

Tony Varley's eye-opening trip to the outskirts of Buenos Aires with the 9/11 Foundation

Firefighter's mission to Argentina

By FERGUS MCEWAN

THE attack on New York's World Trade Centre on September 11 2001 was one of the worst terrorist atrocities suffered by a Western nation.

While the actions of plane hijackers on that day cost almost 3,000 lives, the bravery shown by the Fire Department of New York City during and after the tragedy inspired firefighters around the world. Members of the Isle of Man Fire and Rescue Service donated £7,000 to help those affected by the disaster.

Dr Stephan Hittman, commissioner of the FDNY at the time of the attack, set up the 9/11 Foundation to provide for the families of firefighters who died in the line of duty.

The charity now works to improve standard fire services and increase public awareness of fire safety in developing countries.

When Dr Hittman visited the Isle of Man last September for a memorial service at St Luke's Church, he was keen for a Manx firefighter to be part of the foundation's next project in Argentina in 2008.

Station officer Tony Varley — remembering the impact of images of New York firefighters rushing in to the burning buildings — immediately volunteered to take part in the project during his annual leave.

He found himself travelling with a team of nine senior officers from fire services all over the US, to Garin, a poor province on the outskirts of the Argentinian capital Buenos Aires.

Garin has a fire service made up of volunteers, and receives just enough public funding to pay for the running costs of its five stations and fuel for its outdated engines.

But just across the motorway, the capital boasts a well-resourced, professional fire service.

Tony was shocked by the differences between the neighbouring emergency services, which have led to Garin residents dying in fires which could have been contained or even prevented.

The death of a female volunteer firefighter in a grass fire on Tony's first day in the province served as a stark indicator of the scale of the problem. 'In the Isle of Man, we are very fortunate to have the best equipped fire service in the British Isles,' he said.

'But in Garin, they are lucky if they have a few inches of hose. There is no high rescue ladder, even though there are multi-storey buildings.'

'Besides, the fire crews only know about an emergency when sirens go off. But the sirens are randomly fitted to buildings, so there's no guarantee they will hear them and respond to a fire.'

'We were there to make them more aware of potential hazards while firefighting, and improve leadership and accountability within the volunteer force.'

The team was encouraged by the level of interest in the project — more than 250 unpaid firefighters from all over the country travelled up to 600 miles to take part.

They were split into groups and put through eight training exercises.



CUBBY HOLE: Isle of Man Fire and Rescue Service station officer Tony Varley visits the command centre of Garin's volunteer fire service, which consists of a desk and a telephone



COMMITTED: A group of Argentinian volunteer firefighters taking part in the 9/11 Foundation project, some of whom travelled across the country at their own expense to be there

Tony led exercises on search and rescue operations and the correct use of breathing gear, but he feels his most important contribution was holding lessons on fire prevention and fire safety education. 'In developed parts of the world, the number of fire-related deaths is coming down as more people are being taught about prevention.'

'But in Argentina, the emergency services are reactive rather than proactive. I told them they have got to get the right messages in to the community, like we do.'

'The Manx fire service talks to schools and societies, communicates through the media and advises on building regulations.'

'Ironically, most of the lessons were held in a school that had no smoke detectors, narrow escape routes and no emergency lighting or signage.'

Although the participants did not expect to find themselves back in school, Tony argues it was an essential part of their training.

'They thought they would just be running around in uniforms carrying hoses — so did I and my colleagues when we started the job.'

'But if we get called out to a fire now we consider we've failed to get across the message about prevention.'

The 9/11 Foundation donated five fire engines, two fire trucks and a hydraulic ladder to Garin's volunteer firefighters, who proved to be model students.

'Their enthusiasm was fantastic,' Tony said. 'There's no question about their commitment to the job and to training — they wanted us to give them more — but the funding limits make it difficult for them.'

'Hopefully we lifted their spirits, so they believe in themselves more and understand that what they are doing is a very important job.'

'They have certainly earned the respect of their communities by taking part in this project, because people can see the volunteers are trying to protect them.'

'The two key issues they have to keep working on are, firstly, clearer communication and chain of command, and secondly, increasing awareness of fire prevention in the community.'

The 9/11 Foundation is already monitoring progress on eight previous projects, but it is planning to send a team back to Garin within 12 months and Tony is keen to be part of it.

'I've received good feedback about what I was doing in Garin,' he said. 'If they are happy with my involvement, I'd like to continue working with the foundation.'



BIG GIFT: Manx firefighter Tony Varley (left) and a senior American firefighter from his team pose in front of one of five fire engines donated to volunteer firefighters in Garin by the 9/11 Foundation