

**WITNESS STATEMENT**

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

Statement of: DOTCHIN, BENJAMIN

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

Occupation: FIRE OFFICER

This statement (consisting of 5 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: B.DOTCHIN

Date: 31/01/2018

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

This statement refers is my account of the fire at Grenfell Tower in the early hours of Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

This statement is an account of an audio-recorded interview I gave to PC Zoe FOOTE and PC Abhay DESAI on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> January 2018 at Croydon Fire Station. Present during the interview was Clint RILEY, a representative from the Fire Brigade Union (FBU). During the interview, I referred to my contemporaneous notes that I made on 14/06/2017 and exhibit as BAD/1. I also made marking on a map to identify which way I attended the tower. I exhibit this as BAD/2.

I will mention a number of people;

Firefighter (FF) Ennio GONNELLA, FF Kyle MCCLELLAND, FF Tom BUNDY, FF Tom DOTCHIN, FF HOOPER, FF NWAGWU, FF Michael DENNY, Crew Manager (CM) Tom ATKINS and CM FURNLEY. All are part of the London Fire Brigade (LFB).

I have been in the fire brigade for 10 years, and over that time, I previously worked at two locations. I started my career in 8/1/2007 after completing training school. I then went to Beckenham Fire Station (E43) from the end of April 2007 until August 2009. Following that, I transferred to Croydon Fire Station (H31) and have remained there since as part of the Red Watch.

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I have had training on high rise flats which consisted of theory training and familiarisation 7(2)d visits which is where we attended buildings and identify where we would set up in the event of a fire. We also carry out simulation training of real fires.

I am trained to use a pump, pump ladder and the FRU. The pump is a fire engine that is primarily used for firefighting. At Croydon Fire Station, we have 3 machines. The pump, pump ladder and the fire rescue unit (FRU). The pump and pump ladder are very similar machines but the pump ladder also has a larger ladder that can be used at incidents. The FRU are very different. Their machine doesn't carry any water or hose for firefighting. They are specialist unit who are mostly use for search and rescue. Our FRU specialises in line rescue, water rescue and serious road traffic accidents due to the specialist equipment they carry. I am considered competent and fully trained to ride all 3 machines at Croydon Fire Station and use the equipment on them.

On 13/06/2017 I started my shift at 2000hrs. we completed roll call and I was assigned to ride on the back of the pump, call sign H312. I completed the necessary checks on my breathing apparatus (BA) set, which I do at the beginning of every shift. This check ensures that my set is working correctly and that there are no air leaks or bad seals.

There are two types of breathing apparatus (BA) sets that we use, standard duration breathing apparatus (SDBA), which is mainly used for firefighting and extended duration breathing apparatus (EDBA), which is mainly used for search and rescue. EDBA has roughly double the duration of SDBA. SDBA sets last approximately 20 minutes. I am trained to use both SDBA and EDBA.

There were no calls to any incidents until 0400hrs on 14/06/2017, which is when the first call was received for the Fire Rescue Unit (FRU) to be mobilised. The bells went off in the station, the lights came on and the machine requested was sounded over the tannoy system. The printer in the watch room printed off the information about the call. I went to see what was going on as its unusual for the FRU to be mobilised on its own. This stated that the FRU were being called to a '20 pump fire' which meant that they were attending a fire with 20 fire engines already in attendance. This was a major incident as a 20 pump fire was an awful lot. I put the television on to Sky News. This was when I first saw the major incident.

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CM ATKINS, who was in charge of our pump, had a look to see what units were going to the incident and noticed that all the FRU that could be sent, had been sent, CM ATKINS then called up control and informed them that our crew were all also EDBA trained and were able to mobilise if required.

At 0420hrs we were then mobilised via control as an EDBA crew fully kitted up in our firefighting personal protective equipment (PPE). I was told we were attending as a '20 pump relief to a 20 pump fire'. Riding on the pump with me was CM ATKINS (OIC), FF GONNELLA driving and FF MCCLELLAND. We left the fire station and made our way towards Grenfell Tower via Wandsworth Bridge. As we were on the bridge, still quite far away, I could see the tower, from about half way up I could see orange flames and a lot of black smoke travelling towards the top.

At 0500hrs we arrived and parked up, without any issues, on Ladbroke Grove, which was our designated rendezvous point. We were told to head to the BA staging area by the rendezvous point officer, which was located on the south east side of the tower in front of the leisure centre (marked on BAD/2 as point A). We made our way there on foot, in full PPE without BA sets as our pump only had SDBA sets on it and we required EDBA sets. At the staging area we reported to the officer in charge who told us that we would be used as an EDBA crew once sets became available.

I saw the tower from the staging area on the east side. There was lots of smoke and lots of flames. The whole building looked alight apart from the top few floors. The fire was behaving in an abnormal way. There was debris falling down and to the east of the tower was an Aerial Ladder Platform (ALP) set up. The ALP allows for firefighting to be done on high floors from the outside. At a fire of this scale there are usually command units (CU) in attendance. The CU is a mobile office which allows officers to group together and make decisions.

At 0550 hrs we collected EDBA sets from firefighters who had returned from inside the tower and got new air cylinders. I then moved to the set testing area, which was adjacent to the staging area, and carried out a fire ground A test on the EDBA set. (Marked on BAD/2 as point B). As I awaited tasking I felt agitated, I wanted to help.

We were then lead towards the tower on foot. We walked from the staging area on the east side of the tower and then past the south side of the tower under a walkway to the west side of the tower by the children's play area (marked on BAD/2 as point C). Once at the west side of the tower we waited to get inside the tower. Police officers, with riot shields, were present and ferried us over from the children's

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play area to the tower holding the riot shield above us to prevent being hit by falling debris. This side of the tower seemed clear of flames and smoke but there was a lot of falling debris.

We entered the tower, from the west side, through a door which lead to the lift lobby area. It wasn't the main entrance which is located on the east side. In the lift lobby area there was plenty of firefighters, in SDBA sets, who were waiting for briefing. On the ground floor I noticed the whole floor was above ankle height in water. We were wearing EDBA sets so we went straight past firefighters waiting in SDBA sets and located the entry control officer (ECO) who was located on the ground floor and led us into the lift lobby area where we were briefed. We then moved to the entry control point (ECP) that was located by the base of the staircase that lead up to the mezzanine floor. There they had the entry control board set up. This is a monitoring system which connects to our BA sets after we put in our tally, which is a yellow key that links the BA set to the board. The board then allows officer at the ECP to monitor who is inside the building and what their air consumption is. At the ECP I was tasked, along with a firefighter from Wimbledon Fire Station called John, to go and conduct search and rescue of the 12<sup>th</sup> floor as there was sighting of a live casualty who was waving for attention on the non-fire side of the building that a member of the public had seen. We were told radio communications were not working, no breaking in gear was available and that we had no firefighting medium like water.

I entered the main stairwell, with my BA set on, which was accessed from the mezzanine floor. It was dark and there was no lighting. The environment was slightly smoky but I could see with the use of my torch. Inside the stairwell it was very wet with water cascading over all edges and there was hose everywhere which made it difficult to walk up. I made my way up counting the floors as I went up. This was because I couldn't see any floor numbers. A lot of the walls were fire damaged covered in smoke and soot. Around the 6<sup>th</sup> floor I came across a large body of a casualty on the stairwell. This was the casualty which I was informed of at the ECP and told to ignore and move past. The casualty was a large person who was face down on the stairwell. As I went past the 6<sup>th</sup> floor I could feel the environment was heating up. I moved through the stairwell but I didn't hear or see any alarms or sprinkler system.

Eventually I made it up to the 12<sup>th</sup> floor along with John. I could feel the heat through my PPE but it was bearable. I took a moment to catch my breath and opened the stairwell door into the lift lobby of the 12<sup>th</sup> floor.

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On the 12<sup>th</sup> floor it was incredibly hot and the visibility was poor due to the smoke. The visibility was below waist height, which meant that there was thick smoke above the waist which prevented me seeing clearly. There was another crew on the floor but as far as we could tell were not near us. On to the lobby floor I conducted a left hand wall search. I used my left hand to find the wall, stay in contact with it, and follow it around. I continued to make my way round to the left and followed the wall around. We stopped at the first flat we came to. It was a white door but it was locked. I knocked and shouted very loudly but there was no response. I had no equipment with me to break into the flat and due to the heat we continued the search of the floor. I then came across two more flats. The doors to these flats were closed but unlocked so I entered them one by one and carried out a thorough search along with John. The flat was much cooler than the floor lobby, we had good visibility and the windows were still intact, however there was fire in the room. We searched each room in the flats, under the sofa's, under any beds inside cupboards and shouted, however the flats I searched were empty. I heard another crew that was on the floor. We met up with them in the hallway. They were firefighters from Croydon's FRU. They had completed right and wall search of the floor. This was FF MCCLELLAND, FF NWAGWU, FF BUNDY and FF Tom DOTCHIN. We decided to go back down to entry control, due to the heat and update them with what we had done. This was because the radio communication was not working. We had two radios, one on the BA set and one personal hand held one. Both of which were not receiving any radio communication, just static.

The Croydon FRU crew left first and John and I followed behind. On the way down I bumped into a station manager, who wasn't wearing any BA, around the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. He told us that there was reports of a casualty who was spotted on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor and that any crews in BA should head to that floor and conduct search and rescue of the floor.

The Croydon FRU, John and I, with the new brief attended the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. The FRU crew went left from the stairwell door and John and I went right from the stairwell door. There was breaking in equipment which had been dropped off by the door to the lift lobby previously. I grabbed the enforcer, which is a large bit of metal which is used to break in doors to rescue trapped people.

I made my way to each flat and in the process every door that was locked I broke, with the enforcer so we could search for any persons who were trapped inside. I searched each of the flats. The flats had very minimal fire and smoke damage. I searched 3 flats and there were no casualties in any of the rooms. We met up with the other crew on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor after they completed their search of the other side of the 6<sup>th</sup>

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floor. I then checked my air and with John returned back down to the ECP. I collected my tally from the ECB and updated them of what I had done whilst inside the tower.

I then left the tower from the way I entered (marked on BAD/2 as point D), with a police officer who escorted me back to the west side of the tower using a riot shield to protect me from any of the falling debris. I walked back to the BA holding area, in front of the leisure centre, on the east side of the tower and waited there. Whilst waiting I took my kit off to cool down and rehydrated. I waited there and was told I would need to go back in again due to the shortage of EDBA wearers. This isn't common practice, normally you only wear EDBA sets once at a job, however given the situation we agreed to rest and then enter again.

At 1300hrs I completed another fire ground A test and we reported to the Divisional Officer present and informed him that we were ready to enter the building again. This time I was with all the Croydon crew, all 9 of us. We were tasked with hose management, and the removal of casualties in the building that were blocking the egress of the firefighters in the tower. We went to a FRU vehicle and collected basket stretchers (marked on BAD/2 as point E) and equipment to move the casualties from the stairwell. Again I walked from the BA staging area to the west side of the tower past south side of the tower. At the west side I entered the tower again with the assistance of a police officer using a riot shield to prevent any of the falling debris hitting us with the equipment we had collected from the FRU vehicles. Once inside the tower again we located the bridgehead. It had now moved to the 4th floor. The bridgehead is where the ECP is and is the base of operations. It tracks with the fire and its common for it to move if required.

At the bridgehead, we spoke to the officer in charge and updated him with our current brief. The officer in charge decided that this was not going to happen and changed out brief. We left the equipment we carried there, donned our BA sets and we were split in to pairs and I was tasked to go with FF Michael DENNY to assist other crews on the floor and 'damp down' the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. This meant I was to hose down any small fires or embers still burning. I made my way back through the main stairwell to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. Visibility in the stairwell was good. The level of heat was pretty low and there was debris on the floor. On arrival to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor there was already a crew working there. We decided to help them the best we could. We assisted with firefighting in the flat on the west side of the building. The hose was connected to a dry riser but it had very low pressure. The dry riser is a dedicated pipe built into any building that is above 60 meters which can be pumped with water. The riser has outlets on various floor which hose can be connected to and fight fire.

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I couldn't see any more visible fire but there was debris in the flat which was still glowing from the fire. After only a short while of being on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor we were ordered to leave as the rest of the 'damping down' was going to be carried out by the Surrey fire brigade ALP which was set up outside of the building. We made our way back down to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, to the bridgehead, where we provided an update of what we had achieved whilst inside and then made our way back outside of the tower. Once outside we returned to the BA holding area and waited for the rest of the crew. At 1600hrs we were dismissed and returned to our fire engine which was parked on Ladbrooke Grove. We left the scene and attended Paddington Fire Station for a debrief at 1800hrs. following this I returned to Croydon Fire Station at 2000hrs. at no point did I have any interactions with members of the public or residents of the building.

I think several things could have helped. Having firefighting lobbies on each floor, working dry riser, a firefighting lift, an aerial platform which had a bigger range and more officers trained in EDDBA sets could have helped firefighters in this situation.

I have been asked about the stay put policy. It is when control talk to the member of the public who call when the building is on fire. They then tell us where the trapped person is so we can find them and rescue the, this will prevent the occupants causing a stampede or people unaffected by the fire to be affected.

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