

# **Fire Engine to Kosovo**

**By David Reeks (Edinburgh Direct Aid)**

## **Introduction**

When the Serb forces were driven out of Kosovo by the NATO campaign in 1999 they took with them anything of value that could easily be driven or transported. What they could not take they destroyed. The result was that the infrastructure and public services in the country were left in a parlous state. For example, the fire brigade in the capital, Pristina, was left with no serviceable equipment whatever. Since then, a number of second-hand fire engines and ancillary equipment from around the world have been donated to many of the towns in Kosovo. Over recent years Edinburgh Direct Aid (EDA) has taken two fire-engines and a rubbish wagon to Kosovo.

Early in 2005 Davie Kay (IFRA) and I were discussing the donation of a fire engine to UN Fire and Rescue in Kosovo. (UN Fire and Rescue is the organisation that controls and supervises the operations and training of local fire brigades in Kosovo). This machine would then be handed over by UN to a local fire brigade in Kosovo.

## **Preparation**

A suitable machine was identified and was given to IFRA. This fire engine, a Dodge/Renault, had been used as a training vehicle at the Fire and Rescue Services College at Gullane and had never attended a genuine incident.

The vehicle was carefully prepared so as to be in good condition for the handover to UN. Two IFRA volunteers came forward, Dave Sharpe and Bob Rearie. Both Dave and Bob had considerable experience in training crews in various parts of the world and were no strangers to the type of expedition being planned for this fire engine.

As I had previously taken two fire engines, a rubbish wagon, and two trucks to Kosovo I was able to contribute my experience of the route and border crossings.

Several weeks elapsed as arrangements were made with UN Fire and Rescue, equipment was obtained for the machine, the ferry was booked and customs documents were prepared. Finally, on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005 we were ready to leave.

## **The Journey to Pristina**

On 31<sup>st</sup> March we met up at the Port of Rosyth ready to board the ferry to Zeebrugge. Davie Kay, together with a reporter and photographer from the local press, were there to see us off.

Dave and Bob had done some research and had identified a number of possible camping sites for our overnight stops. As we crossed Germany and darkness fell we aimed for the small town of St Leon-Rot in Bavaria. We drove down the main street of the town and stopped to ask for directions to the camp site. With great good fortune we enquired at the local fire station where we were welcomed like long-lost friends. We were escorted to the camp site where Dave and Bob set up their tent beside a lake. I elected to sleep in the back of the fire engine. This turned out to be a wise decision as, in the darkness, Dave and Bob had pitched the tent with the flap facing into the cold wind coming off the lake; they did not sleep too well that night!

Later the volunteer firemen from the town arrived with a minibus and took us back to their fire station where we were royally entertained with large quantities of food and beer. While being given a tour of the building they showed us how they had extended the structure of the station with a new kitchen, a gym, and recreational facilities for local cadet firefighters. All this work was done on a voluntary basis using a grant from the district council for capital expenditure and donations of help from local traders and tradesmen. It was a real education in community involvement.

Next day we continued our journey, crossing into Austria near Salzburg. We travelled through the Alps to Graz where we had planned to make our second nightstop. There we visited the main fire station where I had been fortunate in obtaining overnight hospitality on a previous occasion. However, although we were allowed to park the machine in the yard, we had to book in at a local hotel for the night.

Next day we set off and crossed into Slovenia. The benefit of Slovenia's admission to the EU a few weeks before was immediately apparent – no customs delays at the border. In an hour and a half we were at the Croatian border where our first session with customs formalities took place. Crossing into Croatia can be a long-winded business but we were lucky; the customs officer was a part-time fireman! After Dave and Bob had swapped yarns and experiences with him we were away with no problems.

As we continued through Croatia we were aiming for Podstrana on the Dalmatian coast just south of Split. There we stayed overnight at a guest house which had been EDA's base during the war in Bosnia. The house was well situated right on the shore of the Adriatic. I was able to renew my friendship with the very attractive owner, Jasminka.

As we progressed down the coast we crossed the Bosnian coastal enclave of Neum where Dave had previously spent some time during one of his training activities. On past Dubrovnik and we entered Montenegro and our second experience of border customs. Eventually we escaped from the border controls and, after driving further down the coast towards the resort of Budva, we started to climb over the first of three ranges of mountains in Montenegro. A long, long climb up and an equally long way down took us to the capital, Podgorica. This is not one of the world's most attractive towns and it was good to get through in fairly quick time.

After leaving Podgorica we drove up the very spectacular gorge of the Moraca river and started our lengthy climb over the second range of mountains. Near the top we were waved down by some local men who had managed to get their four-wheel drive

car stuck in snow. After some abortive attempts we were able to drag them out just as night was falling. We then started to look for a suitable place to park up for the night. Easier said than done. Eventually we had to park in a lay-by used by HGVs and we spent a very cold night inside the vehicle. Bob and Dave felt that the attractions of camping out were outweighed by the lack of security in the tent.

Next morning we drove for a while until we arrived at Rozaj where we had a breakfast of sorts. At Rozaj it is necessary to branch off the main road and take to the mountains again; this is because the main road passes into the Serb-controlled area of Kosovo and there can be considerable difficulties in going that way.

Climbing the mountains in early morning we reached the top where, off the road, the snow was deep. In blazing sunshine we were able to take a short break and admire the amazing views over Montenegro and Kosovo. From the top of the mountain crossing it is 26 hairpin bends down into Kosovo. Part way down we reached the UNMIK border crossing where, after some delay, we met with Neville Fouche. Neville is a South African firefighter serving with UN in Kosovo where he has been responsible for the training of the Kosovar fire brigades. Neville was our host during our stay and he ensured that all arrangements for our visit ran smoothly.

Near Pejah (the name Pe $\equiv$  on the map is Serb and is not now used) we waited several hours for our final customs clearance. During this wait we were taken to lunch at a local restaurant where we were given the most enormous dishes laden with meat that I had ever seen. Fantastic, but too much.

Following Neville we drove on to Pristina where UN had booked us into one of the principal hotels. 5-star it was not! No heating and a general air of decay from lack of investment and maintenance. This, of course, is not surprising in a country with the massive problems such as are experienced in Kosovo.

### **Fire and Rescue in Kosovo**

The fire brigades in Kosovo suffer from a desperate shortage of equipment. For example, the Pristina Fire Brigade provides cover for, not only Pristina, but many small towns and villages on its periphery; the population being served is close to one million. The appliances to cover this population amount to two donated machines plus two locally built water bowsers; many places do not have fire hydrants and bowsers are vital to support the limited water supplies of the fire engines. One of the two fire engines at Pristina is the Scania, donated by Strathclyde Fire Brigade, which I had driven out there about 2 years ago.

The appliance which Dave, Bob, and I took on this trip was intended initially for training and later would go to a district fire station.

While in Kosovo the three of us were hosted by UN Fire & Rescue and Neville arranged for us to be taken to a town some distance out of Pristina to see some typical training of local firemen (yes, firemen – they do not seem to have female firefighters!). Bob and Dave were interested to meet the senior instructors who were seconded from UK . On this occasion the training was in rescue from road traffic

accidents with an unfortunate Lada suffering the rigours of the hydraulic cutting equipment and a live “casualty” being extracted from the wreckage.

### **In Conclusion**

Our outward journey took 6 days and went without a hitch. The weather was perfect, being warm and sunny, especially down the Dalmatian coast; up in the mountains of Montenegro in the snow the sun blazed down on us. Truly the sun shines on the righteous!

Our hosts at UN Fire & Rescue looked after us well and were very grateful for the donation of the fire appliance. It was very evident that Kosovo is still desperately short of good quality machines and could use many more donations.