

Forest Stewards Online Extra (Vol. 3, No 2. Fall 2018) - Ontario Fire Assignment



My Fire Vacation: A Wildland Firefighter’s Experience in Quebec, July 2018, by Amanda Mahaffey

“Maniwaki, Romeo Hotel.”

“Romeo Hotel, Maniwaki - go ahead.”

“Departing Joncas for Fire 365 with four passengers aboard, estimated arrival 30 minutes.”

“Thank you Romeo Hotel; have a safe flight and a nice day.”

The air traffic crackled in my headset over the helicopter rotors’ steady pulse. I was in the middle seat of the Bell 407, shoulder-to-shoulder with two fellow wildland firefighters from the Maine Fire Crew. Our squad boss, Matt, sat up front with the helicopter pilot, Alan, better known up here as Lima Romeo Hotel. To my left, Mark was already tipping his head back to catch a few extra minutes of sleep, while to my right, Gregory stared intently out the window, taking in every detail of the blue-green Quebec landscape roaring by a thousand feet below us. Before long, he, too, would probably close his eyes behind his tinted safety glasses. Conversation was virtually impossible in the air, and anyway, we didn’t want to accidentally override the air traffic. I slumped down in my seat, tipped my head back, and closed my eyes, too, singing softly to myself. My mind retreated to a place of semi-consciousness, rapidly processing the sights, sounds, smells, and experiences of my first wildland firefighting assignment.....



As June 2018 drew to a close, fire activity increased in Quebec, and the province requested mutual aid resources through the [Northeastern Forest Fire Protection Compact](#). Maine responded, and on July 4, a crew of 20 Maine Forest Service Rangers and civilians left our families behind and convened in Old Town. The details of our fire assignment became clearer along the long bus route through western Maine, across the border into Quebec, and west to Maniwaki, a regional hub north of Ottawa, Ontario.

At the Maine Forest Service office in Old Town, crew boss Dan Perkins, a Maine Forest Service Ranger, got the group organized. He made sure we had all the appropriate paperwork completed and gear we would need. The crew was $\frac{1}{3}$ Rangers. The civilian count included children of Rangers. Some folks had been on assignment before, and others were going out for the first time. Each person was fire trained and prepared to say “yes” to the call, ready to drop everything else for 18 days and go fight wildfires far from home.



Quebec requires firefighters to wear steel-toed boots. Because of the Independence Day holiday in the U.S., we had to stop in Montreal to buy boots for some of the crew. To help stretch our legs during this break from the 13-hour bus ride, a group of us attempted a game of hackey-sack in the parking lot outside the boot store. It's a tough game in work boots, but this activity did help build some group cohesion.

SOPFEU is Quebec's firefighting agency. The acronym stands for "Société de protection des forêts contre le feu." Maniwaki is home to one of four regional SOPFEU bases. On July 5, the official Day 1 of our 14-day assignment, we were given a briefing on the current fire situation and the incident action plan (IAP).



Then, we were divvied into squads of four and sent in different directions. Four would stay in Maniwaki; eight would go to a large fire, Feu 332, and eight of us were headed to Lac Joncas, a SOPFEU outpost four hours' drive northwest. We were given a safety briefing, a helicopter briefing, and a box of high-octane bug spray cans before being sent on our way.



Maniwaki houses an extremely well-organized cache of firefighting equipment. Mark III pumps, chainsaws, hose, tools, you name it. SOPFEU has employees dedicated to maintaining this

equipment and having it 100% ready for when it's needed. The SOPFEU system of supply organization is something worth aspiring to.

I've described this as a fire vacation, and a snapshot of the SOPFEU encampment at Joncas will give you an idea of why. The SOPFEU outpost at Lac Joncas is situated some 60 km from the nearest paved roads, a setting reminiscent of northern Maine. Also like Maine, the forests were dominated by spruce, fir, birch, and popple, though in different species balances. Most significantly, Quebec's landscape has an abundance of lakes, ponds, wetlands, streams, and bogs. This landscape drives SOPFEU's firefighting tactics toward two main tools: helicopters and hoses. When forest fires pop up, firefighters are most often brought in by helicopter rather than by road. Water bombers are actively used during initial attack as well. From there, Quebec's firefighters use hoses to put the abundant water on the fire. As one SOPFEU gentleman said with a shudder, "Pulaski? We would run a mile of hose and four pumps before we'd touch a Pulaski!"



Our host at Joncas was Vince (in the white t-shirt at left), a SOPFEU firefighter who works 24 days on, 2 days off. While we were there, Vince and his colleague, Paul (red shirt at left), showed us around camp, introduced us to the dining hall and dormitories, and chatted with us about moose, bear, and bobcat. I'm pretty sure Vince went on every fire served by the Joncas base. At the end of one long day, he had eight red books in his hand. Vince did everything he

could to make us feel welcome and make sure we had everything we needed to help SOPFEU fight fires.

Like Maine, Quebec has healthy populations of black flies, deer flies, moose flies, mosquitoes, and other assorted winged pests. Not coincidentally, Quebec requires its firefighters to sleep in beds, indoors. At Joncas, we had the privilege of sleeping in dormitory housing, essentially a cabin with five bedrooms and a shared bathroom. Yes, we could take a hot shower every night. The Joncas encampment also had additional trailers with extra beds, bathrooms, laundry, and even a boot-drying room (a necessity in Quebec). A dining hall fed the crew, which ate in shifts. Down the road, past the lake shore, the helipad area housed three or more helicopters. Best of all, the office cabin featured a screened-in porch and chairs, from which firefighter crews could enjoy a little wifi and a lot of conversation. These home comforts made our stay at Joncas feel like a vacation.



Our Quebec tour also felt like vacation because we worked quite well with our SOPFEU hosts. We were assigned a fire and asked to take care of it. We were equipped with everything we needed to do our job, and the freedom to do it without excessive scrutiny. We worked hard, and treated everyone we encountered with mutual respect. In the down times, we swept sand out of the common areas and lured fellow firefighters into conversation with jokes and stories. We remained positive, flexible, and committed to accomplishing our task. We had no complaints. We had a great time.

This assignment also felt like a fire vacation because Quebec is beautiful. We got to appreciate this from the air as well as in the woods. Fire weather is good weather - clear, dry, sunny - and in

the deep forests, we were shaded from the summer sun. All in all, it was a beautiful place to be outside all day. Totally worth the insect bites, bruises, sweaty helmet rash, and smoke.



Smoke. My nose twitched, and my eyes flew open behind my safety glasses. The helicopter was angling in a slow, downward spiral, giving us a closer look at the fire activity since the previous day. Our fire, Feu 365, had started with a lightning strike and had spread through intense smoldering through the deep duff. Trails of smoke trickled up through the tall red and white pine trees below us. The fire had spread since the day before; we would need to get our boots on the ground to see the extent of the damage.



It was time to land and get to work. Romeo Hotel landed smoothly in the lake, the rotor wash sending the water into ripples and shoreline vegetation into a wind-tossed frenzy. We tossed off our headsets, exposing our ears to the full sound of the helicopter and making verbal communication nearly impossible. One by one, we jumped into the calf-deep water, ducked, and lined out our gear until it was all safely on shore. Then, with a nod from Matt to Alan, the helicopter took off, leaving us to straighten up and assess our surroundings in the striking silence.



I was still getting to know my squad, but already had a healthy appreciation for the guys I would work alongside for our 14-day assignment. Matt, our squad boss and sawyer, formerly fought fires for the U.S. Forest Service, but since had moved on to put his skills to work with the Maine Fire Crew. Matt sports a grizzly beard that barely contains a wide smile, which spread across his face quite often despite the seriousness of his leadership position. Mark is a structural firefighter for the City of Lewiston. He had a lot of tricks to teach us about water pumps and hose, and also kept us entertained with jokes that his three young children sent him. Gregory is a new Ranger with the Maine Forest Service and is full of enthusiasm for his job. Gregory also has a mischievous side, and his antics helped keep us entertained during the long days of the fire assignment. Then there was me, a newbie to the wildfire scene with a scattered background in forestry, fire ecology, fire science, and music. I was thrilled to be out on assignment with the Maine Fire Crew, and I reveled in being a lowly FFT2 with no responsibilities beyond doing what I was told. As I keep saying, this Quebec assignment felt to me like a fire vacation. Together, the four of us were #MissionReady.



Back to the shore. Matt laid out the plan for the day and reminded us of our LCES (lookout, communication, escape routes, and safety zones). Matt would walk the fire perimeter to determine the fire's progress and our approach for the day. Mark would start up the water pump. Gregory would begin running inch-and-a-half hose up the south flank, and I would pick up running hose along the north flank of the fire. That day, we each had a radio and could communicate easily with one another. In the coming days as fire activity grew and more firefighters joined our crew at Joncas, radios, helicopters, and other resources would get spread a little thinner.

What does a forest fire look like? It can look like a lot of different things. News media like to show towering walls of flame being attacked by brave firefighters wielding hose. In reality, such shots are often staged. Our fire had some potential danger, but not so much as long as we paid attention to our 10s and 18s (the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders and 18 Watch Out Situations). Depending on the wind, relative humidity, and other factors, our fire might smolder severely and insatiably in the thick duff, or it might run up the trunk of a tree in a steep, ledgy section of ground. Either way, our task was to fight the fire aggressively, having provided for safety first.



That day, we faced some typical frustrations. The Mark III pump didn't seem to be putting out as much pressure as it should be. Perhaps the elevation gain was too great. We took turns running water to either the south flank or the north flank of the fire. Per SOPFEU protocol, we soaked the heck out of the first three feet of the "black," or the burned area, plus the edge. The smokes just didn't seem to want to go out. We'd saturate an area and move on, only to look back and see a wisp of smoke escape the deep duff. Prodding with a Pulaski or shovel inevitably revealed an ancient cedar log smoldering beneath the water-blasted pine needles. When one flank finally reached the end of a length of hose, we'd use the radio to call to the other side to take the water flow for a while.



During one of those occasions when the south flank had the water, I was doing a bit of scouting when I heard twigs snapping in a way that indicated a large mammal was coming my way. My first thought was that it must be Matt patrolling the fire. When I looked over toward the black, however, I saw a large furry animal that was definitely not carrying a chainsaw. Not Matt. It was a bear.

I had never seen a bear up close in the wild before, and I wasted no time thinking about pictures. I felt the Pulaski in my hand, gauged the distance between me and the bear, and reached for my radio.

“Amanda to squad.”

GO AWAY, BEAR! I yelled at the top of my lungs.

“Amanda, go ahead.” Matt’s voice, calm as ever.

“Uh, I just wanted to alert you to the fact that there’s a bear on the fire.”

GO AWAY, BEAR! The bear looked up at me, perhaps curiously, and went on snuffling.

“Where is the bear located?”

GO AWAY, BEAR! I double-checked my grip on my Pulaski as my adrenaline kicked in. The bear waddled a few paces away from me, still at the edge of the clearing in which I was working.

“I’m here at the junction with that hose line we’re running under the cliff edge. The bear is in

this clearing.”

GO AWAY, BEAR! The bear was downhill of me now, seeming to be a bit irritated by the loud little human, but not irritated enough to pay me any real attention.

“What direction is the bear moving?”

“Just a sec.” - GO AWAY, BEAR! - “The bear is moving northwards, out of the black, right along the line where we’re planning to run hose.” The bear did, at last, amble off in that direction, eventually out of sight.

GO AWAY, BEAR! I wondered how long I should wait before moving. Although my heart was still racing, I reasoned that I was out of danger, if I had been in any in the first place. Time to refocus.

“Hey Matt,” I said, “The bear’s gone. Didn’t like me much, I guess. But he left me his number and told me to tell you he has a sister.”



For the rest of the assignment, any time Matt was faintly irritated at me, he’d say, “Go away, Amanda!” Fireline humor.

Our fire didn’t go out that day. In fact, it got worse. All the active fires experienced flare-ups; some were scarier than others. The next day, our squad was joined by the other four Maine Fire Crew folks stationed at Joncas - Bob, Steve, John, and Mike. With double the numbers and with a dedicated sawyer, the Crazy Eight got an edge over Fire 365. We ran hose after hose for days, cleared snags, and kicked butt with a better Mark III pump. Eventually, between our efforts and Nature’s course, we had Fire 365 encircled with hose and at least 100 feet of wet line and determined it was contained. On Day 11, we were gridding the top section and finding very few smokes to extinguish, when a whopping thunderstorm rolled in and our helicopter pilot called us off. Six of us piled into the helicopter while our squad bosses stayed behind in the impending

downpour. Fortunately, we had backhauled most of our gear. By the time Matt and Bob made it back to Joncas, the fire was called out.



In the meantime, life at Joncas ebbed and flowed. A 20-person crew from Alberta moved in, and with the additional personnel, more helicopter pilots and technicians, as well as additional SOPFEU staff and a nurse. People came and went, but the daily morning briefings remained consistently clear, coordinated, and focused. It was hard to believe our time in Quebec was almost up. As if to celebrate, Day 12 brought us a small fire that we were able to put out by lunchtime. Then word came that the next day, we were headed back to Maniwaki to reunite with the rest of our 20-person Maine Fire Crew. We would stay the night, debrief, and fly home.

My fire vacation, as I've taken to calling it, wrapped up on a high note. I had re-trained my body to go from 0 to 120 mph in a few seconds. I had laughed so hard with my squad that at times, it was hard to get work done. I had been fully engaged in an environment of hard work, respect, and good attitude. I couldn't have asked for more.



I think Gregory summed it up well during the Maine Fire Crew after action review. “Each day, I gave everything I had out on the fireline. There’s not a single member of this crew who gave any less than their best.”