

International Fire and Rescue Association Convoy 5

On Friday the 3rd of September I got a phone call from Davie Sharp of the International Fire and Rescue Association (IFRA). Davie explained that he was organising a team to take an ex Fife Fire and Rescue Service fully kitted out fire engine to Kljuc, a town of approx 26,000 in Bosnia to replace the 1966 appliance that they were using and he was phoning to tell me I'd been selected to take part in convoy 5. Was I still up for it?? It took approx. 5 milli seconds to say YES.

The conversation continued, with dates, times and places, leaving Rosyth on the 10th, drive and camp through Europe, train the local firefighters in Kljuc on the appliance and equipment it carries and fly back to Edinburgh on the 17th. By this time, not much was making sense as my head started to spin with thoughts and ideas of what I needed to do and sort out before I could go anywhere.

Davie continued, anyway Davey the guys are meeting up on Tuesday night at Kirkaldy fire station, it would be good if you could come along, see the truck and meet the guys. I agreed to the Tuesday night meet and after a few pleasantries the phone went dead.

Sharp intake of breath.....

Off to Bosnia next Friday, well I'd better get started.

On the following Monday, I got turned into a pin cushion at the doctors, on Tuesday met the guys, Davie Sharp, Calum Bruce and Bob Rearie, all from Fife Fire and Rescue Service and the appliance that would be taking us to Bosnia. Ran around daft on Wednesday getting everything organised that I thought I would need for the trip. On duty with Green watch on Thursday dayshift and spent the remainder of Thursday packing and repacking my rucsac.

The guys, complete with fire engine arrived outside my house Friday lunchtime and we set off for Rosyth Ferry Terminal. After clearing customs, we had a photo call with the press. Hearts player, Kevin McKenna was also there as Hearts had kindly donated gate money and tickets to IFRA from a charity game they had played against Bosnian team Zeljeznicar from Sarajevo. The appliance was then named "Heart of Midlothian". After the photo call, we waited for a couple of hours on the dockside to be loaded, long enough to get to know the guys and realise that it was certainly going to be an interesting trip.

The appliance was loaded by 4 o'clock, giving us enough time to get our gear to our cabins and get back on deck to wave goodbye to a handful of well wishers who had come to see the ferry sail at 5.

18 hours later Heart of Midlothian rolled onto Belgium soil at Zeebrugge. By six o'clock that night Bob and I had driven in glorious sunshine through Belgium, Luxemburg, France (after a wrong turn) and spent the night at a campsite at Homburg in Germany. All was well, until 10.30 when the heavens opened and the campsite became a paddling pool. The tents and sleeping bags were soaked and with no way of getting them dry it was decided that Bob and I would sleep in the truck and Davie and Calum would sleep in the launderette.

By six on Sunday morning enough was enough and it was decided to get an early start for our next stop at Salzburg, Austria, where we hoped to dry out all our wet gear. We arrived at the campsite in Salzburg by 4 that afternoon and set up our tents protected by Heart of Midlothian and a salvage sheet tied between the appliance and nearby trees to provide extra protection from the persistent rain and allowing the tents to dry nicely.

Another early start the following day and we were off, thankfully the weather had turned and the sun was splitting the sky as we headed south through the Austrian Alps. After driving through Slovenia and Croatia we arrived at the Bosnian Border around 11 o'clock that night. After a few hiccups the truck was allowed entry into the country, straight into the impound yard, where it remained until late Tuesday afternoon. Thankfully some of the firefighters from Kljuc had made the 2 hour drive to meet us at the border and after being given the OK from customs in the early hours of Tuesday morning we were allowed to cross the border and be driven to Kljuc to get some well deserved sleep.

Bob headed back to the customs yard with Fahrudin (Faro) Jazzovic, Kljuc Fire Komandir later that morning, while our interpreter Sanuel showed Davie, Calum and myself around Kljuc and the ruins of the cliff top fort from where the town takes its name (Kljuc – Key). By 17.00hrs, Bob and Faro had returned from the impound yard with Heart of Midlothian to the Fire station. The look on the faces of the Kljuc firefighters was priceless as old sat beside new in the station yard and the new appliance was explored, examined and inspected thoroughly by its new owners.

That night we were the guests of Faro at a concert at the local academy. The Children had written and produced the concert in celebration, as Wednesday marked the 12th anniversary of the liberation of the town. The performance was very moving and a credit to the children, even for non Bosnian speakers, like ourselves.

Wednesday and we were off to the nearby town of Bosanski Petrovats to train the fire service there in Road Traffic Accident (RTA) techniques. We had brought along an extra set of RTA rescue gear for the Bosanski Petrovac station and after training the crew on the use and maintenance of the gear we supervised as they turned a local banger into a convertible. Up until that point the only RTA gear that they had was crow bars and oxy-acetylene cutting gear, not the best of combinations. After having lunch with the Bosanski Petrovac Komandi, Rifet Naderevic and his crew we headed back to Kljuc.

Arriving back at Kljuc, Faro informed us that due to it being a public holiday in Kljuc we were invited to a picnic. A short drive to the river revealed a fire service barbeque of massive proportions. A part from the duty crew all the Kljuc firefighters were there. The hospitality was amazing and second to none and after a good few hours at the riverside, swapping Bosnian songs for Scots and having a few beers we were introduced to ??????? the local hooch, plum moonshine. If anyone requires a top quality paint stripper or engine degreaser it comes highly recommended. At that point, Faro received a call from Rifet, the Komandir of Bosanski Petrovac Fire Service, to tell him his crew were at a serious RTA, where two persons were trapped and that the rescue equipment and tactics and techniques we had shown his crew earlier on that day were being used as he spoke.

Bright and early on Thursday we were summoned to the mayor's office at Kljuc town hall, to be thanked by the mayor on behalf of the town's people for our efforts and endeavours. We continued the training at Kljuc, with vehicle familiarisation and operation at the fire station, pump and portable pump operations at the river, finishing off with a walk through, talk through road traffic accident exercise with a kindly donated van in a local resident's back garden.

By the end of the day we were sure that the crew could respond to and operate the equipment on board the appliance at any incident that they may be called to attend. The feeling of accomplishment was only surpassed by the smiles and sense of achievement of the Kljuc crew. Afterwards it was back to the Kljuc fire station for coffee, photos and fond farewells.

The homeward leg of the journey began with a 5 hour bus trip from Kljuc, crossing the Bosnian border to Zagreb in Croatia. We had travelled through the night to Kljuc and had not managed to see any of the local countryside or scenery, we had not realised how fortunate we had been. As we made our way north, the sight of bullet and shell riddled, burnt out and blown up buildings was everywhere. We passed everything from minefields to refugee camps on the road to Zagreb, the 5 hours passed very slowly, giving each of the four of us time to ponder and reassess life and how easy it is to take things for granted, in our own silent way.

After finding some digs for the night we headed out into Zagreb for some sightseeing and local culture.

By 7.30 the next morning we were leaving Zagreb by train on the Zagreb to Graz express. We crossed from Croatia to Slovenia and then into Austria on the 5 hour journey. Transferring from the railway station to the airport we boarded our Ryanair flight back to the UK and Stansted Airport, where we finished our final leg, flying back to Edinburgh with Easyjet.

I had been out of the country for seven days, visited and passed through eight countries, delivered a fully operational fire engine to a town over 2,000 miles away. Spent seven days with three guys who until recently were complete strangers and were now mates, made friends with countless people en-route and experienced the welcome and hospitality of the people of Kljuc and Bosanski Petrovac which truly humbled me.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who made this trip possible and for all the assistance and help given to myself and IFRA. Without the help of these people the work that we do and the difference that we make would never be possible.