

Firefighting Camaraderie Spreads Over the Atlantic

by Natasha Rubanova

In January 2016 a delegation of Russian firefighters and rescue and fire prevention specialists visited Greater Portland as part of a peer-to-peer program aimed at fostering the exchange of best practices between representatives of the profession on both sides of the Atlantic. A return delegation from Maine firefighters will go to Russia in April of this year.

And this is only the beginning: two more bilateral visits are planned as a part of this exchange in June and August 2016. The visits involve the Russian city of Arkhangelsk which is Greater Portland's Sister City.

This relationship began during World War II when hundreds of Liberty Ships were built in Greater Portland and then Allied Arctic Convoys carrying food, medicine, fuel and ammunition sailed from Maine and the U.S. to the Arctic ports of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. After the Cold War, in the 1980s the two cities started to communicate again and the relationship was revived with an official Sister City Treaty on November 18, 1988.

The first delegation of Arkhangelsk firefighters was the start of a bigger project organized by the Arkhangelsk Training Center for Rescue Organizations and the Greater Portland Sister City Committee with financial support coming from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. The idea to start an exchange between firefighters was proposed in 2010 by Igor Polivany, head of the Rescue Service of the Arkhangelsk Region, when he met with Portland City Councilor Ed Suslovic who was visiting Arkhangelsk. Today Fire Department Station 17, which became part of the Rescue Service, bears the name of Polivany, who died after a long illness in 2013. It was only in 2014 that the project began to take shape after the Sister City Committee declared support and funding became possible.

Thanks to the joint efforts on the Russian and American sides it became possible to receive financial support from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and the first visit of five firefighters was planned. The five-day visit was organized by fire departments in Westbrook, Scarborough, Augusta, Brunswick, South Portland and Portland. Fire officials and firefighters of practically all levels were involved in planning and implementing the program. Already at the planning stage many similarities were determined.

“I did some research through the Internet about the city and the public safety issues associated with the area and by assessing the demographics and occupancy types for the area, I established that our rural areas could have very similar issues and public safety concerns for fire and life safety measures,” said State Fire Marshal Joe Thomas.

Every fire department involved was eager to cover as many issues as possible. The biggest challenge was the brevity of the visit. Nevertheless, the professional exchange part went mostly as expected.

The Russian delegation consisted of three fire and rescue captains, a fire code specialist and a fire inspector and communications specialist who also served as the group coordinator. The coordinator, Svetlana Kuznetzova, explained how participants on the Russian side were chosen:

“There were several demands made on the prospective participants – they had to be active firefighters. In other words, they needed to be practitioners that are aware of the latest knowledge, are ready to absorb new trends and ideas, are the best at their work and can transfer information to others. The three men from our delegation – Viktor, Konstantin, and Sergei – are instructors to their colleagues. Natalia, another member of the delegation, is the best and practically the only qualified specialist on fire safety and fire codes at the regional level. I participated as a coordinator to see where the project is going, but my other main interest was to see how fire prevention measures are implemented in the U.S.”

Sergei Kvashnin, a firefighter and rescue crew captain, described his feelings and expectations from the trip:

“When we boarded the plane I had many questions – how will they greet us? How will they organize the program? How do things work there? During our second flight from New York to Portland the first pilot announced, ‘There are Russian firefighters on board of our plane, let's greet them!’ and at that moment I understood that they have prepared very seriously and everything was organized at the highest level.”

The program covered visits to local fire departments, equipment demonstrations, trainings, a trip on a fireboat and a shift at one of the stations. Evenings were occupied by informal communication between colleagues from the two countries. Extra time for informal communication and cultural events was provided due to a snowstorm that delayed outgoing flights for the Russian delegation.

Susan McCarthy, a local fire protection engineer said:

“The most enjoyable thing for me was to see this program take flight and how well received this program was with the groups involved. I am very excited for the future of this program. To watch the 2 countries and see how different they are on many levels but when it came to the business of firefighting they were all on the same playing field. They share a special bond and brotherhood. We all want the same outcome and that is to protect the public and save lives. If we can learn from each other on best practices for code technique and technology then this program is built on the same premises of the Liberty ships: to save lives.”

Miles Haskell, the Acting Fire Chief for the South Portland Fire Department, said:

“One place where we took them was near the location where the Liberty Ships were built and has a memorial replica of the bow of one of the ships. This seemed to make an impression on our friends from afar. It's a great group and they represent their department very well. The storm even made the trip go better by allowing us more time and a more personal touch.”

Viktor Kozelsky, a search and rescue team leader from the Russian delegation, regrets not seeing American firefighters at work:

“The only thing that I didn't get a chance to see is firefighters at work. It was a great experience to see the equipment of our colleagues from the U.S., learning the technology of their work, test their training equipment and simply discuss our work. You know, firefighters rarely speak about anything else. We use the same approaches, the same tactics, but here more attention is paid to the safety of firefighters at work. More attention is given here to preventive measures that help to avert fires, and this, of course, makes a big positive difference.”

While many similarities in firefighters' work in Russia and the U.S. were found by the participants of the exchange, differences were also discussed. Thomas stressed the importance of juvenile programs for fire safety internationally:

“Given the fact that our respective cities and countries are half a world apart, the fire and life safety issues experienced by both groups are considerably similar. In particular I was fascinated by the fact that Arkhangelsk has a very robust initiative that works with juveniles that exhibited fire use behaviors. The fact that the associated motivating factors for the fire use behaviors are completely in line with our research indicates to me that these dangerous behaviors are socially connected and in line with mankind as a whole.”

All program participants highlighted over and over how similar their work is and how they feel united through it. Jeff Rogers, a South Portland firefighter, expressed a common opinion that was stated many times throughout the visit:

“The biggest parallel to me is that we do the same jobs and we love what we do. The Russian firefighters got excited about seeing the new trucks and equipment the same way that I do. Firefighters are firefighters, it does not matter where you are from – we all do the same job. Firefighting more than anything is a way of life. They call it a Brotherhood and for good reason, I know that I can go into any fire station anywhere in the world, and I will be welcomed.”

The Russian delegation shared the problems they face at work with their American colleagues and both sides were able to relate to each other. Kozelsky outlined major challenges that his department faces back home:

“Special aspects of firefighters' work in Arkhangelsk is connected to the harsh climate and the lifestyle of local residents...In winter we face problems with the fire water supply—thick ice on lakes and rivers...As far as I understood in Maine there are similar problems.”

Kvashnin spoke honestly about a problem they face in Russia:

“One problem in Russia is insufficient funding. We often don't have money to buy quality equipment. Sometimes we have to buy work clothes, fire boots and different devices with our own money. We have to be inventive too – we learned how to make some things that we see on the Internet with our own hands.”

Another problem discussed by both sides is more psychological than material, as Kvashnin noted:

“Conservatism. I would like to stress this shared problem. We are often resistant to changing established tactics, tools, regulatory documents, because ‘we are satisfied with things as they are.’ We were told that in one of Maine fire stations there is a sign saying ‘150 years of traditions not influenced by progress.’ We can relate to this, in our work changes occur over decades and this is too slow.”

Several things at Maine fire departments were seen by the Russian visitors as something that could be successfully implemented in Russia, particularly, the volunteer program. Kvashnin explained:

“We would borrow your volunteer firefighter program, not in the form it exists here, of course, but the idea itself is great. This system has its advantages: when there is a vacancy at a fire department, the employer is not going crazy trying to find a good employee – there are candidates among volunteers. These are trained people tested by time and work that love what they do. In Russia we often see how a person is trained for half a year, he gets a salary, money is invested in his training, and after several fires he understands that this is not his place.”

The January 2016 visit will be followed by further international meetings: in April a delegation of firefighters from the Greater Portland area will visit their colleagues in Arkhangelsk. The Americans are looking forward to the visit as Chief Thurlow said:

“I firmly believe that no one has all the answers and that we can always learn from others, The American fire service is famous for borrowing ideas from each other and building upon them. Looking at how things are done

in foreign countries is a natural extension of that. The personal connections are equally important. We are naturally much more trusting and understanding when we have a personal connection to others and these types of programs help foster that. In a world full of war and conflict, it was nice to experience such a positive interaction with professionals half a world away.”

The Russians are already excited to show their new friends what they have to offer. “During the return visit we will be able to show our best practices to our colleagues from Maine and I am sure that some of them will be made operational by them,” said Kozelsky.

Kvashnin also knows of a Russian practice American colleagues might be interested in adapting:

“As far as I understood the physical and theoretical preparation of firefighters in the U.S. is examined at only at the moment of employment. And after that each firefighter decides for themselves, if they want to continue exercising or not. In Russia we have to demonstrate our physical condition every year – skiing, running, swimming – and the results of these tests have an impact on our salary. The same is true about our theoretical knowledge. One of our American colleagues told me, that they would be interested to try this system in the U.S.”

The part of the program planned for June and August 2016 will focus on search and rescue operating, including HAZMAT/urban/water/forest search and rescue and related skills. The project covers so many aspects of firefighters' and rescuers' work and is such a rare thing in the current political atmosphere that participants think that the knowledge exchange should continue online and become accessible for a wider audience. There are plans to launch an Internet platform where information on best practices, analyses of systems and practices will be posted and international networks will be built.

“With the political climate set aside,” says Thomas, “I believe our young firefighters will work together for the benefit of mankind as a whole.”