

The impacts of the German reunification for the Berlin Fire Service

By Michael Hanck



East Side Gallery - Berlin

For many people came a long dream true in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell down. Families and friends could rejoin together and everything seems so lucky and positive at these days. 40 years of a separated history seems to be over and everybody was dancing on the wall. These pictures run around the world. However, no one imagined the problems that would come with the reunification. The Berlin Wall not only divided the City of Berlin directly through the middle, it also separated two completely different political systems. It was the direct confrontation between East and West. The reunification of Germany also required the unification of people that had lived under total contrary political systems for decades, the Capitalism and the Communism. Not an easy task. And there are still lots of problem that need to be solved.



Berlin Wall in the 60's

This was also the biggest challenge for the Berlin Fire Service since centuries. The developments and the standards of the two fire services couldn't be more different. The high developed west fire service had to integrate the underdeveloped and neglected east fire service. While the West-Berlin Fire Service technology was up to date with the standards in other bigger fire services in the western world, the East-Berlin Fire Service technology was neglected and it seems to get a review back into the fifties. When West-Berlin fire staff visited stations "on the other side", not only did all of the vehicles seem to be out of time, also the technology of the fire and rescue equipment was far behind

western standards. Even most of the fire stations were still heated by antiquated coal burners and in a run down condition.



East Fire Truck mid eighties

NO CENTRAL DISPATCH OR COMMUNICATIONS

One of the major differences was the fact that the East Berlin Fire Service did not have a centralised control centre. All stations acted independently with separate dispatch centres having their own radio communications, while the West-Berlin Fire Service had a centralised headquarters which dispatched the incoming emergency calls and also controlling the complete radio communication for the 24 stations of the then West-Berlin sector. The greatest shock however was the condition the vehicles, PPE and the general equipment. The average age of the vehicles and equipment was approximately 25 years! Just to upgrade this to western standards was to cost an incredible amount of money. Indeed the fact of getting the money to integrate and upgrade the East-Berlin Fire Service was the greatest problem at all. It was impossible to get all the required money for this so much needed upgrading and integrating of the East-Berlin Fire Service. Not to forget, all these problems occurred to all other essential services like Police, Post, Administration, Army etc.



Modern Special Intensive Medical Care Unit (Photo Shan Raffel)

It was not only the different standards of the technique, but the training standards were on different levels. The West-Berlin Fire Service was not only covering the full range of fire rescue and fire protection, technical rescue and all kinds of hazmat emergency incidents, moreover the complete ambulance service was under the hood of the West-Berlin Fire

Service. It is a high standard system developed with the unique factor of getting specialised emergency medical doctors within an Intensive Care Unit Vehicle to all kinds of serious life-threatening incidents rapidly. All fire staff are trained as at least EMPs or Paramedics and there was a minimum of at least one ambulance unit per fire station. Compare to this the East Berlin Fire Service which did not provide any ambulance service and for that reason the fire staff of the East Berlin Fire Service hadn't had any emergency medical training and knowledge at this time. This further complicated the integration. In a Fire Service where 60-70% of all calls are of an emergency medical nature, it was nearly unthinkable to integrate fire staff without any medical background. But the West Berlin Fire Service had to manage all these major problems.

THE INNER WALL

Even while these problems were big enough to cause lots of headaches for the responsible managing leaders, there was still one major problem we haven't mentioned yet. Despite of all these technical problems, the most obstructive problem was the human factor. From one day to the other people had to serve and work with "the old enemy". In particular the east German Communist political education, trained their people that the West was the "Big Enemy" and for centuries every contact to the West was forbidden and every influence of the western part was just the bad results of Capitalism. The fire staff was even trained like armed forces and belonged to a paramilitary mentality. The political gap couldn't be worse. Suddenly employed by the former enemy, they had to cope with the fact of the new political situation. It was for both sides an absolute strange feeling to work together and protecting side by side with the old enemy. Jealousy and suspicion, mixed with a strange feeling was the first impression of working together. It took a long time for the people to overcome the "inner wall" and to accept the new circumstances. Indeed, some people still are having problems to accept it and looking back to the "former better times". Different ranking and different payment made it even more difficult. The fact that fire officers in the East never ever served in the ambulance service and without any medical experience and knowledge were upgraded to same levels of ranking, made fire staff in the West unhappy, while fire staff in the East were disappointed about a 90% payment compare to their West colleagues. Unbelievable, even 14 years after the reunification the payment is still different, while the standards of the fire and ambulance services now are totally the same in the whole city area.

After all, the main problem was the money. The Berlin Fire Service compensated it with some major changes and had to cut

lots of positions in the service. Nearly 500 positions were dropped to save money.



Modern Fire Appliance (Photo Shan Raffel)

Today the Berlin Fire Service is still one of the biggest in the world. It is covering an area of nearly 900 sq/km with a population of 3.4 Million peoples and responding to approx. 270.000 calls a year. Around 3500 firefighters on 37 professional stations and special departments serving for the community in all fields of emergency rescue.

The technical standards are very high and the Berlin Fire Service has just recently established a new headquarter control center, the most modern in Europe with the capacity of managing more than 750 operations daily and coordinating more than 1 million emergency calls a year.

Though things are getting much better these days, there still exists many major problems for the fire service. It is the passion and the energy of all members of the firefighters of the Berlin Fire Service to overcome these challenges with a positive attitude that makes everything possible. This is the same passion, energy and attitude shared by firefighters everywhere in the world.

This information expressed in this article reflects the opinion and experiences of the author based on 18 years professional service in the Berlin Fire Service. While the data is accurate this paper should not be seen as a statement of the Berlin Fire Service.

To visit the Official Berlin Fire Service Website, please go to www.berliner-feuerwehr.de .