

TRAVEL REPORT

MOBILE, AL 2015

In July 2014 Fire Observers vzw decided to go back to Mobile, Alabama for a training/ride along program with the Mobile Fire Rescue Department (MFRD). It would be the second time being there for a program after a very successful one in May 2007. It was a very fine time back then and the MFRD Staff was pretty fond about our organization and our work. They let us know we were welcome to come back anytime. We stayed in contact and they asked us to come back several times.

We decided to go back to the South for one week of training, working, hospitality and friendship.

Sunday, October 4th 2015:

It was around 8 a.m. when a group of 8 Fire Observers gathered at the departures level of Brussels Airport, ready to start their American adventure. The whole group would number 10 but Carl and Evelien were already in the US for a couple of days to fine tune a couple of things with the MFRD. Dirk was bringing the other members over for reunion of all 10.

This group had 2 members from The Netherlands and 8 from Belgium. There was a nice mixture of paid and volunteer firefighters, covering all ranks and with several special ops licenses. We also had 3 EMS only people in this group. This provided a big diversity for a nice group of very fine people.



We chose Delta this time to fly us over. The first leg was set for Atlanta and after a 3 hour layover we had a small hop to Pensacola. There were no problems on these flights. In Pensacola we were

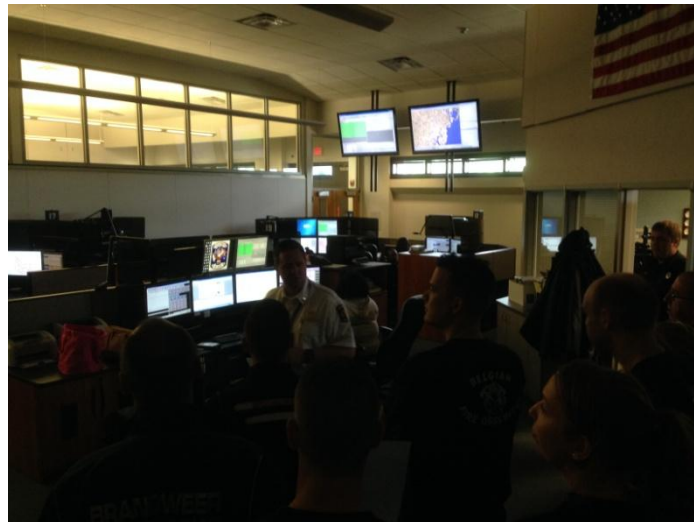
welcomed by Carl and Evelien. We claimed our luggage, checked in for a 2nd car, loaded up and started our 1 hour drive to Spanish Fort where we stayed for the night.

Hotel rooms in the Fairfield Inn were nice. We had time for quick showers before we headed for dinner, drinks and briefing at the local Hooters bar. Everybody was in bed for a good night of sleep around 11 p.m.

Monday, October 5th 2015:

A few hours of sleep can do a whole lot; everyone was looking a whole lot better than yesterday night. All dressed up we were ready to leave the hotel and cross the bay towards downtown Mobile. We were welcomed by Captains Bryars and Norsworthy, our 2 chaperones for this week, at the Central Fire Station (CFS). The upcoming shift showed us the rigs and equipment and we also got a tour of the station. Capt. Bryars led us into a room which was like a small museum...very neat.

We had breakfast at Spot of Tea before heading to the Communications Center where several dispatchings are housed. The Chief of Communications led us through the facility and we were also able to sit down for an hour or so with the call takers and dispatchers.



Lunch was provided by Baumhower's Wings, a local sports bar. Before being assigned to our stations everybody got their full turnouts and a mask at the supply store...ready to tackle fires and stuff.



In the stations everybody was welcomed with a load of Southern hospitality and food. They were all very interested in our country, our departments, our trucks and...our Darth Vader kind of looking helmets. This was a fun first night at the halls with a couple of calls along the way.

Tuesday, October 6th 2015:

A broken up night...this is how it would be like for the rest of the week but hey...this ain't no vacation! We made rendezvous at CFS to visit Fort Conde, the place where it all started for the city of Mobile back in 1702. After the very interesting guided tour we needed to show up at City Hall for a City Council meeting where Mayor Stimpson welcomed and thanked us for our work and for choosing Mobile for our Fire Observer visit.



After a Subway lunch we headed to Orange Beach for an afternoon of “training” with the OBFD. The members of Station 2 were waiting on us to take us out on their fireboat and wave runners.

We were back in Mobile around 7 p.m. for dinner and calls.

Wednesday, October 7th 2015:

Breakfast was offered by the Pleasant Valley Opportunity Club, a service club doing charity work. This club also offers breakfast, lunch or dinner to the MFRD Firefighter of the Month and/or MFRD Firefighter of the Year.

Next was a visit of the MFRD fire station at Mobile Regional Airport Bates Field, one of the airports here in Mobile. They showed us the crash tenders, rolled ‘em out for pictures and to spray some water. Then we went to the other side of the airport, to the United States Coast Guard Aviation Training Center. At this facility they train all USCG aviators and engineers for the MH-60 and MH-65 helicopters and all aviators and engineers for the HC-130 and the HC-144 airplanes. They also have a rescue swimmer school here.



We took a tour of the facility and were able to speak with pilots, flight engineers and rescue swimmers. They showed the aircraft and the equipment; they also talked about training and procedures. This was a very interesting visit. We also had lunch at the USCG base.

We made a quick stop at USA Medical Center where we took a tour of the trauma center, the burn unit and the ICU's before we headed down to the boat station of the USCG base Sector Mobile. The MFRD fireboat is also berthed there; a 2 hour tour was scheduled for us. From the fireboat, we had a nice view from the water over Mobile, the port, and went up the Mobile River then came up starboard side of the USS Alabama.

We were back in the halls around 6 p.m. right in time for dinner, some more time with the crews and some more fire, rescue and medical calls along the evening and night.

Thursday, October 8th 2015:

A full day of training which started at the MFRD Training Center. Some live fire was set up for us but something came up first. One of the MFRD firefighters would participate in a Firefighter Combat Challenge in a few weeks; he had been in training for months. He did the challenge run at the training center, followed by a rookie.

The name and reputation of Fire Observers vzw were held high thanks to Pjotr "Russian Pete" Vroomen and Johan Van Damme who both did the challenge as well. Out of the blue, no training whatsoever and they stood tall and did one hell of a job! RESPECT!

Morning drill was fire evolutions in the burn tower. They laddered the 5 story building and we took access via the roof with an attic ladder. We walked down and stopped on every floor. We were fully dressed and advanced with a charged hose line in another drill when we entered the building from the 2nd story to hit the simulated basement fire on the 1st floor. Everybody was able to dress and mask up, to work with the hose, to be in the smoke and heat, and to see the evolutions in the smoke and fire.



Lunch was provided by Jimmy John's downtown.

Extrication training in the afternoon with the members of Truck 7 and Squad 7. They showed us how they work on a vehicle to extricate people...and we showed them our way. I can tell you one thing...the Belgian way doesn't work on those good ole' American tanks!



After all this sweaty training we were able to take a good shower before we headed to Loda's Biergarten in downtown Mobile. Some good food and a few drinks were very welcome and tasty after a day like today. Once we were back in the halls, it was already kind of late, everybody went straight to bed and nobody went on calls this night.

Friday, October 9th 2015:

A day of tourism: always nice to have a break somewhere in a program. We decided on going to New Orleans for a one day visit, a 2 hour drive, not too bad. We met up with Ff. Nurton, a Nola firefighter we met during the program in New Orleans back in 2011 and a longtime friend of Carl. We had lunch down in the French Quarter before taking a nice stroll thru the markets all the way up to the old US Mint; we went to Jackson Square and the St Louis Cathedral and attended a live steam pipe music venue at the Natchez steamboat. Then we jumped in our cars and drove towards the Lower and Upper 9th Ward where we were still able to find and see the aftermath of Katrina, 10 years ago. We also went to St Louis Cemetery No. 1 and the Cypress Grove and Greenwood cemeteries.



Back in the French Quarter we parked our cars at the NOFD HQ, bought some shirts and had dinner at Bubba Gump's. A few people decided to head back to Mobile while others stayed and enjoyed their night with a walk thru Bourbon, Decatur, Chartres, Dauphine Streets accompanied by some NOFD firefighters.

Saturday, October 10th 2015:

A short night but a very nice and fun evening. Back to work now with some high angle and confined space rescue training at the USS Alabama. The USS Alabama is a 1942 South Dakota class battleship who carried over 2300 sailors. She was active during WW2 and was most active in the South Pacific theater. She was decommissioned in 1947 with retirement in 1962. The ship went to Mobile Bay in 1964 to become a museum ship at the USS Alabama Battleship Memorial Park.

The public can board and tour the ship; the public can also visit the rest of the park where numerous aircraft, tanks, canons and the submarine USS Drum are displayed. We planned on visiting the ship and the park but not until the afternoon; now it was time for training.

We loaded up and boarded the ship and went to the ship's forecandle. We did some training scenarios to rescue victims in 5 story deep shafts with a rescue stretcher and a rescue seatbag. Everybody was able to work on ropes as rescuer or as handler. Later we also rappelled down 5 stories into places of the ship where nobody has been before. There were even helmets from sailors, paperwork, and toolboxes still on the ship from back in the day...like sailors had just left the ship yesterday. This training was fun, very good, very very interesting and unique! This training topped off our week here with the MFRD.



We had some good bbq for lunch before we headed back to the ship for a "normal" visit.



At night we had our farewell dinner at the Original Oyster House, together with Captains Bryars, Norsworthy and Chief Pappas. It was time to thank them for making it possible to come over and train and learn from them once again. Carl spoke and thanked them all for a job well done while Dirk presented the gifts. We also got some goodie bags from our hosts as well as a training certificate and a MFRD Service Recognition Bar.

After dinner everybody went back to their stations.

Sunday, October 11th 2015:

Last day in Mobile and last full day at the halls. Sundays are usually kind of slow but at station 16 we were able to catch approximately 10 calls with the engine and the rescue.

Fabio and I gathered our belongings, cleaned up our bags and suitcases and arranged them for the following week. It was a fun day filled with talks, laughs, pranks, naps, tv, ... and groceries. We decided to thank the members of station 16 for having us here by making them dinner. They took us in, overwhelmed us with food and Southern hospitality, no question or request was left unanswered...this is a very fine hall with a bunch of great people! We made vol-au-vent, something similar to a chicken pot pie.

Monday, October 12th 2015:

7:30 a.m. and it was time to leave; we said our goodbye's to the members of Station 16. Handshakes, hugs, the "be safe" and "take care" greetings and off we were. We picked up a few other Fire Observers and the whole group gathered at the Training Center. Chief Pappas and Captain Norsworthy came by for one more goodbye and to wish us safe travels.

Our touristic week started; we grabbed some breakfast and headed to Pensacola where we visited the National Naval Aviation Museum. It is a very large and interesting museum where we spent a few hours. Had some drinks and a late lunch at Mc Guire's Irish Pub so we were good to set course to Marianna where we stayed for the night. We had a calm evening with some time at the pool with Moonshine drinks, music and some food in a nearby restaurant.



Everyone was in bed pretty early for a first night without tones going out every hour.

Tuesday, October 13th 2015:

Woke up and left the hotel around 8:30 a.m., drove about 1 hour before we stopped for breakfast at Cracker Barrel's around Tallahassee. Did some more driving towards Jacksonville where we stopped at the Baymeadows Mall before checking in at our La Quinta hotel. We bought a couple of drinks and headed to the best bbq place in town...Papa John's! Papa John and Miss Sweetie are lifelong friends to the Fire Observers and they're our American mom and dad. They always take care for us, are a big help and they always throw a big bbq when we're in town. Not only for us but also for the nearby fire hall and a bunch of other good friends and invitees. Always a good time to be here...too bad it goes by so fast.

Wednesday, October 14th 2015:

Had our breakfast at the Golden Corral together with Pops, Sweetie, Megan and Tabatha. Very good to have just a lil' bit more time and some talks...but at one point we need to go.



We started our way towards the South with a first stop in St Augustine where everybody got some free time to walk the old town section, visit the shops, go see the bridge and some churches or even to visit the Castillo de San Marcos. We had lunch somewhere along the St Augustine beach and then we drove down to our end destination of the day, and final place to stay...Cocoa Beach.



Once we got there we claimed our 3 beach apartments, grabbed a couple of drinks and spent some time at the beach. Later we bought some groceries for dinner and breakfast for the next few days.

Carl and Dirk prepared some steak on the grill and we all had a very good meal with drinks and laughter in our apartments.

Thursday, October 15th 2015:

Went to Orlando to spend our day at Universal Studios. Very crowded but we were able to manage all rides and shows. Ended the day with some drinks and dinner at the Hard Rock before heading back to Cocoa Beach.



Friday, October 16th 2015:

One of the things I love about this place are the sunrises. Just a couple of lost souls at the beach, a cup of coffee, silence and sunrise. Those are things I wake up for early and today was nothing less.



Made breakfast for my roommates, had a nice easy walk at the beach with some friends, went to the pier, had a few drinks, saw a couple of sharks,...

We left Cocoa Beach around 1:30 p.m. to hit a few malls down in Orlando. From Orlando we would go to Daytona Beach. It was the first night of Biketoberfest; something you can't miss when you're in the area. Drinks, food, shows, live music, bikes,...a lot of people, weird people, beautiful people,...a way to spend your evening.



Saturday, October 17th 2015:

Our last full day here in the States.... A visit of the Kennedy Space Center was scheduled for today. Started off with the Atlantis exhibit which was awesome! Gave me goosebumps at one point. Also went to the memorial before we boarded the bus for a tour. Tours are kind of different now since there're not shuttles anymore but still it was very interesting. Ended the tour and our visit at the Apollo/Saturn V building.



Stopped for some groceries on the way back since we decided to have another bbq for our last night. Enjoyed some more time at the beach in the late afternoon and as well at night, after dinner. Some of us were even able to see a shark on land that some fisherman caught.



Sunday, October 18th 2015:

All good times come to an end...but not without one last final sunrise. Easy morning but around 10:00 a.m. it's about time to load up the cars and head towards the Orlando International Airport. Our first Delta flight brings us without any problems to Atlanta. A few hours later we board the plane towards Brussels where we land in amazingly cold temperatures and a slight drizzle...



The Mobile, AL 2015 was another success! MFRD pulled all hoses on this one and they gave us good times. Dirk and myself were also very happy with the group of Fire Observers. A bunch of fine people who were able to bond as one group of friends. We hope to see you all on future programs.

VERSTREPEN Carl

With special thanks to Miss Sharon Banwell.