

## Convoy 24 Report Bosnia

### Day 1 Rosyth to Newcastle

Brian, June, Scott and Steven met at Rosyth Fire Station for the usual photo opportunity with Willie Rennie MP and Firemaster Jimmy Campbell of Fife Fire and Rescue Service.



After a quick cuppa we left for Newcastle where we are meeting up with James from Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. We met at the fire station nearest to the ferry terminal. This station is in complete dis-repair, boarded up windows and weeds growing through the concrete training area. Glad I am not leaving my car here like James!!

James has filled his car with PPE, drysuits and other bits and bobs. The minibus is now stacked full.



Since we have not met James before this we spend some time getting to know him whilst waiting to board the ferry.

Ferry sets sail on time and we spend more time going over plans and more socialising.

### **Day 2 Amsterdam to Bischofshofen**

Up early, stuffed ourselves at breakfast. Ferry on time docking and off we went. Only 1,031Km to go!! According to Emily, our SATNAV assistant, she says we will be there in 9 ½ hours. Everyone took turns in driving with some more successful than others. We did try to keep the speed to 60mph but again some were more successful than others!

The journey was not incident free though; Scott was caught in two minds whether to take an exit or not in Germany. He waited for Emily to give him the heads up but she was just as confused as us. This meant heading straight for the concrete corner which would have not been good for health. We did make it but with hearts beating faster. Scott got it tight for a few miles after that. The exhaust began to blow like a tractor and our intrepid mechanical duo of Steve and Scott put a temporary fix of duct tape around the 'small' 5cm hole. Unfortunately the tape melted 100km down the road and again we sounded like a tractor. Not to be outdone, Scott and Steve again went to work and attempted to fix the exhaust this time with a Coke Zero can which we cut up and tied to the exhaust with wire. This did work and we continued on and reached the fire station at Bischofshofen at 2300hrs where we were met by Commandant Christian Machink and Gunter the caretaker.

### **Day 3 Bischofshofen to Buzim, Bosnia**

Awoke to a beautiful view over the Alps. Steve and Scott found duct hose in the fire station garage which we again used to fix the exhaust. Looks and sounds a professional job.

We stopped for breakfast at a resthaus just south of Bischofshofen when we saw a Landrover with Rockingham Landrovers on it. We had stopped at the same resthaus as Rae Nix and Mike Farney, this later became known as an Acorn Aid moment which we would have many more times throughout the mission.

Off we went in convoy, heading through Slovenia and into Croatia. The border guard did intend to search the rear of the minibus but when he saw the amount of gear we had, he quickly changed his mind and waved us through. We arrived at the Bosnian border checkpoint a few hours later where we found that the border chief was from Buzim originally and due to us helping his town we were hastily allowed through after many pictures and handshakes.

Mike and Rae took us to the Senad Krupic, the Fire Chief of Buzims' house where we were greeted with the usual friendliness which greeted us wherever we went. We were invited to stay at his house for a small fee for the duration of the mission. We then travelled to Buzim for dinner where James was stopped by the Police for driving with no lights on. The copper was not amused but allowed us to go when Senad and Mike intervened. Much ribbing of James then ensued. We did manage to get the exhaust fixed by the mechanics of the garage we had used the previous year for the RTC demonstration. The mechanic welded a patch onto the exhaust whilst standing in 2 feet of water. HSE eat your heart out!!

## **Day 4 – 1<sup>st</sup> Day ‘Training’**

We went to the fire station in Buzim which was no more than a garage down the back of the main street in Buzim. We met with the Buzim firefighters and Edith, our translator. We started to unload the equipment we had brought. We asked them to show us the training areas which had been organised prior to us arriving. The training area for the medical days were perfect and the equipment in place, for the BA training it was less than suitable. The building earmarked for us a new build 4 storey building which was not finished yet. There were no handrails, or safety barriers on any of the landings which had up to a 40 foot drop. We returned to the fire station to find the Buzim guys had sorted out the kit into bundles. We told them to take 2 sets of PPE each but to try it on and allow us to check it first. This resulted in anything shiny being taken, with the better dirty stuff being left. Some even had two left or two right boots or ill fitting PPE. This was quickly rectified and the firefighters showed us the equipment and vehicles they use just now. In the afternoon we were taken to see the Green Goddess which was in the middle of refurbishment. All agreed an excellent job was being done on the GG and again many photos taken.



We then went to the local school which we had brought educational items for them. At first they did not seem too enthused about this but we later found out that they received some things in the past which were either broken and/or useless for them. When they found out what was in the boxes and that it was new, they became very appreciative.

## **Day 5 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Day Training**

We all met at the training suit in the Opcina building in Buzim and in true Bosnian fashion; some were late which delayed training by 1 hour. We split the firefighters into 2 groups, group A stayed and did medical training while group B went and did door entry procedures and an intro to BA. We swapped over in the afternoon just in case some did not attend on day 3. Lunch was in a local restaurant but it was too much for us. We expected a small lunch but was given a full on meal. We stopped training late in the afternoon as some are part-time firefighters and needed to get home for their own work. Some also had a long journey back to their own town.

The team went to Bosanska Krupa to get some equipment which we had expected to be in place. We found out that the equipment that was to be split between the two stations had not been done. We were greeted by Suad and then Elvir, both we had met the year before and were good at their job. They showed us around the Dodge which we had delivered the previous year. It was in a very good condition and the pride they had in it was evident.



We managed to get the equipment we came for onto the minibus before Refic, the fire chief arrived. He was his usual self and did not appear to be too happy we were taking stuff away. On leaving the fire station, Brian was driving and a car came around a corner at a fair rate of knots. Instinct said pull left and into side of the road. Big OOPS, that took us into the path of the car even more and meant an even more violent manoeuvre to get to safety. Brian's' turn to get ribbed.

### **Day 6 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Day Training**

Again a small delay in everyone turning up on time. Talking to some yesterday, they have to travel 3 hours in some cases. With morning prayers at 0600, this leaves an impossible travel time to make it for 0900. Scott not feeling well, he has flu like symptoms and has volunteered to be the unconscious casualty. Doing a good job at it too.

Again the two groups with group A doing more advanced medical aid and group B doing BA search techniques. Lunch again too big. Swapped over groups again in afternoon.

As tomorrow is water rescue, have asked for a packed lunch as we are up in hills at lake.

### **Day 7 – 4<sup>th</sup> Day Training**

Scott feeling better, looks like the rocket fuel he drinks at breakfast has helped. By rocket fuel, we mean the coffee. He has had 6 cups now and looks wired to the moon.

We go to the fire station to make sure everyone has a lift. We hear a siren about 1 mile away which is continuous. It is the GG which is now red and looking a treat. The mechanic/driver has done a magnificent job on it. He stops, switches the siren off and tells us he is going for petrol, switches siren back on and off he goes to the petrol station! We then head to house to await the RED Goddess. Everyone there and we go in convoy

down mountain track to lake. RG makes it no problem. Again two groups with one doing extrication from seated position and casualty management while the other group does water rescue.

Scott again is the casualty, finding out that his dry-suit is not living up to its name! Especially when your rescuer grabs you by the collar and lets all the water in. We wondered why the locals were a wee bit concerned about going in the water; it was due to there being water snakes! We did not tell Scott until afterwards.

After a 'partisan' lunch of a baguette and bottle of juice we swapped over again. The Buzim crew were at the end of the day trained in the use of the Defib. Then the fun began. We all watched putting bets on that the RG would not get up the track as our minibus struggled when we checked out the area. How little did we know, it made it no problem. Another testimony to the skill of the driver.

### **Day 7 – 5<sup>th</sup> Day Training**

This was the climax to the training. We all turned up at the fire station expecting the cars to be cut up in place. We did think something was up when we passed 2 car transporters sitting at the side of the road with nothing on the back of them.

Not to waste time we did a run through without cutting on a firefighters' car in the car park. He did look a bit concerned when we asked him but with Edith to translate he stopped sweating and started smiling.

Two cars finally turned up after Senad drove to the garage and told them to get finger out or else.

Scott sat in the car as casualty (see a pattern yet?) Whilst Steve did the cutting and James the commentary. June and Brian did the medical part. As we were delayed it was nearing 1100hrs and the temperature was climbing rapidly. As all were in full PPE, it became a learning curve for all.

After a few words of wisdom from the Mayor who watched us and thanked IFRA for their generosity, it was the local firefighters turn. They all turned up with their PPE gleaming and proud of the fact. With minimal instruction they extricated a 'casualty' from the 2<sup>nd</sup> car with the Mayor, proud Fire Chief and bystanders looking on.

We went to the restaurant for an end of school meal where we were presented with certificates from the school we helped, from Bihac and Buzim.

After more words of wisdom and thanks from all the firefighters who attended the week, we were 'asked' to go to Cazin. Here we were shown the vehicles that they use and as usual were asked if we could get them equipment. Dodging that question with 'e-mail our management committee with your request and it will be up to them' became the order of the day. James was kidnapped by his new found 'friend' who was armed to the teeth and we went to see the town from a high vantage point. James was looking for one of us to get in the car with him but we declined with a huge grin!

This town, although the vehicles are old, do have quite a few of them and in working order.

### **Day 8 – Hearts and Minds**

Chief Krupic had told us that the Fire Chief from Bihac would like to see us and since it is a nice town, he would allow us to use his apartment which his daughter uses whilst at university. Mike and Rae agreed to give us a tour of the area as they had been many times before. A lot of the sights and stories were sobering. Or

example, the beautiful waterfalls next to the village which was ethnically cleansed during the war. No-one lives there from that day.

We met with the Fire Chief and Chemzo who was at the training. They were so impressed with the training and generosity of IFRA that they would like to hold a training school in Bihac if possible. Again we used the 'e-mail the management committee' phrase which went down well as they now have done.

We treated Senad's daughter to a meal as a thank you for allowing us to stay with her and her flatmates. We got concerned when a burly lad came and sat with us. It ended up that he was not only was our hosts' boyfriend but also our bodyguard. We did attend a local revelry where we sat at first on our own but by the end of the night were sitting in a company of over 15, teaching them Scottish party games!

### **Day 9 – Chill with a Difference**

On the way back to Buzim we stopped by to see Nermin Durakovic. It was he who had organised a lot for us before we came but had been diagnosed with cancer. He was very poorly but wanted to see us all to thank us and IFRA for our help. Nermin had been liaising with Chief Senad and translating for us, making sure everything was in place prior to our arrival.



As we entered Buzim we noticed a forest fire on the outskirts of the town. We noticed a fire engine on top of a hill and set out to see if we could help. After many wrong turns and dodgy roads we reached the top of the hill and parked next to the water tender. The fire was by then out and we noticed the firefighters walking back up the hill. The driver/mechanic was in fire kit and they all had the water backpacks with them. After giving them a well earned fluid replenishment break we followed them back to town. 30minutes to get there, 10 minutes back. Local knowledge is a virtue.

As it was going to be our last night we had a good meal and a discussion on how we felt the mission had gone. Note to self, learn what the Bosnian is for certain foods. This stops Convoy Commander killing locals and patrons of restaurant with laughter at the animal impressions to figure out what is on the menu.

### **Day 10 – Farewell**

We left as soon as we could after saying our farewells to everyone we had met. Rae was coming home at the same time as us so we travelled together and headed for Bischofshofen. We got as far as the Bosnia/Croatia border where the border chief remembered us. It cost us a couple of t-shirts and sweets as we had promised him these on the way through the first time. Road chaos in Slovenia cost us about 3 hours travel time but we made it to the Fire Station in Bischofshofen again by late evening.

### **Day 11 – Alps**

We decided to stay in Bischofshofen for another night so we were able to see the beauty of Austria. We tried to go up the Gross Lockner Pass but it was still blocked with snow, so we ended up in Zell-am-Zee next to an amazing lake. We rolled our Easter eggs after getting a cable car up the mountain.

### **Day 12 – Amsterdam Bound**

Said our farewell to Bischofshofen Fire Service and headed to Amsterdam via Luxembourg and Belgium. Said our thanks and goodbyes to Rae in Luxembourg as he is going to Normandy for a few days. We again got held up by traffic and got pulled by the Belgian police as they did not believe who and what we were. Only held up for a little while though. Got accommodation near Maastricht Airport and were awoken at 0600 by jet engines. Made Amsterdam by lunchtime but again held up by roadworks.

Quick pint in Amsterdam and then onto the ferry terminal. Ferry again left on time. Full of noisy French children who have come here due to ferry strike in France.

Very rough crossing, Steve ejected his dinner and retired early. During night Scott nearly fell out of bed.



## **Day 13 – Home**

Seas still rough, Steve looking like death warmed up as opposed to death last night, so he is improving. Noisy French youths very quiet this morning and all carrying paper bags. HEEHEEHEE

Dropped James at the fire station where we were astounded that his car was not a burned out wreck and even still, had 4 wheels on it. Trip back to Fife uneventful and we were home by 1300hrs.

## **Summary**

The mission this year went more smoothly than last year as the groundwork prior to our arrival had been done to some level. The translators Edith/Mike did us proud. Edith was concerned that the males would not listen to her or June but their fears were unfounded. Both got the respect they deserved from all. Mike although not a professional translator managed very well and again got the respect from all.

To the team, thanks. Your professionalism and personality shone through each day. Without the good-hearted banter it would be a dull day. Always remember – seatbelts, lights, drive on the right!!

The hearts and minds part of the mission may not be the most enjoyable part of a mission but it is a very important part. We ended up on national TV and newspapers by doing this, increasing the profile of IFRA in Bosnia. So much so, we have been asked about the possibility of holding another training school in Bihac.

Before taking part in a mission, do your homework on the country. Small things to us could be a big thing to others.

When on a mission, expect things to be held up and changed at the last minute. This happens all the time; it is how we react that makes the impression. You have to either suck it and see and always remember, IFRA is not an experience, it is an adventure!

Brian Miller

Paramedic

Convoy 24 Commander