our cars onto the beach for a while...amazing!

It was just after noon when we parked the cars near Main Street, Daytona Beach. We got a couple of hours off and everybody went their way. 4 Hours were well spent to see thousands and thousands of bikes, bikers and biker chicks, the shops, the concerts, the events, the bars, the saloons... So much to see and do but just not enough time.

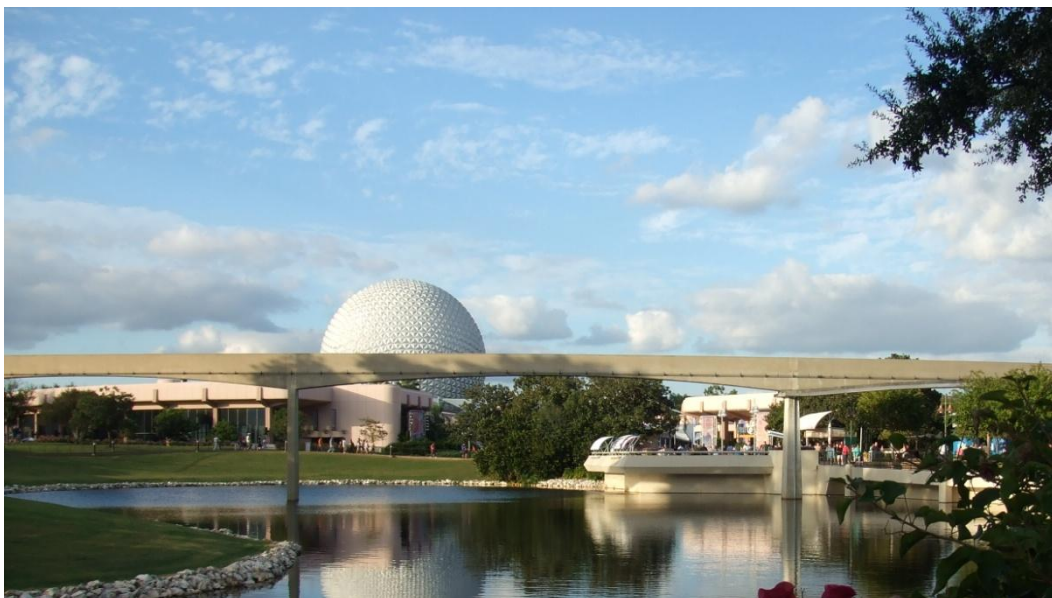


Before driving up to Orlando, we decided to have a quick stop at Bruce Rossmeyer's Harley Davidson Shop. This dealer is the largest HD-dealer in the world, so we took our time to walk around at the site, see more bikes, more bands playing, more drinks, and more gorgeous women.

Our arrival in Orlando was delayed due to a traffic accident which was happened one minute before we drove by. The Fire Observers quickly pulled over and administered first aid 'til the local fire department arrived on scene. The rest of our drive to Orlando went smooth...except for some allergic reaction of Larry. Apparently, ants and Larry ain't a good combination. Eric took him to a CVS/Pharmacy for some Benadryl while the others did some shopping at the Bass Pro Shop on International Drive. When we all got back at the hotel, Holiday Inn Maingate at Hwy 192, we met with our Jacksonville friend JB. It was good seeing him again! He came down from Jax to spend some time with us here in Orlando and in Epcot. Logan's Roadhouse was the ideal place for dinner and Old Town the ideal place for some drinks and the ending of the day.

Sunday, October 16th 2011:

The group split up today with 8 guys going directly to Epcot around 0900 am, and 8 others leaving at 0930 am for some shopping. We first went to the Premium Outlet, followed by the Millenia Mall where we also got a sandwich for lunch at Firehouse Subs. The second car with Carl, Danny, Steven, Larry, Neil, Vincent, Philippe and Gery arrived at Epcot around 0130 pm. We started out with the "rides" of Spaceship Earth, Mission: SPACE, the Test Track, Soarin'...



When all attractions were done, we went around the world via the pavilions of Canada, the UK, Ireland, France, Italy, Belgium, the USA, Japan, China, Norway, Spain, Mexico ...

After the magnificent fireworks, lightshow and music on the lagoon, we all went back to our hotel for some drinks and pool time. We met some other Jacksonville friends here, John and Sweetie. Some of us went straight to bed, others went to the pool for some fun time!



Monday, October 17th 2011:

Breakfast at Golden Corral's before going to Universal Studios. Our last day...

Parked the cars, made some RV arrangements and split up. Some ran directly into Islands of Adventure for some wild rides on the roller coasters, other started the day more easily with rides and shows like Shrek 4D, Disaster, The Mummy, The Blues Brothers, Beetlejuice's Graveyard Revue, MIB, Jaws, Earthquake, The Simpsons, Terminator,...followed by the Harry Potter and Jurassic Park rides at Islands of Adventure.



Since we had some time to kill, a few of us visited the Hard Rock Café for some beers and wings. Around 0600 pm, everybody gathered near the gates of Universal Studios, so we went back to the cars and back to the hotel for our last night. We dove into the pool before leaving for dinner. We had a fun last night at Hooters, with some great conversations, great pictures, great wings, great burgers...great times!



Tuesday, October 18th 2011:

Shower, breakfast, getting all of our stuff in the suitcases... Ready to leave...

Left the hotel at 1000 am, heading for Orlando International Airport for our first leg to Washington-Dulles. Turned in the cars and went to the United Airlines check in desk. Had some extra pounds in my suitcases, as we all had, but got thru without any problem. The check in agent even gave me a first row seat, which has more space, for the first flight and a single seat in the Economy Plus section for the trip Dulles - Brussels. 'Cause you're a fireman and you're doing such a great job!

Passed the TSA-checkpoint pretty quick and in no time we were in our terminal, one hour early for our flight. Some of us started to arrange some picture on their laptops, others tried to get some extra sleep; the rest went to a nearby bar for some drinks and a chat with the lovely waitress Blanca.

First trip went smooth; however, we left with a 45 minutes delay due to brake system issues. At Washington, we had one hour to kill so we decided to grab our last burger at Wendy's and some extra presents in the duty free shop.

Same procedure as always for the Brussels flight; take off, drinks and snack, dinner, coffee, movies and music, sleep,...drinks,...

Wednesday, October 19th 2011:

Around 0600 am, the lights turned on and the smell of freshly made coffee aired from the galley towards the cabin. 30 Minutes after breakfast was being served, we touched down in Brussels.

We claimed our luggage fairly quick and were welcomed by friends and family members. First reports, the last group pictures and Palm Beach County, FL 2011 was a fact!



VERSTREPEN Carl on behalf of the Belgian Fireobservers group.