

9984

614.88
COW



MFB LIBRARY
B09919

COMBINED EMERGENCY SERVICES FOUNDATION

REPORT

URBAN SEARCH AND RESCUE USA TRIP

Compiled by: Station Officer Steve Cowling
Metropolitan Fire Brigade
Melbourne
18th March 1997

614.88
COW

97.0213

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to highlight the activities undertaken by myself in the United States of America during May through to July 1996. Being a recipient of the 1996 Combined Emergency Services Scholarship, this trip allowed me to study, observe and participate in Urban Search and Rescue activities as well as other associated matters with six (6) fire services across five different states within America.

The main focus of my chosen study area was Urban Search and Rescue training strategies and techniques along with looking at the specialised equipment used and how Urban Search and Rescue teams in the States are structured. Aside from the chosen study area, I took the opportunity to observe many other facets of the operational activities of the fire services which included Emergency Response, EMS First Responder and the general overview of firefighter training techniques. The trip also allowed me to attend the 1996 National Association For Search and Rescue Conference and Exhibition being held in Denver, Colorado. Along with this conference, I participated in a three (3) day training course on the fundamentals of Search and Rescue as well as sitting in as an observer on the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) Conference held at the same venue as the National Conference (NASAR).

I have detailed my activities and benefits in the following pages, but would like to take this opportunity to thank the Emergency Services Foundation for providing opportunities, such as I have experienced, to members of all agencies who may not generally be exposed to the operations of services in other parts of the world.

I believe providing these opportunities not only benefits the services who have members participating, but can provide people with a once in a life time opportunity to travel and represent, not only their service but also their country. In my own personal case, the experiences I was exposed to are priceless and will always be remembered and believe the entire trip was a huge step in my own personal development as a Fire Officer. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Chief Fire Officer Godfredson and Inspector David Self for their invaluable assistance and guidance in the preparation of this trip.

Summary of Activities

- Attended a three (3) day training course on the fundamentals of Search and Rescue in Denver, Colorado.
- Attended the 25th Anniversary Conference and Exhibition of the National Association of Search and Rescue (NASAR) from May 29th through to June 1st 1996 in Denver, Colorado.
- Observed the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group Conference.
- Visited the Denver Fire Service, Hazmat Unit and the surrounding fire stations.
- Was hosted by the New York Fire Department for three (3) days and responded with their Specialist Rescue stations. Observed and responded to a five-story structure collapse incident.
- Was hosted by Fairfax County Fire Department, Virginia, for four (4) days, responding with EMS crews and visited the Urban Search and Rescue Cache Holding Station as well as visiting their excellent training facility.
- Was hosted by Phoenix Fire Department, Arizona, responding with their EMS crews and toured their training facility and Urban Search and Rescue Holding Station.
- Was hosted by the Los Angeles County Fire Department, California, where I stayed and worked for ten (10) days in their Specialist Helicopter Holding Area and Urban Search and Rescue facility. I also attended a two (2) day Skills Maintenance Course for Urban Search and Rescue Team Members.
- Was hosted by the San Diego Fire Department, California, and responded with the EMS fire crews.

Denver, Colorado

The purpose of being in Denver was to attend the 1996 National Association of Search and Rescue (NASAR) Conference and Exhibition. This event attracted over 500 participants, representing Emergency Services from all over the United States of America, and was held at the Denver Marriott Tech Centre.

The event itself was held from May 29th until June 1st 1996, with Specialist Training courses available prior to the stated dates. I chose to attend a three (3) day training course on the fundamentals of Search and Rescue held from May 26th. The three (3) day course was facilitated by members of NASAR and was attended by approximately 12 other participants. Unfortunately, this course was designed for more the Wilderness Search Rescue Teams and covered topics such as compass readings, map reading and analysis, rescue dogs and emergency supplies. The contents of the courses held, were not available to me prior to leaving Australia so it was really a suck it and see type exercise. However, I found the course extremely informative and enjoyable, and it provided me with many contacts, and information regarding search dogs, which are a crucial part of the Urban Search and Rescue Team.

The Conference and Exhibition kicked off on May 29th with participants representing fire Services, police services, Medical services, volunteer agencies, government departments, armed forces and private exhibitors just to name a few. The networking and information gathering opportunities were incredible which I took full advantage of. The proceedings over the four (4) days were held in six (6) different seminar rooms where presentations were given. A time table of presentations, topics and contents were issued, which gave the participants a varied number of options, this sometimes posed problems if two presentations of interest were presented at the same time, but generally it was managed extremely well.

I endeavoured to focus on all the Urban Search and Rescue presentations, but occasionally ventured to other interesting topics such as White Water Rescue, Wilderness Search Strategies, Search Dog Handling Techniques and some extremely informative Medical presentations. The Urban Search and Rescue presentations were varied and were presented by leading experts in this field, including Mr Frank W. Borden, former Chief of Los Angeles City Fire Department, where he presented slides and information on various major incidents including the North Ridge earthquakes. Also, Mr Sean Foohey (from the Federal Emergency Management Agency F.E.M.A.) gave an extremely moving presentation on the Oklahoma City bombing, and also gave an insight into the F.E.M.A. Urban Search and Rescue Team Structure.

One of the best presentations given was that by the Director of National Civil Defence of Iceland on a major rescue operation involving a landslide on a village trapping dozens of people for 24 hours.

During this extremely busy four (4) days, I found time to sit in on the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) Conference which was held at the same venue. Mr Jeff Godfredson, Chief Fire Officer of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Melbourne, was in attendance as well as Mr Trevor Haines from Emergency Management Australia, Canberra, along with representatives from countries all over the world to discuss USAR capabilities and strategies. This event was chaired by delegates from the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, Geneva. Along with all the conference presentations, an exhibition of equipment was conducted in a large exhibition room of the hotel where exhibitors showed off the latest equipment to suit all search and rescue situations including digital colour search cameras and the latest trapped person locating devices. Needless to say, my luggage weight almost doubled, with brochures and pamphlets collected to bring home.

While in Denver, I took the opportunity to visit a couple of fire stations to observe equipment and facilities available to their fire department including an impressive hazardous material response unit. I was suitably impressed with their capabilities, but I could not compare their main strike appliances to ours and realised how advanced we really are here in Melbourne

New York City

I flew out of Denver on June 2nd and flew into New York City. The sheer size of the city was intimidating to say the least. I was hosted by the New York City Fire Department and spent three (3) nights in selected fire stations and by day toured their Urban Search and Rescue Office and Equipment Holding facility as well as their very traditional training facility. The culture shock was enormous and the amount of people quite astounding. One fact given to me was at certain times of the year between the hours of 9a.m. to 5p.m. the city population can escalate up to 20 million people and on a regrettable note the fire department lose on average eight (8) firefighters per year dying in the line of duty.

The first night was very busy, staying with Rescue 2 Brooklyn. We responded to three (3) fires and a multiple fatality car accident and to use their terms, was a very quiet night. One interesting point was at this particular fire station when the appliance turned out, a firefighter was left at the station armed with a revolver because of security problems. The station itself was in a predominantly black neighbourhood with an extremely high crime rate. The second night was spent at Rescue 3 Station in the Bronx. This station housed the Specialist Collapse Unit which was of the semi-trailer type and carried an enormous amount of equipment for Structure Collapse Rescue. One statistic given to me by the Fire Captain was that New York City in the previous 12 month period had thirty (30) structure collapses. Fortunately, the majority were uninhabited and was mainly due to deterioration and re-development.

The third night was spent with Rescue 1 Station in Manhattan which has the dubious reputation of being the only New York Fire Station which burnt down due to an out of control fire in adjoining structure. On this particular night a five storey structure collapsed, again uninhabited but was due to a redevelopment of the property next door.

During my visit to New York I spent a day with Mr Edward Beban who has the title of F.E.M.A. Co-ordinator and Military Liaison Officer. His duties included acquiring equipment for their Urban Search and Rescue Team and that of Logistics Manager of the Team itself. The specialist equipment kept by New York City were housed in two very large warehouses and probably equalled in quantity to that of all the other teams put together. Most of their equipment is purchased or given to the fire service by the military and to say they are well equipped would be a drastic understatement.

Fairfax County, Virginia

From New York I flew into Virginia and was hosted by the Fairfax County Fire Department, one of the most efficiently managed fire services in the United States. For a County that has a population of under 1 million people, the fire service is well represented by 33 fire stations and 1, 156 uniformed staff and respond to 116,000 calls per year. 71,000 of these calls are EMS calls. All staff are EMS trained and have one (1) paramedic on each appliance. During my stay with Fairfax I attended a White Water Rescue Training Day and responded with the Battalion Chief to numerous fire and Medical calls. I spent a full day at their training facility which was first rate and read through their training courses for Urban Search and Rescue. I also visited their USAR Equipment Holding Station and was extremely impressed with their computer bar coding of all equipment and colour coding systems.

The Fairfax USAR team has the reputation of being one of the most well trained and experienced teams having been responded many times to major incidents within America including the Oklahoma bombing. The insight and information given by members of this team has been invaluable.

Phoenix, Arizona

The extremely comfortable weather experienced in Virginia was sadly missed as I flew into Phoenix as it literally was 115°F in the shade. I visited their USAR Equipment Holding Facility and Training Complex and was impressed by their general operations. I responded with a number of fire units who, like Fairfax County, are all EMS trained with paramedic specialists on every appliance. On one particular hot Sunday morning we responded to five heart attack victims in various churches in one area, and to watch these firefighters in action saving lives was very impressive. All the victims on this particular day were elderly and all were revived by the firefighters and were transported to hospital. One firefighter said to me that it was a perfect strike record, five life threatening calls, five lives saved. Spending time in Arizona really brought home the importance of fire personnel being EMS trained and I now believe for the good of the community we serve here in Melbourne, it is essential that we take on the role of First Responder.

Los Angeles, California

California was the last leg of my fact finding mission in the United States. California has several major earthquake faults and over the years have experienced many major disasters including the North Ridge Quake which caused the hills around Los Angeles to rise six inches in some areas.

I was hosted by Los Angeles County Fire Department and stayed at their Special Operations Division, Urban Search and Rescue and Heliport in Pacoima, North of Los Angeles. Captain Larry Collins is Los Angeles County's USAR expert and has experienced many major incidents including North Ridge and Kobay, Japan. While in Los Angeles Larry showed me all their training material and equipment lists. His experience and knowledge was of great value and I attended a two (2) day Skills Maintenance Program facilitated by Larry for members of the USAR Team. This Skills Maintenance is a requirement of F.E.M.A. and all team members must attend two such programs per year.

The idea of the Skills training is to cross train people, expert in one discipline such as dog search to another such as rescue techniques or electronic equipment search. The idea is to multi-skill members of the team. During this program, we had equipment familiarisation sessions and theory classes on USAR procedures. We also had practical drills using dogs, search cameras and Seismic Trapped Person location devices to locate people trapped in rubble. The special operations division also have six (6) helicopters manned by fire service personnel, two (2) being paramedic firefighters. I was lucky enough to spend a day with one of the units which fly out daily to bases in the hills surrounding Los Angeles. These helicopters are strategically located to reduce response times to rescue calls around Los Angeles County.

San Diego, California

I drove from Los Angeles to San Diego and met up with a firefighter who had spent time here in Melbourne on an exchange. He invited me to stay at his fire station and I responded with them to many EMS calls. In one shift we had four (4) drug overdoses, two (2) heart attacks and many other minor Medical calls. Again, my time here highlighted the important role of the firefighter trained in EMS.

As far as Urban Search and Rescue is concerned, San Diego is not as advanced as Fairfax County or Los Angeles, but are on their way in getting together a capable rescue team. By this stage of my trip I can honestly say I was exhausted, with turning out on nearly all night shifts and visiting departments during the day I really needed a break so I had two days off before driving back to Los Angeles and flying home.

Conclusion and Benefits

To conclude this report, I have listed in point form, the main benefits gathered from my USA travels in relation to Urban Search and Rescue. However, on a personal note, many other areas were of great value, to me personally, as well as organisationally. To place a dollar value on the experiences I was exposed to would be impossible. Responding with US fire services and observing their operational procedures and guidelines was extremely beneficial.

As mentioned, the fire services I spent time with, are all EMS paramedic trained, and to witness firefighters in this role was inspiring. Training techniques and skills maintenance training were areas I have interests in, and I managed to gather much documentation in regard to training structures and assessments. Comparing our fire service to the US services in regard to training, I believe, we are well on the way in becoming one of the most thorough and efficient in the world, but would like to emphasise that there is always room for improvement. One of the major disappointments was in Fairfax County, where there Urban Search and Rescue Team was gearing up to be deployed to Atlanta, to stand-by for the Olympic Games, as a precaution in case of a major incident. I only missed the opportunity to be deployed with the team by a few short weeks.

With terrorist activities and natural disasters being a fact of life. I believe Urban Search and Rescue capabilities are an essential part of Emergency Services. The structure of the federally funded USAR teams are extremely well developed and have been proven to work on numerous occasions. This structure is one our particular fire service is basing its own USAR capabilities. And having already completed two USAR training courses of our own, which have proven to be very successful, I believe this structure to be a correct move for our service. I also believe on a federal front, that funding should be made available for a national capability to service not only our own continent but also the South East Asian and Pacific regions, where USAR activity is limited.

Benefits

- I was provided with the up to date F.E.M.A. Urban Search and Rescue Team Structures and Management information which has been valuable in compiling our own USAR courses.
- I was also provided with the equipment lists for each team, which is a minimum suggested by F.E.M.A.
- I was introduced to the latest equipment used for Urban Search and Rescue and have made recommendations in the purchasing of new Digital Colour Search Cameras and state of the art Trapped Person Locators.

-
- I was exposed to training techniques used for USAR team members as well as skills maintenance. These areas are being addressed at the moment for our own course currently being developed.
 - Uniforms and protective clothing used by USAR teams were very impressive and in fact the helmets used in New York were produced in New Zealand. I made note of the manufacturer, and as a result, we have purchased the same helmets.
 - I witnessed first hand, USAR team members in simulated drills using equipment and procedures outlined by F.E.M.A.
 - During the trade exhibition gathered information on equipment new to fire services, such as new emergency entry tools and have forwarded relevant details to our Research and Development Department.
 - Reference material gathered from all services encompassing a large range of topics have been either issued to the Tactical Rescue Department or the MFB Library.