

CONVOY 26 MOLDOVA

Around about July I received a text from Dave indicating that he was looking for someone to go on another of his missions, I had always been interested in the work that *IFRA* were involved in but up until now other than a few fund raising days other commitments meant that I had never been able to offer my services, that was about to change.

He required

1. A firefighter. ✓ (20 years should just about qualify me),
2. An HGV licence. ✓ got one of those,
3. Experience of wearing BA, ✓ has been known,
4. Experienced in attending RTC's, ✓ the odd one or two.

That was the start of mission 26

At this point I didn't know the important points of Where when or who I'd be going with!

Dave had previously told me that I would be helping out Gary Bennett, whom I knew as a former colleague from my work in FFRS. But that was as much as I knew.

I went through to the Crammond hotel on the edge of Edinburgh for the first meeting for our trip.

The mission was being run by Blytheswood Care and *IFRA* had been asked to assist by providing a couple of instructors.

After meeting some of the guys who were to be going, Gary got down to business and before long I discovered that we would be leaving on the 20th of August and travelling to Moldova, and we were to be based in the town of Nisporeni.

We would be taking with us four fire appliances and two ambulances and staying for a week to get the local guys up to speed with the equipment we were taking.

Our team was to be made up of firey's, mechanics, a couple of IT guys, a Joiner, a sports teacher and even a doctor.

Gary also gave us a brief outline of the conditions we would likely encounter in Moldova,

A very poor country in general, with a severely run down infrastructure that meant the vast majority of the population of Nisporeni had no sanitation and indeed drew their water supply from wells.....

First thing I did when I got home was to get on the internet and find out where Moldova was, and the Town of Nisporeni in which we would be based.

As you can see from the map, we would be travelling right across Europe, passing through Belgium, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania and finally into Moldova.



This would see us cover some 1800 miles.

The next bit of info didn't entirely light up my day..... We would be driving almost non stop, only taking a break to change drivers and fuel up!

Just a simple map of Moldova, to highlight the location of Nisporeni. To give you an idea of scale we crossed into Moldova from Romania at the closest point of the boundary to Nisporeni and it was a good hour's drive to Nisporeni; Also Chisinau the Capital city is approx sixty miles away from Nisporeni. Our date for leaving seemed like ages away, but in no time at all the weeks flew by and were filled with working extra shifts to get some of the time off I needed, trips across to Dalmeny (Gary's base) to help kit out appliances and hours spent trying to prepare for the unknown!

In the run up to our leaving date, a million and one e-mails were whizzing back and forward between Gary and the team with various bits of info and jobs to be done before we left. And then before we knew it the day had dawned!

What started out as a relaxing morning with five or so hours to kill before arriving at Gary's base turned into bedlam, with visits to both my own station in Glenrothes to pick up some kit and then onto Dunfermline station to pick up kit from IFRA stores.

When I finally made it to Dalmeny it was even more chaotic there with the team trying to shoe horn the last of the kit into the vehicles.

Due to a missing bit of kit for one of the appliances, myself, Dave and John had to make a dash back to IFRA stores to find the missing item, talk about looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack!

After finding what we were looking for we made it down to Rosyth and met up with the rest of the convoy to fuel up before heading for the ferry.



I don't think I'd ever seen so many strange looks as we got from the public as our convoy took over the petrol station In Rosyth!

We finally made it to the ferry terminal with minutes to spare before the deadline for loading, thankfully the paperwork is all in order and we are loaded onto the Scottish Viking quite quickly and it's not long before we get our rooms sorted and for the first time in 10 hectic hours we get a chance to chill.



After getting ourselves sorted out, we made our way down to the lounge for a little team bonding session! With the voyage to Zeebrugge being some 17-18hours long there was always a temptation to have more than a few quiet beers, but to a man an early night was had by all, not only due to the fact we would be driving on leaving the ferry but indeed we were all completely knackered from our first days exertions. As we make our way across mainland Europe, it's a little disappointing that all we basically see are the motorways of all the countries we pass through, I for one would have liked to have seen and experienced more of the countries we were passing through.

After what seemed like forever (18hrs driving) we stopped in the early morning for Breakfast at an Auto grill in Austria, the break was a welcome one. Just prior to stopping our one and only cock up of the journey occurred, at one point we had Gary the leader going in one direction, and the remaining five vehicles going in completely the opposite direction as we tried to locate the motorway junction for the service area. A sure sign that tiredness was beginning to creep in!

One thing that I hadn't expected was the complete lack of border controls, and it was only when we reached Hungary that we had to stop and purchase the vignette's for the vehicles.

As we waited for the paperwork to be sorted out, we thought we were in for some trouble due to the sudden and very noisy arrival of many motorcyclists who are behaving wildly, with their engines revving full tilt, horns blaring amid much antics, then all became clear it was a biker wedding!

The bride arrived on the back of a chopper among much furore and then the groom arrived and proceeded to screech around the parking area smoke belching from his tyres and his engine being revved almost to destruction it only ended when he managed to burst the rear tyre with his antics much to the delight of the assembled wedding party!

By Sunday lunchtime we have made it to the Romanian / Moldovan border area, we stop about a mile short of the first border control to give us a brief but needed break, but also to allow Gary to brief us on what to expect and how to behave.....the usually jovial Mr Bennett is deadly serious, especially when he knows the sense of humour most firey's possess. We are well warned that unless we fancy being carted off to the local cells we should be more than polite and not to even crack the smallest of jokes as the border guards have had a serious humour bypass and not to even dare taking a camera out as we would all be for the high jump.

We head off to the first control point and after only a ten minute wait we are brought through to the second point where the paper work and passports are checked, this takes about an hour and a half, but for six vehicles and sixteen individuals on an unusual journey this seems to be some kind of a record to get through border control. We are allowed to head off on the mile journey through no mans land to the Moldovan border controls, again we are to be on our best behaviour but everybody is in good spirits and expects to be greeted by open arms of the people we are coming to help.....how wrong can we be!

Having made it through the first set of border controls in near record time, we thought we were almost home and dry..... Surely we wouldn't get any hassle from the country we had travelled all this way to help..... Wrong

We were in no mans land, and frustratingly could see the people waiting for us stuck on the Moldovan side of the border.....

The authorities tried to force several situations onto us,

1 leave the vehicles here and proceed with only the guys.

2 leave one of the vehicles behind and a couple of the guys.

3 Leave half and half

And so it went on until some "deal was reached, by which time most of us had been taken to Nisporeni in the locals pickup truck.

Only when we had reached halfway to our base, did we finally get a message to say that reluctantly all the guys and all the trucks would be let through, but only as a temporary measure, as a token of their kind heartedness.....!

Finally after two and a half days driving and some 1800miles later we finally make it to our base in Nisporeni, the photos you can see are virtually the moment we have arrived and parked up, and then taken off to our accommodation where as I'm sure you can see by the faces we are all shattered, but thoroughly looking forward to the next five days ahead of us. The training phase!

A quick bight to eat and we are all in bed and dead to the world for the next 8hours.

Not only did IFRA assist by sending Steve and myself instructors, but also made a major contribution with the donation of 40 sets of fire kit and 20 BA sets and cylinders.



Even though Monday was our first proper day in Moldova, I realised that we were already half way through our trip.....

As many of you will know from your own experiences these missions are no holiday camps, and our day starts at 07:30 and we work through to 20:00, with only an hour for lunch, even that hour seems to fly by. Having been briefed by Gary as to what was required for each day, the team began by sorting out all of the kit and issued fire kit to the assembled firey's.

The guys have come from near and far, both local firey's from Nisporeni and also from Chisinau are here waiting for us.



By afternoon Steve Dave and I find ourselves delivering the first of the training sessions, in the make up and use of the BA sets we have brought with us.

The interpreters we had were a great help and there English was very good, our only difficulty was getting them to understand the fire related stuff to be able to pass on the information to the guys, The Interpreters had their own problems as the locals spoke a variety of Romanian, Russian, "Moldovan" a mixture of the others and somehow even French seemed to have an influence!



As Steve, Dave and I concentrate on the Breathing apparatus set and gauge interpretation input, other preliminary sessions are taking place including Trauma care, and RTC equipment familiarisation.

These sessions last until 18:00 hrs when we all head off to the training area we have been allocated, and another two hours of practical work is carried out, this time involving working from open water (wells much to the disgruntlement of the locals) with main and portable pumps and introductions to 13.5 & 10m ladders.

The local guys are keen to show their prowess especially with ladders, and practically run up them much to our alarm. It has to be noted that they still use suicidal hook ladders.....enough said!

Each day the firey's rotate through a series of practical sessions of the core skills in each of the disciplines and also spend time going into greater detail in each of the main areas of Trauma, RTC, and BA.

On Tuesday and Wednesday Gary decides to pack me off to Chisinau, to visit the main stations and show the city guys how to work the kit we have brought over.

On Tuesday when we arrive, having just blued and two'ed it through the city centre with an escort (causing traffic mayhem) I drive into the main station to find fifty or so bods waiting for me, I'm not on my own although Ian the mechanic and Victor the Doc arn't much use when it comes to firey stuff to it was a full on day.



Wednesday was slightly better as Gary sent Paul another firey along with me and it was then far easier to demonstrate the kit and keep control of the local guys when taking part in practical training sessions.

One small fly in the ointment was a bit of attitude we were getting from some of the locals who seemed to think that we were there to lord it over them, and I have to admit the fire service in the city was of a much higher level than what I had been expecting.

Even though the provision of the fire service was more advanced than I had been expecting, you can how see for yourself just how much more up to date the appliances we had delivered were, than those already in Nisporeni.

Thursday was the best day of the whole trip.

It was a very hand on day with practical scenario exercises taking place.

We carried out several HOT fire training exercises, while the RTC guys carried many car fire/ RTC scenarios.

It was a real firey's day, getting hot n sweaty and turning out to incident after incident and the local guys loved every minute of it.



It was also the hottest day of our trip, adding that to the time Dave and I spent in BA in a fire chamber, we were well and truly roasted by the end of the afternoon.

After a hard but very rewarding day, we had all the gear made up by tea time, and we had a treat in store!

As it was the Moldovan Independence day Gary let us finish for the day at 18:00hrs, a rare treat indeed and what a celebration it would turn out to be!!!!

We had made our way back to the hotel and were enjoying a couple of beers outside, when one by one the local firey's started to arrive, each had brought home grown fruit and home brewed wine and spirits to share with us.

Even the Mayor joined in and before long a major session was underway with round after round being down in time to the roar of the assembled crowd. It turned out to be a great night and much closer bond was made with the local guys than we had experienced all week.

There were a few casualties along the way as I'm sure you can see!

As the night wore on everybody almost everybody from Nisporeni that was involved in the mission turned up to join in the fun.

Friday our last proper day in Moldova,

We still had a bit of practical work to do in the morning before the vehicles were due to be officially handed over in the afternoon.

The morning was taken up with a mass exercise that saw every length of hose and pump used, and just to make it a bit more fun, the task was set as a competition between the local firey's and the city firey's with the instructors helping out.

(There's nothing like a bit of competition to get the local guys fired up!)

The prize was simply, the first team to get set up and working got to soak or rather foam the other side!

By lunchtime we had everything cleaned up and looking good for the presentation.

At 15:00hrs we were ready as the chiefs from Chisinau arrived for the formal presentation ceremony, and after a few speeches the vehicles were handed over to their new owners.



We were all presented with certificates for our efforts and received various gifts as a token of their appreciation.

Immediately after the presentation all of the team were taken up into the hills where a barbeque had been laid on in our honour.

The food and company was excellent, and the views overlooking Nisporeni were spectacular in the evening sunshine.

Following our bbq were taken back to the town, where a show of traditional Moldovan dancing and singing had been put on for us.

We were all beginning to feel that we had made an impact with our mission and that the local people were very appreciative of our efforts.

Quite humbling in a way.

Finally the team for Mission 26.

Moldova or bust