

TRAVEL REPORT

SAN DIEGO, CA 2017

It was the summer of 2016 when we decided to reach out to the San Diego Fire Rescue Department to discuss the possibilities to run a new training program with them. Fire Observers vzw and SDFD have a very strong and long relationship since we've conducted our very first program in history back in 1996. Since that first program we returned 3 more times and the 2018 program is in the making. There's no other department that has hosted our firefighters more than SDFD.

Saturday, May 6th:

It was a nice and warm spring morning when the entire group gathered at the departure level of Brussels Airport. The group consisted out of 11 members coming from various departments in Belgium and The Netherlands. The 3 crew leaders were Filip, Peter and Carl.

All flights were uneventful and the landing at LAX was right on time. The group was welcomed by Peter and Carl who were in the States already for the past couple of days. We claimed our luggage, got the rental cars and drove to our hotel, just a couple of minutes away from the airport. Time to enjoy a nice cold welcome beer in the room and a quick shower.

We grabbed some dinner and drinks at a nearby Denny's but went back to bed, all exhausted, around 11:00 pm.

Sunday, May 7th:

Early breakfast and we were out! We drove via Del Rey towards Venice. Everybody got some time to walk the beaches of Venice and Santa Monica, all the way up to the pier and back. The next short ride took us thru the streets of Bel Air, Beverly Hills and Hollywood with stops at Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills City Hall and "the Strip". Some of us went to a 60's diner for lunch, others to Hooters.



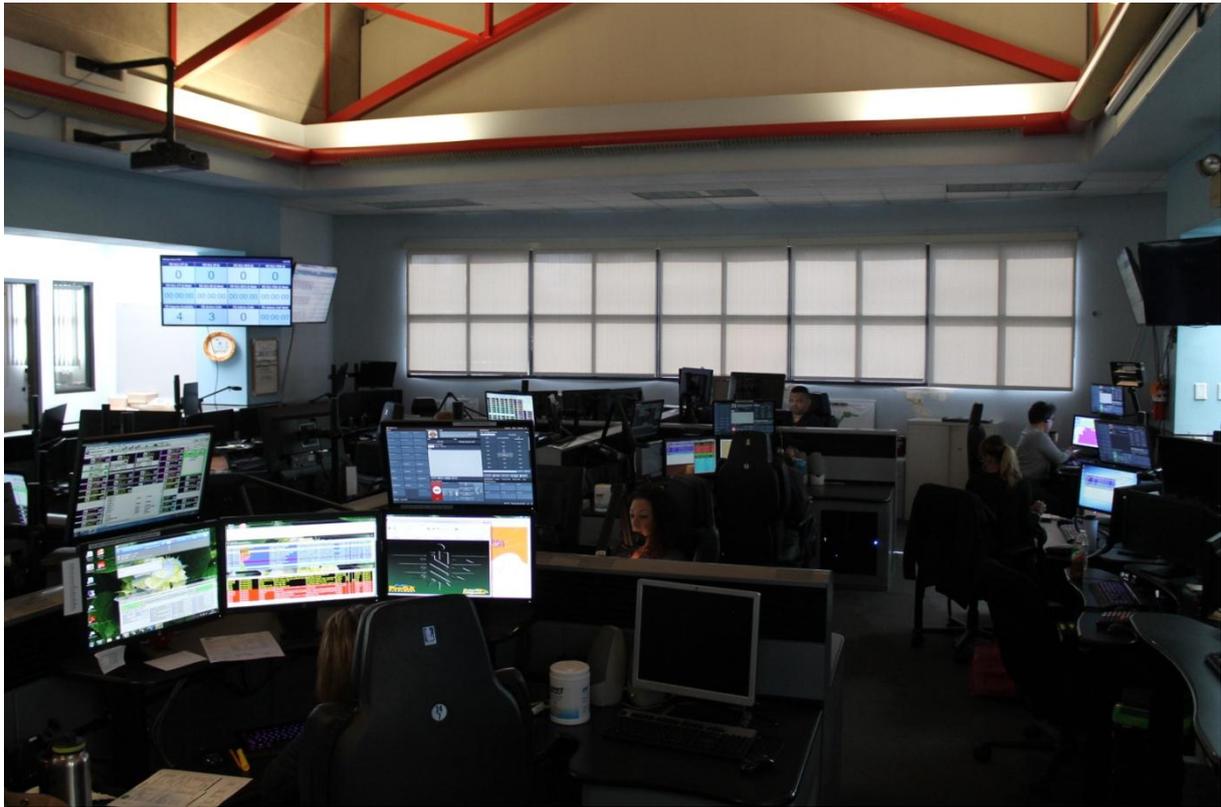
We left Hollywood around 0200 pm and headed South towards San Diego. We arrived in heavy showers and therefore all cinco de mayo festivities in Old Town were already over and done. Went straight to the hotel to claim the rooms and enjoyed some margarita's and Mexican dinner. We also met with Mark Alvarez, our assigned chaperon of SDFD.

Monday, May 8th:

0800 am and all bright eyes and bushy tailed present at the Emergency Operations Center of San Diego, where we were welcomed by Mark Alvarez and multiple chiefs and supervisors of SDFD. EOC visit took about 90 minutes before crossing the street to Montgomery Airfield where SDFD AirOps is located. The crew showed us the aircraft and did a long line demo for us.

First shirts and caps and stuff were bought at the uniform shop of the local union before heading to Pacific Beach for a quick lunch. There's a 9/11 memorial right at the front lawn of SDFD fire station #21 so we all lined up for a salute.

We started our tours for station assignments around 0300 pm. Carl is at #21, Dennis, Wendy, Bianca and Peter Krom at #1. Johan and Philippe went to #18, Filip and Jeroen to #45. Renato was assigned to #11. Timmy got #10, Maarten went to #26 and Peter and Arnaut to #12. Time to be welcomed by all crews and to take in the first calls.



Tuesday, May 9th:

Months of preparation but we only got full permission in the past 24 hours to visit the USNS Mercy, one of the biggest hospital ships in the world, homeport San Diego.

US Navy went all the way on this one! The visit lasted for more than 3 hours going from the hull all the way up to the flight deck and the bridge. We saw numerous consultation rooms, triage rooms, operating rooms, the intensive care wards,.... There was not a single room at the whole ship that was kept aside and closed. At one point we were even welcomed by the CO and the XO. After our visit to the USNS Mercy we went to the base store to buy some clothing and presents. The Subway lunch was followed by a hop over the Coronado Bridge to make a few stops at Coronado Island before heading back to our stations.



Wednesday, May 10th:

The morning visit was scheduled at the Lifeguards HQ down in Mission Bay. We got a tour of the facility and the boats. Later we went out on 2 boats to navigate the bay and even for a short while on the ocean.



We all got lunch at Ocean Beach before heading back to our stations.

Thursday, May 11th:

The whole group met at Station 1 to ride together to the USCG base, station San Diego. We were welcomed by the Operations Control Center Supervisor and a Jayhawk pilot. First they gave us a presentation on USCG and USCG San Diego in particular before we went to the hangar where a Dauphin and Jayhawk were parked. Out on the ramp a Jayhawk was in start up so also that one got our attention. The boat station was next and they even took us out for a ride in the bay.





The SDFD Fire Chief wanted to meet with us so we made a short stop down at HQ just before a lunch downtown.

Before heading back to all stations we went to Point Loma for some nice views at Cabrillo National Monument.

Friday, May 12th:

Kind of a day off today. Everybody got some downtime in the afternoon. Fire trucks were replaced by an aircraft carrier, the USS Midway. We spend the evening and night for drinks, dinner and music downtown in the Gaslamp Quarter.



Saturday, May 13th:

We all met for lunch at the Kansas City BBQ, famous since that 1996 movie Top Gun. It was nice to just sit down in the sun, enjoying some drinks and listening to all stories at the table.

We decided to do a farewell dinner ourselves today so we invited some SDFD chiefs, captains and firefighters over for our thank you's to them and the entire SDFD. During dinner prep, the bomb squad was opened up for us so everybody was able to learn more about the squad, the men, their procedures and equipment.

Chief Heiser presented our training certificates later that night, nice to frame.

Sunday, May 14th:

Our last day in San Diego, a full 24 hour shift with the crew.

Over at Station 21 Carl enjoyed his time with a wonderful crew. They filled the day with touring the city, making calls, beach time and food. That food was a homemade Belgian dish made by Carl. Good times down here in PB and San Diego. All of SDFD involved in our program went all the way for us!

Monday, May 15th:

Time to leave this beautiful city and this wonderful department. We left San Diego pretty early to drive one hour North and to grab some breakfast in Temecula. We also did some groceries to fill up the coolers with drinks and lunch.

Next stop was Joshua Tree National Park. We got some very beautiful views to enjoy at several stops. For lunch we did a picnic. Hours later we arrived at our hotel in Laughlin. Drinks, pool, shower and dinner and more drinks. All that followed by a good night sleep without tones going off.



Tuesday, May 16th:

First stop of the day was Oatman. No donkeys to be found but it was nice to take a stroll and to take in all images of this small mountain village. Kingman was our lunch stop before heading to our final destination of the day, Las Vegas. Just another quick photo stop at Hoover dam and then towards the Sin City. We stayed at the Excalibur Hotel where we immediately took possession of the swimming pool. The night was ended on Fremont Street.



Wednesday, May 17th:

We filled the morning with some shopping time and the afternoon with pool time. The group split up, some went to the Grand Canyon, others stayed in their rooms to get some extra sleep and other were found at the casino floor. Filip, Peter, Carl, Jeroen, Arnaut and Maarten explored the Las Vegas Boulevard and practically all hotels.



Thursday, May 18th:

We left Las Vegas to stop for breakfast one hour later. Then we drove towards Death Valley with stops at Death Valley Junction, Zabriskie Point, Devil's golf course, Badwater and Stovepipe Wells. We stopped for lunch at Furnace Creek.



We changed this probably most desolate area in the world for some new views and some very nice driving around Lake Isabella and along the borders of the Kern River to get into Bakersfield where we stayed for the night.

Friday, May 19th:

Early morning start to enter Yosemite National Park via Oakhurst. Stopped several times throughout the day to enjoy this magnificent place.

Stayed in Merced for the night.

Saturday, May 20th:

Driving further Westbound today all the way up to the coast. Stopped in Carmel and drove the 17 Mile Drive. Because of traffic we lost Filip's car along the way. It turned out he took the Interstate while Peter and Carl enjoyed driving on Highway 1 all the way towards San Francisco where the group was reunited.



Drinks and dinner for the whole group.

Sunday, May 21st:

Already up and walking to our tram at 0745 am to get on the Early Bird Tour on Alcatraz. Came back on land on Fisherman's Wharf where everybody got some time for lunch and a stroll before heading back to the hotel. We were supposed to go to the Golden Gate Park for drinks, dinner and music but it turned out everything was already over by the time we got there. So we had some drinks at the hotel before going out with the whole group for our last night.

Fun night with drinks, laughter, pictures and good food!



Monday, May 22nd:

We left the hotel around 1000 am. It was our final day here in Frisco and the States. We went for a touristic ride to explore some more magnificent views of the city. Painted Ladies, Twin Peaks, Golden Gate Park, Golden Gate Bridge, Presidio, Lombard Street and Treasure Island.

We left the city to have a late lunch and some more shopping time in Serramonte before heading towards the airport. Turned in our rental cars, checked in, passed security and enjoyed some drinks before finally boarding our United Boeing 747 with 3 seats for everybody. It was a nice and calm flight back to Europe.



Tuesday, May 23rd:

Short 90 minutes stop in Frankfurt and a 1 hour flight to Brussels right after. Brussels Airport, where our journey started some 16 days ago and where it all came to an end now. Welcomed by friends and family we all said our goodbyes and went all our own ways.

San Diego 2017...another successful program for the books!

VERSTREPEN Carl

