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Heavy Rescue: Airport Firefighters Keep an Eye on the Sky

by Ricka (Dailey) McNaughton

We are riding with “Charlie” Collins, State airport Firefighter, in a signature-red, \$300,000 fire truck equipped with ladders, hoses, turrets and requisite panorama of dashboard instruments. We are at runway’s edge at the Air National Guard Base in Burlington - adjacent to the Burlington International Airport. The day is jewel-bright for November, so far. On the horizon, Mt. Mansfield wears a scarf of pewter-bottomed snow clouds. The wind is chill, gusty enough to bobble small planes as they land.

We are going to have a look around at the airfield, grounds and the daily goings-on at this place, Charlie’s home fire-fighting turf. Today, while he’s on shift, Charlie’s truck must go everywhere Charlie goes. Just in case a call comes in.

We climb aboard and Charlie radios the control tower for permission to cross the airfield. There are no planes about to leave or land that we can see. “We just don’t want any skid marks on the roof of the truck,” Charlie quips, as the tower considers its reply. There is much implied, throughout this visit, about safe and respectful procedure. Thirty-one men and women comprise the State’s professional

firefighting team here. They are State Military Department employees with federal support and management. Under Federal Chief Myrl (rhymes with Earl) Jaquith, they provide heavy rescue and fire protection services to the State, the Air National Guard, the City of Burlington’s International Airport and elsewhere.

Of this arrangement Chief Jaquith remarked, “So often we hear about military budgets that run into the billions...people watch their Federal tax dollars go...well this is one case where the taxpayer’s dollar comes home.” The State firefighters support the South Burlington community as well as the airport. Their rescue specialties have broad use. They put out



I have not been able to find reproducible forms of the original photos which appeared with this article. Above, Airport Firefighter Charlie Collins graciously agrees to show a very interested 10-year old, Ian McNaughton (the author’s step-son), the inside of an F-16 cockpit. The visit was arranged shortly after this article originally came out.

chimney fires. They assist ambulance crews. They clean up hazardous spills. They bring the “jaws of life” to free trapped accident victims, all throughout the greater Burlington area.

The control tower gives us permission to drive across a series of the runways to the other side of the airfield. Charlie hits the gas and we waste no time getting there. For the moment, the airfield seems like an immense stage, and we are the behind-the-scenes players awkwardly caught in the limelight.

Once across, we pass a clique of imperious looking private jets...no corporate entourage in sight just now. Next to these, a few parked light planes seem barely more than stripes and framed paper. Like very big kites.

Up the strip, the package handlers feed a row of giant metal bins which await daily pick-up by two different faster-than-those-guys commercial express planes. We pass the main commercial terminal, with its corrugated metal skywalks jutting into space, waiting for planes to sidle up. Aviation emergencies pose special problems for firefighters – who are trained to expect the unpredictable and the unthinkable, every time a plane moves.

As Charlie puts it, “[With a plane,] where’s the emergency going to start? That’s the first thing you have to determine.” There are plans for every sort of incoming trouble, from the minor pickle to the major catastrophe. Training, rehearsals and maintenance fill many hours between calls. In the event of a call, firefighters are dressed and driving through the station doors in 50 seconds.

We call for permission to come back across the tarmac. We defer to a US Air departure before borrowing a stretch of main runway.

On a grassy patch beside the base side we pass a stand of retired bombers – venerable but bulky old war horses posed like statuary on a village green. By contrast, the view ahead reveals a pair of lithe, sleekly designed, ultra-high tech F-16 Alert Birds parked in their hangers, poised to engage and defend. Charlie cuts a wide arc around them, as though to dodge a swift kick from a bored and nervous thoroughbred.

Chief Jaquith credits his crew with some tremendous saves. But don't use the word "crew" in front of him. "We had an incident...an aircraft [was coming in] that was having trouble with both engines. I read in the paper how our 'emergency crews' responded. You know what 'crew' sounds like to me? A bunch of guys in a locker room, and somebody yells 'hey guys, we gotta go out.' To me that's a whole different thing that a fire department staffed with full time professional firefighters."

It was a scrambling week for the F-16's. On this day, a Canadian jet fighter crashed into the Gulf of Mexico during a mock dog fight with a Vermont Air National Guard F-16 Fighting Falcon. A rescue helicopter picked up the pilot intact. The day before, two Vermont F-16's intercepted four Soviet military planes off the east coast. The Tupelov 95 “Bear” aircraft were in international airspace and received a Vermont escort to Iceland.

The recent arrival of the top-of-the-line F-16's to the Air National Guard base out of the tactical category and into “alert” status. The Vermont Guard base was one of the first units in the country to receive

them. Fire and rescue personnel at the base increased from a core dozen, eight months ago, to its present department of 31.

Charlie draws up to the station door, surrenders the driver's seat to Peter Brown, a recent addition to the force who – Charlie assures – can already thread the enormous rig in backwards with his eyes closed. Charlie throws the door switch. Brown pulls in. Charlie removes his boots and protective outer clothing from the cab and arranges them carefully on the station floor, next to the cab of the truck. His overalls are neatly accorded over the boots, with the boot tops poking through the legs. Clearly this is a man who knows how to put his pants on two legs at a time.

Charlie has some training to do today. There are some Maine firefighters on site to learn F-16 rescue procedure, the better to support Vermont's F-16's when they are in Maine. Earlier, we saw them gathered around a small simulated cockpit learning extrication techniques. Now we enter a hanger for a first close encounter with an F-16. We mount a platform level with the cockpit and Charlie begins addressing the visiting group. He tells them, "You've got to talk to the pilot...tell him what you need to do...watch that ejection (switch) or you'll both be statistics...and watch this here..." He wraps up his part and we leave. He explains later, "It's different with military aircraft...we've got potentially rockets and ammunition to consider. We have to decide whether we can go in...how quickly the fire will get to them."

What "right stuff" do airport firefighters need to have? No one we talked to claimed a lust for derring-do. No one followed a childhood fantasy. Most took up rescue work as a military service option and liked it. The learning, discipline and esprit' de corps have strong appeal. All of the firefighters like being around planes. But didn't necessarily want to fly them.

The firefighters serve 24-hour shifts. Some are married to tolerant spouses. Some feel out of sync with the mainstream and their families. Not long ago two firefighters married each other. After that, by amicable arrangement, one left the department. Charlie joined the Guard in 1961 and took up rescue work because it "was better than watching them build the Berlin Wall." But it was different than he supposed.

"You have to change your attitude about work," he said. "You're on nights, weekends, holidays. The cost of fouling up is high. It can be stressful. When I was brand new I could just about spell 'fire.' That was it. I'd get headaches. You learn to relax yet stay alert...but you never get to the point where you can say, 'No sweat, I can handle everything.' Then you aren't good, you're dangerous."

We hear from another firefighter, Michael Calcagni. "We're always learning and a lot of things come with supporting these planes. The tools of the trade are always changing." Airports bring a special depth – both technical and tactical – to the business of fire protection.

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bunch of guys in a locker room, and somebody yells 'hey guys, we gotta go out.' To me that's a whole different thing than a fire department staffed with full time professional firefighters."

Firefighters put great store by ordinary days. "We're like an insurance policy," surmised Charlie. "Maybe you don't use it every day. Yes it's an expense. But if you need it, you can't put a price on it."

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