

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: FELTON, BENJAMIN

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

Occupation: FIRE OFFICER

This statement (consisting of 6 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: BEN FELTON

Date: 10/11/2017

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

This is my statement regarding the Grenfell Tower Fire that occurred on 14th June 2017. I provided this statement at Hammersmith Fire Station in the presence of DC Simon FEIGHAN, DC David PEARL and Dave YOUNG from the Fire Brigade Union.

I am posted at Hammersmith Fire Station within Hammersmith Red Watch, G36. I have worked as a firefighter for 22 years in January 2018. I have always been posted at Hammersmith Fire Station and have always been in the role of firefighter.

In this statement I will refer to the following people I was working alongside the night of the fire; A crew of three firefighters from Paddington Fire Station, who I do not know. One of them was called Jim. I will also make reference to the colleagues I attended the fire with within Hammersmith Red Watch G36; Firefighter Broderick, Firefighter Matt SEPHTON, and Watch Manager Paul WATSON. I will also make reference to an Unknown Watch Manager in charge of the bridge head. I believe he was from Paddington but I can't be sure.

I will throughout also make mention of members of public I encountered. My memory of their descriptions are poor and I will note them at the time I encountered them, if possible.

I will also make reference to the following places; Hammersmith Fire Station, where I am based; which situated on Shepherds Bush Road, W6. Kensington Leisure Centre which is a building in the near vicinity

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2018

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of the tower which I will refer to as 'the gym'. It is separated from Grenfell Tower by a small green area with a couple of trees. Lastly I will largely be mentioning; Grenfell Tower, W10; The location of the fire. Made up of twenty three floors. The lower floors were not residential and you would enter the foyer and then go up to a mezzanine area where the staircase to the residential area was. I was already aware of Grenfell Tower having attended Grenfell Tower before for AFA calls, which is when a fire alarm has been activated, though I never went further than the Foyer on those occasions. The tower has one road approaching it and that is Grenfell Road.

On 14th June 2017 I was on duty when the call came out to mobilise for a fire. I rode in a pump ladder engine to the scene with 5 others. Inside this machine alongside myself in the rear were Firefighter BRODERICK, Firefighter SEPHTON and in the front was Watch Manager Paul WATSON and I can't remember who was driving. A pump ladder has the larger ladder of the engines and is usually what the Watch Manager rides in. From our station we went north along Shepherds Bush Road to Shepherds Bush Green. Travelled around the green and went over the Southern Roundabout of the A40, exiting onto Holland Road, before taking an immediate left and along St Ann's Road toward Latimer Road Tube Station, before turning off before the station and eventually approached the tower from Grenfell Road. Watch Manager WATSON had access to the MDT of the engine, which is the on board computer the calls and details come into. He then briefed us on route and I was aware that there was a fire at Grenfell Tower, W10.

We were approximately the third machine at the venue. I cannot remember what time this was but we would have been there approximately 5 minutes after being alerted to the fire I do not remember there being any issues with parking we managed to park up a distance of about 30 seconds from the tower. I do believe that after we had left the engine, the driver repositioned the engine as we were very aware of blocking entry to other engines. I do not know when it was moved but when I returned to the engine when leaving, it was some streets away. At the time we arrived at the tower, the fire was covering a large area of the façade, on the side nearest us. It was more than one flat, the fire had spread more vertical than horizontally and was a couple of flats in height. I did not know whether this was all internal or external only. The fire was burning well and was a large fire already at this stage. There was quite a lot of flame and was an alarming sight. I knew that we were going to be very busy as it is unusual for tower block fires to have spread so much. As for the surrounding area there were very few people around on our

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2018

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arrival.

On exiting the engine we were told by Watch Manager Watson to take as much equipment as we could carry into the tower and take it up to the Entry Control Point. I had my Breathing Apparatus (BA) on my back and carried a few lengths of hose in hand and made my way to the tower and entered the Foyer. This was clear of any smoke and visibility was no issue. I then made my way up a flight of stairs to mezzanine where the Control Entry, Bridgehead point was situated. On my way up to it a few members of public passed me coming down the stairs toward the exit.

I arrived at the Bridgehead and the Entry Control Board was set up with the unknown Watch Manager running it, some firefighters were there from Paddington, plus my crew were present. I put the hoses I had been carrying here and waited further instruction. I noted that not as many residents as I would expect in a fire this size, were coming out of the tower. I also was very aware of the fact there was no audible fire alarm. This concerned me and I spoke to Watch Manager Watson and made that point and ask if there was a call point to set the alarm of to raise awareness of the fire and aid in evacuating people from the tower. He said he hadn't seen one and didn't know where to find one. Whilst at the bridgehead, a crew from Paddington were one short of a four fighter crew to go up. I joined them to make up the numbers and we were told to go up and get people out. We took no firefighting media with us; so no hose, extinguishers or media used in fighting fires. This is unusual as it is good practice to take media up with you for your own safety. I don't know whose decision it was that we would not take any firefighting media up with us and I don't remember anyone actually saying don't, but it was a feeling I got from the Paddington Crew and I believe they were under the same impression. We were essentially there to complete what we would call a snatch rescue. This is where we prioritise getting people out as quickly as possible over fighting the fire occurring. I don't know if the crew from Paddington had already been told more, as I was just an additional person added, but I was not aware that we had been told a specified floor or a location to go up to.

In full BA we entered the stairwell and went up the stairs with me at the rear of the four. The stairwell remained clear with good visibility till about the fourth floor. The first few floors I would say you would have been fine without any BA on. But from there, progressively the conditions worsened. I remember seeing the floors were numbered and the last floor number I saw was the fifth. After the fifth I remember

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2018

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looking to the area the number would have been found, and being unable to see it due to the poor visibility created by the smoke. The staircase itself was very narrow for the size of the building, I would guesstimate about a metre. People could and did pass on the staircase but I wouldn't say comfortably. During our ascent up the stairs some members of public came past us going down. When this occurred two of us would go down with them to make sure they got to the stairwell where the air was clearer, and then we would go back up and catch up to the other two in the crew again. The two not going down with them would wait on the stairwell. At this stage none of members of public appeared particular panicked or worried. They weren't coughing or spluttering and appeared to be breathing fine. This occurred a few times but I don't remember how many. We got up to an unknown floor a few floors above the fifth, I would estimate the seventh by the amount of stairs we climbed. The Paddington fire fighters informed me that we were going into the landing area of the floor and once on the landing we would be completing a left hand search. A left hand search is where you follow the wall on your left till you come to a door, this was to aid us in keeping our bearings and knowing the way to the exit. This was because visibility at this stage was so poor you could barely see your hand in front of your face. We worked our way left and after a very short distance came across a door. We knocked on the door and someone opened it and there were two occupants inside. I don't remember what they looked like; it was a male and a female and I feel like they were in their fifties. They were packing a suitcase of belongings but were told by us to leave the luggage and follow us out and back down the stairs. The flat wasn't smoke logged so visibility in it was good. They were asked if anyone was in the flat with them and the flat was checked. Then I and another from Paddington escorted the two of them down to the entry control point. We deemed it safe enough and close enough to the clearer air to take them without BA. The visibility and smoky conditions chopped and changed as we descended down and then when we reached the entry control point we handed the residents over to other firefighters before then going back up the staircase to meet the others. On this climb up I don't remember passing many residents coming down though there were a number of firefighters on the staircase. The pair of us reached the same floor we had before and again did a left hand search and passed the previous flat we had just escorted people down from. We continued completing a left hand search and then reached a new flat and found the door was ajar. Which indicated to us it had been vacated, however me and my colleague from Paddington entered the flat and swept it for anyone. We didn't find anyone inside and then exited this flat. I think the Paddington firefighters may have had communications between them, as they were communicating with each other in some way. The other two said they were going further upstairs and me and the firefighter I was with decided that the conditions

Signature: BEN FELTON
2018

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seemed to be getting worse so we would go back down and confirm that the situation beneath us had not deteriorated. The heat was intense and the smoke in the stairwell was concerning, especially as we had no firefighting media and would have been at risk of being trapped ourselves if the fire had worsened and blocked the exit. We travelled down the staircase and got to the clear air and it was evident nothing appeared to have changed, so then we made our way back up. We reached approximately the seventh or eighth floor, at which point a message was relayed from the other two fire fighters in our crew to the Paddington firefighter I think they were on the ninth floor and had found two residents that needing bringing down, but it was too smoky to bring them down so they requested we obtain BA sets for the residents and bring them up to them.

So we went down the staircase again and reached the Bridgehead. Once there I saw my Officer in Charge; Watch Manager Paul WATSON and said I needed a BA set and he asked what for. I explained and he provided me with one and the Firefighter from Paddington had a second and then we made our way up the stairs. On heading up the stairs my own BA was on whistle, which meant I was running low on air and should be exiting. Whistle is an audible whistle sound that occurs when BA equipment is low and is a sign that you have a limited time before you need to change it. We reached the fifth or sixth floor but by which time I was exhausted and another firefighter on the stairwell took the BA I was carrying for the resident from me and continued on. We didn't really communicate but he clearly knew what he was doing with the BA. I then checked my BA air level and realised I wouldn't be able to get up there and back down with so little and what potentially be more of a hindrance than a help. I made my way down to the entry control point and once there waited to make sure the Paddington firefighters I was with came out ok.

I waited till they came down with the people they required BA for, though I'm not sure how long that was. First a little girl came down, she was about seven years old with Spanish skin and was with a Paddington firefighter. She was ushered out toward where the paramedics were and I continued to wait for the next person and the rest of the Paddington crew. Then a female adult came out, I believe she was the little girl's mother. I would describe her as Spanish skinned, quite short, possibly in her thirties, she was accompanied by the other two Paddington firefighters. I then took the mother outside and once we were outside and clear of any falling debris, we took her helmet and BA off her and then escorted her to the ambulance triage area which was up by the gym, as I believed that is where her daughter would have been taken. The ambulance triage area was by the gym near Bomore Road. She was reunited with her daughter and then I left that area.

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2018

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On leaving the triage area I then took my set off and rehydrated with water. I sat on a wall by the green near the leisure centre. I was sat on my own and remember looking at the fire and being quite staggered at how far the fire had spread across the tower. I cannot remember how high it had reached but it was certainly very alight. It was like something out of a movie, debris was falling off the tower at this point, and I could hear people shouting for help from inside. At this point there wasn't much of a crowd from the members of public, I think the police already had it cordoned off. From memory the nearest members of public were at the triage area. I was sat near to where they were wheeling out the casualties on stretchers and wanting to help further I could see that a lot of the ambulance crews were slight in build young girls and the casualties were sometimes quite large and the triage area was up an incline from where the casualties were coming out the tower. So I began to help them wheeling the casualties up to the triage area. I must have helped with about four or five stretchers. On stopping helping with conveying the casualties, I then did a Fire Ground A test on my BA. Which is basically replacing the cylinder of the BA so I was ready to go again if required. A BA holding area had been set up at this point by the leisure centre.

I had at this time met with a couple of my colleagues at the BA holding area and they did the same Fire Ground A tests and we all remained in the holding area awaiting further instruction. We were moved several times in preparation to complete actions but I never actually re-entered the tower. We were ushered at one point toward the tower to re-enter but the decision was made to only send in those with Extra Duration Breathing Apparatus Training, which I do not. This was pretty much the last thing I did and I remained waiting for actions till eventually we were released from duty, around midday on the 14th June 2017.

At no point did I fight a fire and when inside the tower never came across flames. However when in the tower I was very aware of the fire burning as I could feel the heat and was obviously working in the smoke from it.

A colleague got a burn on his neck from falling debris but I myself suffered no physical injury.

I have made reference to several notes, maps and floor plans and as such exhibit them as follows;

BJF/1- Written Notes

BJF/2- Typed up notes

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2018

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BJF/3- Close up of Tower

BJF/4- Floor Plan

BJF/5 -Map with Letter Markings

The letter markings on this map are;

A: The rough area on Grenfell Road we parked and approached the tower from

B: The ambulance triage area location

C: The area I sat on the wall to rehydrate

D: The area the BA holding area was situated

We receive regular training at Hammersmith Fire Station including Lectures, yard exercises and hot room training at Park Royal. We do the hot training roughly once a year and Hammersmith is a fairly busy station as such I have had to wear BA on numerous occasion. I have also previously dealt with tower block fires, though they have normally been self- contained. I have received high rise block fire training and it is incorporated into our normal training. I have been on a familiarisation visit to a high rise block of flats before and I was not aware of the risk the cladding posed and I am deemed trained and competent.

Regarding the fire safety of the tower I note that as mentioned before there was no audible fire alarm to warn the residents of the fire. I could not see any call point to set this off. There was no sprinkler system, though this is not unusual in a tower block. I do not know if the doors to the flats were self-closing though I note that the second flat we searched was found with the door ajar which would suggest it didn't self-close.

The incident Commander changes as an incident worsens. It will begin as a watch manager and continue to elevate in rank until it reaches a chief officer. It is dependent on the amount of pumps in attendance.

My understanding of the 'stay put policy' is that if there is a fire in your block of flats and it is safe and you are able to get out, you do so. Though if the fire is between you and your exit the safest thing for you to do is, stay put and put as many doorways as you can between you and the fire, using towels and blankets to block the bottom of the doorway. Then call 999 and inform them where you are so firefighters can be directed to you.

A command unit attends any fire requiring four pumps or more. It is essentially a mobile office for the

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2018

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command to situate and make decisions. I believe our nearest command unit in this area is based at Fulham Fire Station.

In my professional opinion there are things that could have made a difference in this tower. The lack of an alarm is significant and the limited size of the fire exit staircase. I also think that Water drenchers on the outside of the building could have helped, which basically pour a wall of water down the outside of the building from the roof, though these would probably be too costly.

In terms of rescue equipment, I think smoke hoods would have aided the rescue. They are used by airline and would have saved the time it took to travel up and down the stairs to obtain BA, allowing more time to complete actions such as searching rooms and helping casualties get out. The lack of a ladder that reached high enough is also something to consider. You shouldn't be building residential towers higher than any emergency services ladder can reach.

This was a harrowing experience and the overall enormity of it all will stay with me. After it happened I didn't want to keep talking about it as some did. It will never be forgotten but I want to move on now. I am happy with the support being provided to me, but I have decided not to take any counselling up at this time.

I am happy to answer any further questions if necessary.

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2018

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Page 9 of 9

Signature: BEN FELTON
2018

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