

KEFLAVIK AIRPORT FIRE DEPARTMENT

When I think of the Fire Department aboard the Keflavik Base one word always comes to me and that is "professionalism". I first encountered the Fire Department when I landed at Keflavik in the summer of 1965. I was a young Lieutenant Junior Grade in Patrol Squadron Eight (VP-8) and our Commanding Officer was Commander Harry Rich, destined to become Rear Admiral Harry Rich and the Commander of the Iceland Defense Force in the 70s. We were there in the relatively new P-3 Orion to observe the summer exercises of the Russian fleet. My first recollections of the Fire Department were their sharp uniforms and professional approach to all they did. It was clear to me, even then, that they took the greatest pride in their department, safety aboard the field and keeping the base and airport "up and operating". Harry Rich made it a practice every time he was there to "visit the Fire Department, have coffee and just chat about issues and the airfield". This is a practice I adopted and maintained throughout my association with the Fire Department.

My very close association with the Fire Department expanded from 1982-1985 when I served at Keflavik as a Captain and as the Chief of Staff of Fleet Air Keflavik. Soon after I arrived in 1982, I had my "cup of coffee" with the Fire Department, visited with their personnel, looked at their equipment and was brought up to speed on the current issues. Over the next three years, I was to learn much more about the Fire Department. How they maintained their equipment and took great pride in never throwing any useful equipment away. How they were the leaders in the world in developing new procedures and modifying equipment to meet new requirements. Finally, how they trained their people, instructed the base population on fire safety and how they took the greatest pride in keeping the "airfield open". On this last point, as an aviator, I always had the feeling and confidence that no matter how bad the weather was, how deep the snow, and how much ice, that the Fire Department would have the field and the runways open for me to land and taxi to the hanger safely. This a vital safety matter in northern regions such as Iceland.

From 1989 through 1992, I was honored to be the Commander of the Iceland Defense Force as a Rear Admiral. In this capacity, I had the closest relationship with the Fire Department and the then Fire Chief, Halli Stefansson. The Keflavik Fire Department was at the pinnacle of their profession and in my judgment there was not a better Fire Department and Snow Removal organization in the world. In the 3 1/2 years I served as Commander of the Iceland Defense Force, I can only remember two times for a short period of time, that the airfield was closed for winter weather. Throughout this time the Fire Department and its personnel were stellar members of the base community and the surrounding area. Their personal pride and professionalism shown brightly in their uniforms, personal conduct and community involvement.

I had the wonderful opportunity to play basketball against their departmental team and on the court they were fierce competitors and would fight to the end to win. However, when the game was over, they were gracious to their opponents and a delight to get to know. Sometimes there are those whom say "basketball resembles life" and in this case it did. During these years the awards for the department and for Chief Stefansson continued to roll in and they were clearly recognized as one of the

finest Fire Departments in the world. It was a sad day for me in 1992 when I left Keflavik and my close association with the Keflavik Fire Department.

However, it was an even sadder day when in 2006 I was assigned to be the Chief Negotiator for the United States in the negotiations for the removal of all United States Forces from the Keflavik Base. During these negotiations, I maintained a close connection with the Fire Department in order to ensure that the continuity of operations would continue aboard the Keflavik Base. As usual, the Fire Department stepped forward and assured both the United States and the Government of Iceland that the Fire Department would continue its mission and that the safety of the base and the airport would be maintained. That certainly was the case then and it is today. Although considerably smaller in size and operating under a different mission, there is no change in the attitude of the Fire Department and its present Chief, that professionalism and accomplishment of mission remains the number one priority of the department.

I salute all of the members of the Keflavik Fire Department, past and present, for your superb professionalism throughout the years. There are simply "no finer" anywhere in the world. **YOU ARE NUMBER ONE!**

Signed:

Honorable Thomas F. Hall

Former Commander of the Iceland Defense Force

Former Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (President Obama Administration)

Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs (President Bush Administration)

Retired Rear Admiral United States Navy