

WITNESS STATEMENT

Criminal Procedure Rules, r27.2; Criminal Justice Act 1967, s.9; Magistrates' Courts Act 1980, s.5b

Statement of: NORTH, ROBERT

Age if under 18: OVER 18 (if over 18 insert 'over 18')

Occupation: FIRE OFFICER

This statement (consisting of 8 page(s) each signed by me) is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and I make it knowing that, if it is tendered in evidence, I shall be liable to prosecution if I have wilfully stated in it anything which I know to be false, or do not believe to be true.

Signature: R NORTH

Date: 16/08/2019

Tick if witness evidence is visually recorded ☐ (supply witness details on rear)

This statement relates to Grenfell Tower, W10. On Tuesday 16th July 2019 I attended the London Fire Brigade headquarters at Union Street, SE1 and spoke with PC GREENGRASS. Also in attendance were Civilian Investigator David BRATHWAITE and I was introduced to Dr Catherine BROADWAY from the NHS Grenfell Support Team.

I am a retired firefighter with the London Fire Brigade (LFB). I joined the LFB on 4th January 1988 and after initial training I was posted to Westminster A25 where I spent eighteen (18) years and then transferred to G27 North Kensington where I spent the last twelve (12) years of my career. My initial training was at the Southwark training centre. The course covered using fire appliances, firefighting drills and then progressed to a station based probation period where I took a number of competency exams before being signed off as a competent fire fighter. During my career I had a brief spell where I was promoted to the position of Crew Manager but missed the role of fire fighter so referred back.

My experience of dealing with high rise tower block fires has varied. Since being posted at North Kensington I've had a lot of calls to deal with fires in high rise premises within the borough both before and after the fire at Grenfell Tower. North Kensington is the local station so I've had many visits to Grenfell Tower relating to other areas within the fire brigade such as Home Fire Safety Visits (HFSV) and Section 7(2)(d) familiarisation visits. A 7(2)(d) visit involves looking at access points (staircases), means of escape, positions of dry risers and the best location to position the pump appliance upon arrival.

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These two type of visits are conducted regularly but I have no idea how they are planned or monitored, once complete the office staff deal with any paperwork we have.

The previous high rise fires that I've attended were at Trellick Tower a few weeks before the fire at Grenfell where a lady was burnt in a flat on the sixth floor. This fire went without issue for us. I covered for Red Watch in the days after the fire at Grenfell Tower and that crew were first on scene at Adair Tower when it caught light, this was also on the sixth floor. On this occasion both of the lifts were out of action so we had to get up the stairs with the kit whilst people were trying to leave, we had to reassure them that we had this fire covered and under control but they didn't listen to us. I don't blame them one bit for this and wanting to get out with the fear of another Grenfell type incident. Red Watch also went to another fire at Trellick Tower during this cover period. As a crew we know how to fight fires in high rise buildings and what equipment to take from experience and the training for these incidents was good at station level to prepare us. We had made up our own unofficial high rise bags with all of the equipment needed long before the fire at Grenfell to make the jobs easier to manage and get all the correct kit up to the bridgehead. Tower block fires are hard work both physically and are mentally demanding, I've never felt that there wasn't a fire we couldn't attack in a high rise. I remember talking to my wife about the fire at Lakanal House when that was going on saying it was unbelievable that we were in attendance for twenty (20) minutes and people were dying. It just doesn't make sense, fires are internal and don't go outside of buildings. They remain compartmentalised and never spread like that. I remember attending a fire a few years ago at Adair Tower where again we went against policies to fight it. There was only one appliance at the scene so the guvnor had equipment around his neck to carry up when he should have been on the ground running things. If we hadn't made that initial decision to attack the fire then it could have been much worse as you can't give fire time to develop. You need to do the best you can with what you've got there and then. I understand that Adair Tower was covered with a polystyrene composite mix that caught light.

Whilst at North Kensington working with White Watch I attended Grenfell Tower on 10th June 2017 to conduct a HFSV. The Watch Manager (WM) told us that morning we would be going out to do some cold calling at the tower, I suggested another estate to visit which was Henry Dickens Court but were sent to Grenfell. I live in the area around Grenfell so know a number of residents that lived there, On the appliance that day were Crew Manager (CM) GOTTLIEB, Fire Fighter (FF) KATZ and FF BILLS from Red Watch, my hours of duty were 09:30 - 20:00hrs. We arrived and went to the top of the tower with the plan to work our way down and get as many answers from flats as possible. Usual policy for this is we

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would go in twos to the flats on each floor but on this occasion due to the layout of the floors and the close proximity it was decided we could go individually as we would know which flat each member of the crew was inside, we were in radio contact and I didn't feel any kind of threat to myself or my colleagues.

A few people answered their doors on this day but most either didn't want to speak with us or it wasn't convenient for them. One lady came to the door in her dressing gown so wasn't able to speak, I noticed she had smoke alarms in the hallway and confirmed with her that they worked. She said yes, I took her name and she closed the door. This then goes down as a HFSV on the system when it shouldn't as it wasn't thorough enough. Since then seeing faces of the people who died in the fire I can confirm that this lady was one of the victims, her details will be on the completed paperwork but I don't recall her name or the number she lived at. I believe I personally spoke with residents of around seven (7) flats including residents I knew Debbie LAMPELL, Denis MURPHY and Steve POWER plus I did speak with Jessica RAMIREZ as she was able to understand English better than her family so took charge of my visit. I remember going into their flats, talking to them and going through safety information. Unfortunately the information I gave them around tower block safety didn't work as they died in the fire a few days later. One of the last visits I remember from this date was on one of the lower floors where a small family lived. The lady from this flat was asking me about her doors and if they were fire proof. I went round the whole flat with her to give advice on the flat doors, the only door that wouldn't have been fire proof was the bathroom as fires don't tend to start there. I explained that her doors should be resistant for thirty (30) minutes and its smoke that kills in a fire not the fire itself. I now know that at the fire on 14th this was different and the fire did kill some people. I went through the process of what to do should a fire break out in her flat and that she should block the gaps, keep the door shut and stay safe before the fire crews come and get you out.

I saw this lady speaking on the TV in the days after the fire where she said that she ignored the advice given and got out early. I'm thankful she did this as all my advice in that situation was wrong.

FF KATZ spoke with a family that had raised concerns about the refurbishment of the building such as shoddy workmanship, gaps in the cladding and the poor means of escape should something happen. They raised this with us in the hope we could advise them or help them. They showed us a letter from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council saying that if they continue then action would be taken against them. I know that this family died in the fire at Grenfell Tower and that they were right in what they were saying and that is so very wrong.

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If we do find any issues or have concerns within a flat when conducting HFSV then that requires a follow up visit called a "Temporary Fire Risk". I believe I have had to do these previously if there was an obstruction blocking an exit route for example. I've no recollection of any specific addresses where this has been the case within Grenfell Tower but they are documented on an LFB form if found.

I disagree with the whole idea of cold calling and think the fire service need to restructure how HFSV's are conducted as we are doing the public a disservice. When at a visit the pump we are posted in is still classed as "on the run" which means at any point we can be called to attend an emergency incident elsewhere. This is impractical as if we are at the top of a high rise like Grenfell then it takes time to get down to the pump affecting the response time plus if we are in the middle of speaking with someone about any fire safety concerns then all of a sudden we have to leave in a rush to attend the incident. It doesn't look very professional from us, there needs to be a dedicated team within the LFB responsible for HFSV and not make it reliant on station based fire fighters. Also within our station there was a league table that each watch contributes to stating how often they visit sites to make it be competitive, I'm unsure if this is an LFB initiative or was just something done at North Kensington. We got a lot of pressure from ranks above to increase the HFSV within our borough.

I have worked in the fire service for 30 years and can confirm that premises inspections that were conducted before 2005 when the Fire Regulatory Act came in and it became the down to the "Responsible Person" were much more thorough. These inspections would take around half a day, I remember doing these down in Westminster where the whole watch would attend each building. The process was to check/test the dry/wet risers, check the fire doors for closing and whether they were being wedged open for any reason. Even now when we attend a building we always look for fire risks that could have an impact on us when we attend an incident there in the future. The process is like I mentioned earlier. We would go to the top floor and as a crew work our way down looking at each area of that part of the building for any damage or equipment that was vandalised. We would do a "wet test" with the equipment to ensure buildings wouldn't flood plus look at firefighting options such as where we would position our bridgehead one (1) floor below the fire. I know this is now two (2) floors below. A fire scenario would be in place to aid our familiarisation with that buildings layout.

On the night of 14th June 2017 I was at home with my wife in bed. At around 01:08hrs a short time into the fire I was awoken by a horrendous scream from my wife. My first thought was that one of my children had been hurt, I'd never heard these type of screams come out of her before. I panicked and was

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trying to get information out of her but all she said was look Grenfell's on fire. We got dressed and went out onto the streets at about 01:10 and stayed until later in the morning in complete utter disbelief. It went against everything I know as a fire fighter about how fires develop, it was almost surreal and at times felt like it wasn't real life and we were in a movie. I put this down to shock at the time from seeing people in the tower jumping to their death and in particular I remember the roar of a man who I saw in a window. He put his arms out like in a crucifix shape, let out this intense roar and was just engulfed in flames, I never saw him after that. In one of the corner flats by Bramley Road there was a group of females letting out screams that were not nice to hear, these were getting louder as the helicopter was above and I assume people thought this was going to rescue them like in the movies. These screams got louder and louder then suddenly fell silent as the flames got them too.

I remember thinking at the time the only chance people had was to get out and not stay as the fire went up and wrapped around the tower. I've asked myself about the stay put policy and when was it changed on the night to get out as it would have saved people. We were out on the street for around 5-6 hours before trying to get back home, a police officer let us through the cordon and we sat for a short time in our flat. This lasted probably less than 5 minutes before we went and helped out with the aid coming in from various support staff, my wife and I were exhausted and shocked but couldn't just sit around watching it on the TV when it's happening outside. I managed to get a trolley of water for the fire crews and went to the inner cordon where the police let me in and so I spent some time giving out water to crews that were there. I did consider going to the station to get breathing apparatus and coming back to go in the tower on duty but we aren't allowed to do this, I wanted to help as much as I could but knew this option wasn't possible. I was simply a resident at this point not a fire fighter.

Later that morning I had some contact with the wife of Tony DISSON who was a friend of mine that sadly passed away in the fire, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] At the time she was on the phone to him as he was considering jumping from the tower due to the fact he couldn't get out. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I'm fairly sure his wife wasn't in London on the night of the fire but came back up when she heard. Most people around the area of Grenfell know I'm a firefighter and the information she had been told from Tony was to stay put and fire crews will come and get you.

As this didn't happen and he died trying to get out [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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I didn't have any contact with anyone else in the tower that night. I saw a guy at the base of the tower shouting for people to get out as he didn't understand why they were being told to stay inside under the stay put policy. I almost got into a fight with him over this as he was being abusive towards my family and I tried to calm him down. I understand his frustrations though as the only chance people had was to get out of there.

The atmosphere around the tower that morning was quite hostile at times with people acting over the shock of it, at the start I'd estimate around 20-30 people but this increased as more were alerted. My wife was panicking so I just put my professional head on and told her that it would get dealt with, I think this calmed her down. There was a lot of abuse being thrown around, and as I was coming towards the end of my career it made me feel very vulnerable in this situation. I was getting fed up with people trying to take pictures of the fire that weren't involved plus the news crews were hounding everyone when they came outside asking if we were local and looking for information we may have had about people trapped inside. I stayed quiet all through it, I wasn't going to talk to them. A few days after the 14th, I was with my wife on our way to the local shops when a male approached asking where Grenfell was as he wanted to go take pictures. I explained a route to get there if he really wanted to do that and as we separated, he picked up a paper and said he blamed the fire fighters that had killed all the people that died. I lost it and went to attack him but my wife held me back and we walked off.

I tried to speak with people in the fire brigade on the night as I felt I was in a vulnerable position both as a fire fighter and as a local resident due to the negative attacks coming at us. It was hard to take personally as I was passionate about the role and proud to be a fire fighter.

From where we first saw the tower I'd say the initial scale of the fire was low on around the 6th to 8th floors, it was easy to tell at this point the fire was out of control due to the conditions from the night. It was hot so lots of windows were open, I knew the fire had developed behind the cladding and was then bursting through at different points. I felt we wouldn't be able to actually put this fire out and that it would just have to burn itself out.

The roads were full of different fire vehicles, my street was busy with fire trucks that had been diverted there as some local gas works had closed off parts of Bramley Road meaning access to the area for emergency vehicles was restricted.

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As the fire developed and the hours went by the screams from the people still inside the tower became less and visible external parts of the building started to come away falling to the ground whilst still on fire. It was obvious by this point as daylight broke through that most of the people who hadn't managed to get out had either jumped or were killed by the fire. This put me in a state of shock that I've never been in before during an incident.

I didn't see any of the crews tackling the fire on the night as this is always done internally, I saw some water being sprayed on the outside and I've since seen the inside of the tower as I attended after. The staircase within Grenfell is tight for people to get up and down, the crews would have had to queue to get in and out. I've been told they were moving each other around dependant on the level of air they had left in the BA kits so that those with less could get to clean air. The fire fighters dealing inside would have had no idea what was going on outside the building or how the fire was moving. There is no training that I'm aware of for fighting a fire from the outside on this scale, there was a turntable ladder and covering jet putting water on the fire as we get trained to do this but it didn't really do any good. We couldn't fight this fire, it was impossible.

I saw some of the crew from North Ken as there was a support unit set up outside my flat. I saw the Red Watch crew manager and Mike DOWDEN here, one of them was in floods of tears, they were about to go off duty and be relieved by Blue Watch. A guy I know through the job called Andy REAGAN came and [REDACTED] he was quite upset as there were several bodies that he'd seen inside the tower that affected him, particularly the young children.

Earlier when I was taking the water round for the crews, I saw the LFB Chief Commander and was going to tell her who I was but didn't get the chance. Instead I got met by one of the station commanders who wasn't very polite to me. I explained what I was doing to assist and he informed me that he was the new station commander at North Ken. We had a brief conversation where I was trying to tell him how good the borough and staff were but he cut me short saying he didn't want to be a "party pooper" but as I wasn't in personal protection equipment (PPE) I had to leave the area. This made me resent him for quite a long time due to his choice of words that night, it wasn't a party for anyone and I was just trying to do what I could to help. He did try to speak to me a few times at work after this but it made it difficult to respect him.

Since leaving the fire brigade and reviewing how certain things are done, I feel that changes are needed in some areas. As I mentioned in this statement, fire engines shouldn't be on the run when conducting HFSV

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at buildings due to the reasons I've said and the fact they should be booked in as scheduled appointments, not cold calling. The LFB have fire safety teams in each borough so these should be responsible to conduct the visits where they won't have the possibility of being pulled away to respond to calls.

The night of the fire at Grenfell has obviously affected me due to my close relationship with the community. My grandson at the time was in bits as his best friend died in the fire, he was saying at the time "my best friends missing" and I had to say he wasn't missing, that he was dead. It was important for me to go into the tower after both as part of the job and personally so that I could say goodbye to the friends I lost. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I knew I wanted to go to flats where my friends had lived so I managed to get through it for them. This was in the days directly after the fire and bodies were still in situ where they had died. I remember seeing a mother and baby near the top that were both badly burnt.

The thing that really struck me when I was inside the tower came after I had spoken to my son. He was offered a flat in the tower but didn't take it. I asked him if was living there what he would have done during the fire and he said to throw himself down the rubbish chute. This seemed like a strange idea but on every floor I went up, I made a point of looking in the room where the bins were kept. This room obviously had the correct type of fire door fitted as the paint inside every room was intact without damage, if people had thought to go in here then lives would have been saved.

I've attended meetings since the fire in relation to the cladding at Grenfell so know politically why this was put on there at a cost of ten (10) million pounds to the borough. Having spoken to people in the area I know from the residents rather that cash had been spent elsewhere. The block was too difficult to bring down where it was so they spent the cash to make it look good for the people heading along the road to Westfield. The question needs to be asked why it was cladded in the first place and why that type of cladding.

It has now been over two (2) years since that night of the fire at Grenfell Tower and I've been retired for nearly eighteen (18) months. I'm yet to be offered any proper support or counselling from the LFB, in the days after the fire I got spoken to by Mike DOWDEN about a referral for treatment [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

It was only when I got the call from you that help was even offered, [REDACTED] as I feel totally let down by the LFB. The Chief Officer came to our station and I've known her since training school so when she said we could contact her after the fire I believed it. I wanted to do something to help the community so sent an email to her but didn't get a reply. I tried again but with the same non response. It was only due to a coincidence that I was on a pre-retirement course at Union Street Headquarters so I went up to her office based on the fact my emails had been ignored. I was made to feel very unwelcome by the staff there and almost treated like a threat. People were panicking why I was there, the CO was [REDACTED] so I left my details with a PA asking for some contact but am still yet to hear anything from her office. It just went against all her initial actions, she came round saying contact me and giving out hugs saying the right things but didn't follow up with it. The loving caring LFB I was a part of wasn't there at this point when it was needed by its members. I really felt let down by the LFB now I'm retired so it's like I'm forgotten about, even more so when I had the letter from them that the police wanted to speak with me. There was a line about getting some help but it was too little too late.

[REDACTED]

A couple of weeks ago I was watching TV feeling fine and something about Grenfell came on the screen, out of nowhere I was suddenly in uncontrollable floods of tears. My wife changed the channel straight way to distract me.

I'm glad I've been given the opportunity to speak and tell someone about my experiences from the night of the fire and how things are with the community since.

I have been shown a map of the tower area by PC GREENGRASS, on this I marked the location of my flat and the areas around the tower where I went during the night of the fire.

- A - Location of my flat in relation to Grenfell Tower
- B - Location where I was when assisting at the base of the tower
- C - Area where I took the aid given to fire crews

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Form MG11(T)

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I exhibit this map as REN/1 and it has a Met Police exhibit label attached with the seal number of
MPSZ13337165.

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