

ALLAN GRICE

FRIENDSHIPS,  
FEAR AND FIRE...

Call  
the Fire  
Brigade!

Fighting London's Fires in the '70s

'Probably the best book ever  
written by a fireman about the London  
Fire Brigade. Read it.' Gordon Honeycombe



The author as a Station Officer in the late 1970s, alongside the wheeled escape ladder, wearing the Proto oxygen breathing apparatus

# CALL THE FIRE BRIGADE!

Fighting London's Fires in the '70s

Allan Grice



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## **Author's Note**

Having spent 20 years as a fireman and officer in the highest risk areas of the London Fire Brigade during some of its busiest periods, I have experienced much of life and death and the general harshness of our existence. Moving from West Riding County Fire Service in 1972, anxious to feel the excitement, as I felt sure it was then, of a metropolitan fire service, I joined the London Fire Brigade and so began my initiation into the brutal reality of life in a teeming city, brimming with danger and poverty.

Often the hopelessness and desperation of life in areas where we responded to emergencies was palpable – even as I crawled, face to the floor, trying to escape the dense smoke of a deadly fire. This was especially the case when responding to 999 calls in the cosmopolitan East End, that district of mean and moody streets, meths drinkers, teeming tenements, densely crammed workplaces and the giant warehouses and wharves of the London docks, then in the final years of their once distinguished and colourful life.

Over the many years that I worked on the front line as a fireman, I kept a brief note of the fire and non-fire emergencies I attended. I wanted to be able, if I lived that long, to one day look back upon those days and nights spent protecting the people of the capital, and their properties and livelihoods. By drawing on selected incidents and situations, I have described the real-life drama and humanity of the world of fire and rescue of over 40 years ago: of the sadness felt by crew members at the loss of life, and the elation experienced when lives were saved.

Why did I write these accounts? There were a number of motivations. Many people, on learning of what I did and where I had served, asked me questions about life within the fire service. This got me thinking that there would be others out there also curious to know. On top of this, as far as I could see, there were very few accounts in existence that recorded the perspective of someone who had actually been there, in the thick of it, back then.

The 1970s was a decade in which there was a massive sea change in attitudes to life and society. Some of these were a natural result of progress and were welcomed, but within the fire service some of those new ways of thinking would herald the end of an era. With the introduction in 1974 of legislation regarding health and safety in the workplace, the old 'firedog' mentality - and the cult of the 'smoke eater' - was dealt a blow.

Over time, as the legislation took hold, some with command and control responsibilities became frightened of transgressing the safety laws, to the extent that their natural and developed professional instincts for selfless action towards those needing help were throttled. The UK fire service has always prided itself on its overall high standards of personnel safety in what is potentially an extremely hazardous occupation. Given the thousands of dangerous situations dealt with, the safety record statistics of the UK fire service in terms of death and injury are excellent. Strong discipline, firm but fair management and experience-based leadership always played a key role in the safety of fire and rescue crews of my era on the front line.

Those of us who, because of the lack of breathing apparatus, had to endure vile smoke and fire fumes will always be grateful that those who came behind us did not have to suffer such a hazardous exposure. Health and safety requirements today ensure high levels of personal protective equipment and training so that firefighters are better able to cope with all eventualities, and this truly is a

blessing. The concept of personnel safety is a noble one, indeed; however, if the regulations become unbalanced in their application - and I have seen this happen - a distorted preoccupation with the safety of emergency service personnel starts to inhibit overmuch the essential human instincts to place one's own life on the line to save those in peril. Mollycoddling - wrapping people up in thick cotton wool - is a distorting process that plays its part in making individuals averse to risk. It is at this point that serious questions must be asked of legislation.

For me, the sliding pole, the ear-splitting sirens and blue beacons were there to help us get to the scene as rapidly as possible. Both Pumps were usually crossing the threshold in not much over a minute during the wee small hours and at the incident within four more. No other service could beat that. This was a world away from what arose in later years, when this vital rapid response by our sister services was halted within high crime areas until police escorts could arrive to help ensure the rescuers' safety whilst those awaiting help may have lain dying, thanks to an unintelligent application of health and safety legislation principles.

London Fire Brigade is world renowned for its high courage and fire and rescue effectiveness. There is no doubt in my mind that this reputation was grounded in the massive practical experience gained on the busiest inner city fire station areas in times of peace and war when the character, attitudes and traditional decency of people in all walks of life were markedly different from today.

So my accounts are about another time and about a type of character that rarely exists today. My old 'guvnors', men who had been tempered and forged in the searing heat of the Luftwaffe's Blitz raids on key locations within this country, as well as serving on the front line in Europe, were from an era where military-style discipline and hierarchy could mean the difference between life and death.

Although it is true that the overall numbers of emergency calls received today are generally higher than was the case 30 or 40 years back, the numbers of serious life-taking and life-threatening types of fires, and the numbers of major property fires responded to in this century, are far fewer than those attended by London fire crews of the years described in the accounts which follow.

Fires were dealt with without the level of personal protective equipment provided today. Perhaps the biggest shift seen, though, over the years since my accounts, has been that related to the operational strategy employed. Then the approach was one in which officers in command insisted that we 'got into fires' at all costs in order to save both life and property; today, safety laws temper and, some would say, tightly shackle such an aggressive approach.

This is a no-punches-pulled, warts-and-all account that, in some places, is not for the squeamish. It gives the truth of what it was really like to be a fireman in the 1970s - that turbulent decade of massive political unrest.

Above all my accounts allow you to walk within my world as a firefighter - to feel the tingling on your ears that alerts you to the heat, urging you to get out of the building; to see the charcoaled remains of women and children with no escape from fire; to experience the elation of saving a life; to smell that unmistakable odour through the Pump window en route to a call - the cocktail of burning wood, paint, fabric and rubber all in one - telling you to take a deep breath and face up to what's coming.

\* \* \*

By its very nature, the fire station is a place where, especially on the 15-hour-long night duties, crews talk over the jobs that they have been involved in. It was through these conversations that I was able to see incidents from the perspective of the other firemen on duty (female



firefighters were not recruited into the London Fire Service until 1982, so in my day it was a purely male contingent) and am able here to relay their experiences. In addition, having had the great privilege of not only being a front-line fireman but also, eventually, a watch (shift) manager, I am able to convey what I personally experienced and also what I know those who were my guvnors and mentors during my first years in London would have been feeling when responding to and effectively dealing with the hundreds of emergencies we attended back then.

While my accounts are based on notes taken at the time, many of the most dramatic responses – and some, like the dreadful Moorgate tube disaster of 1975 – were so horrific that the memory of them is seared onto my mind like today's digital technology can burn an image onto a CD. I can recollect scenes in intimate detail still of some of the more horrific rescues we carried out.

As not all of those whom I worked with, and their children and the public we served, have passed on, in order to respect their privacy I have used pseudonyms for all of the actual personnel I was so privileged to work alongside; furthermore, some situations and locations will still be emotionally sensitive, so I have omitted some street names. None of this alters the fact that these are true accounts of my life within the Big Smoke in those years before the nanny state with its throttling, European Commission edicts on health and safety at work altered the way in which we had operated so effectively for so long.

# Chapter 1

## Death in the Small Hours

*'Fire in tenement - multiple calls being received.'* Our officer in charge, 'Biff' Sands, is reading the slip through sleep-bleary eyes as I and the rest of the watch plunge down the sliding pole and look up through our own fuzzy vision to the coloured indicator lights fitted above the station doors that indicate who will be responding. Green is for the Pump with its crew of four; red is for the Pump Escape, with a normal crew of five. Both lights are glowing and the diesel engines growl like chained guard dogs sensing an intruder and raring to go. They fill the air with pungent exhaust smoke, through which the light from the fast-spinning electric-blue beacons eerily reflects.

Blue Watch is the duty shift. Biff is leading it, in charge of the Pump. The guvnor of this watch, he is distinguished by a white helmet with a narrow encircling black band. He is supported by his number two, Sub Officer Jack Hobbes, and his number three, Leading Fireman Dick Friedland. These three manage us six firemen, whose ages range from a callow nineteen to the grizzled early fifties.

We quickly pull on helmet, boots and leggings, then a silk neckerchief, which protects against hot embers getting past the collar of the cloth tunic. Finally, the belt and axe pouch is secured.

The Pump, with its Dewhurst ladder, which can be extended to 30 feet, roars out hard on the heels of the Pump Escape, the brigade's principal rescue ladder, a one-ton wooden beast with four-foot-diameter wheels, enabling it to be swiftly positioned and then hand-wound to a maximum height of 50 feet. Less than 60 seconds have gone by from the first urgent clamour of the call bells to our leaving the station, now silent and deserted like the *Mary Celeste*, with only kicked-off shoes lying on the red-tiled floor as proof that we were there.

Such is the importance that the London Fire Brigade attaches to the speed of response that a senior officer can turn up unannounced by night or day to implement a test turnout by actuating the call bells and timing us with a stopwatch. Woe betide crews that are sluggish. No matter how deep a man might be sleeping in the iron army-type bed provided, once the call bells clamour he is expected to be awake and on the appliance in seconds. You never know if the call is for real or if a cunning and impassive-faced officer is behind the rude awakening. Turnout competitions are held and the rivalry between stations to secure the trophy for the swiftest is intense.

No matter how much some men might curse them, the motive behind these test turnouts is noble - long experience within the high-risk inner city has hammered home how the saving of seconds can be vital where persons are trapped by fire or hanging by their fingertips on a ledge where they have crawled to escape the searing flames and choking, superheated smoke.

The mean and moody East End street where we have been called is in what at the time would have been called a dodgy district, the kind where coppers patrol in pairs. The street is thick with buildings: five-storey tenements crammed in next to furniture and garment makers; printers, plumbers and pawnbrokers side by side with wine and spirit

merchants, timber and builders' yards, and a host of other commercial premises in the heart of this seedy enclave.

The cab window next to Biff, our guvnor, is open a few inches in spite of the bitter cold of this January night and the job can be detected even though it's several streets away. Building fires create an unmistakable odour. It is a cocktail of burning wood, paint, varnish, fabric and rubber all in one. No matter how many hundreds of times it enters the nostrils, heart rates quicken and the adrenalin rush is full bore with the nervous anticipation of what is to come.

Both pumps career round the bend into the street and immediately run into the heavy hot fog of thick brown smoke that has all but obliterated the sodium street lamps.

There are long tongues of yellow and red flames shooting fiercely skywards from several windows at the fourth and top-floor level of a grey tenement. A burning timber window frame is on the pavement, having fallen from on high.

'We've got a right bleeding goer here, boys,' shouts Station Officer Sands.

As we squeal to a halt, a shocking sight confronts us. A man is impaled on a set of spiked iron railings that separate the street from a basement area below. It is clear he has jumped, chancing his luck from fifty feet rather than being burned alive, but with over six inches of pointed steel sticking out of his chest, it looks as though his luck wasn't in.

The noise of the fire and the roar of the arriving pumps have awoken residents of the tenement and other dwellings in the street. Some 30 or 40 folk are on the pavement opposite the burning building. Some are wrapped in blankets, with striped pyjama legs just visible above carpet slippers; others are fully clothed, their necks craned back as they look up at the inferno, hands on mouths with shock. A couple of police officers are at the scene: a six-foot-plus PC with the build of an all-in wrestler and a much shorter WPC

at his side. Both are trying to help the unfortunate speared from back to chest by the railing spikes.

I can see Biff calling on his vast experience to inform his decisions. He needs to work out how many men will be needed to best save life and property. With three pumps automatically dispatched to all building fires within this powder keg of a district, and with a fourth on its way because more than one 999 call has been received, he knows that the best part of twenty men will soon be battling this blaze. Adequate for the time being.

Jack Hobbes is detailed by Biff to check if any fire is visible at the rear of the tenement and if anybody is visibly trapped at windows.

Biff establishes from a man who says he is the caretaker for the block that a family of three occupy the top-floor flat from which the flames are billowing. He thinks that the person on the railings is one of them, but the other two occupants are nowhere to be seen.

Once Biff hears this, he instructs the Pump's driver to send the priority radio message, '*Persons Reported?*'. This will result in Fire Control ordering an ambulance, but the pool of blood on the pavement means it's probably too late for this man and all efforts will be directed at firefighting and rescue.

Fellow Yorkie Barry Priestley and I have been instructed to rig in BA. Once the third pump arrives, a further pair of BA men will be similarly instructed and they will back us up. Since time is crucial to fire suppression and victim location, Dick Friedland and crew member Ricky Tewin have already entered without BA. They have taken in a jet and one will operate this whilst the other begins a preliminary search for the missing persons before the BA crews relieve them.

Unless a fire is so well advanced that we are forced to tackle it from the street, the drill is to drive the fire and heat back outwards through the windows rather than pushing it

inwards, which can spread the fire and lessen the survival prospects of anyone trapped.

After Jack confirms that no persons are trapped at the rear, Biff makes his way up the stone staircase to the fire floor. Officers like him don't ask their men to go to places they won't go themselves, so he steps around the hard red snake of hose and meets the heat and smoke at the top-floor landing. It is so hot, so thick and so pungent that it forces him onto his knees, making him curse at its awful ambience. It is fiendishly hot, but his earlobes have not quite begun to tingle with the heat. He knows that when they do it's an urgent warning for Dick and Ricky to get out fast before the whole apartment erupts into a deathly lung-searing fireball. But for now he pushes on, confident that he'll know when things are getting too hot for safety.

His knowledge is grounded in advice handed down by his mentors of years back, when he was still a young fireman; mentors who were greatly experienced men, old 'firedogs', as they were known - long-serving, seasoned and very competent fire officers, many of whom had earned their spurs and that title fighting the conflagrations of the Blitz. He has augmented that advice with 20-odd years on the ground in the heart of what are some of the capital's highest fire-risk districts.

There is a thin vein of air just above the floor. Biff is now flat on the fifth floor landing, breathing this in, his white helmet almost invisible in the gravy-thick acrid smoke. He can hear the crashing noise of the jet being operated by his men, who are taking a lot of punishment fighting the flames in that cruel interval before others wearing BA arrive to relieve them.

In the days before there was a BA set for every crew member - something that didn't happen for quite a few years after my transfer to the capital - those who were to wear BA for the shift would be taken from a roster and announced at roll-call. When you responded to a job where

it was clear that breathing apparatus would be required, you only put the set on when your guvnor ordered, 'BA men get rigged!' or 'Don your sets and start up.'

To rig properly in BA - the closed-circuit 'Proto' apparatus - was quite a lengthy process. The set has a harness and breathing bag that go over the shoulders and the oxygen cylinder is in the small of the back, along with a brass on and off valve in the form of a wheel. Another two controls allow you to either send more oxygen into the chest bag if the work is heavy or to permit an overfilled bag to vent the excess. The latter is frowned upon, as you are getting rid of oxygen that might save your life should you become trapped and capable of operating the valves. A set of rubber-framed goggles keeps the eye-stinging smoke out and a mouthpiece secured to a personal head harness is placed between the teeth. A set of nose clips keep you from inhaling the deadly fumes.

It is because properly rigging takes time that Dick and Ricky went straight in under that vile smoke to begin their combined search and firefighting efforts: seconds saved can be the difference between a victim being dead or alive.

I quickly tighten the body belt, take out my personal hand-sewn head harness, which I keep inside my helmet, and position it ready to attach the mouthpiece via two D rings. Mouthpiece in, I crack the valve and feel the chest mounted bag engorge. I secure the nose clips, pull down the goggles and put my helmet on, then hand in my name tally to the Pump's driver.

With Barry Priestley, I make my way to the fire floor, wondering as always whether we will get out in one piece, recalling a recent fire at a Chelsea restaurant where two firemen had died, the pure oxygen in their BA sets apparently having intensified the burning of their air passages. But these thoughts cannot be dwelled upon.

We reach the top floor, where Biff is on his knees, barely visible amid the smoke, the awful product of burning

furniture and floor coverings. We enter the first floor and such is the heat we are forced onto our knees. Barry's thick ex-coalminer bunch-of-bananas fingers grasp the red snake of fire hose which Ricky and Dick have taken in. The crashing of its jet is loud as they beat down the searing flames and so dense is the smoke and so terrific the heat that the pair must be on the point of collapse. Though the mouthpiece renders clear speech impossible, Barry mumbles, 'Get out - get out now!' Barry takes the nozzle, swirling it around to lower this awful heat - it's far worse than being inside a gas oven on high - while I start a search of the apartment.

I know from personal experience that Ricky and Dick will have by now crawled out, coughing and retching violently on hands and knees, their faces red as lobsters and glistening with the intense heat and strenuous effort. Their noses and mouths will be caked in the snotty mucus caused by ingesting the foul smoke.

I start my search for the missing persons, following a systematic plan. First around the edges of the rooms, then diagonally across in sweeping arcs, with hands feeling for victims, probing under tables, on sofas, and on and under beds. I then check inside the bath tub and cupboards, under the windows and behind the doors - the last two places being where we often find victims who have made a desperate effort to reach safety and clean, life-giving air.

Only ten minutes have gone by since our arrival but already most of the fire has been suppressed. The terrible smoke is now thinning rapidly and the skin-searing heat is falling in temperature by the second.

Biff can now afford to stand up, even though the atmosphere in an upright posture is still a lot hotter than on the ground. At least he is able to make out Barry handling the jet and myself and others searching earnestly for the two occupants still unaccounted for.



There is a grunt from one of the other BA men instructed to assist us with the search for victims, his speech gagged by the mouthpiece and nose clips of his oxygen set. He signals for the Station Officer to come over. He points his lamp beam to the floor and onto a steaming pile of what looks like the debris of plaster, burned ceiling laths and the remnants of incinerated furniture.

It is neither of these. What it is sadly is the partly cremated remains of the two missing residents. They must have been asleep in a double bed in the front room, where those wicked flames were issuing on our arrival. The heat has been such that the skin on their torsos has split like that of a sausage that has not been pricked before going under the grill.

As always when I see death, especially where the terrible burning makes it absolutely impossible for the victim to be alive, my mind thinks of the absolute irreversibility of that state. For me, it is like a 'frozen in time' image - 'the decisive moment', captured by French street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. It is indeed a sobering sensation, reminding you to savour the fresh air and your good health while you have them.

A radio message is sent and the matter-of-fact wording reduces the terrible tragedy to the details of an official report:

*Tenement of five floors, 60 feet by 40 feet. Twenty per cent of top floor damaged by fire, heat and smoke. One male jumped from fourth floor to street before arrival, apparently dead. One male and one female found in front room on fifth floor, apparently dead, all awaiting removal. One jet, one hose reel, four BA.*

The next hour is spent ensuring the fire is fully extinguished. The apartment is a blackened, steaming mess. Debris of furniture, timber, plaster and lath is turned over and damped down so that there is no prospect of it reigniting. But it is done without disturbing the charred human remains

that might contain vital clues as to the cause of the blaze. Fatalities mean that the incident becomes a matter for the police and coroner and that at some future date those in the Brigade who discovered the bodies will be called to court to report the facts of their involvement.

The gas and electrical authorities are called to verify all is safe with their equipment and a senior officer from the brigade's Divisional HQ has come on, as it is the policy for one to attend jobs where lives have been lost.

The detailed investigation into the cause of the fire reveals that a paraffin heater had been knocked over by accident. This had flared up and the leaking fuel had turned the apartment into a furnace within minutes.

Two hours after our arrival at the fire, both pumps are back in the station. Biff Sands is writing up his reports and the rest of us are busy re-stocking hose, cleaning and servicing the BA sets and polishing the red bodywork until it gleams. All of this to ensure that we are ready for the next shout for help from wherever and whenever it might come in this mighty metropolis of seven million people, with its thousands of premises, large and small - and the calls never stop coming.

## Chapter 2

### **Beginnings**

When I was 13, I happened upon a book by former inner London fireman John Anderson. *The Fireman*, published in the 1950s, described Anderson's career before, during and after the war. The book's opening words stirred something within me, something that somehow integrated with earlier medical ambitions of mine, and my wish to do something worthwhile with my life:

Bells, so often it begins with bells, and then round the corner two gleaming red fire appliances come into sight and you have a brief glimpse of helmeted men inside as they charge past . . .

I was too young on leaving school to apply to the fire service, so instead I secured an apprenticeship in one of the city of Leeds' most famous colour printers, Alf Cooke's in Hunslet. The mid-1960s is remembered by me, from the standpoint of today, as an important staging post, a springboard from which I would make my 'leap for life' (those three words were to be relevant to my journey, too). Perhaps when you are still in your teens it is always a good time to be around, on that exciting threshold of your future; the truth is that the mid and late 1960s were exciting and memorable periods for so many.

The 'Fab Four' had only recently started out on their journey. So different was their music from what had gone

before. The haunting lyrics, and their captivating and earthy personalities, soon to charm the whole world, were also ringing the changes of a society that only two decades earlier had been suffering the privations of war. Leeds was, of course, the birthplace of Jimmy Savile, the former road-racing cyclist and DJ. He could often be seen charging through the Headrow, a main street in the city centre, on his bike, his platinum blond locks flowing in the air and his 'Savile's Travels' motorhome in front. The same air also seemed to be carrying a wind of change in politics, as PM Harold Wilson, a son of the textile town of Huddersfield, made his speech about 'the white heat of technology'.

It was definitely an exciting time to be young and to experience what this new age would bring. What it brought for me, although I did not, of course, know at the time where it would end, was a series of events that linked in to those opening lines in John Anderson's book.

It was whilst I was on the shop floor of Alf Cooke's massive printing works one winter's morning in the mid-1960s that something happened that helped consolidate my ambitions for a life of fire and rescue work. The staccato peal of fire engine bells announced the urgent arrival of two pumps from the local station of Leeds City Fire Brigade. They had been called to deal with a mysterious haze of smoke that had appeared in the main press room. As three or four of a crew entered, resplendent in their gleaming black helmets, boots and double-breasted Navy-style fire tunics, Eddie, my press assistant, who had seen active service in Italy during the war, said, 'What a fine body of men.' Back then, the sight of uniforms was reminiscent of a not-very-distant past when so many, like Eddie, had donned uniform either as regulars in the 1939-45 war, or in the Korean conflict or had completed national service, which had only ended a few years earlier. As such, the general public were much more willing to respect the courage and sense of public service displayed by firemen and police officers than would be the

case as the years went by, when a sinister and unhealthy resentment of anyone in authority took hold amongst many people. For me, the presence of those smartly turned out firemen brought back the words and images in Anderson's little book.

However another much more dramatic event hammered the nails into the coffin of my printing career, provided that I could unlock the tight shackles of my five-year-long apprenticeship - a not inconsiderable feat in those days. I was on the second of two night school classes, part of a City and Guild's course in lithographic printing. It was about eight in the evening in early summer and I was at a desk overlooking the main street down into central Leeds. I was being sent to sleep by a lecture on the constituents of printing ink when an urgent ringing clamour aroused my interest. Anderson's line - 'Bells, so often it begins with bells . . .' - was again triggered in my mind. I looked out and saw the Pump Escape and Pump from Leeds Central fire station race past. Within the next few minutes, more bells and the wail of a New York-style wailing siren, as two more machines roared by.

With the lecture over, I started the long walk to the central bus station. It was just becoming dusk but about a mile away there was a huge, sinister-looking black smoke plume reaching hundreds of feet into the darkening sky. I reasoned that was where those fire appliances must have been heading.

'The Calls' is an old Leeds street. Today, it is a district of trendy apartments, nightclubs, hotels and bars, but back then it was a heavy commercial district of warehouses abutting the black waters of the River Aire. It was one of these warehouses, which I later learned was stuffed with highly combustible raw wool bales, that was fiercely and spectacularly ablaze. A baby-faced bobby, who was probably not long out of recruit training, was at the top of the street, doing his best to prevent the mounting crowds

attracted by the smoke and fire bells from getting too close. But I managed to circumvent his restriction via a back alley, which got me almost into the affected street. I could not believe the sight of the angry rolling red and yellow flames that were billowing from the highest windows and roof of this multi-storey redbrick Victorian warehouse. Such was the size of the fire that the rapidly falling night appeared in the surrounding streets like a bright summer's day.

Atop a Turntable Ladder, which must have been a good 70 feet high, the fireman looked like a toy soldier silhouetted by the lurid flames. A silver rod of water from his hose was being played on a slated roof on a premises next door in an effort to prevent the massive waves of heat being radiated, igniting first this building, then the next. The cloud of steam that arose when he played the jet elsewhere indicated how hot those slates were.

As I stood in my doorway, almost transfixed, the night air was rent by the bells and sirens of more and more reinforcing appliances, the name placards on their lockers indicating they had been dispatched from such neighbouring towns as Wakefield, Rothwell, Bradford and Dewsbury. Stentorian commands in the hard consonant dialect of West Yorkshire were being rattled out like bullets from a machine gun from a shortish man whose helmet markings indicated that he was brass.

A glance at my watch showed if I didn't pull myself away from this high drama, I would miss the last bus and that would entail a 14-mile walk home - not good when you have to be up at five the next morning to ride the double-decker back into town to start a shift at 7.15. On the bus, which I just caught before it pulled away, I went over all that I had seen and by the time I was home I knew the die had been cast. I wanted a life coloured by fire, smoke and rescue work, not the rainbow spectrum of printing ink.

Although there were not the same number of applicants back in the 1960s for the fire service as there are today, I was still up against stiff competition when I learned of two vacancies in the Wakefield City Fire Brigade. Back then, because there were so many employment prospects, and because a fireman's wage was so paltry, you would normally apply for such a potentially hazardous job only if you were dead keen on the work, or because it was a last resort after failing in other job applications. Whatever the reason, the senior brass interviewing still wanted to recruit the most suitable applicant, so they would be looking for evidence of knowledge of the fire service, plus a good attitude. The fascination I had for the work, first stimulated by John Anderson's book, meant that I was well up on what the service was about. I must have been convincing, or the other applicants poor, because to my great delight I was offered one of the two posts.

Even though the brigade was bang in the centre of the county's headquarters town, it had no connections with the West Riding in terms of fire protection. You see, up until 1974, when local government boundary changes took place nationally, the UK fire service consisted of a mix of county council and county borough brigades. So although surrounded by West Riding county fire stations, such county boroughs as Wakefield, Leeds, Bradford, Halifax and Dewsbury were their own entities with their own budgets and hierarchies. To be a high-ranking officer in a county borough was to be a big fish in a little pond, whereas the same rank in the much larger county brigade was a case of a smaller fish in a much bigger pond.

But before I could accept the job offer I had to get out of the iron-clad indentures of my apprenticeship. Much to my delight, with some persuasive talking, they released me and I was allowed to leave. With luck, and by successfully getting through my recruit training, I would be in an

occupation in which I was not hemmed in by walls and a clocking-in machine.

I did complete the training - it was the nearest I would ever get to being in the forces. Most of the recruit instructors were former military with active service and, being serving City of Leeds firemen with a fair bit of city centre experience under their belts, they instilled in me a sense of fair but no-nonsense discipline that stood me in good stead in my later career.

My two years in this one station outfit at Wakefield taught me that when a fire station does not deal with very many emergencies, the potential for cynical and lazy attitudes develops. (In later years, a grizzled London senior ranker would state that the happiest stations were always the busiest.) So when I learned of a vacancy in the county brigade, I applied to transfer, reasoning that the greater opportunities afforded by a large number of stations would give me the practical experience I sought. But always at the back of my mind it was my ambition to one day become a London fireman.

The reason I sought this 'shop floor upwards' experience was connected to the fact that by dint of rigorous study I had managed to get two of the statutory promotion qualifications under my belt before I was 23. (To achieve permanent promotion, a fireman had to pass a written/practical national examination to qualify for the first three service ranks. In 2004, these qualifications were made obsolete and replaced by a psychometric test-based method.) My inner drive and tenacity were perhaps inherited from two coalminer relatives on my mother's side who had hewn the black gold from the deep mines of the Yorkshire coalfield. Such results when you are so young and look so boyish, however, can create resentment and jealousy, especially in the minds of those who are past the first flush of youth and find exams difficult. I was determined, therefore, not to attract the pejorative label of



'bookman' and my transfer to the West Riding County Fire Service, and a posting to Castleford, home to a top-flight rugby league team known to the locals as 'Classy Cas', was hopefully another step on the road to my gaining more experience.

Although the station was not particularly busy, I attended a lot more incidents than at Wakefield. When I look back, it was one that ironically occurred while I was off duty that, I believe, became instrumental in the way I carried out my job in later years. It not only consolidated my wish to seek a huge practical experience but also played a part in the way that I would eventually manage the safety of men I was in charge of. It hammered home to me life's fragility but also the importance within an emergency or military service of shared belonging.

I had been on nights and was driving back to the two-up two-down mid-terrace my wife Carmel and I had recently bought in a little village off the A1 Great North Road. Back then you came on duty and went off duty wearing your undress uniform so you were easily recognisable as being in one of the emergency services. On a busy road, infamous for road traffic fatalities, and near the entrance to one of the many collieries of the district, I saw a car half in a ditch and impacted into a telegraph pole. Although I would have stopped anyway, my being in uniform seemed to compel me to see what had happened and, if appropriate, render what first aid help might be needed.

Sadly, it was too late for first aid. The driver, who it turned out was an Asian GP, had collided with the telegraph pole and, it later transpired, been killed instantly from a broken neck. I had not seen death before and because I was not with a team of crewmates, I felt the shock of this sudden ending of life - the sudden awareness of the sword of Damocles that hovers above us all - more than I would have otherwise, as part of a fire and rescue team. The mutual support, the so-called *esprit de corps* that lies at the heart

of an effective emergency service unit, was not there because I was outside its sustaining force. I remember so clearly how the GP's skin was an ashen grey and how the still open eyes stared lifelessly at me. In the succeeding years, I would witness death many times, often amid scenes of devastating carnage, but as horrific as some of those fatalities were, they were easier to deal with than on that first occasion. Of course, one becomes case-hardened - a mental callus forms over time which protects - but I think one of the most important contributors to the efficacy of an emergency squad, be it in a hospital, on a battlefield or as a member of a mountain rescue or lifeboat, is this support that crewmates give one another.

That young doctor's death was another consolidating factor in my eventually always appreciating the guvnors who 'ran a tight ship' but knew when to let their men relax. The former applying, of course, to every emergency response; the latter during stand-down time in between calls on the long night shifts.

I constantly wrestled with the idea of applying to transfer to London, but my having passed two important promotion examinations must have been noticed by someone at BHQ because I was promoted at the young age of 24 to Leading Fireman. I was posted to the inland port of Goole, which promised much action in its wharves and quaysides, but it was very quiet and my mind was looking south yet again.

I had reason to attend Brigade HQ one cold January morning and in the mess room I picked up a copy of the *Sun* newspaper. In it was a report on Prime Minister Ted Heath's signing the first part of a Common Market document. My eyes were then drawn to a dramatic full-page image, captioned by those three words: 'Leap for Life'. It was a photograph of a fatal fire that had occurred on a Sunday morning in a flat above a post office on London's King's Cross Road. Crews were manoeuvring the wheeled escape ladder, two ambulance men were tending to two young

people who had leapt out of the top-floor window and two other firemen were preparing to work a hose into the building. That chance pick-up of that paper crystallised everything. I knew for sure that, as big a move as it would be, I would apply for a transfer into the London Fire Brigade.

As I write these words, I can look over and see on a wall a framed copy of that photograph, which played such a part in my own 'leap for life' as I began the process that led to my adventures within the Big Smoke.

## Chapter 3

### **Whiskey in the Jar**

I'm quite cold, standing on the platform of a surface station of the London underground. My usual mode of transport to the fire station, over 15 miles across the congested roads of the capital, is by car. Unfortunately, after ten years and 100,000 miles, the gearbox has decided to call it a day. As a consequence, here I am, at 4.30 in the afternoon, taking the tube. Fortunately, it's not too far to walk to the station the other end, where the first of my two night duties begins at six.

After waiting for a good 20 minutes in the chilling breeze, I am glad to see the red snake of the train pull in. It's good to feel the relative warmth of the carriage as I grab one of the few empty seats on what is a train packed with mostly homeward-bound commuters. No matter how many times I ride on the underground, the unique association with London that these trains and stations evoke in me is always there - their smell, their sounds and that tingling anticipation of new experiences that the capital provides.

Perhaps it is the abundance of ever-changing advertisements. Those long, curving strips underneath their glass and acrylic cases, with their stainless steel frames, so many of which evoke the London scene of commerce, leisure and endless opportunity.

Above all, perhaps the unique atmosphere that I feel in London comes from the tightly crammed, cosmopolitan crush of people within the confines of the clattering carriage.

To travel on the London underground during the peak hours is to travel amongst so much of what helps to make the capital what it is: a huge, sprawling, bustling, rushing, teeming fleshpot; a cosmopolitan container of people that daily disgorges its human cargo across the length and breadth of the city.

On alighting, this thronging mass makes its way to countless destinations for countless reasons and purposes, each with a specific motivation . . . most honourable, some not. But wherever this teeming throng of people go, there is no place within this conurbation that falls outside the embrace of the brigade and its fire stations, the crews of which stand their safety vigil by day and during the long watches of the night.

Wherever masses of people live and work, the risk from fire and other calamities will exist. For myself, there is therefore nothing like a crammed full tube train to best remind me that it is within the largest conurbations that the greatest risks to life exist.

I step off the train onto the platform deep below the mainly mean streets of the inner-city suburbs where my fire station is located, wondering what act of human anger, weakness or mistake might occasion an urgent call of the turnout bells on my 15-hour-long night duty.

‘Busy day, Mart?’ I enquire of Marty Molloy as I enter the station via the open doors of the appliance room, where he stands looking on to the street. Marty is a 20-year veteran of the brigade and one of the most respected firemen around.

‘Nah, couple of mickeys and a “wash petrol off roadway” after a two-car shunt outside the station. Still, if nothing

else, I won't be falling asleep with fatigue tonight,' he answers, this last remark a reference to his part-time job on the door at a local dance hall. Marty had been a useful light-heavyweight boxer as a young bloke. Today, he tips the scales at fifteen stone; at just under six feet, with powerful shoulders, close-cropped dark hair, flattened nose and square jaw, he is a good visual deterrent to most would-be troublemakers fuelled by drink.

'Well, perhaps it's our night for some action, Mart. Just hope you don't get too much, if you know what I mean.' I then go up to the dormitory locker room to change into my uniform, ready for the roll call, due in 20 minutes.

'Looks good, Paddy. What's in the pan tonight, buddy?' asks Ricky Tewin of our 'chef', as he strolls into the first floor galley kitchen, following our couple of hours out in the drill yard.

Each watch on London fire stations had a mess manager - it was usually a job that certain fellows who fancied themselves in the cooking department sought. During weekdays, most stations employed a civilian cook, usually a woman, but it was still the mess manager's responsibility to buy in the food for meals using the monies that each man contributed. However, at weekends and on night shifts there was no civilian cook and at these times it was the chef's job to rustle up a satisfying meal. This meant he would be occupied straight after the six o'clock roll call, so he was excused drills on nights - the more cynical would say this was an incentive to take on the role!

'Sausage and mash with onion gravy, followed by tinned oranges and cream, mate. How's that grab you?' Paddy Mulligan, a 14-year veteran of the brigade, replies.

'If it tastes as good as it sounds, it should be handsome, Paddy. You've missed your way in life. You could have been another of those famous television chefs.'