



EDITORIAL

The Swords of Iron War and Firefighting

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Abstract

Examining the experiences of a firefighter paramedic from the United States who deployed to Israel as a member of the Emergency Volunteer Project and assisted Israel's Fire and Rescue Services during the Swords of Iron War, beginning just days after the attacks on October 7, 2023.

Key words: war, firefighting, humanitarian service

After the famous Mount Carmel fire near Tel Aviv in 2010, in which forty-four people lost their lives, the Israeli Government formed a unified Fire and Rescue Service throughout the entire country. Even though the Israeli Fire and Rescue Service is responsible for fire protection for a whole nation, there are only approximately 2,500 career firefighters. Additionally, there are around 3,000 more volunteers throughout the country. Volunteers primarily engage in supportive functions rather than actual firefighting operations, and many of them are teenagers interested in becoming career firefighters after they complete their mandatory military service or in lieu of military service. New York City has a population of around 8.5 million people, and its fire department has approximately 11,000 firefighters, compared to just 2,500 firefighters in Israel. Most fire apparatus are staffed with two firefighters: a crew manager, which is compared to a front-line officer in the USA, and a firefighter. When staffing is heavy for that shift or a volunteer is at the station, the apparatus will be staffed with a third firefighter.

The Emergency Volunteer Project, more commonly known as EVP, was established in 2012. It is a disaster relief and rescue organization that deploys volunteer teams to Israel in times of crisis. EVP was established in collaboration with Israel's emergency services and local municipalities. The objective of EVP is to provide services to Israel in times of need. The organization is non-denominational, with three separate divisions: firefighting, emergency medical services, and mass feedings for the Israeli Defense Forces.

I became involved with EVP in 2016 when my fire department hosted a training session for firefighters from around Southeast Florida who were interested in volunteering. Earlier in my career, I was interested in obtaining my certifications for FEMA USAR; however, at that time, I was married and a father of young children, which made it difficult for me to commit to obtaining these certifications. EVP enabled me to be part of a specialized team that would deploy to Israel to supplement their services as firefighters without requiring any specialized certifications since my primary role would be that of a general firefighter at one of the Israeli firehouses. I obtained my certification once my training was complete, including classroom instruction and hands-on training, to familiarize me with how the Israeli Fire and Rescue Services operate.

Fast forward to October 7, 2023. When I am off duty, especially on the weekends, I rarely watch the TV other than watching Premier League football games, which are televised early in the mornings due to the time difference between the USA and England. It was not until I went to work the following day, on Sunday, October 8th, that I realized what was happening in Israel. I vividly remember being in the officer's office, watching the news on the television, and seeing the reports of the atrocities that Hamas was committing. It was unbelievable what was being committed and how brutal an attack this was. Within minutes of being at work, I started to receive text messages and emails from EVP about an imminent deployment to Israel. Without hesitation, I responded to



confirm my availability and would be able to deploy in the next 24 to 48 hours.

Four days later, on October 11th, I boarded a direct flight from Fort Lauderdale to Tel Aviv via El Al Airlines. I was one of twenty firefighters throughout the US being deployed to Israel to assist the Israel Fire and Rescue Services during the Swords of Iron War. Twenty of us were deployed throughout Jerusalem, Ashkelon, and Ashdod firehouses. Ashkelon and Ashdod were two of the cities that Hamas struck on October 7th. Jerusalem was selected because it is the capital of Israel and is considered one of the holiest places in the world. Two others and I were assigned to Uma Station, or “The Nations” Station in Jerusalem, which is in an Orthodox area. Upon arriving at the firehouse, we were all welcomed with open arms and expressions of extreme gratitude for dropping everything immediately, leaving our families behind, and flying across the world to a hostile environment to assist our brothers and sisters in Israel.



I did not know what to expect during my deployment. I knew our primary responsibility was being assigned to a fire station and responding to emergency fire-related calls. I was no longer the captain in charge of a crew. I was now the “rookie,” and I was the one following the leader. To make matters worse, I do not speak Hebrew except for a few words, and I certainly did not understand it. This was challenging when you were responding to calls and have no idea what you were responding to other than what you could make out by the Israeli firefighters who barely spoke English. You prepared for the worst and hoped for the best.

Firefighting in Israel is different than in the US regarding tactics; however, the objective is the same. Mitigate the emergency. Differences in tactics have to do with staffing, distance, and terrain. Because the apparatus is staffed with two firefighters, setting up operations and placing hoses in service to fight a fire can be very time-consuming. You have one firefighter setting up the attack lines, which may include extended stretches and additional appliances to add hose lines if needed, and the other firefighter setting up pumping operations when the hose lines are placed into operation. Although most of the country is flat, there are many areas, especially in the main cities, where homes are built on mountain slopes and not evenly spaced out. In urban areas, apartment buildings and commercial structures can be staggered among each other, and accessibility is not always easy to locate. Having to quickly determine the distance to where you need to place your attack line to start with operations, the amount of hose line that you need, and having situational awareness of potential obstacles can make it incredibly challenging. You typically begin the operation with minimal personnel, such as one engine and two firefighters, not including yourself. As they say in the fire service, “adapt and overcome.”

Life in the firehouse is no different in Israel than in the United States. Although most Israelis speak English fluently or not, there is a universal way of communicating among firefighters. We start with words to formulate a sentence and use hand gestures to complete the sentence and the point we are trying to make. Within a brief period, we had conversations and enjoyed each other’s company with a few spoken words. During my first deployment right after the attacks of October 7th occurred, I had an opportunity to hear the stories from many of the Israeli firefighters that I was stationed with in Jerusalem. Each firefighter had a personal story to tell regarding the attacks. Whether it was someone they knew personally who was killed, taken hostage, or managed to escape, the intimate details of the story struck me inside to the core. I would sit there with tears in my eyes, listening to their story and wondering how they shared it with me, a stranger, and had the strength and courage to speak without completely losing it and breaking down. The answer is simple. What else are they to do? They want everyone to know what took place. They want everyone to know the details of what took place, as hard as it is to describe. The world must know what took place because if it happened here in Israel, it could happen anywhere, not just for the Jewish people but the entire world who does not conform to the ideology of Hamas.

Since October 2023, I have been to Israel three times as a member of EVP. The first one was right after the attacks on October 7th. I was in Israel and stationed in Jerusalem from October 12th through October 23rd. The second trip was a training deployment at the end of July. The trip was for one week but ended up being two weeks due to the rise in tensions in Northern Israel. Airlines other than El Al canceled flights in and out of Ben Gurion Airport, and I found myself, along with three others from my group, having to stay an additional week before we could find flights back to the US. I spent the first week in Haifa and the second week in Hadera. I am currently on a two-week deployment due to the increasing tensions and missile attacks that are occurring in Northern

Israel. I am presently in Haifa, at the same station where I was only a few months prior. Over the past year, I have spent six weeks in Israel as part of EVP, trying to do my part for a country that I hold dear in my heart as a Jew, representing not only my profession as a firefighter but also my department, the city that I serve as well as the country that makes me proud to be an American.



I have had people ask me why I volunteered to join EVP and go to Israel to assist in firefighting, especially during times of crisis. I suppose the answer is not as simple as just wanting to do my part to help my Israeli brothers and sisters. I was born and raised a Jew and came from a Conservative Jewish household. I am proud of my heritage and identity as an American Jew. I cannot say that I am a practicing Jew since I am married to a Catholic, and my four children are Catholic as well. I do celebrate the traditions of Judaism around the holidays, even if only to light candles and make potato latkes during Hannukah, as well as other traditional meals during the holidays of Rosh

Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover. I have passed on these traditions as lessons for my children to teach them where my heritage came from and for them to accept all people and their religious beliefs.



Part of that acceptance of others plays a role in having joined EVP. EVP is a non-denominational organization with members of all faiths who have one common bond: to help Israel in their time of need. As firefighters, we are in the business of providing help, and I genuinely believe that providing help is the driving force behind what we do. I would bet my paycheck that no firefighter is in this for the money. I may not know each person's truth, but I can confidently say that it has to do with being there for another person in their time of need. It might not look like the proverbial "saving a life," but it most certainly has to do with the ability to touch another person's life and give back to the community that you serve. As I mentioned before, I am not overly religious by any means; however, I am very spiritual. I believe we are placed on earth for a purpose, and I am doing what I was put here to do. Call it a master plan or whatever you see it as, but I feel that my purpose in life is to be here doing the job that I love to do and receiving the happiness that I get out of what I consider the best job in the world.

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