

Report by Station Officer Eric Harries on his work with Operation Florian, Mostar, August - October 2005

On Tuesday 30th August 2005 at 11.00 hours I travelled from London Gatwick to Dubrovnik, Croatia. From Dubrovnik I would travel on to BiH, where I would spend 7 weeks working with Operation Florian providing fire training to students from in and around the ethnically divided city of Mostar.

I have been travelling to Mostar for the last 11 years. My first visit was in 1994 when I was given the opportunity to drive a redundant fire engine, donated by the then Dyfed County Fire Brigade to the citizens of East Mostar. Soon after the first trip I returned to Mostar, this time with a WrL to West Mostar so that we would not be seen to be favouring either the Muslim or Bosnian Croats.

In 2001, I was given the opportunity to take part in Florian's "Soldier of Saviour" project in Neum BiH. This was a 3-month project where a number of recruit courses were undertaken to re-train "de-mobbed" soldiers, based on the premise that they would be trained to fight fires rather than fight each other! This was a great success and during the 3 month period a large number of new firefighters were trained. Initially I was signed up for one month's detachment, but soon after, the Commanding Officer made a request to the CFO for a further detachment; a request that I am glad to say the CFO and the Fire Authority agreed to and I was granted a second deployment to Neum. For this second deployment, (3 weeks) my brief was to encourage the Fire Community in Mostar to hold a Florian course in their area. By the end of the detachment the Oic of Florian had received a letter from one of the Commanders in Mostar requesting Florian to undertake a course in their area. The aforementioned letter from one of the Mostar Commanders represented a powerful message from the Muslim community. Despite the number of courses previously undertaken in Neum, there had been a distinct lack of Muslim students who had enrolled on these courses.

The letter was to form the foundation stone that triggered off many meetings and discussions between Florian and Mostar's hierarchy. By spring of 2005, it was finally agreed that Florian would facilitate a course in Mostar and I was delighted to be a part of this training.

I arrived in Mostar one week before the onset of the 6-week course. There would be a main 6-week recruit course (to American level 1 Ff

level with added courses for First Aid, drivers, RTC, CFS and aerial appliances). The project would be managed by a three person team: myself, S Darby (Lancs.) and S Jordan (GMC). We would be joined by specialist trainers from all over the UK for specific parts of the course.

The first week of the project was spent ensuring that everything was ready for the commencement of the course. There were a number of British appliances dotted around Mostar which had been donated over the years by various UK Authorities. Batteries, tyres and servicing items were begged, borrowed or purchased, and, by the end of that week we had five UK appliances ready for use, including the two appliances that we had taken over in 1994/95. The appliances were kitted out with basic equipment to make them usable for ladder, hose, open water work and BA training. We even managed to construct a BA crawl out of sawn timber and black plastic sheeting and the local council cleaned out a couple of buildings that had been partly destroyed by bombs for us to use for BA and ladder work.

At the end of the first week, reinforcements arrived in the form of trainers from Wales and GMC but unfortunately, a convoy of vehicles from Florian with firefighters kit did not arrive in time to enable us to kit out the recruits on the first day.

The course had been well timed as on the 1st April 2005 the Fire Brigade was put under the Command of the City Civil Protection Group. This was the first step towards the unification of the Fire Brigade in Mostar. A Commander had been selected for the whole of Mostar (Peter), previously the Commander for West Mostar and his Deputy was chosen (Miro) from East Mostar (previously Commander for East Mostar). In reality whilst they still operated separately, there was at least some unity and dialogue between the two sides.

The courses had been co-funded by monies provided by the MOD, DFID and the Cabinet Office.

On the first day approximately 40 students registered, which was more than we had envisaged. There were 6 students from Gatsko. A newly formed unit some 40km from Mostar, the number included some demobbed soldiers. One student from Rama, a new firefighter who would join a team set up in Prozor by Florian and eight new recruits from in and around Mostar. The rest were existing firefighters, some of whom had been in the fire services for up to 11 years and had not received any formal training, even though they considered themselves to be

professional Firefighters. This group formed the main part of the student body and proved to be the most challenging students.

The first week was extremely hard work. We were soon to realise that the existing firefighters, who were now on this course resented the situation and being the largest group to be trained, their influence was felt throughout the group. The arrival of the fire kit and a Volvo Fire Appliance on the Wednesday gave a tremendous boost and eased some of the tensions. For this first week I was attached to the Gatsko and Rama recruits. These students were starting from the beginning, and it was my job to get them up to speed during that first week to enable them to join the main group for the second week. This was very enjoyable and it was great to see the transformation from new recruits to good trainees by the Friday. This group's enthusiasm and confidence increased as the weeks went by and they helped us to maintain the balance within the main group. The highlight of the first week was the arrival of Dr John Reid (Secretary for Defence) on the Friday. He was very interested in the training, particularly the training of the de-mobbed soldiers, and spent a long time with us, in fact far longer than the time originally scheduled.

For the whole of the project the mechanics were kept busy as machinery that had not been used greatly in recent times or maintained, kept breaking down.

By the second Monday of the course the number of the students had dropped down to 30 students. Some recruits had found the course too hard, some thought that the course was an attendance course and that a certificate could be taken for granted at the end of 6 weeks and some were Fire Brigade Mechanics who should not have been enrolled on the course in the first place! That second Monday saw the remaining recruits sit their first assessment. Over half failed and had to re-sit. It had been my responsibility to prepare the assessment and in view of the number who failed I reviewed the questions. Typical questions for the week 1 assessment were:

- ◆ If an appliance is parked 130m away from the incident, how many lengths of hose would be required?
- ◆ If the head of a ladder is pitched to 12m, how far from the base of the building should the heel be?

On review I was strongly of the opinion that the questions were entirely appropriate and it was evident that some of the students had not taken

the assessment seriously. The re-sit was scheduled for the Wednesday and on their second attempt passed all candidates passed.

I was scheduled to join the main course on the second week but this changed at short notice as the Manager for the local aluminium factory had heard of the course and he wanted four of his new firefighters to be trained by us. The aluminium factory is the main employer in Mostar, it has its own firefighters, is well equipped with modern appliances, but the firefighters have no formal training. My job was to enable the four employees to join the main course on week three. This was going to prove difficult – two weeks worth of training in four days!!! Although this seemed to be an insurmountable challenge at the time the trainees were very keen and we reached the target in four days.

Numbers were now up to 34 students. The news had spread and we were regularly making the evening news. This was good for all concerned, particularly as we needed to promote the role of the firefighters, who had slid down the “social ladder scale” over recent years. The new Commanders were greatly impressed with the training programme and were delighted with the results,

Weeks three and four were mainly for First Aid and BA training. Any spare sessions were taken up with consolidating the training undertaken in week’s one and two. We also had a new group of instructors, most of whom were to stay with us to the end of the project which would be helpful for consistency and continuity. Along with the main course, we had driver training and aerial appliance courses running at the same time.

Week five saw all the students coming together. Composite drills, practical sessions and the second assessment were all undertaken. Only 2 students had to re-take this assessment but were successful in the re-sit.

Week six saw the specialist RTC course running at the same time as the main course. A firefighter from North Wales joined us for this course. On Monday morning the final assessment was undertaken and I had great pleasure in announcing that all students were successful. Students then prepared for the passing out parade. By Thursday of the last week we were ready to practice in the Fire Station in West Mostar – the chosen venue for the final parade. It was of great importance to ensure that this went smoothly as most of the training had been done in East Mostar.

The pass out itself was scheduled for 12 noon on Friday October 14th. It was attended by representatives from the City administration Civil Protection, BiH National Office, OHR, UNHCR, HMIUK, CFO's from many UK Brigades, the CFO of the Allied Forces in BiH and Florian management members along of course with families, friends and members of the local community. The proceedings commenced with the the National anthem and some traditional singing and dancing from a local folk group (Comrade). The students then emerged from behind the closed doors of an appliance bay and marched in front of the clapping crowd. The students performed the four drills in quick succession – ground monitor, 2 x 13.5 ladder pitches, LPP drill and a composite finale to include ladders, hose and fire fighting, BA's and rescues. Everything went well and the students deserved the enormous applause they received from the appreciative onlookers. In the six weeks we had managed to transform raw recruits to professional firefighters.

Below are listed some of the key points arising from the work that I undertook with Operation Florian:

Benefits

- ◆ Both sides were persuaded to work together as one, which would go a long way towards unifying not only the Fire Brigade but also the City of Mostar as a whole.

Standards

- ◆ The firefighters earned their certificates and could be proud of their achievements; many had been firefighters for 10 years or more without any formal training.

CFS

- ◆ Whilst this was a new concept, it was embraced enthusiastically. Trainees were taken in groups to local schools and delivered their own material.

CRR

- ◆ Introduced to Fire Safety and they saw first hand how we carried out inspections and wrote reports. Inspections were made of local hospitals and orphanages.

Personal Development

- ◆ An excellent opportunity – I was given the responsibility of managing and delivering the course, overcoming numerous logistical, practical and political hurdles. My management skills were well tested having to respond to problems such as local difficulties as well as issues arising from within the team of instructors.

Personal “Highs”

- ◆ The idea of the course being held at all.
- ◆ Being asked by Florian to assist with the management of the course.
- ◆ Being granted permission to attend by CFO and Fire Authority.
- ◆ Seeing wrl's from Dyfed and Swansea that had been donated 10 years ago being used during the course.
- ◆ Witnessing the progress made with students during the course.
- ◆ Making a positive contribution towards the unification of the Mostar area.
- ◆ Hopefully leaving behind something that has assisted with the new future of the Fire Brigade in BiH.
- ◆ Being told that the National Politicians were now considering setting up a National Fire School for the whole of Bosnia.
- ◆ A canton in Northern Bosnia has requested similar help from Florian having heard of the success of this project.
- ◆ Realising that the British Government took this work very seriously (ref John Reid's visit to the training school).

Future

- ◆ In my opinion Florian now have two options:
either:
 - i) Deploy someone to Mostar for a long detachment to oversee the training and development of the Fire Brigade in this area.

- ii) Organise a further course a.s.a.p. to train the trainers to take the level of training on to another level and to ensure continued development.

Acknowledgements.

I am very grateful to the officers of Operation Florian for inviting me to take part in this project.

I am greatly indebted to my County Commander, Chief Fire Officer and the Fire Authority members for supporting my application to be involved with this venture. I trust that my brief report will have conveyed a “flavour” of what proved to be a particularly worthwhile experience at Mostar.