

Convoy 21 Lushnje Albania



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John Arnold - Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service
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The purpose of Convoy 21 was to deliver an ex Northumberland 1987 Volvo Fire Appliance to the City of Lushnje in Albania and to train the Fire-fighters on the equipment carried, specifically on RTC Procedures using the Clan Lucas Equipment on board. The total travel was in excess of 2000 miles, 1400 of which was by road and would require us to travel through 6 countries on route.

For those of you who don't know, Albania was one of the worlds most isolated and controlled countries until about 1990. It is going through a period of change, but the infrastructure of the country, including the Fire Service is in a terrible state.

Out of the three fire engines in the city of Lushnje, 1 is of 1967 vintage, a second from 1971 and the third is a converted milk tanker. The fire-fighters had no protective equipment and regularly tackle fires in just a pair of trousers and a t shirt. The cutting equipment we took is only the second set in a country of nearly 4 million.

DAY ONE

The journey started on Sunday 1st June with myself (Gary Johnstone) meeting up with Dave Hume & Dave Kay in Rosyth before heading off to Edinburgh Airport to leave my car for the return leg and then depart for Newcastle. On route, whole mission nearly scrubbed as John calls to say the appliance will not start. After much decision making, we decide to continue on, while John attempts to get appliance started. Call received from John to the sound of a revving Volvo engine cheers us up just as we arrive at Hexham fire station. Quick transfer of equipment a tearful goodbye to Dave Kay and we speed off for the port to catch the ferry. Crossing was very pleasant with single cabins, 4 bars and a nightclub, before we arrived in Holland next morning.

DAY TWO

Depart ferry quickly (first one off) and we head off, making good progress on the way. John was happy to drive and in no time we had left Holland behind and were nearly through Belgium before disaster struck. As we were driving along, John announces that the machine is sluggish and we are losing power, just enough time to pull into hard shoulder before appliance cuts out. We trace it very quickly to having run out of diesel, this is despite gauge reading $\frac{1}{4}$ full. Luckily we have 5 cans of fuel on board, we top up and attempt to fix problem, even cleaning out fuel filters, before giving up and calling the RAC. Eventually a recovery truck pulls up, bleeds engine and off we go. Then the RAC call to ask us our location? Seems the recovery truck was a Good Samaritan! Overnight stop at a hotel in Strasbourg, along with a traditional French meal of Kebab & Chips.

DAY THREE

Depart bright and early for next leg, John has said he is happy to drive again, we enter Switzerland and all is going well until we are pulled into a lay-by containing a 5k line of trucks. We end up stuck in queue for 2 hours for no apparent reason before moving on. Gives us plenty of time to polish and clean appliance and soon it is sparkling in sunshine. Pass a few more queues of trucks, but we decide that we are now a bus and just ignore them! Transit into Italy for our overnight stop at Bologna, Sat Nav which we have brought along saves the day as hotel is in middle of village on outskirts, lovely “award winning” restaurant next door. The “award winning” should have warned us, as we are stung 60 Euros each for a meal of lamb and pasta.

DAY FOUR

Depart early again, with Dave and myself doing this leg. We swap over every hour and are making such good time that we can afford to stop and finish polishing appliance. Arrive Bari late afternoon, John asks if we can find cash point, which to cut a long story short, ends up with us stuck in traffic in the middle of Bari. Dave blasts bull horn to clear way and like the scene from Bruce Almighty, the traffic parts and we are off to port. All paperwork was meant to have been sorted, but we end up having to pay 108 euros for taxes before they will issue tickets. We proceed to customs and immigration and more difficulty, the Italians can't understand why we are taking a fire engine to Albania. Dave produces his IFRA identity card and for some reason the customs officer thinks we are on a church mission and waves us through. For next trip we have decided to travel as vicars on tour! Board ferry and find our stately cabins.

DAY FIVE

Wake, shower and step outside on ferry, go to check on appliance, to be greeted by a load of Tennents Cans rolling about on deck, wonder who caused that? Depart ferry on arrival in Durres and we soon meet up with Durium and Adriatic the Chief from Lushnje. His smile says it all. Then the problems start again, the paperwork is locked in the Chief of customs office and he is out of country. We end up sitting for 10 hours twiddling out thumbs in scorching sunshine, while Adriatic and Durium try to get things sorted. Eventually give up and we leave appliance behind at docks while we head off to hotel. Get 5 miles along road and are told to return to docks, seems much telephone calls have been made, The Prefect (Mayor) of the city has phoned the Minister of Interior and customs have had a talking to. We collect appliance and are out of the docks and on our way within the hour. We put on Blue Lights and Sirens as we head through city centre en-route to station and we are nearly called into action as we

come upon an RTC. All is well though and we drop off appliance at station before heading off to our hotel for night.

DAY SIX

Whole crew are at station when we arrive, much handshaking before we hand the keys over to Adriatic. Rest of day is spent familiarising crew on appliance and equipment; they are really interested in the cutting equipment and grasp the basics very quickly. We check the store and start kitting out appliance with as much equipment as we can find which unfortunately is not a lot. The crew on duty then treat us to a lovely meal in the station.

DAY SEVEN

Adriatic the Chief has managed to get hold of an old car for us to train on. There are a lot of cars about in scrap yards, but there is a lot of recycling of parts so it was difficult for the chief to source a car. Eventually we get hold of an old Audi and start demonstrating the different techniques. The rain is managing to keep us cool, so we look not too bad when the TV crew turn up to film us training. Good day's training and they have started to pick up the fundamentals very well. Treated to another meal.

DAY EIGHT

This is the day when the crew spend time with their families; we decide to have a lazy day at the pool in the hotel complex. A few of the lads join us for a nice relaxing day, before we are collected again and rushed off for another meal.

DAY NINE

We have been looking forward to today. We are taking the old Dennis Fire Appliance down to Diviak National Park, where it sits for the summer season for the Forestry workers to use. The Volvo comes along too and I see the funniest sight for a long time – a Volvo at the Beach. Treated yet again to a lovely meal.

DAY TEN

Busy day today; arrive at station to find all the crew assembled. The Prefect arrives along with the head of the Emergency Services in the region. A TV crew and numerous other reporters are present for the official handover of the keys. Much handshaking and translating later and the Volvo is officially handed over (and we are on TV again). It is then time for some Pump & Ladder Drills, during the 13.5m ladder going up, some masonry falls and strikes John. He suffers a bad cut to his forearm but stubbornly refuses to go to hospital. We then head down to local café for a coffee with the Chief when the Scania Water Tanker Goes past us, a fire has broken out at a school. We sprint back up the road with Hassan one of the Drivers to the Volvo and head off to the school. The Volvo soon demonstrates how good a machine it is when we catch up and overtake the Scania, then disaster strikes – just as we pull up at the school it runs out of diesel!! We assist the crew in deploying hose from the Scania instead. On investigation it is found, the fire has broken out in a storeroom under some stairs. We all soon get to work in tackling the fire. The fire-fighters who were inside are only wearing their working uniform with a BA set on top. Myself and Dave don BA and go in to assist, we are in full ppe and we are feeling the heat from the fire. Soon the fire is quickly extinguished, the kids from the school soon find out we are from the UK and start demonstrating their understanding of English by chanting “Dave & Gary are our heroes”. Dave and I are soon saved by the police who take us across the road for a nice cool can of Amstel beer. Eventually John and Hassan get the Volvo going and we are on our way back to the station. A quick freshen up and it's off for another meal before John has to head off to the Airport.

DAY ELEVEN

On arrival at the station, Hassan (who is the station mechanic) has the Volvo cab tilted and is working on the fuel system. Within a matter of hours, the fuel tank is removed, cleaned, welded, painted and fitted together with new filters. The Volvo is running like a dream. Rest of day spent at station, just going over appliance again and answering any questions they had before we are off again for another meal.

DAY TWELVE

More pump & ladder drills at the station, we stand back and allow the crew to operate the appliance. They have really grasped how to use it, even when the pump is losing its prime they soon solve the problem. Ladder drills are better; the lessons learned from the last time are evident. The crew, who are participating, all wear PPE which is then swapped with other members to allow everyone to take part in the drills. Good day's training accomplished before we head off for yet another meal.

DAY THIRTEEN

We are off to visit the City Of Fier today. We meet the Chief of the Regions Fire Service and the Head of Finance at the City Hall before visiting the fire station. The Fire station covers the district of the same name with a population of over 200,000. We meet with the crew and the Chief of the station before looking over their appliances and equipment. The problems they have are seen when we are shown the only BA set they possess, any other times they require BA, they wear a simple military style respirator. The appliances consist of two water tankers, an old ALP and a broken down Dennis. They have no PPE and very little equipment. Is a big eye opener.

DAY FOURTEEN

The Chief has arranged another car to practice RTC techniques on; we depart the station with all the crew and head for a scrap yard. On arrival we find the car to be unusable as most of it is missing, luckily another scrap yard along the road has a car available. For this training scenario, I undertake the part of the driver who is trapped and Davie acts as safety officer. The Crew soon get to work, with the rest of the crew enthusiastically giving them pointers from a distance. The equipment is set up and they are soon at work cutting the car. They demonstrate excellent understanding by providing casualty protection before removing me from the car. An excellent training scenario which has demonstrated that they are more than capable of utilising the equipment.

DAY FIFTEEN

Today is classed as a rest day; we spend it at the station with the duty crew before they treat us to a meal.

DAY SIXTEEN

The day we have been dreading, our last day. All the crew are at station when we arrive, a long speech is given by Chief Adriatic; we present t-shirts and uniform to them before much handshakes and hugs. Then it's off to City Hall to meet with the Prefect again, he thanks us for all we have done and extends an invite to Dave Kay to come to their city. We head off for a few drinks with the Prefect, before we have another meal and then it's off to the Airport and a tearful goodbye.

As my first IFRA trip this was a big eye opener. You do not realise what we take for granted in comparison to what the Albanians had to live with. We were thoroughly looked after and taken care of, Davie Hume commented that it was the best trip he had had to date. The Profile of IFRA has been raised dramatically by the appearances on TV and the locals could not have been more grateful for what we were doing.

For the future, it is hoped that another appliance can be sent out. Lushnje will act as the centre for the distribution of equipment and training of outlying stations. Lushnje itself still needs assistance in the form of PPE, equipment (hose, BA) and further training. Fier is in need of an appliance and equipment (hose, BA, PPE, Cutting equipment).

Gary Johnstone
Convoy 21



