

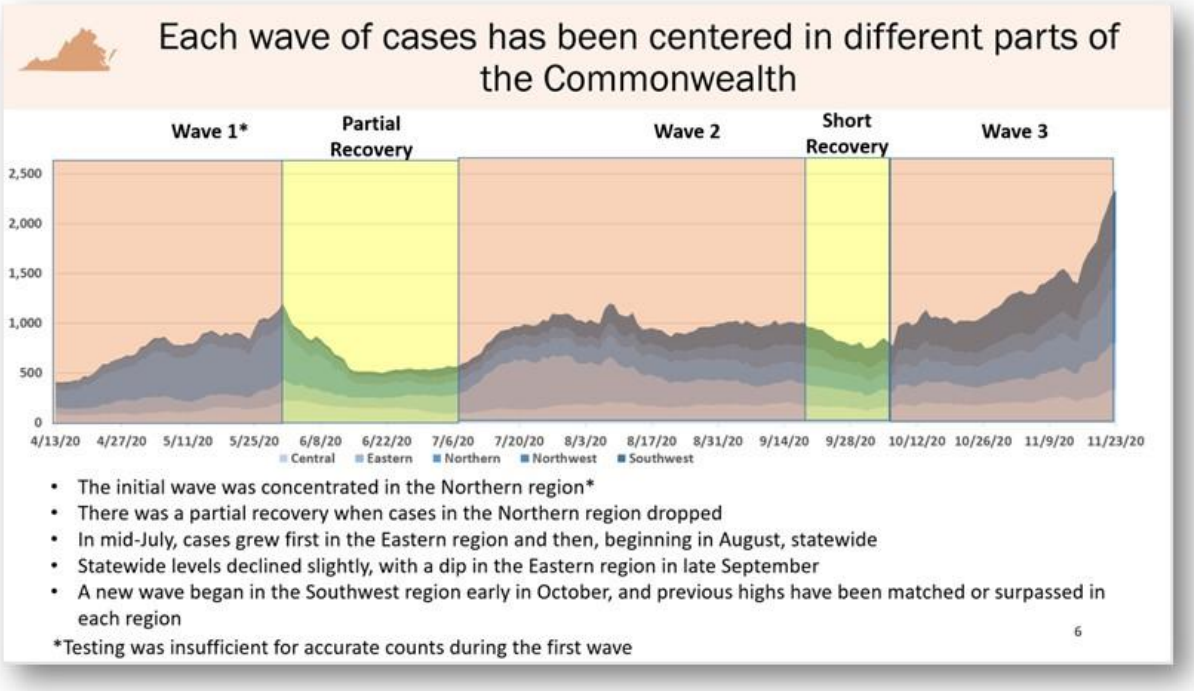
Picking Up

The new normal

Almost three months have passed since the last two-pager 'C+182, dated 13 September. Not unsurprisingly, I was not able to pick up the thread to start writing our 'Across the Pond' editions. The last 3 months were very busy, partly of my doing. I felt to urge to write and some of you asked for it, however, I needed a trigger.

That was given by the announcement that American COVID-19 deaths continue to break records with Virginia remaining RED (above 25 cases per 100 000) and the Virginia Department of Health reporting "SUBSTANTIAL COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION in the Eastern Region of Virginia".

It is useful to compare the current situation in Virginia to that in the Spring. As the chart below shows in Wave 1, the Pandemic was focused largely in the Northern Region of Virginia but with Wave 3 there is more of an even distribution of cases across all regions. I was not aware that we were out of the first wave.



The last drop was the increase in positive COVID cases in our HQ. The situation now is worse than at the start of the crisis. Enough reason to start writing again. Not ready to start writing long editions, I have opted for a new series of two-pagers. You may expect editions heading your way – you can unsubscribe if you do not wish to receive these – but not on a daily basis. They will come at my tempo.

Tuesday, 02 December 2020

Picking Up

I also needed a new heading. Lacking the creativity of the moment, I gave it the title 'The Other Files'. There is a 3-month gap since I halted the Corona-files. The following days, I will send out some to fill you in, but these will not be enough to tell the complete story.

The life thereafter



Because I burned the Summer holidays, I had still had an almost untouched credit of 2019 leave days. September promised to be a little calmer, but October and November would be rollercoasters. I decided to set up a few 4-day weeks by taking leave on Fridays. Some time to spend with Calle – in the end, less than planned.

Scarcity stimulates creativity. As big, indoor manifestations like opera are not allowed, freelance singers are deprived of an income. Somebody thought if our public is not allowed to come to the opera to watch us performing, why not go to our audience and perform outdoors? We had the privilege to attend such a performance and it was great.



Our bubble was limited by circles on the ground in a private garden next to the water. Some neighbors watched the show from small boats. We had to bring our drinks and food, and chairs. The weather was great and the scenery perfect.

Playing tennis was still allowed under strict rules as it happens outdoors. Calle drives almost every Tuesday and Thursday to the base in Little Creek for her portion of hitting balls followed by coffee and grocery hunting.

Other things that are still happening: drills. While playing tennis, an active shooter alarm was activated. Not sure what to do, the tennis ladies hid in their car. I am not sure if that is the best reaction, but who will tell? Later, it seemed that somebody mistakenly pushed the alarm button.



My attempt to virtualize my game quickly and cheaply was stopped. Well, I stopped it because it was too expensive. The initial rough estimate was 5000 USD as prize money for a development challenge. Obliged to go through limited bidding, I raised the estimated cost to 30,000. At the end of the award procedure, the minimum total cost was 200,000 USD. Too much for me and so I stopped. Strangely enough the budget people were surprised by my decision. That had not happened in years. Does not matter, it was too much money for me, and it was my call.

Mid-September we went to the Ladies Bubbles Night in the very fancy Cavalier Hotel in Virginia Beach. Champagne at 10 USD the bottle with free 'amuse-gueules'. Something not to be missed, although respecting social distancing was hard. Following the bubbles event, we went to the Rooftop restaurant to enjoy a nice dinner.



The 2nd of December, the birthday of Ciaran, was a nice day to restart the 'Across the Pond' two-pagers. Don't you think?



In the Meantime

This second edition, a probably a few others, must not be seen as sequential. I thought it might be interesting to inform you about the major things that happened during those months since September 13. It is also a test to write more thematic two-pagers replacing the formal journal style. Let us see if that works.



Stone and SAR



99% of the time, Stone is a great family dog, but that 1 % strange behavior is annoying, and we had no idea on how to remediate that. I knew that some of the dog handlers visited a dog trainer in North Carolina to improve their work as a team. From a previous inquiry about the costs for dog training, I knew that this would not be cheap, but doing nothing might lead to real problems instead of annoyance. In October, we drove to NC for our first lesson.



Ellen, the dog trainer, loves German Shepherds and give confidence that she is good at her job. Her initial impression is that because Stone never had been trained, he has the brain of a puppy in an adult body of 43 kg and the attention span of a frog. We need to train him so that he can develop his brain and improve his behavior. As expected, that also means training us, the human part of the equation.

From that day on, we drive every week to NC for an hour, and more, training of humans and dog. Every day, that is the intention, we train the basics for some minutes. There are improvements, but it will take a while before we reach the level we are aiming at.



Following her assessment, I decided to scale down the SAR training and go back to the basic exercises. Because his attention span is so small, there is no use in frustrating him with long exercises. After a few weeks, faster than expected, we could increase the difficulty of the exercises again. Slowly and successfully.

I also decided to give Stone much leeway in SAR and to push myself. Normally, the dog is ready before the handler. I plan to do it the other way around and to be ready when he picks it up. Therefore, I am on the call roll for live searches and already participated in two. Both were live searches, but with a bad ending.

Wednesday, 03 December 2020

Being 'on-call' again combined with the possibility to do something good for an unknown person reminds me of my initial years in the military. Always ready! When I leave for such events, Stone thinks we go to training. He is disappointed when I leave him behind. A good sign meaning he loves the SAR training.

LIVE NOW / Watch WAVY-TV 10 News at Noon

SUFFOLK

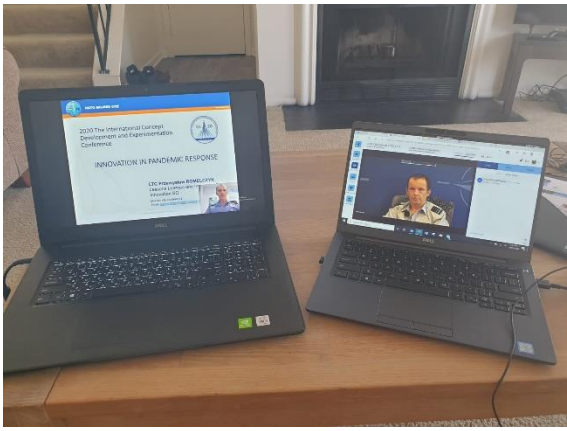
Elderly hunter found dead in Suffolk after he was reported missing

Conference

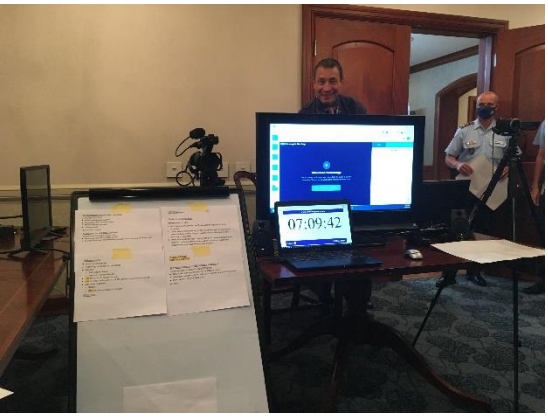
As you have read in the Corona files, Mid August I complained about the approach for our international conference and was dragged into the organization as what became the role of 'creative director'. I had nothing urgent planned in the months of September and October and thus I could spend some time on this challenge. There was no template to base the approach on. It was something completely new.



Simple ideas were hard to implement, sometimes because we had no experience and sometimes because the administration was not susceptible to the new approach. Even if you explain the new approach to people after a few days they fall back to the old thinking. No, we do not organize a webinar, no we organize a virtual conference with everything on it. We worked hard and long hours on solving problems and pushing things through the system. It was hectic till the final day of the conference as you can see on the 'Behind the Scenes'.



The four days of the conference were interesting, and we learned a lot, although some things, as predicted, went wrong (our blooper video illustrates that). Our team was ready for every challenge and there were a lot of them. Providing live streaming in a pop-up studio was something new. Watching the conference teaser knowing that when it ends you are live, is a very stressful period, I had to relive every day. I think there is a noticeable difference between my presentations skills on the opening of the first day and the last day.



Next edition will be a hybrid one, although I have not defined what that means. We will see it within a few months if going to Paris is an option and how to mix it with a virtual approach.



More Themes

Sports

It was not easy, but we decided that Seighin (number 18) could keep playing soccer. Soccer is a contact team sport and following the COVID19 distancing rules is nearly impossible. Soccer is not only training but also games and tournaments. More contacts, higher risks. What is the right balance between social contact (very limited as high school is the social center for American teenagers), keeping fit, and the infection risks?

A few months ago, visiting soccer fields, not the training sessions, was like entering a corona-free world, but slowly rules crept in. The first set was that the teams and their parents and supporters had to be on the same side of the field. No limitations on the number, but masks and social distancing had to be observed. No checks, however. The rules were there but not always followed. Certainly, after a game, it seemed that the applicability of the rules had stopped too.

Recently, the number of supporters was limited, and the ref had to count. If too many, he could stop the game and wait till the maximum was reached. I did not see that in practice but in the mind of the supporters that was enough to reconsider following the rules more strictly. During tournaments, teams play in limited pools. No extensive ladder system and no celebration of the champions. But the boys and girls can play.

Seighin's team is not playing well. It looks like they have lost the team spirit even though most of them were player last year in the same team. Strange.



Seighin and I are since September member of a fitness center close by. Although the Navy fitness rooms are open for active-duty military only, the few days that I work at the HQ would limit my sessions. We cannot drive to the Northwest Annex like we did before corona hit the USA because they are open for active-duty alone. Also, no group HIIT, only



individual sessions. If I have no early morning meeting or obligation, we visit the gym three times a week.

Calle plays tennis twice a week with the SOPC ladies in Little Creek. After that, she honors the routine of a Starbucks coffee, although less that during the first tour and buying groceries in the Commissary.

We try to run together our 5K three times a week, but we rarely succeed in that. Sometimes I just go running alone, a bit longer and faster, but I prefer our duo runs.

I do not know if it falls under sports; every weekend I am out in the woods for the SAR training. That means a lot of walking, hiking in deserted corners of State Parks. On those days hitting my daily objective of 13500 steps is a piece of cake.

Halloween

Thanks to the travel ban in our HQ, I was home for Halloween this year. In the week before Calle decorated the house for this American tradition and we went with Stone for an evening hunting decorated gardens. As expected, the Pisoni family has a very busy graveyard.

A few days before trick-or-treating, there is a storm turning the scary front yards into more realistically abandoned cemeteries. A pity that the non-zombies living owners cleaned up and resurrected these fields. Maybe it would have been too scary for the kids?







We doubted until the evening itself if there would be kids on candy hunt. How could we give candy without touching it? What about all those people walking in the streets? But the neighborhood was preparing for the evening pulling tent, chairs, tables… out, so it would happen. Our neighbors were busy the whole day to set up all their scary stuff (the day after they tore it all down). We dressed up in our costume and prepared the firepit on the driveway. During the evening walk before H-hour, I had noticed somebody had moved his to the front and we agreed to copy the idea. Three chairs, one extra for our headless friend, in a semi-circle around the fire, masks and gloves on. We were ready for the waves of trick-or-treaters. What followed was a steady stream of costumed visitors. Our Belgian chocolate was a popular treat.

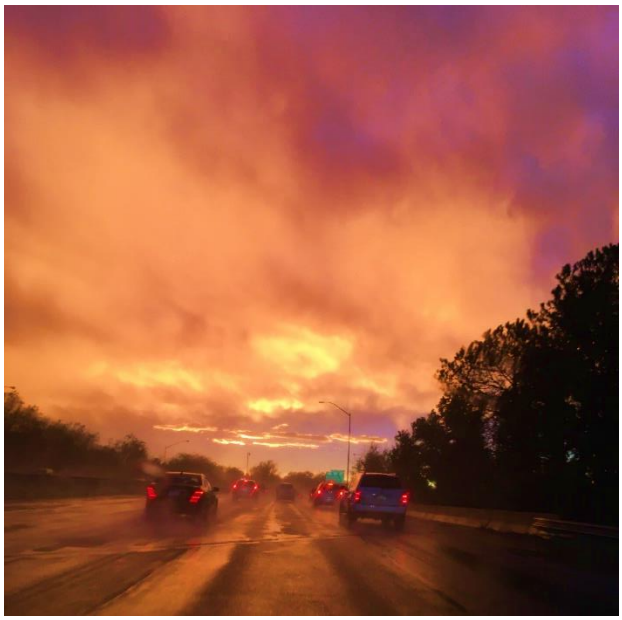


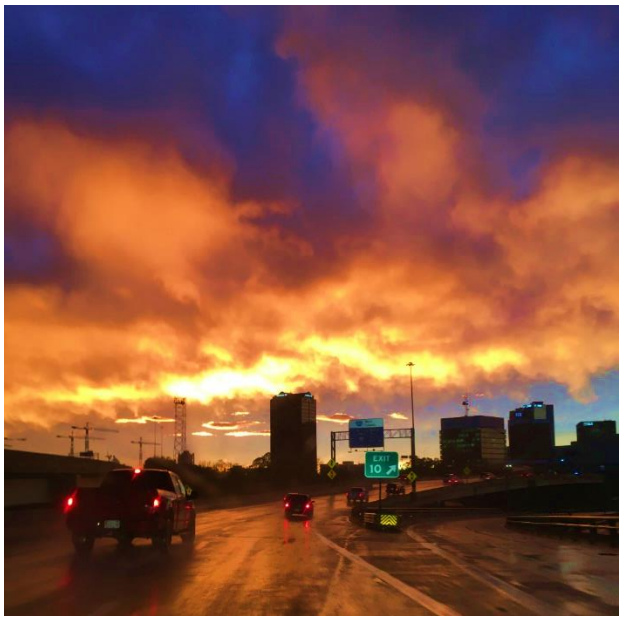


Two hours later and a half an hour before the official end, Sophia and Seighin took over the guard duty and we left for a quick tour in the community.

Scary sky

During one of my rare commutes, Waze advised me to take another route home. It was raining and that meant traffic accidents. The sky was full of a strangely apocalyptic and reddish light. It had something special. Hard to describes and certainly hard to condense in a picture. I tried to capture it with my 'car cam' App, but the effect is not that.







Elections

Presidential elections in the Shenandoah





One of the things we were looking forward to at the beginning of our second tour was the presidential elections. We had missed those in our first tour. However, as election day came closer the excitement cooled down and it looked like it would take a long time to know the results. Discussion about the legality of some aspects were already hot promising long struggles and a lot of recounting. Bad weather had spoiled our previous hiking weekend in the Shenandoah, we planned for a second try while many Americans would go voting. That it was cheaper was a nice extra.

Initially, we would go with two couples, but Carolyn took the opportunity of a military flight to visit the family and was replaced by Stephane. We hired a hiker's cabin from the company officially related to the National Park believing we would have something like the one rented from the PATC. We were in for a surprise. Yes, it was a cabin, but there was nothing in it except two bunks beds and a small wood stove. Primitive!



Once arrived, we enjoyed a little walk in the vicinity of the deserted campsite and noticed that it was very cold. Very cold and windy. Luckily, the wood was for free. I loaded at least 12 packages of wood just the be sure because I did not want to disrupt the renter's sleep for more fuel. Unfortunately, the wood was a bit wet and needed drying before burning, which complicated things.

Stephane and Lieven took care of the first dinner: BBQ. It took a while before the fire pit was hot enough to grill and so we enjoyed a long aperitive. It was worth the wait, and we were hungry. Stone also appreciated the grilled meat.



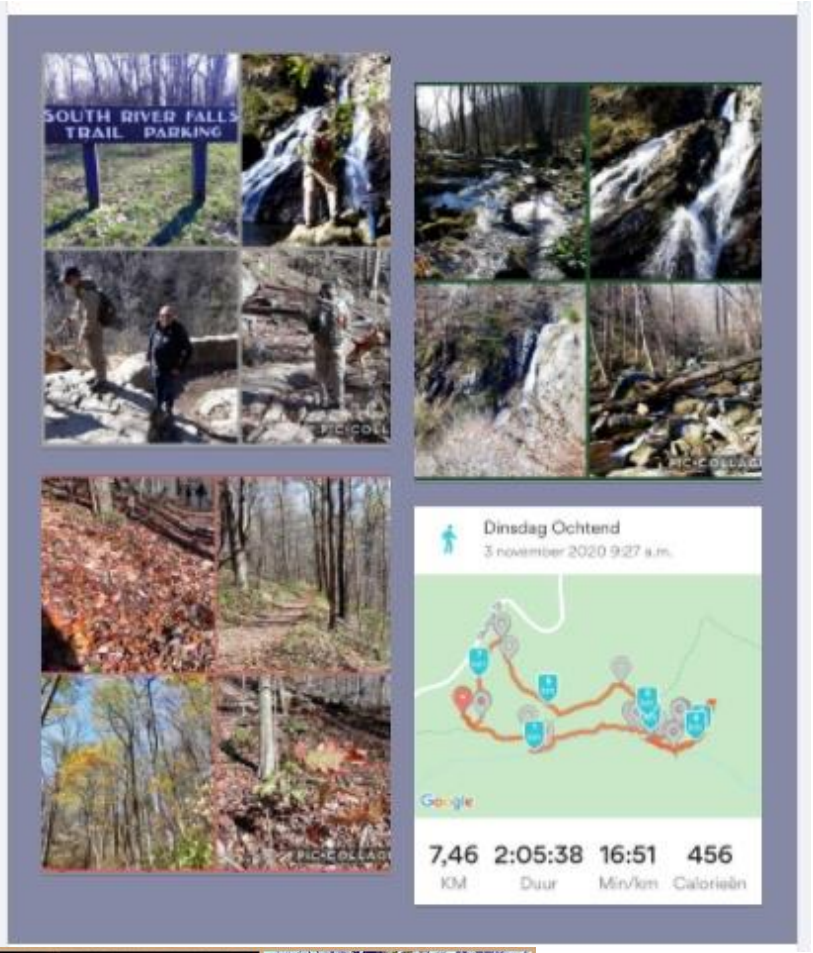


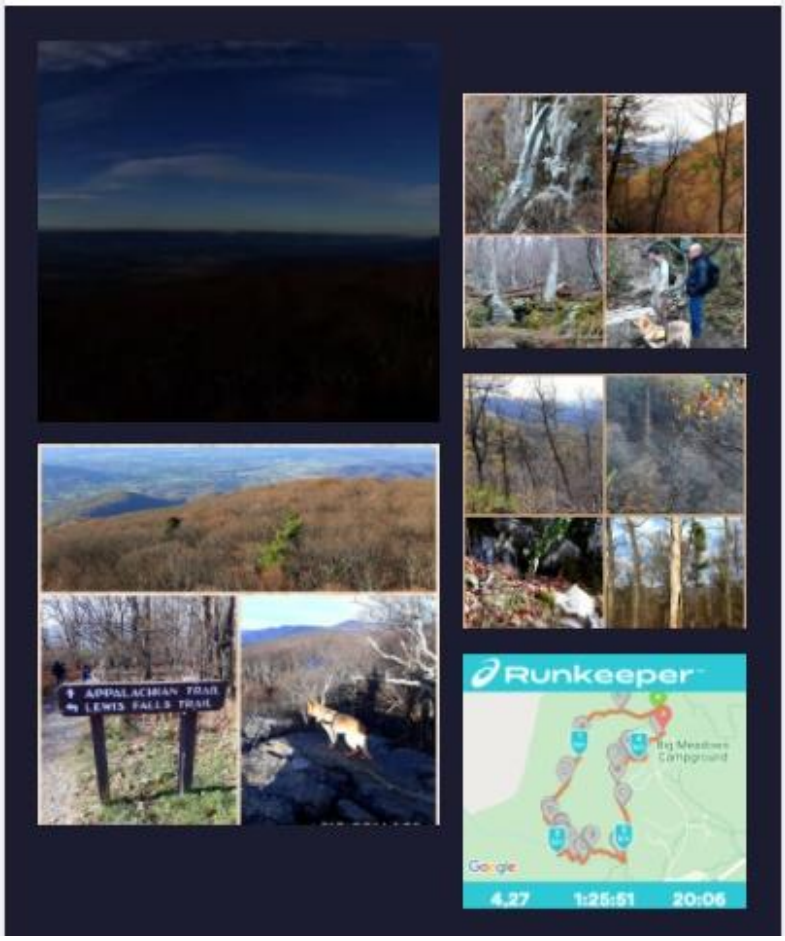
After the reinforcement of the inner human, it was time to make our beds and go to sleep. Ice on the rocks our way up warned us that it was cold the previous nights. Without somebody responsible for keeping the stove warm, it would be a very cold night. There was an icy wind, and the lodge was unprotected against the elements. Stone would not suffer from the cold thanks to his fur and he was sleeping on the floor at the same height of the stove. Our fur is less thick, and we slept further from the heat source.

Our plan did not work well as the fireguards had a hard time to stay awake. Our stove ran out of fuel a few times and we had to restart the thing. We survived the coldest night in the Shenandoah this year, till now! The second night was less cold because there was no wind.

Elections

The purpose of these two days in the mountains was to hike. We started with a known hike: the South River Falls. A nice walk with almost nobody else on the trail. After our lunch in the cabin with Stephane, we did not join during the hike because he was suffering from his allergy, we decided to walk to the Lewis falls. This is a steep walk with loose stones hidden under tons of leaves.





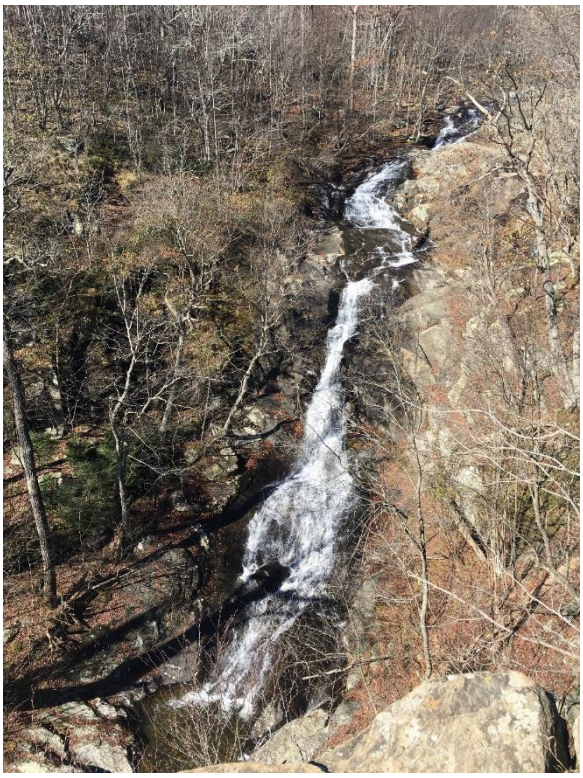


The canned dinner tasted well after those hikes. This night we would sleep alone as the others rode back home. Luckily, we did not need a fireguard to keep the cabin warm.

A good night's sleep and ready for the second day of hiking. A bit longer this time. We pick the Whiteoak and modify it a bit. Normally it is a return trip, but we make it a loop by traversing the river following a fire lane and returning via the Appalachian Trail. There are more hikers on our path.

The views were worth the cold and the effort. We end our two days off with a cappuccino on a terrasse. Sucking up the last rays of mountain sun.







Veterans Day



I was ready to participate in the memorial service at the City Hall. All dressed up, I check the parking place and see that it is replaced by a virtual ceremony. Not unexpected.

It is nice outside, but the forecast promises rain for this evening. I prepare the BBQ for this noon instead of the evening as planned. Now that I do not have to show up in my nicest uniform, we better enjoy the good weather while it can.

Although on this day military people get extra discounts, we stay at home enjoying the day off.

Flooding

The next day, the water was everywhere. Some cars were flooded on the parking lots in the HQ. Oldtimers know this risk and park their cars at high places, but the new ones do not know this. Luckily, Calle was away with the big Chrysler. She arrived home safely. For me, driving the Prius C, it is another story. Forest Lakes is not 100% accessible. Not risking flooding the car, I park on a high spot and walk through the gardens to our home.

We never saw it that bad. Tomorrow will be cleaning up day.



Happy Birthday

Calle's birthday

It happens every year. It could/would have been special. However, Calle did not want to celebrate it big, although I was planning for a kind of a surprise. Of course, 'big' is something relative related to 'party' and 'corona'.

The celebration activities on the 17th were limited to some snack with her tennis pals and an improvised birthday cake home.



Friday, 05 December 2020

The following weekend, we went for dinner with three in some fancy restaurant. It was the first time we used a valet parking and had figure out what it was on the spot. A service not fully compatible with corona safety.

The restaurant was fine, but a bit too expensive for what they offered. They were neglecting the details that would have justified the price of the meal. Eating is not only about food.

Course

Based on the experience with the platform during the conference, I, as the new responsible for the concept development & experimentation course, decided to use the same platform for a virtual edition. Normally, this course is given in the NATO School in Oberammergau guaranteeing me a trip to the German-Austrian mountains and a stay in hotel Arnika twice a year. However, leaving this routine, we had to cancel the iteration of last May.

In August, we were confronted with another cancellation due to the travel ban. I concluded that we could not afford to skip the Fall iteration. It is possible that the next iteration will be a no-go in Oberammergau and people would expect a good virtual alternate by that time. Something we could not promise without a first try. I decided that this time was a good as any to try it.

So, after the conference, I was recording voice-over tapes to add to the course slides. To limit the live sessions to the interactive parts, as we did for the conference, we had to make educational videos of the theoretical parts. This was a hard thing to do. Unfortunately, the videos were must shorter than the in-person sessions. Some Info must go lost in the process. We will need to improve that.

The big unknown was the group work sessions. How would people work together in a virtual environment? Well, that part went better than expected. Everybody gained experience on how to do that and how to use interactive tools. This was an unexpected added value of the course.

Most people were satisfied with the final result. We, the instructor team, have a nice list of things to improve within the coming months. Things that we could use, even if we will be allowed to travel to Germany.

Thanksgiving



We had invited Mark and Alex, the couple Loic came in contact during his year in Delaware, for Thanksgiving but they declined it. Their state colored red and they did not want to risk it. Understandable.

This did not leave our table empty. We had invited Carolyn and Lieven too and added late Stephane who was alone in the USA. Not a full table, but enough to have a good evening enjoying a Thanksgiving dinner. No, I did not prepare a full turkey. Too much hassle for the whole day.

Christmas decorations

A few days after the disappearance of the Halloween graveyard, Christmas decorations started popping up. I believe the season started earlier than the previous years. Calle went decoration hunting with the cellphone in her hands while Stone and I minded our own business.



We decided to put up some lights ourselves. No decorations in the house, only outside to prevent giving the impression that we are gone to Belgium. Of course, that means that our lights will be on while all the neighbors have pulled theirs down. But that is traditional with us.



Calle found at Kroger a particular Belgian edition of a Christmas tree.

First real meal



Suddenly, we were contacted via WhatsApp to witness Lily-Rose's first solid meal. A bit strange, but fun to see our granddaughter evolving. Looking forward to meeting her in person.



To Belgium



The plan was to fly to Belgium for the Christmas holidays this year. We did not know when and how. Dates were flexible because Seighin follows high school online and has no need to be in school to do that. He could attend the courses in Belgium. With the time difference, these would happen in the afternoon and evening, but that was a minor nuisance. I had still lots of 2020 leave days left and also an online course in December.

We did not know who would pay for it as the approval for a year extension would mean that we received an extra ticket to fly to Belgium. Somewhere in November, another opportunity presented itself. A military plane, the leased Falcon 7x, would fly to Tampa, FL, to pick-up some pilots after their training and there were some seats left. If there were candidates, they would ask if the plane could stop in Andrews Air Base near Washington DC. We did not need much time to decide. We would tackle the how and when for the return once we were in Belgium.

With the when and how solved, we had to decide on another matter.

What about Stone?



Because we knew it well in advance that we would fly over the pond, I had already informed in the K9 SAR group if somebody was willing to take care of Stone. I was surprised that two persons volunteered. That question was answered and of our mind.

During one of the training sessions, Ellen, our dog coach, mentioned that she does dog boarding too. After considering the pros and cons, we decided to go for that option. Stone's basic training has a higher priority than his SAR training and being boarded with his trainer will support that. Also, he knows her well and we hope that this change will be less stressful for him.



So, on Sunday 06 December, Seighin and I were driving to North-Carolina to drop off Stone while Calle prepared our luggage. It was a quick transfer, less than 5 minutes.

Strange how quickly you miss a dog in the house.

Tuesday, 08 December 2020

On the road again



It has been a while, but today we will fly again. We go against the advice of a few weeks ago when the CDC and the Virginia Department of Health strongly advised against travel. Several parts of the USA are reporting that medical services are approaching full capacity and staff and their families may struggle to access treatment when travelling. However, we will not travel through the USA, but to Andrews to catch a flight to Belgium. I do not think that advice is meant for us.

The hours before our leave are the usual hectic. The biggest challenge is limiting our luggage to 20 kg each and one piece of hand luggage with a maximum of 5 kg. Not an easy task as we need winter clothing and some nice stuff for the holidays. I do not succeed fully in my mission as the three suitcases are between 20 and 21 kg.

The drive to Andrews is uneventful. We discover snow around Richmond, but the sky is clear in the Washington area. Although our CAC card, i.e. US military ID card, should give us access to the base, entry is refused. We need some document that we are not aware of. Luckily, we are picked up by the line protocol.



After a self-corona test, no passport check, and a bit of waiting in an empty VIP room, we are called to board. A very nice but small plane is waiting for us.

The service is excellent, and although we were told that there would be no meals, we get dinner. A nice dinner. We have very much enjoyed the flight to Belgium.

Early in the morning, we arrive in Melsbroek. We must wait a few minutes for an entry check by the police. A quick check and we are

off to Zoersel. Luckily Papie was there to pick us up and drive us to our pool house for a week of quarantine.



On Belgian soil again

Thanks to the good preparation and the care of the Pieters-Feyen family, our stay in their backyard is agreeable. Seighin does his homework in the morning and attends classes in the afternoon. I am occupied with almost the same routine; except I have two exams. Not the most interesting course, but something to keep me busy.

I try to have a daily walk in the neighborhood to reach my steps objective. Calle and I want to pick up our routine of going for a run. Will we succeed?

Our quarantine clock is set on zero. It can start ticking. Once it reaches 7 days, we will go for a test to see if we are 'free' again. Freedom limited by COVID rules and common sense.



Surprise

Another birthday



Against my own advice, I take a morning nap on our first day back in Belgium. Normally, I do not do that because it may make the jetlag worse, but I had no meetings planned the coming days. The only thing I must do is following an online course. The sessions start at 1400 because it is for our HQ in the USA. The rest of the day is a bit dazing around for us, although Seighin attends his classes as good as he can.

The next day, my birthday, we are late up and a good night's sleep. That does not mean that the jetlag is history. The first night normally goes relatively well, the following nights are bad. We are late for breakfast but I blame it on our sleep deficit. Suddenly, Amber, Sander, and Lily-Rose are there, for brunch with a full load of Belgian bakery delights. Very nice surprise.



We are careful in our greeting, keeping distance, and wearing masks. After the meal, Amber asks me if I want to hold Lily-Rose. An offer I cannot refuse, although I do not want to get her infected, you never know. I enjoy this moment after 7 months. A nice birthday surprise.

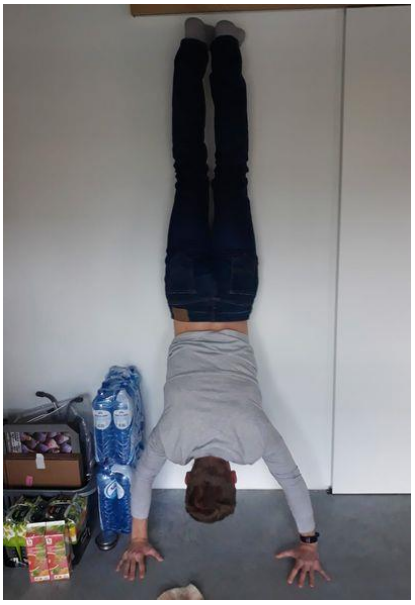
Strange duck in own village

It is not the first time that we stay in this pool house but somehow it feels different this time. During my (almost) daily walk I feel like a stranger. Inside the house, I get a glimpse of the feeling illegal immigrants have when into hiding, of not being 'allowed'. We are in self-imposed, post-travel quarantine because we did not receive a text related to our passenger form telling us to stay home. Also, the rules do not take expats returning home for the holidays into account. Are people with the same reference address considered as living under the same roof? Even if they reside across continents? Anyhow, we try to play it safe and limit our exposure to the practical level.

We receive visits from Amber, Sander, Lily-Rose, mamie and papie. All with the necessary precautions, although we tend to loosen the applications a bit. Not a very smart thing as we are not tested yet.

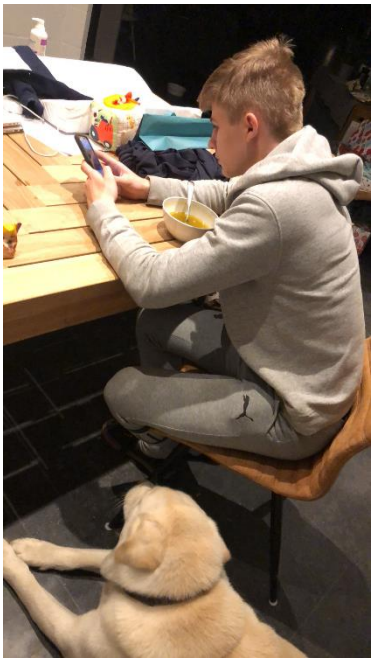
Wednesday, 09 December 2020

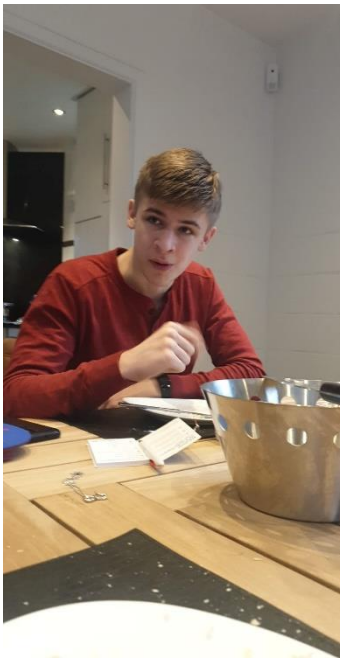
The following days, we have a daily routine of breakfast, preparing for the course/class in the afternoon, lunch, online course/class, running, walking in the neighborhood, dinner, and a movie. Sometimes we go shopping, but these excursions are limited. Calle takes care of the administration and the Christmas cards. Being in Belgium, Chrisje from the Hippocampus redaction comes by to give me the year's end gift. The new NELOS book on sport diving, a bottle of champagne (the one I offer to the others when in the USA), and a face mask. The latter is nice because with Skubba & Fred illustrations.





For the weekend Ciaran stays with us, while Seighin goes to his sister. Their dogs are happy to see him again after almost a year of absence.





Surprise

While the first shots were given in the American mass vaccination campaign on Monday morning. The coronavirus death toll in the U.S. passed 300,000. Over the past week, there has been an average of 210,112 new cases per day, an increase of 30 per cent from the average two weeks earlier.

After the no-so-interesting online course on Managing Successful Programmes, I have to take the exams. The fees are paid and I feel that if you attend a course paid by NATO, you have somehow the obligation to take the exams, even if you think that the course missed its objective. The first online exam is a closed book and not that hard. The second one is an open book, that means I may use only the handbook but is a typical Anglosaxian test format. Multiple choice playing with wording. Not really probing at your understanding of the content but at your ability to read and interpret English. I hate those. Anyhow, I passed both exams after a few days of preparation. No idea what I will do with this extra knowledge.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Mark Basham, CEO, AXELOS
Panorala Theleriti, Certification Qualifier, PeopleCert

Next one to join us is Loic. He flies over to Belgium on Thursday evening and stays the night with Amber and Sander. The next day he joins us at the pool house.

During the week, Calle takes the necessary steps to get us corona tests. Officially, and this is a bit strange, we are not obliged but we decided that getting tested is a prudent measure and would give us some peace of mind. By the end of the second week, we will all be tested, and hopefully, all will be fine.



Verdomme

Intro

In the beginning, it was not clear to me and I am not sure it is now, so I hope you will bear with me as this might get a bit complicated. I will try to give the whole story but may drop a few details on the road.

If you plan to travel to Belgium, you must fill out a Passenger Locator Form in the 48 hours before your arrival. Part of it is a self-assessment questionnaire. Based on your answers, the form will calculate your corona risk. If the assessment is high, you get a text message that you must stay in quarantine. This is the case when you fly in from a red zone. The text message also contains a code with which you can get tested. If you do not receive a message, there is no need to go into quarantine.

Quarantine means preventive isolation to limit the possible spread of the coronavirus. It is not isolation means because that means you must stay at home with stricter rules.

No text equals home free. Well as free as you can under the Belgian corona rules. Right?

Negative tests

Flying in from the USA, definitely a red zone, we expected a text message telling us to stay in quarantine and get a test. No such thing before we set foot on Belgian soil. Maybe, we will get one later? Anyhow, we had decided to go into a self-imposed post-travel quarantine period, just to be on the safe side. Without a text message, there was no need for such a measure and testing was not mandatory either.



Our quarantine countdown clock starts at 7 days.

During the first week of wearing masks, keeping distance, limiting contacts, only get outside for urgent groceries, Calle arranges to get all four of our quarantine bubble a test code. This code is necessary to book an appointment for a corona nose swap leading to a test result.

On the Wednesday after our arrival, Calle and I go for a test, followed by Seighin on Thursday and Loic the day after. Within 24 hours we get the result, luckily not the 10 days it took the US Navy clinic. We are negative.

Positive news

On Friday evening, I get a call from the federal COVID center telling me that I have been in contact with an infected person and that I need to go in quarantine again. Completely overwhelmed by this surprising news, I try to figure out who that could be. They do not

give me a name, just the day of the possible transfer. Wednesday. I have not been in contact with somebody. It is too soon to know the result from Loic, and Seighin cannot be it because he did not leave the pool house, except for a weekend with his sister. By the time I figured it out, Calle and Amber arrive confirming my suspicion: it must be Seighin.

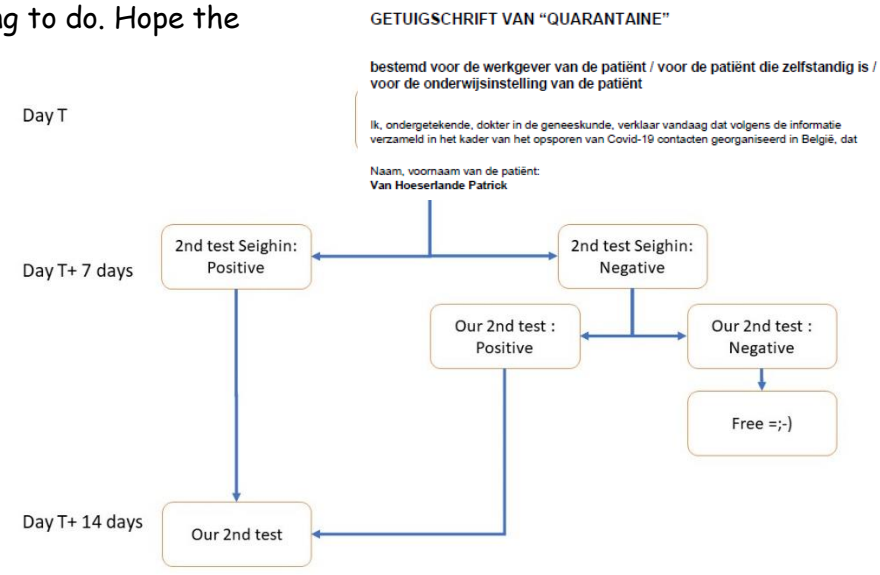
The lady on the other side explains what I must do, I listen but not with full attention. I must go in quarantine and get a test 7 days after the day of contact, i.e., 18 December. Unless Seighin stays with us. As that will be the case, we must stay 14 days in quarantine before being tested and wait for a negative result. If all goes well, that means about 17 days in our backyard hide-out. I am not sure I follow but say that I have understood it. Thanks and enjoy the holidays.

When we collect the Info, we got from the different calls, we get completely confused as there are differences in data and interpretations. Also, how could Seighin test positive and we not? If he is, where did he get it? During his weekend with his sister? Is there a mix up because we swapped the appointments of the two boys? Or are we dealing with a false positive? Should we go for a retest?



We decide that it must be a false positive and that the best approach is to go another 7 days in hiding. We rest our quarantine countdown clock at 7 days. Although they only go back two days, Amber finds it wise to go in quarantine because they had Seighin over last weekend and is working very susceptible patients.

Maybe, I need some explaining to do. Hope the illustration explains better our thinking. After again 7 days, Seighin could go for a test. If that test turns out positive, the first one was right, and we stay locked away for another 7 days plus the wait time for the test results. If that test is negative, it must be a false negative. Just to be sure, we go for a second test too. This should confirm our thinking and we are all free. If one result is positive, we just go for another round of quarantine, right? With this flow of logic, we have got a chance of a late family Christmas reunion.



Verdomme

Calle sends an e-mail to our family doctor to confirm our strategy and to get a test code for Seighin. Although we have received 4 codes after the COVID alert call, none is for Seighin. Following our scheme, we will soon need second tests and because getting an appointment in the short term is difficult, she starts fixing those. In case we are wrong, it is easy to delay the appointments.



het volgende:
Deze persoon is arbeidsgeschikt / kan onderwijs ontvangen, maar mag zich niet naar de werkplek / school of andere onderwijsinstelling begeven

van **18/12/2020** tot **28/12/2020** (inbegrepen).

omdat de patiënt een hoog risico contact had met een persoon die positief testte op Covid-19

Een staalafname voor een PCR-test kan worden afgenomen vanaf **25/12/2020**.
De reservering voor de staalafname kan gebeuren via : https://testcovid.doclr.be
Voor meer informatie over isolatie en quarantaine: https://www.info-coronavirus.be/nl/quarantaine-isolatie/

Dit getuigschrift betreft:
☒ het begin van de quarantaine
De woning verlaten is niet toegestaan.

Overeenkomstig het artikel 47 van het decreet van 21 november 2003 betreffende het preventieve gezondheidsbeleid kunnen maatregelen tot afzondering opgelegd worden,
waarbij bij niet naleving van deze maatregelen een proces-verbaal kan worden opgesteld en eventuele strafsancties kunnen volgen overeenkomstig het artikel 79 van voornoemd decreet waaronder een gevangenisstraf tot zes maanden of/en een geldboete tot 500 euro.

In naam van de afdeling preventie - team Infectieziektebestrijding en Vaccinatie van het agentschap Zorg en Gezondheid

Identificatie van de arts met RIZIV-nummer: **1 1585 362**

Dirk WILDEMEERSCH

Date : 19/12/2020

Seighin feels guilty for causing the trouble and being the reason for changing our plans. There is nothing to be sorry about as he was and is the most prudent of us.

Negative?

On Monday morning, Amber calls us saying that the family doctor Anke has contacted her to tell that there might be a mistake in the results. She received a message that Seighin's test was negative. She will try to make sure and will contact us in the afternoon.



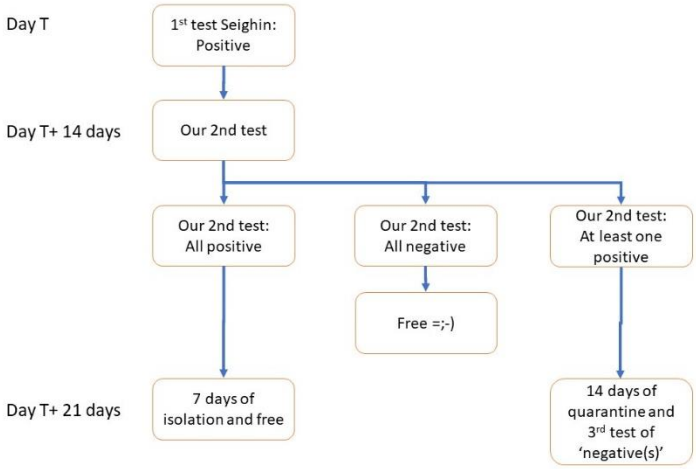
That makes more sense. A confirmation would be great news. We do not cancel our festivity plans yet and we also keep our test appointments. We still have time to adapt it all. On Monday afternoon, no phone call but an e-mail saying that it is not sorted out yet. Tomorrow?

Our quarantine count down clock set on zero?

No luck

A day later, we get a mail telling us that there is no mistake. It was just a mix-up because Seighin was twice in the system. The negative test result was Loic's.

Also, our logical flow is not right. Once tested positive, you are not supposed to take a second test. After seven days of quarantine, you are free. We may not get tested a week later. We must wait seven plus seven days, thus 14 days after the positive test of Seighin. Why? A person is infectious the first (5?) days of getting corona. To be on the safe side this period is extended to seven days. Because they cannot know when somebody was infected, they take the day of the positive test as the day of the infection. That person



can infect others during the coming week. So, if you live with that person, you can get infected during that week. If you test negative a week thereafter (thus 14 days after the positive test), you were not infected. If positive, you were but your infectious period is already old news. Normally, you should be free to go, but the instruction tells you to stay another 7 days in quarantine. Why? Question: what if one is positive and another negative? Well, I guess that person must stay another 14 days in quarantine. Not sure.

Another question: what about Seighin? Being positive he is temporarily immune to corona and that period may end while we are in quarantine, but he is not tested again. And even if he would get tested, what does another positive result mean?



So, we reset our countdown clock to 14 days (minus the days we are already in quarantine).

Calle starts rescheduling our test appointments to 31 December. With the closure of the laboratories during the holidays, the result will be known after the weekend, on Monday, January the 4th at best. That leaves us a few days to organize a family reunion before we leave. Unfortunately, that also means that Christmas and New Year will be celebrated in small bubbles with Ciaran a bubble of one. The poor boy.

The next unanswered question is if Seighin is allowed to fly back with a positive test result. You may not fly with a recent positive result, but nowhere to be found what recent means. Something to ask before we book a flight back. I hope we do not have to wait till a negative test result.

Not the kind of holiday we have planned and that because we wanted to play it safe because as told, we did not need to take a test. Now, we must wait in quarantine for the result of our second test.



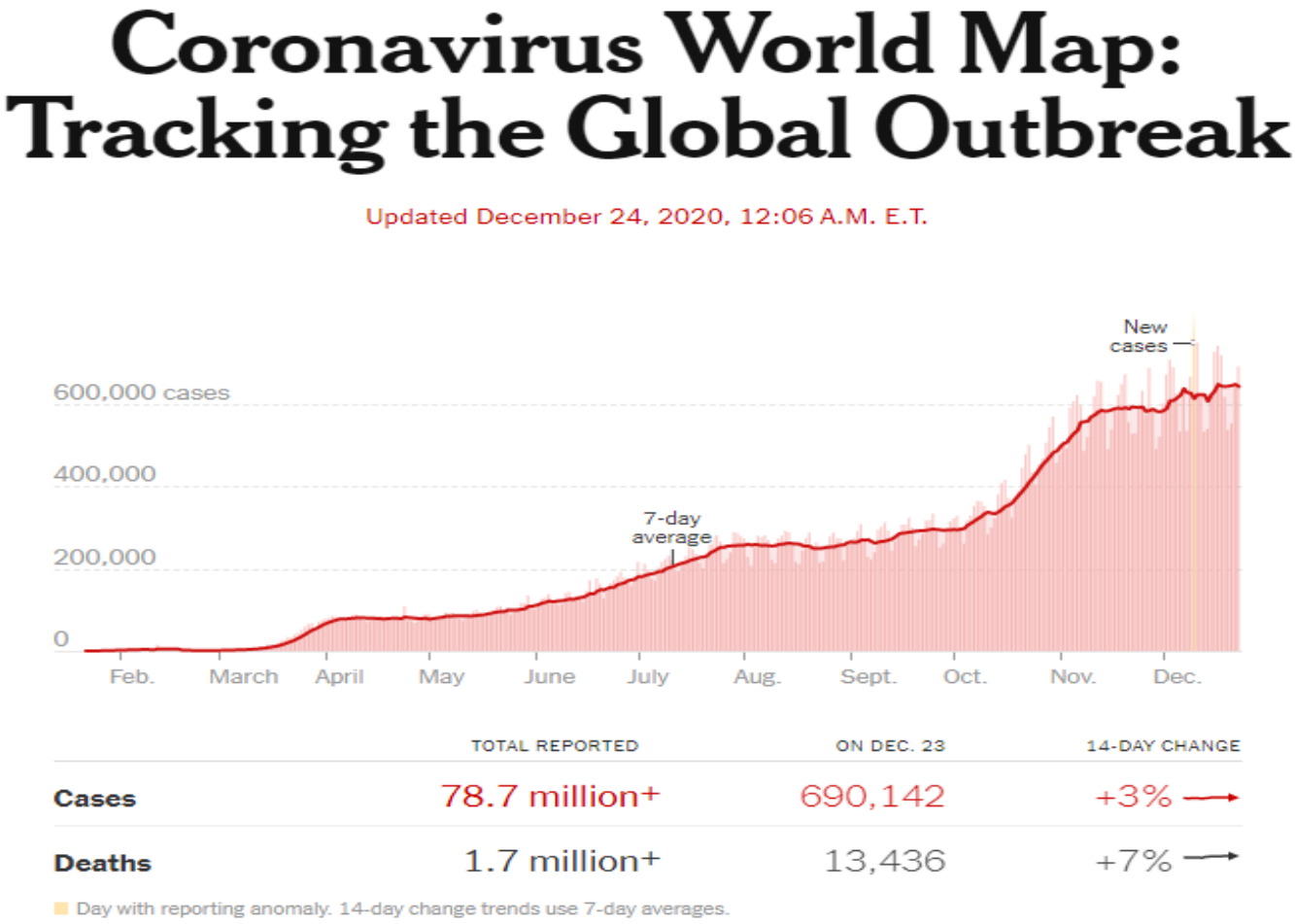
Christmas

The day before

As explained in the previous two-pager, a small virus has spoiled our original plans for a Christmas family reunion. Not having a plan B, we need to improvise. The new plan is to stick with the 'van Gils' tradition of a fondue meal on Christmas eve combined with a virtual reunion. If a tiny thing forces us to change our plans, other smaller things will help us with our new plan.

In the morning Ciaran asks if he may order a home delivery meal. Of course, he may. He will be in a bubble of one, while the rest can celebrate in larger ones. We discover that it is hard to keep secrets in the pool house because of the almost perfect acoustics when Loic asks us about a special delivery for Ciaran. First, we have no clue to what he is referring, but finally, we understand that heard us talking with his brother. Ah, ordering a special Christmas meal.

Across Italy and beyond, many people were looking forward to Christmas with loved ones to soothe the heartache of a year of mourning. But with a surge in infections, mounting numbers of deaths and new lockdowns dashing those hopes, "home for the holidays" has



Thursday, 24 December 2020

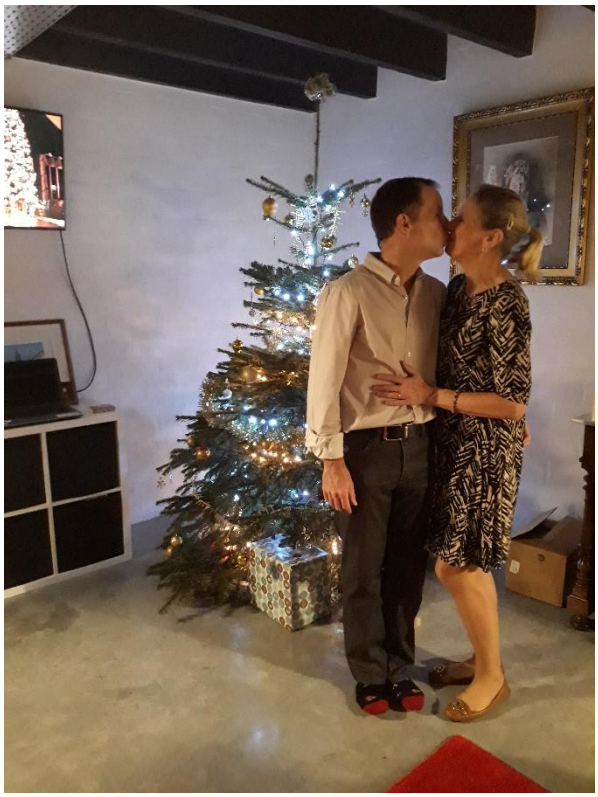
taken on an ominous meaning: There is nowhere else to go. According to Loic, the government had temporarily made Italy an orange zone to give people the possibility to travel to their hometown before closing all down again. People are not allowed to leave town under condition red.



Humanity is not winning the battle against the virus, yet. The holidays will make our fight even harder with a further rise of cases. The promise of vaccination may make things worse in the beginning and lead to confusion. Why would a vaccinated person apply the corona rules? And if they do not follow them, how will these rules be enforced? What about shame, if you are the one with a face mask because you are not vaccinated yet?

We first have a short visit by Papie bringing some things for this evening. Soon followed by the threesome Amber, Sander, and Lily-Rose. We intend to walk the dogs, but rain destroys this plan after about 500 meters. Backtrack to our start point.





For our Christmas lunch, we still miss some cranberries. On the bike again to see if there are back in store. Tomorrow, most stores will be closed, so it is now or not. They are. Good.

In the preparation for our dinner, I must shuttle a few times between our host family and their pool house. It is surprising how many small things you miss in the kitchen. Even for something simple as a fondue. After a good, long aperitive, we have dinner while Ciaran, Amber, Sander, and Lily-Rose are online. Not what we have planned, but at least we are together. It is around one o'clock when we hit our bed. The two boys stay awake to play a few games.

Christmas



We did not plan breakfast. Brunch would be early enough. Of course, somebody must bike and pick up the order from the bakery. This is certainly something we miss in the USA. There is a special line to the garage of the bakery for prepaid orders. I do not have to wait in the long line habitual on Sundays and special days.

A few days ago, Seighin remarked that most face masks in Belgium are of the single-use type unlike in the USA where people mostly wear self-made or personalized masks. Is this a sign that the distribution of surgical masks was better and that there was no need to make a DIY mask? Or do American like masks with a personal touch?

After our brunch, we get Mamie and Papie as guests. They come just at the door for a little chat and a few bubbles (of the drinking kind). A bit strange, but a wise precaution.

Soon after they have left, Jelle and Koen arrive. We start outside in the warmth, and the smoke, of the firepit. Seighin tries to keep it burning and succeed in it, barely. After a while, it starts raining, again, pushing us inside to continue.

The third duo of visitors of the day is Amber and Sander, and of course Lily-Rose. The latter steals the show and attract everybody's attention. It has been a full day.

After the disaster with the pizza, I try the steam oven for this evening's dinner. Calle is reluctant, but I am willing to take the risk. Luckily, it works fine, and the result is great. Family movie of the evening is 'Home Alone' (yes, I did miss my annual 'The Battle of the Bulge' moment).


HOME ALONE
A FAMILY COMEDY WITHOUT THE FAMILY


BATTLE OF THE BULGE
HENRY FONDA ROBERT SHAW ROBERT RYAN DANA ANDREWS
PG



Another Year?

Bad news

A few months ago, I had introduced a Model B, the form to ask something related to Human Resource, with the request to stay another year in the USA. That way I could end my military career here in an interesting and challenging job. I fact I had to introduce it twice, first on paper, then via the new HR IT system. The aim was to get a decision before they publish my post. However, they classified my request without consequence, and I had to wait for the new call for candidates before I could apply for my current post. This made no sense because why opening a post if you let somebody stay for another year? I suspected then that they honestly considered pulling me out of the USA to go to waste for a year in Belgium.

Not trusting the way our HR department handles things, I look for a plan B and found it in applying for a civilian job in this HQ. The job opening is in the Operational Experimentation branch and should match my profile. However, my wish is to end my career as active-duty military, not as a civilian.

During the CD&E conference in October, I receive a call from my personnel manager thinking it is positive news. Very early in the chat I reckon that it is not good news. He must look for a job for one year for me. He does want not to do it, but he must. He asks me if I fulfilled a very important role in the HQ and is clearly fishing for arguments to keep me in the USA. I feel sorry for him. The final decision will be made on 01 Dec 20, leaving little time to act.

Doing his job, he asks me what I would want to do if the decision of my return stays. I tell him that I do not want to return to the Defense staff and certainly not to my former department. I had enough time as a staff rat under my belt and do not look forward to adding another 12 months. If I must go, I want to serve my last year in a unit. Back to the real action. No more paper pushing. I feel that there is no job for somebody with my profile anymore.

Shortly after that call, I go live. Not a good preparation for that but I need to stay professional. Why did he have to call? Why do the ones taking the decision not have the nerve to call me? Not an example of the human side of our HR department.

As soon as I find the time, I try to get Info on the decision-making process. It seems that there is an internal HR decision to use the retirement date of 01 Jan 23 as the cut-off. All those before will get approved, all after get refused. As mine is exactly that day, my extension will be refused even though there is no real job for me in Belgium.

A few weeks later, I have my career manager again while watching Seighin's soccer game.

He is still fighting for an extension of my stay and mentions that already two generals have intervened on my behalf influencing towards a positive outcome.

In his opinion, a letter from HQ SACT could help tip the balance and would certainly do no harm. We talk about my intention to send a letter to the CHOD and he agrees that it is a kind of last resort, but one that could succeed. He would give it another try (and he some extra arguments) this week and promises to contact me by the end of the week (the decision date is moved to the 'right'). If unsuccessful, I can send the letter without compromising his efforts.

My branch head wants to help me, but from experience I know that that will only support a positive decision, not changing it. NATO requirements have little effect on Belgian HR decisions as they see posts abroad as something they must fill, not as something valuable. The only chance I have is to ask support from people with influence on the national system. So, I send a few e-mails.

Of course, this is not only about me. It would be great if Seighin could finish here with a full high school career and Calle would like to stay too.

Good news

The NLR is not fully supportive of my request for another year. He is only considered with having the posts filled with the right people. Being right somewhat loosely defined. The BH on the other hand is very much concerned as he knows my worth in the process. Of course, an HQ will survive my departure, but it will lose certain things.

It is quite for a while and little Info trickles down. On Wednesday, November 25th, I receive an e-mail saying that all is arranged. I may stay till August 2022. I may not tell the good news till it is official to make sure that nobody intervenes because interference could jeopardize the decision. We can start planning again. However, we are cautious because as long as it is not official anything can happen.

I decide not to send my letter to the CHOD. I prefer this issue being resolved within the HR department than bothering our highest general with it.

The request not to tell anybody placed me in an awkward position towards my branch head and NLR. I could not tell them the reason why a supporting letter was no longer needed or even desired. I had to find a way around it.

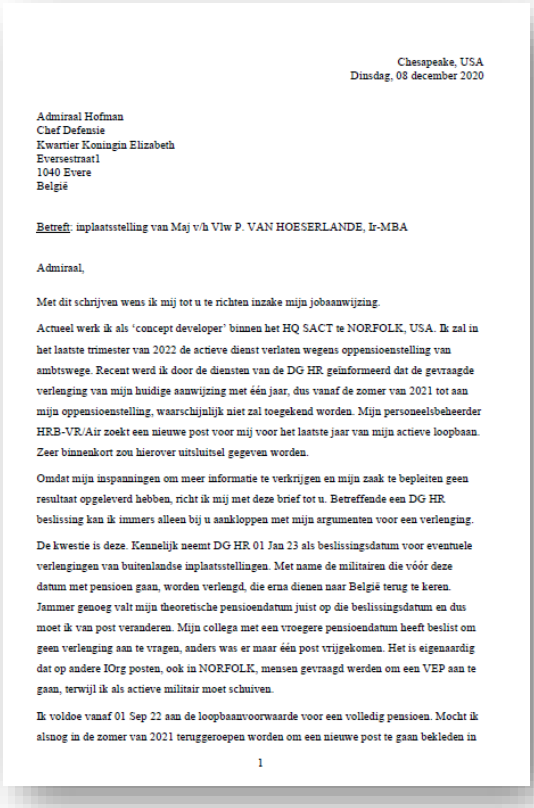
Bad again

During my drive to Andrews Air Base for our flight to Belgium, I receive a call with the bad news that the decision was revoked after the NLR contacted the HR department. The

story goes that he called an office not aware of the decision of which the head did not agree. Formally, that was not necessary because that service only needs to be involved if there is a disagreement, but that was not the case. From then on it went downhill. I did not get to hear the details as it was labelled internal business. Anyhow, we are impacted by the result.

The morning after, I mail my letter to our CHOD and additional Info to his Aide de Camp. The latter replies that the CHOD has received my letter and that he also questions the logic of the decision. Could something good come from that?

The next day, I receive an e-mail from a colonel working in the Strategic department telling me that he was informed that I will be transferred to that department. Oh no. They do not only call me back, but they also want to put me in the job I explicitly asked not to be assigned to. Do they really want to demotivate me?



Chesapeake, USA
Dinsdag, 08 december 2020

Admiraal Hofman
Chef Defensie
Kwartier Koningin Elizabeth
Eversestraat1
1040 Evere
België

Betreft: inplaatsstelling van Maj v/h Vlw P. VAN HOESERLANDE, Ir-MBA

Admiraal,

Met dit schrijven wens ik mij tot u te richten inzake mijn jobaanwijzing.

Actueel werk ik als 'concept developer' binnen het HQ SACT te NORFOLK, USA. Ik zal in het laatste trimester van 2022 de actieve dienst verlaten wegens oppensioenstelling van ambtswege. Recent werd ik door de diensten van de DG HR geïnformeerd dat de gevraagde verlenging van mijn huidige aanwijzing met één jaar, dus vanaf de zomer van 2021 tot aan mijn oppensioenstelling, waarschijnlijk niet zal toegekend worden. Mijn personeelsbeheerder HRB-VR/Air zoekt een nieuwe post voor mij voor het laatste jaar van mijn actieve loopbaan. Zeer binnenkort zou hierover uitsluitsel gegeven worden.

Omdat mijn inspanningen om meer informatie te verkrijgen en mijn zaak te bepleiten geen resultaat opgeleverd hebben, richt ik mij met deze brief tot u. Betreffende een DG HR. beslissing kan ik immers alleen bij u aankloppen met mijn argumenten voor een verlenging.

De kwestie is deze. Kennelijk neemt DG HR 01 Jan 23 als beslissingsdatum voor eventuele verlengingen van buitenlandse inplaatsstellingen. Met name de militairen die vóór deze datum met pensioen gaan, worden verlengd, die eraa dienen naar België terug te keren. Jammer genoeg valt mijn theoretische pensioendatum juist op die beslissingsdatum en dus moet ik van post veranderen. Mijn collega met een vroegere pensioendatum heeft beslist om geen verlenging aan te vragen, anders was er maar één post vrijgekomen. Het is eigenaardig dat op andere IOrg posten, ook in NORFOLK, mensen gevraagd werden om een VEP aan te gaan, terwijl ik als actieve militair moet schuiven.

Ik voldoe vanaf 01 Sep 22 aan de loopbaanvoorwaarde voor een volledig pensioen. Mocht ik alsnog in de zomer van 2021 teruggeroepen worden om een nieuwe post te gaan bekleden in

1

The decision



Chef Defensie

Brussel, 24 December 2020
20 - 50253680

Maj v/h Vlw P. VAN HOESERLANDE, Ir-MBA
HQ SACT – NORFOLK
USA
(via e-mail)

Majoor,

Ik heb uw brief van 8 december 2020 goed ontvangen en hij heeft mijn volle aandacht gekregen. Na ontvangst heb ik via mijn kabinet aanvullende informatie opgevraagd bij DGHR.

Personeelsbeheer vertaalt zich steeds in het verzoenen van de noden van de organisatie met de individuele wensen en ambities van de werknemer. Bij Defensie is dat niet anders. We trachten onze militairen maximaal kansen te geven op zelfontplooiing en opdrachten in het buitenland maken daar onmiskenbaar deel van uit. Die zijn echter niet voor iedereen weggelegd en elk jaar opnieuw moeten we heel veel kandidaten ontgoocheien. Twee aanduidingen, voor een post in het buitenland zijn veeleer uitzonderlijk. Voor uw post waren er zes kandidaten en de vergelijkende studie heeft als resultaat gehad dat de voorkeur werd gegeven aan Luitenant-kolonel SBH De Decker. Ik zie niet meteen een grond om de uitgevoerde analyse in vraag te stellen en de resultaten ervan te wijzigen.

Uiteraard heb ik heel veel begrip voor de praktische problemen die een niet-verlenging van uw verblijf met zich zal meebrengen. Ik zou u willen aansporen om de resterende tijd in Norfolk te gebruiken om oplossingen te zoeken. De Defensiestaf kijkt in elk geval uit naar uw terugkeer in Evere. Met de expertise die u in de voorbije jaren heeft opgebouwd, zal u nog ruim een jaar uitstekend werk kunnen afleveren op de NATO desk bij ACOS Strat/Defence Policy. Ik reken onder meer op u om mij advies te geven over het NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept.

Ik begrijp dat de inhoud van deze brief niet zal beantwoorden aan uw verwachtingen, maar zou u willen vragen om de genomen beslissing volledig uit te voeren. Ik maak graag van de gelegenheid gebruik om u fijne Kerstdagen en een voorspoedig en gezond 2021 te wensen.

Hoogachtend,

Michel HOFMAN
Admiraal
Vleugeladjudant van de Koning
Chef Defensie

There is overwhelming silence since I have sent the letter. No Info at all. Is that good news? Strangely, I did not hear anything from our HQ regarding the vacancy either. This is odd but I do not want to force it if I do not have a final decision from Brussels. But something is nagging me.

When I open my work e-mail on December the 24th, I see a mail from a colleague working at the cabinet of the CHOD. The reply is there. I go to the kitchen to tell Calle about the reply before I open it. I want to keep my promise about keeping her in the loop. "Read it," is her reply.

It does not take long to see that he confirms the decision of my return to Belgium and transfer to ACOS Strat. Not the best kind of news the day before Christmas. This is the end of the line. I will need a lot of soul searching to decide how to handle this.

A few days later and after some searches, I discover why Plan B was nagging. I had received a mail from our human resources department telling me that I did not make the final selection for the job. This seals our return in August 2021. Not looking forward to it.



Interfestum

The daily routine reinvented

With the start of the week before Christmas, the obligation to follow online courses dropped impacting the daily routine we had adapted since our arrival. The day starts with sleeping in, meaning getting up at 'second' daylight. We are awake a bit sooner but without urgency to get out of bed, the morning ritual takes a little longer. Once downstairs and dressed up, I start my laptop. While following the slow startup process of my prehistorical PC, I check my mail and social media on my antique iPhone. Calle prepares a big bowl of fruit salad for our breakfast. Most of the times, she also brings me a freshly brewed cappuccino. The coffee machine in our quarantine safe house is quite sophisticated and combined with a 1 USD IKEA milk foamer, we can make an almost perfect morning starter. If I am lucky, I see my Windows opening screen by the time the foamy coffee reaches me. When my configuration is fully functional, Calle and I can enjoy breakfast.

After the first meal of the day and the second foamy coffee, we start doing whatever we intended or not to do. For me that means writing a two-pager, translating an article, replying to emails or texts… Nothing important, just things that need to be done someday and it is 'someday' every day in quarantine.

Around noon, Loic comes down for breakfast. When he has some tutoring to do, he is up earlier. The big table becomes busy. Frequently, when Seighin descends I go out for a walk. Hitting my 13500 steps daily objective is kind of hard to reach. Only on days combining a walk and a run is reach that limit. The scores of other days are just proof of the sedentary aspect of quarantine. An article mentioned that the total muscles mass is going down. I fully understand that now, although I think that they forgot to mention that the total mass of fat is increasing.



Wednesday, 30 December 2020

After lunch together, we sometimes get visitors. It reminds me of waiting for visitors when hospitalized. You wait till somebody shows up unable to influence actively the possibility of a visit. Any visitor is welcome to break the boring routine. Due to the mask situation, those visits are mostly a short event, unless Amber brings their dogs, and we go for a walk.



Every other day, when the sun sets, we go running around 5K with three. Not dressed for the cold, just enough to get through. We postpone the run when it rains. Being in Belgium that is quite often. The other days, Loic and Seighin have an improvised fitness session outside when it is not raining, upstairs when it does, the latter a bit noisy.



Seighin found a electronic piano to rent for a decent price. His sister was kind enough to drive him to pick it up. Now we have a rented piano in our hideaway and Seighin can practice his newly acquired skills.

When all sportive activities are done, it is time to prepare dinner. My skills in cooking with a steam oven are improving. Not that I will install one in our kitchen, but I know when it is advantageous to steam food. After dinner, or sometimes during, we watch a movie. The hard part it the selection. It is not easy to find a compromise over two generations, but we succeed. Following the movie are the dishes while the two boys prepare their computers to play. Most of the times, they start with learning Italian by Loic and French by Seighin. When they start gaming, I am heading to bed to read a bit about the life of Marechal Rommel. Calle joins me sooner or later, but mostly after midnight.



Over the pond, Stone is having the time of his life. I wonder how much he will be changed in behavior and training.

News for 2021

In the two-pager 'Verdomme' I explained the flowchart of corona tests and quarantine. The unanswered question was if Seighin is allowed to fly back with a positive test result. A few days ago, I called the Flemish and federal services connected to corona for an answer. The first one, the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, I call, an answering machine tells me that there are many calls and that the service is working at full capacity. It also warns me if it takes too long to get an operator, the system will cut the line and I have to call back another time. After three rings, I get kicked out. Well, they do not wait long in that service … The second, a Flemish service, I got the number from the COVID crisis center, tells me that I have to call the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs. I did but they kicked me out. They give me another number.

That number is the permanence of the whole service. The lady on the other side of the line gives me another number and tells me that she cannot put me through as their telephone system is not reliable. Nobody answers my call.

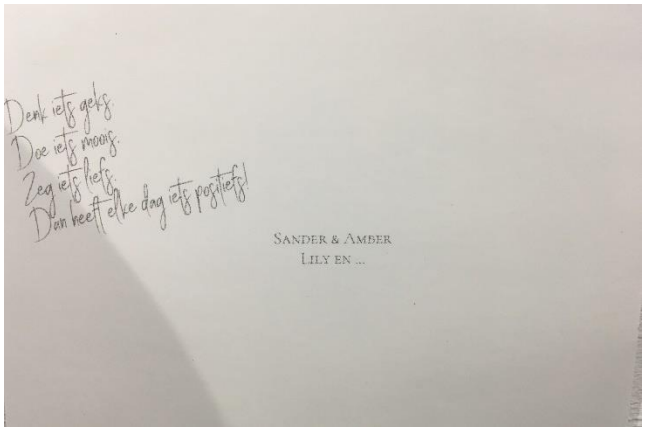
The only thing left, is to call the Flemish COVID center where they could not help me a few days ago. This time I have a friendly person on the line. I explain our situation and

question. He does not know the answer, but ask his colleagues for advice. They contact, yes indeed, the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs and they reply instantly. While we wait he tells me that he does not like the USA because he always has troubles getting in. Already twice he was subjected to hours of checking. Knowing how homeland security works, I reckon that something must trigger this behavior. In reply, he tells me that he has an Arabic family name. Gotcha!

It seems that you do not need a negative test to enter the USA. However, they recommend to get a blood test and based on that the doctor can write a statement that the infection is an old one. I joke that Seighin just brings the American virus back to the States. To wrap it up, I write an e-mail to our doctor explaining the request.

A few days before Christmas, I was not allowed to tell it earlier, Amber and Sander gave us there 'Happy New Year' card. The front is a nice picture of Lily-Rose and the backside holds a hidden message. Yep! You got it (I think 😉).







Happy New Year

The last day of 2020

A period between the feasts ends logically with the second one. On San Sylvester, we had to explain to our kids what that name meant, we start our daily routine, although Seighin is not in. He stayed a night with his sister. He is officially still the only one temporary immune to corona and not infectious. Of course, if it turns out that it was a false negative, this assumption was wrong.

I go through my emails and write parts of the two-pagers, while Loic is tutoring. I lost count on how many students he has now. Today is a new one. The medical admittance exams create extra demand for tutoring. Does that mean that no course profiles are preparing high school student for that exam? Or is becoming a doctor a late calling?

Around noon, I go for a walk. There are a lot of people around. I must zigzag. People talk about celebrating in small bubbles. A kind of conversations you would not have heard a year ago. I am sure that some will not follow the strict rules, but maybe these rules are so strict to limit excesses. Also, how will the police enforce these rules?

In the early afternoon, we get a visit from Sander. He is in the neighborhood to distribute the Christmas/New Year wishing cards to the family and needed urgently a restroom. He comes in around the time we must leave for our second corona test.



Friday, 01 January 2021

Nobody is waiting for a test, so we may directly enter the test stations. This allows me to take some pictures. I am careful not to take pictures with other people on it. After a short exchange, we endure the nose swab (my third). It does not hurt; it is only very annoying, and it produces tears in your eyes because the cotton stick goes deep. When will we receive the results?







After our tests, we bike to our favorite flower shop and then back to our 'quarantinekot' as I started to call the pool house. We expect Amber and Sander to show up at any moment. Seighin is happy because he has collected the rented electronic piano and can now pick up practising again. He wants to play immediately and sets it up.

After they have left, Papie comes by to drop off the raclette machine. We have chosen to have raclette because Loic and Seighin do not know what it is. For those who do not know what it is: Raclette is a Swiss dish, also popular in Savoie, France, based on heating cheese and scraping off the melted part. At home, we use a heat lamp to substitute for the open fire, as in



the traditional method, with the cheese being put under the lamp and the melted cheese scraped off. The melted cheese is accompanied by potatoes in a jacket, cornichons (gherkins), pickled onions, and dried meat (such as jambon cru/cuit, salami). Although traditionally, there the meal is accompanied by white wine, we prefer red. This meal is known to us from the ski trips of times long ago.

In the afternoon, we have some suspicious when texting with a father in spe that the moment is almost there. Certainly, when we ask him to share his location because we suspect they are in the maternity, and he refuses to do so, we knew it would be for today or tomorrow. A little family poll decides that, if having the choice, it is better to be born on the 31st than the 1st. Hope the baby is as smart as our collective wisdom.

Late in the evening, our suspicion gets confirmed. Viktor Cornelis saw daylight for the first time today, and it was still day! 2020 closes with new life. Welcome! Congratulations to the new parents and new grandparents.





We have a difficult start for our dinner. The yearlong gap took away our experience on how to handle raclette. It takes some time and a torn paper tablecloth before we figure out how to do it. But once, we have it under control, it goes fine.

Around midnight, we have a video call with Ciaran, Amber, and Sander while some forbidden fireworks are racing for the skies. A visit to the curfew breaking party of the

neighbors to chat and a quick dance in the street closes the outdoor New Year activities. We finish our dinner with a small dessert. A few hours into 2021, we go to sleep while the music outside tells us that the neighbors are still enjoying the new year.



The first day of 2021

Not unexpectedly, we sleep in on the first day of the year. Once awake, I take Amber's car to fill it up and drive to the bakery. There is a long line outside. The outside lines at stores are longer and more frequent as the number of customers in the store is limited and of course, people must adhere to the 6 feet rule.

This is not my problem today. We have prepaid the order. I have a short line for picking up orders. Not stop is to return the raclette heater. Drop off and go.

When I return, we have brunch. Or must I write lunch considering the time? Surprise, the results of the tests are coming in. We thought that the laboratories would do routine tests because of the holidays, but they are busy. The three results are negative. First positive news of the year. We are free to go wherever we want (only limited by the current corona measures)!

In the afternoon, Seighin and Loic leave us to join their sister because she is home alone. We take the bike for a ride to Mamie and Papie for an aperitive turning into a long chat. The bike ride is interesting as we drive through the woods in the dark and in unknown territory. The ride back is less adventurous as Calle is afraid to get her nice shoes dirty by riding uneven and wet forest paths in the pitch dark. We take to dull, easy way back.



The Run Up to the Return

Family reunions

After the first day of 2021, we must get up early. No sleeping in, or recuperation. We have a family reunion. Sander works in the afternoon, so we will start early to get everybody together.

Our Christmas tree has collected many gifts during the last weeks. It takes a long time to unwrap those. Certainly, because some gifts only give clues to the next clue till you find the gift itself. And it seems harder to solve the mystery than to set one up.



The biggest surprise comes from Sander. He kneels before Amber, but instead of proposing, as that kind of situation suggests, he gives Amber a USB-stick with the title 'The birth of Lily-Rose'. It is a composition with pictures of the pregnancy turning into an ode to Amber. The movie is followed by a second kneeling position. This time for real!

Yes, we have a wedding in 2022… or 2023!



The timing is certainly a surprise. We knew he would propose. A year ago, he had asked Amber's hand, during our previous stay for the holidays, but we could not tell anybody. We smoked a Cuban cigar and drank whiskey on it, as I had to do, but after that, all went quiet… till today.

After our brunch, Sander leaves our pool house. The kids start a session of taking pictures in front of the tree. It is fun.



Later in the afternoon, Mamie and Papie visit us. I guess we do not strictly follow the corona protocols in this situation, but soon we will be gone again, and our time together is very limited.

To get a full picture, we still need to visit Calle's sister in Ranst. Here also, we sidestep the current protocols, although we take measures to keep risks low and three of us tested negative recently.

Friday, 08 January 2021

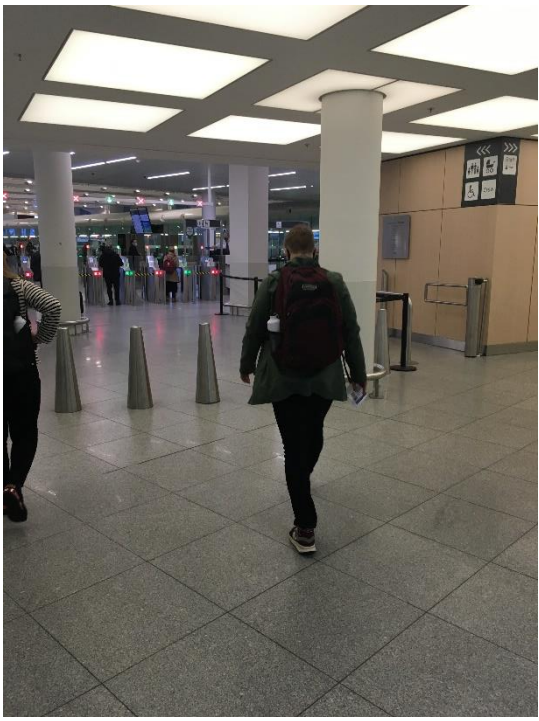




Loic needs a negative test result within the 48 hours of his departure to Torino. A demand of almost every European nation but hard to satisfy. Not all centers test for travel, whatever the reason and it is hard to find out if they do or not. He had an appointment in the test center in Leuven because he wanted to visit Ciaran. However, at the moment of the appointment, they told him that they do no test for travel. With less than 48 hours to fly, he needs a place that could guarantee a result within a day. He is not allowed in the big center of Antwerp and there is no information available on other sites nearby. The COVID crisis center is closed too. In the end, he has to drive to Schaerbeek, Brussels.



As promised, he gets the result, negative, on time to leave the next day, but not before he has eaten the pancakes Seighin has promised him. In the late evening, I drive him to the almost empty airport in Zaventem. Three to go.

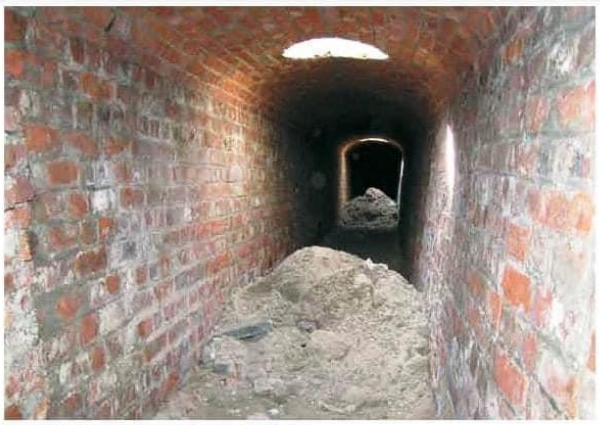


Zeebrugge

Early in the week, my cousin Marc sends me pictures of tunnels from the Atlantic Wall. The Atlantic Wall (German: Atlantikwall) was an extensive system of coastal defenses and fortifications built by Nazi Germany between 1942 and 1944, along the coast of continental Europe and Scandinavia as a defense against an anticipated Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe from the United Kingdom. The wall was frequently mentioned in Nazi propaganda, where its size and strength were usually exaggerated. The fortifications included colossal coastal guns, batteries, mortars, and artillery, and thousands of German troops were stationed in its defenses. Today, ruins of the wall still exist in all the nations where it was built, although many structures have fallen into the ocean or have been demolished over the years.



Why these pictures? Well, in our younger days, we used these tunnels to enter the Naval basis in Zeebrugge, a former Atlantic Wall stronghold. The tunnels went under the fence with access to the construction site of the basis on the local beach within the port. A challenge for boys of our age made even more interesting because there were guards on the terrain. After a while, they filled the entrance of the tunnel near the 'Visserskruis' (Fisherman's cross). This did not stop us and thus they closed the tunnel with a mortar and bricks wall. We needed more time to get passed those obstacles, but we succeeded in



3 *Een zicht op de overdekte gang die in Zeebrugge onderzocht werd.*
A view over the covered alley which was examined in Zeebrugge.



4 *Op regelmatige afstand werd een overwelfde kamer aangebracht.*
Several sheltered rooms were built on regular distances.

removing the upper layers and make holes big enough to crawl through. The final solution was to dump concrete in the hole: we did not have the tools to remove that.

But that was not the end of our explorations. We knew the tunnel had a connection with the casemate of a coastal gun. By descending into the casemate, we could still enter the base. They stopped us by sealing of the casemate. After that, the only way we could enter the base was through the gate and that would only be possible years later.

Now, they have opened the tunnels again and consider them as archaeological sites. Did they find traces of our explorations?

Kings in the Capitol



Following traditions, we have a 'driekoningentaart' on January 6th. A simple pie with a hidden 'bean' in it. The one that has the bean is king or queen for the day.

In the evening, we have our delayed Christmas dinner with Mamie and Papie at their house. It is a nice evening that ends with the historical moment of right-wing extremists storming the US Capitol to prevent the confirmation of the presidential elections.



Although there are not that many people involved, the character of the act and the media present give it a big impact. I think that the picture with the barricaded door and the armed policemen will surface every time this incident is mentioned. Certainly, not a happy day in the history of American democracy.

It is a reminder to all of us that democracy is fragile and always in need of protection.



In the aftermath, there is a discussion about impeachment and invoking the 25th amendment. Although our sons knew about this thanks to the course on US history, I had to look it up to understand it.

"More than 50 years ago, the framers of the 25th Amendment to the Constitution foresaw the possibility of a president's behavior becoming so unstable that it would prove necessary to have some constitutional mechanism to remove him immediately from office. Section Four of that amendment provides a process for doing so: If the vice-president and the majority of the Cabinet decide that, for whatever reason, the president has become unfit to carry out the powers and duties of the office and they transmit a letter to Congress to that effect, then the vice-president becomes the acting president and remains so unless and until Congress refuses to allow that transfer of power to stand."

This should not sound strange. On 29 March 1990, the Belgian Chamber adopted a bill partially decriminalizing abortion. As in many countries throughout the world, the Head of State must sign the bill before it becomes official. It is only a final and formal process which usually does not raise any issues.

But Belgium is Belgium. When presented with the bill, the king told the former Prime minister, Wilfried Martens, that he did not want to sign the bill on account of his conscience. To tackle the issue, an exceptional solution was found. Under article 82 of the Belgian constitution, the king may step down for "impossibility to reign". It has only been used once in the history of Belgium when King Leopold III was detained by the Germans during WWII. So, the king enacted this power and stepped down, allowing the Council of ministers to sign the bill in the early hours of April 4th. 36 hours later, the MPs gathered to vote the end of the impossibility to reign and king Baudouin returned to power, abortion had been partially legalized, and no big demonstrations took place. A typical Belgian story?





But, in this case, the 25th amendment would be used in a completely different setting.

While watching the latest developments on the news, I see an opportunity to honor the tradition of abducting the statue of baby Jesus in the crib and change it for something else. Not a tradition appreciated by Mamie but that makes it more challenging. Anyhow, my mission was a success.



Till Departure

Which flight?

Because we cannot return with a military flight for the simple reason that there is none, we must look for a commercial one. Luggage is not a real issue. We came only with three pieces of 20 kg – a little bit more – so the normal package should be enough. No need to press on my frequent flyer privileges.

The cheapest flights are on the first Friday of the year and then every Thursday and Saturday, with TAP. Luggage and trolley are included. It is a two-leg flight over Lisbon, and we will arrive just before midnight in DC. Flying United is more expensive, although thanks to my frequent flyer status, we can take more luggage and it would be a direct flight.

Calle does not like to leave before the weekend. I am a bit reluctant to leave earlier than planned, but for that price, I am ready to give in. Seighin wants to fly back as early as possible. After some discussion, we settle for the Thursday flight.

When I book, I discover that we must pay some extras for the luggage and that the promised reduction does not apply. So, the published price is not what you pay in the end. This is on the edge of honest publicity. Anyhow, the tickets are still the cheapest. The system refuses to accept my Gold Star Alliance status and the site does not provide Info on the advantages. I fire an e-mail to TAP to ask what about the extras.

Something I worry about is the huge suitcase Calle had brought with her. According to the TAP website, it is just too big. When I check-in, I see that I may take two pieces of luggage with me. We replace the big suitcase with two smaller ones. Strange, we have almost 100 kg of luggage now. No clue where that extra 35 kg does come from?

Family reunions

Our late departure makes it possible to meet some more family or to revisit some. The first on our list is the newborn Viktor – in my previous two-pager I wrote the wrong family name but that is now corrected – who will take on a long stroll in the neighbourhood. It is a nice walk in nice weather. Today it is not raining and there no grey overcast.





A few months ago, I had stopped the procedure to turn my educational game into a virtual one. It was just too expensive. However, that did not mean I was ready to give it up. After finding an online board game engine, I started experimenting to see if it was doable. Within two days of trying and without any design skills, I had a good-looking result. Good enough to convince myself that this is a way with great potential.

However, months later, I discovered that TableTopia is founded by Russians and working with Russian developers. Being my naïve self, I thought that because they were honest about that, it would no problem, but that was not the way of thinking of NATO Counterintelligence. They gave me a big 'no go' and mothballed this approach. Back to searching for a game engine and does putting the virtual game in the freezer. A pity. Creativity stopped by intelligence…

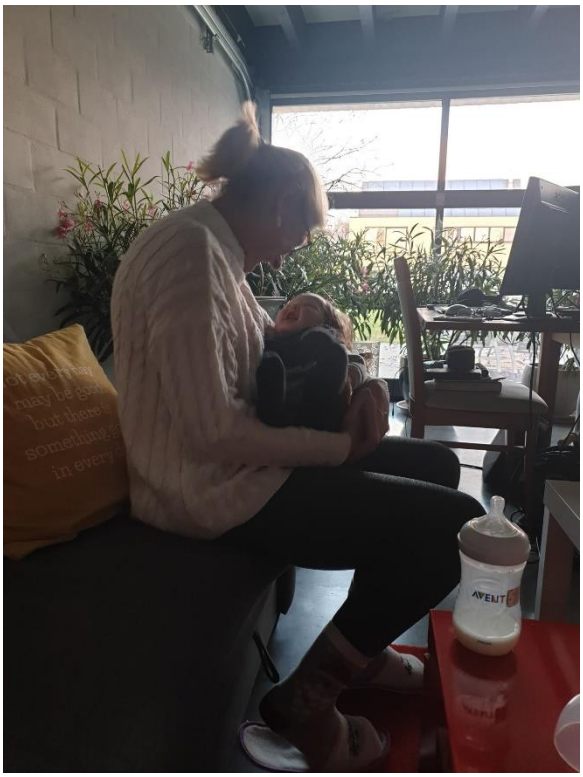
While we are here, we take the opportunity to celebrate the anniversary of Sander with the family. Another family tradition, although in all honesty, I should say from the Antwerp side of the family, is 'Lost Monday' (French: Lundi perdu or Lundi parjuré). Exactly why no one seems able to explain as the origin is lost in the legends of the Middle Ages, but the modern acceptance of the day is certainly lost to no one in Antwerp. It is a Belgian tradition that is generally celebrated on the Monday after the Sunday after Epiphany. Especially in the province of Antwerp, it is tradition to eat sausage bread and apple dumplings on that day.

This 'worstenbrood en appelbollen' (as we called them in Flemish) must be prepared in the oven, or at least reheated after you bought then at the bakery. We do not have a traditional oven at our temporary place. The alternative? I do not risk it preparing them in the steam oven. They will be hot, but a bit 'mushy'. The other option is to microwave them. I go for the better one, ask our 'neighbours' because we know they will prepare them too.



The last visit by Samber and a bike ride for groceries. We will miss both for the coming months, years?





On the morning of our departure, we are running late. No real reason why, it is just like that. I drive grandfather's car to the airport. In a bit of a rush, we take the luggage and walk quickly into the terminal. While we wait in the frequent flyer lane, we get a call from papie. The car has stopped because I took the key with me. It is a proximity key. It is still in my pocket and thus the car stopped running. Calle must run back with the keys while I take care of the tickets. Not used to a NATO2 visa, the lady at the counter has issues.

It takes almost an hour before we receive the tickets and can walk to the gate. The stress level drops, we can start enjoying our travel back.

And then we take off.



Preparing the Road Trip



Memorial Day

31 May 21: our last Memorial Day in the USA.



Sitting in a Panera Bread, Calle tells me that it would be great to restart the 'Across the Pond' series as some people have asked about it. My desire to write ebbed away due to all kinds of reasons: engagement in K9 SAR – almost every weekend a whole day gone, sometimes also in the week, and of course the real searches for lost persons -, my doctorate, work, the troubles related to our 'extra' year – more about that in an extra edition -, the daily walk with Stone, the crash of my two hard disks at the same moment… Not all these things are bad, most I love doing, but they all take time. Resulting in less time to write.

Honestly, I did not feel the urge to write either. Not for writing the series, nor for other things. Writer's block? It has been months since I wrote a ThinkBox. Number 49 left my computer this week, while 48 must have been published a few months ago. Let us hope that I can keep it up.

The first 'Across the Pond' you already have received. I found a partly written one on our last visit to Belgium. I decided to finish and publish that one before jumping a few months to the now. I hope that was not confusing.



In that period a lot has happened, and I do not think I will be able to tell you all because I will just forget to write about it. I cannot even tell the most important things afraid of missing some equally important stuff. So, try to catch up while you read.



A few days ago, an ex-colleague informed me that another ex-colleague died of cancer. I have known Rudi Marteau for at least two decennia. We had some very serious and fun moments together. In 2018, he retired from the service. A retirement I missed because of our flight to the USA. I wanted to reconnect after our tour here, but that is no longer possible. One remarkable situation was when one day he approached me and asked if I wanted to sign a

book. "A book," I asked. "Why?" He answered that he wanted the author to sign it. Puzzled I looked at the book and saw that he had printed and bundles all the stories I had written during my operation in Kosovo.

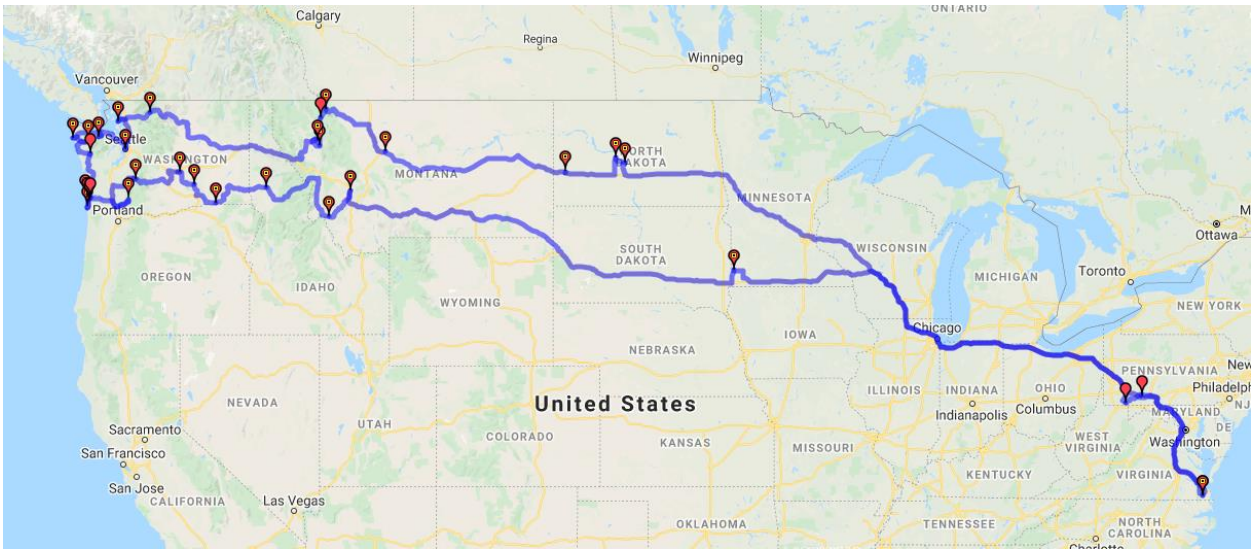
No Alaska

Although my leave starts today – I still had to take my leave days from 2020 before June 31st – I went to the HQ to finish some smaller tasks and to activate my out-of-office assistant on the classified site. Back home, I will not return till the beginning of July.

Next to working on my doctorate, my main task will be planning our road trip on short notice. Calle pushed to go on a last road trip when she saw that Seighin had at least 10 days off between the last day of school and the start of summer school. If he learns and travels for the first days, we can make a trip of 3 weeks. Not to Alaska as crossing the US-Canadian border is still not allowed for tourism. We must limit our reach to Washington, state!

I take the planning for our Alaska trip and kick out everything from Vancouver on. After that, I must fit this route with our travel dates, the summer school days, and Ciaran's arrival. After some days, a plan is taking shape.

Without the overnight stops, we will have to drive about 12000 km. There will be some long days, but we are now with 3 drivers. Getting to the other side is always a challenge.



The only thing that needs to be done is booking accommodations along the route. Something we do together. This is like going on the road for the second time.

Planning the return

A less pleasant activity is planning our return. Although I went through the motions five years ago, things have changed so it is easy to step into the trap of 'I know how to do this.' First, I must coordinate the packing and move with the final clean up. Because Defense has now a unique contract with the mover Gosselin, I have no levers on the company. They are very slow in reacting and I cannot force them to do something as I am not the one paying.

We still consider moving our Prius C back to Belgium. That means looking for a shipping company that could do that for an acceptable cost.

Second, I must book a flight and make sure that Stone can be on the same flight. For that, I must fly from DC to Amsterdam with KLM. United does not offer that service yet. Of course, I must arrange travel from Chesapeake to DC and from Schiphol to Zoersel. It seems easy, but there are multiple players who all need to agree on time and price. I will leave the USA on Friday, August the 13th while Calle and Seighin will follow on the 19th.

If all works out, I must see how Ciaran and Loic will travel to the USA and back. But these are worries for within a few days.



The Background of Our Return

A little bit of history

A warning before reading further: every edition in this series reflects how I look at our lives as expats in the USA. However, this edition may be specially colored as its content has a direct and negative impact on my family and I. What you read below is a subjective view of how we experienced it and our interpretation of the things we see and know. We do not have the whole picture and will probably never will. This is our site of the story.

Although we still try to find a solution to stay one more year in the USA, we consider our attempts as failures and thus plan prudently a return to Belgium this Summer. This spoils the plans we had assuming we would stay a fourth year.

Why did we think we would stay another year?
Well, on January 1st, 2023, I will retire from active service after more than 38 years in the armed forces. Yes, I am relatively young to retire, but early retirement is one of the few advantages left of joining the Belgian Defense. What I will do after that date is still an open question and nothing that matters now. Anyhow, I do not plan to stay calm in my last months as a military. Trying to improve the world till the last day.

So why an extra year? When we return in the summer of 2021, I will arrive in Belgium with all my leave days for 2021 and 2022. Combine this with the extra 3 months of 'leave' to prepare for retirement, and you quickly end up with about 8 months of effective work months. After 3 years in the USA, my residual knowledge of and contacts in the staff are almost negligible, meaning it would take some months before I would be efficient in whatever desk job. Simple conclusion: better to stay in the USA and do great work for NATO.

It is not that we are not looking forward to being full-time grandparents, seeing the family again… Returning to Belgium is certainly our goal, but not one for this summer. Also, for Seighin it would be better to finish high school in the normal 4 years instead of rushing it in three. However, not trusting the inner obscurities of the staff, we had luckily initiated the early graduation scenario as plan B. The best preparation for Belgian higher education is done through Advanced Placement courses in senior year.

There was the unspoken rule that people abroad could stay if they only had one or two years before retirement, and everybody confirmed it unofficially. Staying till retirement would be no problem. Doing otherwise would be plain stupid.

To make sure that our HR department would not open my post, I introduced a request to stay an extra year in May 2020, well before the publication of the international postings. If they approved it, there was no need to go through the whole administrative burden. I did this even twice as they changed from paper to software. This request was surprisingly

refused. The reason was that I, like anybody else, had to apply for my post after they had published it.

This made no sense. With only one year to go, I could never apply for a three-year tour. Secondly, if there was another candidate, he or she would have priority over me because I already was on my second international tour. And why publishing a post knowing that you would refuse new candidates because you would keep the one already in that position? The purpose cannot be to frustrate potential candidates. The decision to go abroad is not taken lightly. The only valid reason I saw was that they wanted me in case there were no candidates.

As told in a previous edition, while leading the conference I was contacted to see where I wanted to go after my return. A shock, as the colonel calling me, was not the one who had decided that I had to return. I guess he or she was too chicken to tell me that personally and made it somebody else's problem. My second reaction, the first you can guess, was: whatever you do, I do not want to go back to my previous job because I was bored to death. The third was: if I have to return then give me an operational job, no more desk work. I am and still feel a military. I should have said: I feel more military and more Belgian, but no more Belgian military.

First attempt

After that call, I - Calle certainly much less inclined - had no intention to roll over and accept the decision. This was a loose-loose situation. We, nor the Belgian Defense, nor NATO would win something. Yes, I would be a warm body in an empty seat, filling a black hole, but with minimal output – as all black holes. Could somebody be so naïve as to think that I would be motivated in these circumstances? Having to return against all odds with less than a year before retirement to a position I ran away from while creating big issues for the family? Okay, I am highly and intrinsically motivated, but taking all into account this is a far stretch even for me.

Asking some highly placed people – I want to thank them all without giving their names – to see what they could do, After a few days, I get contacted telling me that I can stay but have to keep it quiet for a few weeks. Considering the source, Calle and I see the future as positive. Reason has won. Ouf.

Complete surprise when I get the message that I have to return. Later, somebody passes me the information that my NLR had intervened against my stay and that somebody in HR went against the provisional decision while he was not involved. This Info was informal, so only good for my knowledge, but not actionable Intel as we in the military call it.

As this was an HR decision, I had to assume that the whole department was aware of it and would back it up. No use to contact the general of the department. Or he was part of

the decision-making process, or not worth leading it. The only option left was to write a letter to the big boss, the CHOD. Not something I looked forward to as he should only be involved in high-level issues, not in individual cases. But this was certainly a symptom of something that went astray, and this would be my only letter to him to ask for some common sense.

I had good help in drafting the long letter explaining it all in detail. It was a nice one. The first and direct feedback was supportive. This was a crazy situation needing to be corrected. Something had to be done. May we be optimistic about the outcome?

The day before Christmas, I received his reply. He agreed with the decision: I have to return. The letter is clearly written by somebody from the HR department with input from the NATO desk. The reasons for my return are bogus. If these were the real reasons, then it would be better for everybody that I stayed in the USA as that is the place where I could be instrumental in the project. Or do they want to sabotage the work?

Having engaged the highest level, all my cards within my organization are played. With only one year to go, I will need to reach my retirement date and do the minimum to get my golden ticket out.

Second attempt

However, there are still possibilities outside the fence while keeping the ticket within reach. I have the right to one year leave without pay. Getting a job in our HQ as a civilian or contractor could be a solution too. Certainly not my preferred option as I still feel very much military, but when forced to choose between going back to something boring or staying for a challenge, well them getting out one year ahead of time looks most attractive.

Looking at the work heading our way and the available expertise, the conclusion is that when I (and my Canadian colleague) leave there will be a big lack of expertise in concept development. There will be nobody left with that kind of experience and the instructor will also be gone. After the summer, there will be a boost in that kind of projects – the reason why according to the Belgian Defense I have to return while the projects have still to be initiated and developed at NATO level – but nobody with the experience to take these on and to assist others. If I could stay another year, that would be very helpful.

The brand head starts up a proposal to create a temporary post for support in concept development. Although the requirement is there and open for anybody, I would fill it. All levels up to the highest agree that this is a good approach.

When things are almost written in stone – well on paper but you get what I mean - my NLR intervenes. Again, not in my favor. After he approves my request for leave without pay, he

contacts the HR staff of the HQ and protests the creation of the temporary post. As a representation of Belgium, the HR staff backs off. Nations rule in NATO and the staff is afraid of getting an official letter from Belgium, although I do not think that the NLR received the task to do that. But, an inquiry of an NLR is enough to halt the machine.

The result is that this approach comes to a full stop; it is not allowed to introduce the request, even if it was a real need. Maybe they may launch it after I have left the building?

What now?

A few days ago, I received the confirmation that my leave without pay is approved. No surprise there. I can take up another job and that is my intention. A few days ago, I started actively looking for a job in the USA, but I am ready for other challenges abroad, or in Belgium. If I can make it happen, then I will not return to my old job.

Lately, I read posts complaining about the decennia of neglect of the Belgian Defense as the main (only) cause of the current debacle. Sure, that is a major cause, but not the only one. There is much going wrong internally, and nothing is done to improve it, or at least at a too slow pace. As long as people lay the blame outside, there will be no improvement. Anyhow, I tell potential recruits about the good things in life as a military, but they for sure also get the less bright side of the whole organization as an extra.

The strange thing is that after all that has happened and may happen, I would still jump at an offer for a command, an operation, or even the chance to change the organization for the better. But I do much to prevent fossilizing in a chair behind a desk.

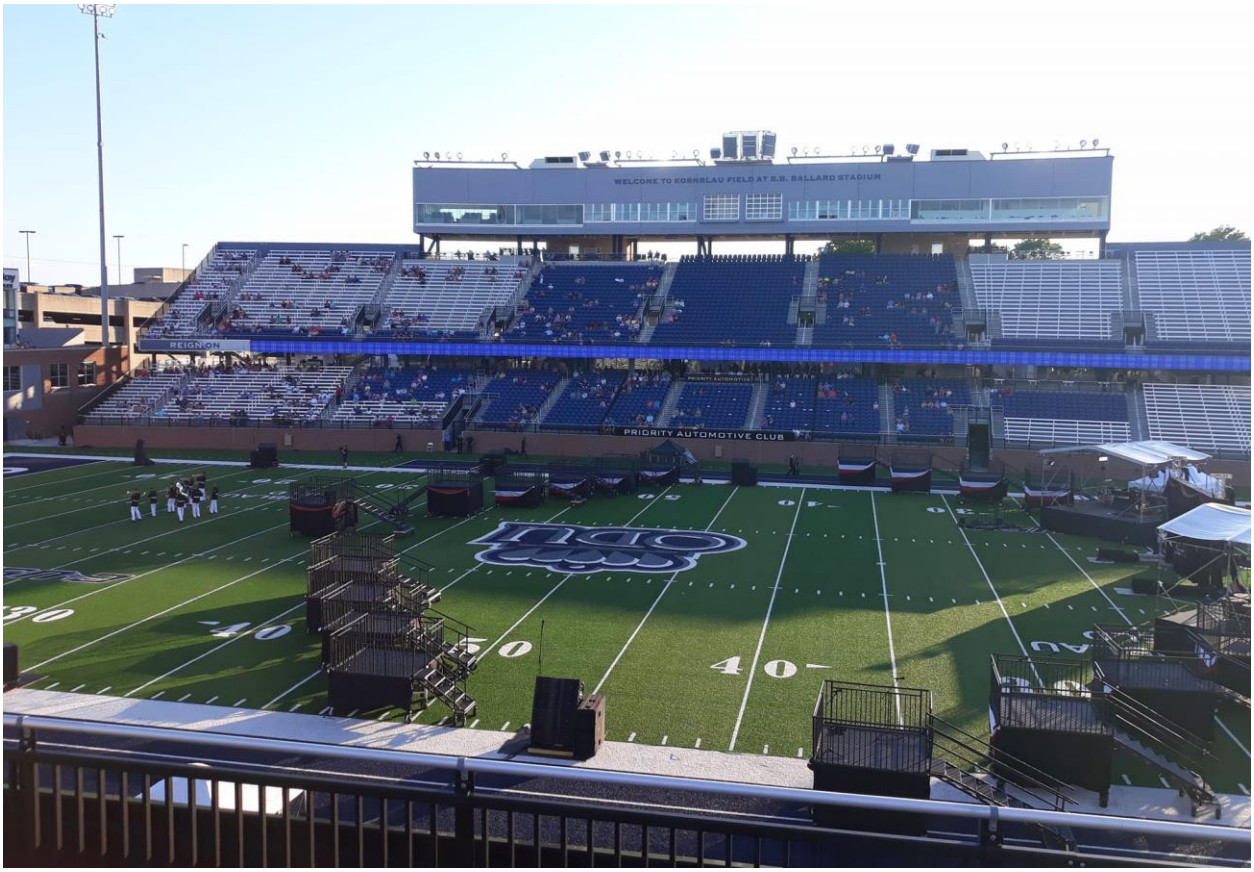
The Last of Things

Tattoo

Nearing the end of a long stay abroad, there comes a moment when you realize that current events are like trophies in the category 'the last time'. That moment is when your mindset switches to going back.

One such happening is the Virginia International Tattoo, although this year it was less international. Normally a huge musical indoor event, COVID has also changed that character. First, the 2020 edition was cancelled. Second, this year, they moved it to an open, football stadium of the Old Dominium University in Norfolk. However, the weather was not really in favour of this change. On Thursday, they had to cancel it because of a thunderstorm and on Friday they had to postpone it for 30 minutes because of a tropical rain shower. Luckily, Calle booked our seats on Saturday.

I was not looking forward to this event as there were no non-American groups, meaning fewer back pipers, and in the open. Also, it was a bit expensive. However, Calle had set her mind on this last edition and thus on Saturday evening, we drove to Norfolk and slowly raised to the highest level of the parking garage.



08 June 2021



The stadium was almost empty. Due to the rules, they had left every other row empty and two free seats between group or bubble. Theoretically, they could have filled a bit more than a fourth of the stadium, but I had the impression that there were fewer people. The weather was polite. The sky was clear and the sun was giving her utmost.

I must admit that this edition, considering all the limitations, was a nice one. Yes, the full-throttle version is more impressive, but one must admit that although the Americans are not good at organizing in general (nobody offering drinks nearby the seats, no after-show activities, misery in the parking garage…), they are experts in making a big show out of little. We Europeans are much too 'cool' for that. It is not only the organizers, the speaker, and the performers, but also the public that plays its part in these manifestations.

After the show, the Air Force drill team willingly accepted invitations to be photographed. They should all do that as part of the event. It would increase the experience, but after-show activities are lost in this part of the world.

K9 SAR



Normally, I, or better we, as Stone is part of our little team, would be on a night training, but the Tattoo had priority over an evening in the woods. Our K9 SAR training is not going that well. Stone's drive was food, meaning that I rewarded him when doing something as expected with a mix of cheese, meat, and other nibbles. The fact that I had a mix as a reward shows that his taste changes over time. I could not pinpoint what he prefers. For what kind of food he goes nuts. Should I try bananas?

Anyhow, a few months ago, his drive dwindled. Sometimes he performed great, sometimes he was simply not interested. First, I thought he needed to be challenged. He acted differently than the other dogs, but all within tolerance. He found the subjects and indicated when he did. Normally, a SAR dog finds a subject by following his/her scent, the K9 goes to the subject and, after indicating the find with the handler, shuttles between the subject and the handler till the human team member reaches the subject. Stone does not run into the subject, detecting the subject with certainty is good

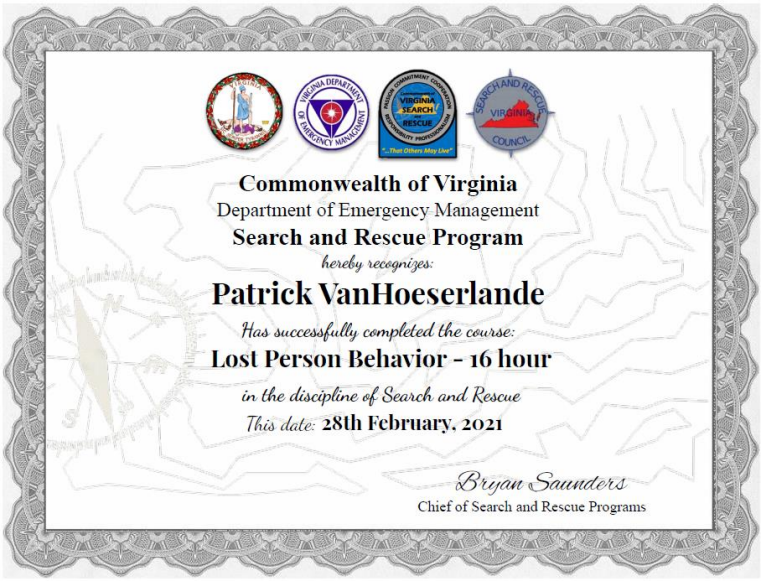
enough for him. A K9-trainer told me that is what shepherds normally do, so no worries. After indication, Stone does not shuttle but takes me to the subject by running 30 meters ahead and stopping when I am too slow. He takes me on a long, virtual leash. Is he lazy, or smart? Anyhow, this method works fine.



But he should have the drive to search always on any mission, not when he feels to it. So, now I try to get him a ball drive instead of a food drive. We are working with two other trainers to reach that. Stone and I have now an almost daily routine to play ball. It took a while, but he gets it and even is enthusiastic about it. We need to pump it up. Maybe he can become a real SAR dog after all? I hope it works out in Belgium.

Between January and June, I went on a few live searches. Being stand-by for a search is something that I am used to as a military, certainly at the beginning of my career. Teaming up with other volunteers and a dog to search for a lost person is kind of rewarding. Everybody hopes to find the lost person, but it is not a competition. You just believe that that person will be in your sector and that your team will be the one that brings a bad situation to a good ending. However, we all know that you are rarely that lucky.

After a few days, the chances to find somebody alive are slim, but the 'find' is still a driver. We want to give the family closure, even if that means bad news. And people are known to stay alive for days, so anything is possible.



Commonwealth of Virginia
Department of Emergency Management
Search and Rescue Program
hereby recognizes:
Patrick VanHoeserlande
Has successfully completed the course:
Lost Person Behavior – 16 hour
in the discipline of Search and Rescue
This date: 28th February, 2021
Bryan Saunders
Chief of Search and Rescue Programs

Looking for human bones in a state park is a very different experience. As the bones and fragments get spread out by animals, this task is much harder than expected. At first sight, there is not much difference between a small branch and a bone, or between human and animal remains. Anyhow, from that day on, I look at the forest floor in parks with other eyes.

Daily life



On Sunday, I was looking forward to diving in the aquarium again, but the dive was cancelled due to a radio communication breakdown. I hope that I can have a few last dives in the coming weeks.

Although I am on leave, I cannot stop supporting my colleagues in the organization of our next conference. On Monday, I went in the afternoon to Lockheed-Martin's Center for Innovation to test some things out. This was quite successful. It opens the way to a great hybrid event.

The previous free moments are spent booking accommodations for our road trip. Some places are void of possibilities and thus we need to be creative. Step by step all the pieces fit together into a great trip. Looking forward to it!



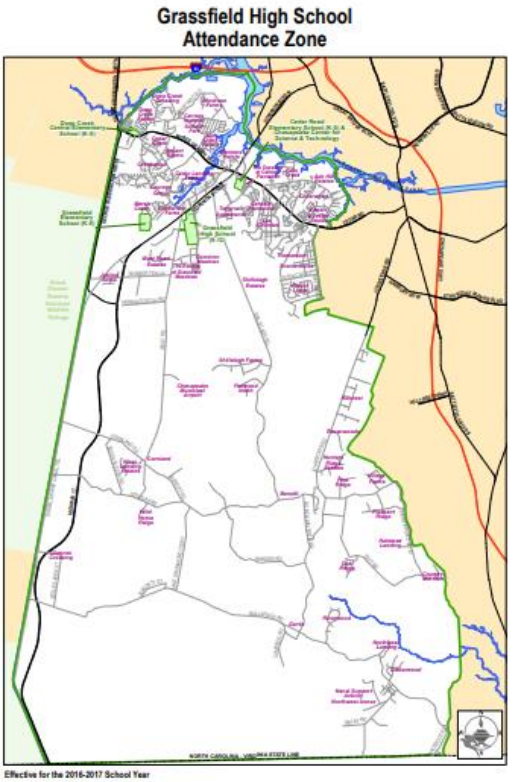
The Continuation of High School

About senior year

As you have read, the day before Christmas, we received the confirmation of my end of tour. Besides the disappointment, returning this summer has a huge impact on Seighin's study. We knew this was a risk, but assuming we would stay four years, we assessed the risk as low. However, we had planned for early graduation, i.e., high school in three years, without compromising the possibility for a normal four-year school career. This sounds easier than it is. If you want to know the details, ask me and I will happily explain them at length.

On paper, there were a few options to explore after receiving the news of our unanticipated return. Before I explain these, I need to tell you that for Seighin to be allowed to study at Grassfield High School – he rightfully did not want to switch school - there are three conditions to fulfil:

- A valid visa: As I will leave the USA, he will no longer be entitled to stay under my NATO 2 visa. He cannot go to a public school with a tourist visa. This means he needs another type of visa that allows him to study in the USA.
- A residence in the Grassfield attendance zone: A school attendance zone is an outline of where students will attend public school, in his case Grassfield HS. Students are not free to go to the school of their choice in the USA. Some exception aside, they must go to the public school determined by their home address unless they go to a private school.
- Not have graduated: Once graduated you cannot attend a high school. When enrolled in early graduation through summer school, this means you must quit summer classes before the end of June. The clock is ticking!



What were the options?

At the beginning of 2021, the options we considered were:

- Stay in the USA for an extra year:
    - Do not finish high school, i.e., leave the early graduation path, and stay for senior year with a foreign student visa (J1).

    - Do not finish high school and stay for senior year with an exchange student vise (F1). Although cheaper than the J1, a student can only stay one year in the USA with this visa, but that was fine.

- Finish high school and return with us:
    - Attend a transition/preparation year.
    - Attend the sixth year and get a second, Belgian HS diploma.
    - Go to university.

Although not easy in more than one way, we would have preferred that he stayed in the USA for another year to follow the normal curriculum. There were two families ready to take care of him for that period. Housing was no issue and both families are living in the right attendance zone.

Of course, there is still the issue of guardianship as Seighin is a minor and we might have to go to court for that. But first: find a workable option.

Study in the USA

When going for the J1 visa, foreign student, the school need to 'sponsor' the visa. This process and requirements vary by school. The only schools that have recent practical experience are the Virginia Beach City Public Schools, which 'sponsor' for one year only upon payment of tuition for the school year (14,000 USD). After contacting the Chesapeake School board, I learned that they do not sponsor J1 students. Option closed.

But Chesapeake accepts exchange students as our sons have met some of this type of students in high school. Unfortunately, Chesapeake Board's first answer was that they did not allow foreign students as long as there were COVID19 restrictions.

In May, I contacted them again after the CDC tuned down the measures and the school board decided that 2021-22 would know a 'normal', non-virtual start.

Yes, they would allow exchange students next year. Great! However, exchange students may not have graduated, and they cannot graduate either. I understand that a normal exchange student cannot graduate from high school in one year – although in other parts of Virginia that is possible – however, this is not a normal situation. Seighin did already three years in the USA. Can you not make an 'exception'? A word of black magic in an administrative world. He cannot leave the USA with diploma because that is not a solution. Or you allow him after he graduated, or you let him graduate, whatever suits the board. Neither is possible. Option closed.

The last American possibility is to study via Virtual Virginia. This is an organization that offers all the courses virtually. He must not even be in the USA for that. Unfortunately, this organization is not officially a school and thus we would need a school that certifies his graduation. And for that, you need to fulfil the three conditions above. Back to the original problem. Option closed.

Conclusion: unless we stay in the USA, there is no way that Seighin can attend Grassfield. Early graduation is the only road ahead.

Well, there is another one and that is telling nobody that we have returned. As checking the 'zone' is not repeated yearly, the chances are that we could pull it off. However, he would be an illegal alien. His stay would affect all involved when caught. Not something we consider, but I wanted to mention it for completeness.

Back to the Belgian options

When Ciaran returned under the same conditions, he opted for going to Maris Stella – his old school – and attend the sixth year, 12th grade, again. That meant that he finished with two high school diplomas in his pocket. No worries about getting admitted to higher education, although that was never an issue with the American document. However, because of the differences in school systems, he had seen certain courses completely, others partly or nothing at all. He had a hard time playing catch up or not being bored. Not the ideal situation to get prepared for university. Although this is an option, we rather not walk that road.

Seighin could opt for going to university a year early, but 17 is a bit young to go loose in that kind of life. Also, because he missed the advanced placement courses, his preparation is not ideal. He has gaps in his knowledge and those need to be filled for a smooth transition from high school to university. Not an option.

All other options thrown overboard or in the back pocket, the only viable one is that he attends a transition or preparatory year. After a bit of searching and thanks to Loic's Info, we found the only school in Antwerp that offers such a special year.

After a virtual chat with a representative of the school – who was half American and thus had some knowledge on the topic - that extra 'high school' year would indeed be the best solution. They will have a look at what he saw in the past three years to see modules they recommend, although it is clear for us that it should be the one focused on math. We need to find the optimal way to commute to school, but we have time for that. After our return, we can test this out while visiting the school.



Two Months Left

Last planning elements

The free moments of the last days were spent on booking accommodations for our quickly approaching road trip. It has been harder than anticipated. Are there no good accommodations around some of the interesting national parks? Are we just late with booking? Or is it a combination of those two? Anyhow, I think we never have spent that much time and effort on booking hotels rooms, cabins, and AirBnB rooms.

On Friday, we discovered that Seighin has nothing to do on the last day of school and decided to add an extra day to our travel. We leave a day earlier freeing the last day of visits and got rid of the last moment rush. Of course, we had to book an extra night.

Looking at all the bookings, we took our time but made it one of our cheapest travel plan. Based on the experience of previous travels, I had a rough estimate of 40 USD per person per night, but we booked at an average of just above 25 USD. Not bad! Of course, these are not the only costs.

The list of places we will visit:

- Harpers Ferry NHP, WV
- Fort Necessity NB, PA
- Flight 93 National Memorial, PA
- Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, ND
- Theodore Roosevelt National Park, ND
- Giant Springs State Park, MT
- Glacier National Park, MT
- East Shore Smoke House Restaurant, MT
- Flathead Lake State Park, MT
- North Cascades National Park, WA
- Deception Pass, WA
- Olympic National Park, WA
- Hoh National Rain Forest, WA
- World's Largest Sitka Spruce, WA
- Cape Disappointment, WA
- Ecola State Park, OR
- Fort Stevens, WA
- Lewis and Clark National Historical Park, WA
- Mount Saint Helens, WA

16 June 2021



- Mount Rainier National Park, WA
- Ginkgo Petrified Forest State Park, MT
- Manhattan Project NHP Hanford, MT
- Whitman Mission NHS, MT
- Nez Perce NHP, ID
- Big Hole National Battlefield, MT
- Grant-Kohrs NHS, MT
- Pipestone NM, MN
- Effigy Mounds NM, IA
- Dayton Aviation Heritage NHP, OH
- Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers NM, OH
- And of course, some visits to Starbucks shops to complete Calle's collection of state mugs.

The only thing we need to do now is to make it a reality. We are ready for it!

In the meantime

A bit struggling to make everything fit into the schedule for our move out. The pieces of the puzzle are coming together nicely. Organizing simple things are hard when there are more than two parties involved. Certainly, when some do not react quickly or with dubious answers. But we must press on.





Seighin picks up his class ring. It is a nice one. Now all three sons have such a ring. A token that they have graduated from an American high school. As Loic has already proven, wearing this ring on the right occasion may be advantageous.

Talking about Loic: it is not sure that he will be able to visit us in the USA. There is still a ban on leisure travel for Europeans. We must lookout for a potential change in the restrictions before buying a flight ticket. On the other hand, Ciaran will join us in Seattle on our trip. With his NATO-2 visa, he is allowed to enter. He only needs to show a negative COVID test, although that might be a bit of a challenge. He also will probably have to pick up his luggage in Washington DC, get out of the airport, come back in, and check-in for Seattle. He has three hours for that. Should be more than enough. Anyhow, I booked both flights with the same airliner.



Leaving means also some last visits to friends you will leave behind. The first is the Italian family. They were part of our 'foreign' dinner club that broke up because of COVID. It was nice to do this again, albeit in a much smaller setting.

The days here are or very hot and humid, or rainy. In any case, not the type of weather Stone prefers to walk in. His motivation to go for a walk is below zero. Every time I must drag him out of the house. I have never met a dog that did not like to go outside. Now, we have one.

While Calle is cheering for Belgium, Loic visits Firenze. The team wins its first match of the 2020 European championship. I am not a soccer fan but cannot help it to stop working and watch the goals in the replay.

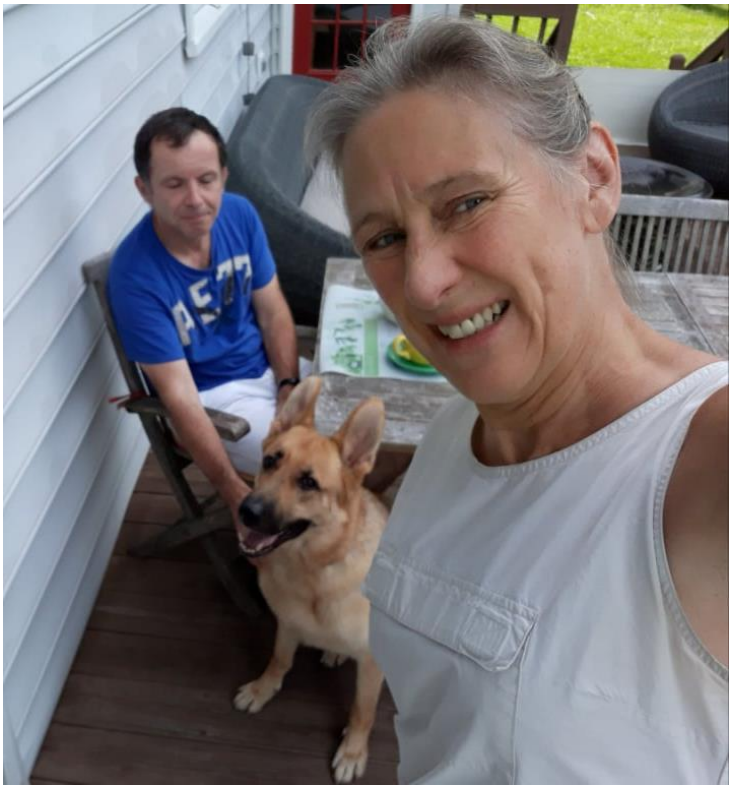


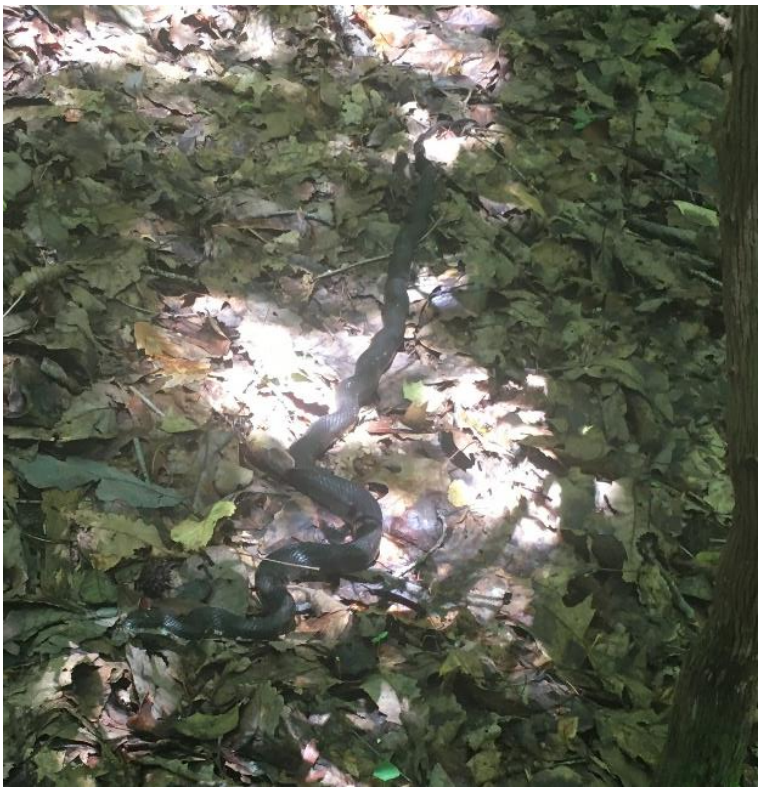




On Sunday, father's day in Belgium – in the USA that is next month – I do what I mostly do on Sundays: going on K9 SAR training. 6 hours in the woods walking, orienting, and relaxing. I am going to miss that. I announced that we will leave in August. They to organize a throw-out party. Well, another farewell activity on the list.

While walking in the forest, we stumble on an Eastern Rat snake. The snake is about 1.3 meters long. Not knowing my snakes, I take a picture at a safe distance. Later, I found out it is non-venomous, but better be safe than sorry.





One of the tips you get before moving out is to sell stuff you will not use anymore. We went through our belongings and picked those we would or could not use in Belgium. After putting some for sale on Facebook's Marketplace, some things went out faster than I could respond. I hope the rest sells as good. It is not easy to keep track of the different requests to make sure you do not sell the same thing twice.



The last days before a road trip are always a bit hectic. This times it is no different. Soon, we will be on the road again, but first, we must survive the pre-holiday rush. I leave Stone for three weeks of boarding after our weekly training. In the evening we want to have our 'traditional' start-of-the-road-trip dinner in the Smashburger, but they are closed for maintenance. Chick-Fil-A? Only lucky with the third one.

The only thing left is to load up the car and go to bed.