

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: DE-ST-AUBIN, ALEX

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

Occupation: FIRE OFFICER

This statement (consisting of 7 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: ALEX DE ST-AUBIN

Date: 02/02/2018

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

In this statement I will talk about my role on the night. I will cover the actions I took and conclude with some post-incident information. My colleagues I will mention will be Watch Manager Mike DOWDEN, Watch Manager Louisa DA SILVA, Crew Manager Charlie BATTERBEEA, Fire Fighter Danny BROWN, Fire Fighter Justin O'BEIRNE and Charlie from Euston. I will begin by outlining my level of experience as a firefighter.

To introduce myself my name is Alex DE ST AUBIN a Fire Fighter Red Watch North Kensington. I've been at North Kensington for twelve and a half years. With regard to high- rise training we are given lectures at the station but every buildings different so unless you go out to the building and do a drill at the building you're never going to be able to anticipate what's going to be happening that day. Every station has a tower in the yard and ours is five floors maybe: so we do drills on that. We do ladder drills, ladder pitches, we'll get water to work on a second floor, third floor and half a loft gear we need up there. The classroom stuff is all about procedures that are in place. We'll speak about the bridgehead, the gear that's to be used up there, about setting in two floors below the fire, back up crew on the floor of the fire following the first crew as a backup. So that stuff can all be done at the station. I've never gone to a specific tower block and done a high-rise drill there. But we'll do a drill at least once a tour, whether it'll be pumping from the machine or ladders pitches and we'll have lectures as our Crew Manager's quite on the ball with this. I can't remember specifically but I think we had a lecture on Lakanal house within the last few months. We don't drill everyday but we drill at least once a tour. The facilities at our station can't

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facilitate a high-rise drill. I have had experience of high-rise fires though. I'm considered Competent as a Fire Fighter as I've completed my book.

I have previous experience of Grenfell as we did a visit after the refurb, after it was finished to have a look at the gym they had built, the boxing club that they had built downstairs to check the new lobby area. We didn't get to go into any of the flats. They are called 72D visits where you check the dry riser and access to the building, check fire escapes and check if there is an evacuation plan. We had always known that one staircase wasn't great but where the building was just refurbished, I don't remember the guy we spoke to or the day we did the visit, but everything seemed in order as much as it could be. There being only one staircase for people to use in such a big building wasn't great. It's just not a good design but there's always going to be faults in the system with buildings. They told us they had evacuation plans, they told us the residents had been informed about the evacuation plans. The alarm system supposedly was working on the day we had the visit and that's pretty much the standard we do when we do any 72D visit. We check for water plans, we check for access, we check evacuation plans, we check for a firebox to see if there's any keys in there we would need to access any parts of the building and that's pretty much it.

The visit that we did at Grenfell would have been a long time before the fire. I don't remember going there specifically before the fire but maybe they did so when I was off. I'd say we did the visit between about six months and a year before the fire. I wasn't aware of any pre-prepared fire-fighting plan for Grenfell Tower. However we have an MDT on the truck that gets updated by anyone who does visits to the tower so any new information I'm assuming would have been updated on the MDT. I wasn't driving so it wouldn't have been my job to look at it. But it has a plan of the building and should have what floor the dry-riser starts on so all that stuff can be obtained from the machine. I'm assuming somebody would have been able to print that off. I don't think there was a sprinkler system in the building. I've heard subsequently that there was a smoke extraction system in the building but it wasn't working at the time of the fire. I've no knowledge about the gas supply in the building or what happened with it on the night of the fire. I wasn't aware of any pre-prepared plan for when compartmentalisation failed in a high-rise block. However, I did a BA course last October and it was on compartment fires, carbonation course, dealing with heat and branch techniques. But I wasn't trained in how to deal with fires where compartmentalisation fails.

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On the night of the Grenfell fire we were on nights so my shift would have started at 20.00 hours. It was pretty much a normal night, I came in did checks on the truck and had dinner and was on call for any shouts that come through.

At the time of the call I was in the watch room so I was the first one to see the tip sheet which read if I remember correctly, fire Grenfell Tower. I don't remember if it stated which floor that the fire was on. Once you see fire you just give the sheet to the driver, get your gear on and jump on the truck. It would then have said what appliances were attending the incident but I don't remember what the other ones were. So we knew it was a high-rise so we were all prepared. To have a fire at one o'clock in the morning when a fire comes through you know it's a job that late in the morning because people are sleeping so usually there's something going on. I don't recall the route we took but referring to the statement I made at the time we approached via CORNWALL CRESCENT and BOWMORE ROAD. We ended up I think it was under TESTERTON WALK right at the entrance of Grenfell Tower. On arrival I don't really remember who said the fire was on the fourth floor but it was established that the fire was on the fourth floor.

We were the first two machines that arrived at Grenfell Tower. G271, G272. I don't think there were any issues gaining access to Grenfell Tower as we were either let in by a resident or we have specific keys that are lift keys called a drop keys that would allow us into the block. So then it was a case of going into high-rise procedures and what you take up to the floor. I wasn't BA crew that night so I knew that I'd probably be entry control officer which would be the guy who is in charge of talking to the BA teams, taking their tally's off and relaying information they give back to the officer in charge. So I went up with the board, I think I had the thermal image camera and the rest of the boys brought up the other kit which would just be high-rise kit; lengths of hose, branches, IEC Bag, fire breaches, you know whatever we thought we'd need to be fair. The Thermal Image Camera logs a record of you using it as soon as you turn it on. It helps to locate fires in smoke logged rooms and it helps to locate people so is a good bit of kit. A BA crew would have picked up the one I took into the building as there was no need for me to have one where I was.

We set-up entry control and the bridgehead on the second floor which was two floors underneath the fire which is standard procedure in high-rise incidents and that's when it all pretty much started: crews were getting rigged to go in.

The first two crews I remember were Fire Fighter BROWN and Crew Manager BATTERBEE. They went into the flat on the fourth floor. I never actually saw the flat that was on fire but from what I was told

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afterwards by firefighter BROWN who's a very experienced firefighter who's been in the job a long time was that it was a small fire in a kitchen. I don't remember if it was behind a fridge or a cooker. At this point the radios were fine so we were able to keep in contact with them. We were using personal issue hand-held radios but with a BA crew one member of the team has a headset radio. We go onto channel six from an ECO so I was talking to Danny and Charlie on channel six. I don't remember which one of them had comms but one of them definitely had comms. We chose different channels to keep traffic to a minimum but as more and more crew turned up with BA more and more crews were using channel six. I could get a good idea of what was happening, how big the fire was. By the sounds of their voices they weren't panicking and within minutes, between five and ten minutes, they were saying the fire in the kitchen was pretty much out. But I heard over the radio on coming crews saying the fire had spread to the outside of the building. In a real short space of time it was coming over the radio traffic that the fire was jumping from the fourth pretty much up to the eighth and ninth. That was a matter of minutes so then I guess things started to be a bit more, everyone started to panic a bit more. You could sense that because became rushed more in their movements. I really didn't understand how it had jumped up so fast because I had spoken to Danny BROWN and Charlie BATTERSBEE and they were pretty sure that the fire in the kitchen was out. Obviously were inside the building so we can't see outside the building so none of us knew that it was on the outside of the building.

A couple of residents passed us but it wasn't many, just a handful of them. I don't know what floor they were coming down from as my focus was on the firefighters at that point. But they seemed distressed because there was a fire but I didn't see any black smoke around their faces or anything like that so I assumed they were just told there was a fire in the building and they were leaving the building. There was a lot of movement around me now, crews were getting rigged and being prepared to get rigged. At this point the fourth floor was becoming a bit smoky so entry control was moved down to the third floor. I don't remember the time-frame that it was moved down to the third but I know we did move entry control and the first time it was down. At this point there was a lot of crews; I mean I was just taking tallies off crews and taking their briefs. Before they go anywhere they're being briefed what they're going to, what they're going to do so whether they're searching or rescuing or whether they're going to fight fires. Everyone now knew that the fire was on the outside of the building. So at this point I was with another fire-fighter on my watch, his name's Justin O'BEIRNE. Justin was doing a board next to me and watch Manager Louisa DA SILVA was overseeing what we were doing and relaying briefs back to the crews. There were also other officers there but I wasn't in direct contact with them unless they were talking to

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me asking me where's this crew, where's that crew. But I don't know the names of these officers.

There were multiple boards running, it may have been three or even four at this point. There's ten slots per board so that's five crews. The board also gives you a rough estimate of when a firefighter's air is going to run out but you have to manually put the times in yourself. We were writing people's names and call-signs on the walls, what floor they'd gone to, what flats they were going to, just in case as by this point the radio traffic was getting so much that the radios were becoming redundant to be fair. So it was a case of at least at the point that they were leaving me I knew where they were going if anything was to go wrong or I didn't hear from them within a certain amount of time we could at least send crews to their last known location if any Fire Fighters got into trouble. I don't know the time but it was at a point when we were on the third floor and a Watch Manager came to assist us with entry control, Watch Manager DE SILVA I think; she's at Chelsea. We had multiple boards going at this time so the situation was just becoming a bit manic.

I remember at one point we lost two Fire Fighters, I'm not sure if it was one or two Fire Fighters. But in the chaos you're supposed to come back to me as entry control with your tallies before you leave the building or when you finish doing whatever task you're doing. I'm guessing the heat or the work rate they were doing upstairs they just left the building. At this point it was a case of we didn't know where these Fire Fighters were so that made the situation a lot more dire. So now we had to go and send Fire Fighters to go and look for these two Fire Fighters that were lost. It was established that they'd left the building but that went on for a little while. We were looking for those two for a little while so it was a Fire Fighter emergency at that point. I don't remember their names but the story after was that they were just knackered, suffering from heat stroke and they had lost their bearings and had left without checking back in. It's quite a slow process because you have to come back to me, close down your BA mask, give me back your set and tally and I have to write down what it is you've done and where you've been. So that process is quite long and if you're suffering from heat stroke you just want to get out the building and I'm guessing that's what they did. You can go back in after a while if you have enough air in your set and you're fit to do so. They recommend that you only go into performance specific task but at that point, I couldn't say names, but I know that there was a number of firefighters who were coming back, testing their sets and going back in just because of the severity of the situation. I could hear loud banging that looking back at it now it was parts of the cladding falling off the building as I couldn't see out the building. It was loud crashes like someone smashing furniture so it could have been window panes

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smashing. I don't have a concept of the times that entry control was moved as the situation was just so manic.

Entry control was moved for the first time at that point as floor number three was becoming smoke logged as well. Entry control was moved down to the main lobby of the building which was on the ground floor. There was also a lot more room down there to send crews up as higher up was short of space with crews stood on the stairs. It was all glass in the lobby which was completely clear of smoke so you could actually see parts of the cladding, the debris falling and fire around the building. There was fire on the floor, sheets of metal, glass and a constant stream of things falling off the building. The sound was of loud bangs as bits of metal fell off the building. Being in that situation the only thing that comes to mind in that situation if the twin towers; you're thinking that the building may collapse around you.

Everyone carried on working. Justin at this point had gone and I didn't know where he had gone. So it was just me, Watch Manager DE SILVA and another firefighter, I don't know his name. We were on multiple boards and there were multiple fire crews, just dozens and dozens of firefighters lining up in BA getting ready to go in. I could hear at this point residents were being told to stay in their flats. I could hear many people saying this and it was coming over the radios. We were being told that there were certain residents in specific flats so BA crews were being sent to them to either bring the residents out if they could or just give them a bit of reassurance that somebody is coming back to get them. It's common knowledge that people were being told to stay in their flats and that is the procedure I guess in any other building other than Grenfell that works because you would have a bit of time to get to them.

The stay put policy is stay put, lock the doors, if you can't get out wait for a firefighter to come and get you. I know they stay on the phone to people from control. Is it right? Is it wrong? Obviously at that point it didn't work but nine times out of ten it probably would work. I don't remember a point when they started telling people to come out. There being only one stairwell it probably would have caused more harm than good at that point in the incident. Two people getting past each other on the stairwell side by side would struggle and in thick black smoke so having dozens of residents coming down at the same time as firefighters are trying to go up would have been counter-productive to be honest. I carried on writing down names of firefighters, call signs and what flats they were going to and what flats had been searched. Just trying to have as much information as possible for the Officers to see and just so we could try to keep the firefighters as safe as possible. Radio traffic by now was kind of non-existent. I was just

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trying to get through to people as and when I could. There was just too much going on on the radio so people weren't coming back to me and I couldn't get through to the people I was calling. In the ground lobby there's a short staircase that leads you up to the first floor and it's just like a balcony.

I could hear crews shouting out casualty so I was running from the board up to the first floor taking casualties off the crews and bringing them down and handing them over to other firefighters who were taking the casualties out of the building. This was just so crews who were coming down had an option to go back upstairs straightaway so they didn't have to come down to the board. They were just going back in and we had this multiple times, adults, children, it was just a case of whenever they needed my help I'd go and grab the casualties and I'd bring them out. I'm guessing they just went back upstairs and carried on with their searches and their rescues. I couldn't leave the boards so I could only go up a couple of flights of stairs and then come back down again.

At this point there were massive sheets of metal outside the building all on fire. Everyone was panicking, firefighters were coming down ripping off their facemasks. I'm guessing going from the ground-floor up to the tenth, eleventh, twelfth I don't think they weren't getting much done, just getting to a certain point having a look and coming straight back down again. I continued being on the board, helping out casualties for the next few hours. At one point helping with a large casualty I twisted my knee; it hurt but it wasn't bad enough to stop me working. I didn't need to go sick afterwards as I was off for a month anyway [REDACTED] Basically where my role was I just stayed in there. Somebody relieved me, I don't know what time it was but I know it was daylight outside. Then I went to help with escorting crews and officers, watch managers and LAS in out of the building using the police riot shields because there was falling debris and that. I did this a number of times, for a while until I needed a break myself. I don't remember what time I got relieved left the building but I was in there for hours so it was early morning, maybe five, six in the morning, maybe even later. I was relieved by a Crew Manager from Northolt. A real nice big fella but I don't know his name. That was the first time I got a chance to actually look up and see Grenfell Tower and to my horror the whole building was on fire. I remember the feeling because it made my knees buckle a little bit. My perception of the fire was that I knew it was bad because of the firefighters and the casualties but I guess in my head I thought it was restricted maybe to the middle section of the building but I didn't expect to come out and see the whole building on fire. That was a bit of a shock to the system to be fair. I'd never seen it before. I didn't have a clue how that would have happened. I see news reels of it and it looks like there was petrol on the side of the building it's going up the building so fast. I'd never seen anything like that before.

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I've been in the fire brigade twelve years, I've been to big fires, good fires but I'd never seen anything like that before. We have loads of high-rise blocks on our ground, North Kensington so I've been to fires but they're always contained to one flat maybe two flats. I've never seen the outside of the building go up because of the flat inside. Not on a high-rise block. You know fire spreads from house to house because it goes up to the roof and spreads along that way but I've never seen a singular tower block on fire like that. After that I pretty much helped crews with their sets, I was testing, getting other crews ready to go in, moving equipment outside the building, helping people get out under riot shields. Outside of the building it was just chaos with hundreds of people around; there were groups of firefighters who had been in sat down on a wall getting a rest before being told they had to go back in again. Some of it was organised and some of it just chaos. There were people crying, people screaming, firefighters knackered. Describing the scene just does not do it justice. I've never seen an incident like it.

Police there, LAS there, there were hundreds of people. Then I was told to go and try to find the rest of the Red Watch from North Kensington. There was multiple times people nearly got hit by debris. There were window frames, glass, bits of metal, just anything from the outside of the building. I didn't speak to any residents outside. I spoke to a firefighter who knew one of the residents and he was on the phone to his family but at that point I was out the building and I wasn't going back in. There was nothing I could do but there was a fella called Charlie from Euston and he went off and spoke to one of the officers to let them know about this guy's family. My interaction was solely with firefighters. I think I found my guvnor Watch Manager DOWDEN and we tried to locate the rest of the boys and we sat down for maybe about half an hour until we were told that we were going back to North Kensington. By this time it was probably about ten a.m in the morning. The highest I went up in the tower was to the third floor and I didn't wear BA that night. My job was solely to be entry control officer. However, as I've said I did help bringing down some casualties.

Some firefighters were calmer than others but I suppose that comes with experience and how hard you've worked. I remember a little Indian girl who only looked about six or seven years old but I don't think there was a chance she was going to survive; she was pretty much dead. I'd say ninety per cent of the casualties, both male and female, I came in to contact with were unconscious. I only remember two actually walking unassisted, the rest were being carried and not conscious so I wasn't confident they were going to survive. If not dead at that point then probably not going to make it through the night. I'd say I helped more than ten casualties but less than twenty to give an estimate. I went to the Salvation Army van

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at one point and got a drink and spoke to some firefighters congregated around there. At the beginning of the incident I think my governor Mike DOWDEN was in overall control of the incident. At the bridgehead I think it was Crew Manager SECRET who was instructing me. When it changes over to bridge control senior officers came on and I don't know who they were.

Decisions I make are based on my procedures. I don't fill in any logs. I don't know of anyone else keeping logs. You have to have a minimum of a Crew Manager at the entry control so he would have been there with me at that point. We went back to the station at North Kensington and the statement you guys have got is the statement that I wrote at the station. They were going to let us walk back as it was only a couple of miles to walk back but we waited around for a bit and they got us some transport to take us back to the station where we did our statements, got changed, had a chat with each other for a bit just to kinda calm ourselves down. This had happened on our first night duty. There was talk of us going back to Paddington but I think as we were the first crew there they decided not to. That was pretty much my night at Grenfell Tower. We were given excused absence for that following night shift so I stayed at home with my wife and son.

I don't know what they could have had in place to help us deal with the situation we were confronted with. Just a catalogue of things that could go wrong went wrong. I don't know how you account for something like that. The only thing I struggle with now is members of the public asking me why they were told to stay in their flats. I don't know but in my head I think there must have been a time-frame when it was safer to tell people to leave than it was to tell them to stay but when that time was I don't know because there was a point when it probably was more detrimental to the firefighters and to the people coming down the stairs. So that's the only thing I struggle with. I don't have an answer for people and I get to go home to my son and people who ask me that question don't get to go home to their families. So that's something that always comes out that there must have been a time where it was in everyone's interests to get people out of their flats but when it was I don't know as that's a decision for the guvnors. Anything I added would be other peoples' stories. Everything I've told you is my account. I exhibit my notes as ADA/1.

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