

**WITNESS STATEMENT**

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

Statement of: HOLEHOUSE, BENJAMIN

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

Occupation: FIRE OFFICER

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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: BENJAMIN HOLEHOUSE

Date: 06/02/2018

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

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I am making this statement in relation to my involvement in the fatal fire at GRENFELL TOWER on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

The people that I will mention in this statement are my colleagues from the Fire Rescue Unit based at HESTON Fire Station call sign G386. These colleagues are Crew Manager (CM) Paul GRAY, Fire Fighter (FF) Gary HISCOCK, FF Dan PEGRAM and FF Alan HUDSON. I will also mention the four survivors of the fire that we located on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. Due to the nature of the fire and the situation at the time of locating these survivors I cannot give a very details description of them. However, I remember that they were a mixture of males and females. I would put them all in their 50's. I would describe them as being of either Chinese or Asian origin. They were all fully clothed and they were all able to walk and they all had clothes wrapped around their heads and faces to try and stop them from choking on the smoke.

I have been a Fire Fighter for the last 15yrs. I started on Blue Watch and then about 6 or 7yrs ago I moved to Red Watch. I have undertaken a large amount of training throughout my time in London Fire Brigade and am classed as fully competent. In addition to the normal skills and training as a Fire Fighter I am a qualified member of the Fire Rescue Unit (FRU) crew at HESTON Fire Station. Being FRU qualified means that I have undergone additional training and am competent in Open Water Rescue, Line Access and a number of other specialist areas. I am also a fully trained member of the Urbans Search and Rescue

Signature: Benjamin HOLEHOUSE  
2018

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(USAR) team.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> June 2017 I came on duty as normal at 2000hrs and I was detailed on that night to be part of the FRU Crew call sign G386. This is the Fire Rescue Unit, it is a specialist appliance that does not carry any water. The FRU has five Fire Fighters on that night these were Crew Manager Paul GRAY, Fire Fighter (FE) Gary HISCOCK, FF Dan PEGRAM and FF Alan HUDSON and myself. I was on the back of the FRU and the driver was FF HISCOCK. I was sat directly behind the Crew Manager in the rear of the cab on the left side.

The FRU appliance carries additional tools such as additional cutting equipment, heavy duty lifting equipment, line rescue equipment and a host of other bits of equipment as well as the extended Duration Breathing Apparatus (EDBA). These EDBA sets allow Fire Fighters to have an extended period of time under air. There are sixteen stations that have a FRU, therefore these vehicles and the crews can be deployed anywhere in London and we frequently cover our neighbouring grounds if needed.

To become part of the FRU you put yourself forward for the dedicated FRU course which is a course which teaches you how to use all the additional equipment that is carried on the FRU. You cannot have an FRU qualification if you do not work at an FRU station. Once you have completed the initial training then you need to keep up to date with all your qualifications and there is a series of ongoing training to be completed every year. There has to be a minimum of three USAR qualified personnel on the FRU machine at any given point during the shift. There is also a rotation factor involved in the deployment of Fire Fighters to the FRU, it just so happened that on that night it was my turn to be on the FRU.

The FRU was not part of the initial call to the scene in fact we were called when the requirement went up to 20 machines. It was about 2am when we got the call. When the call came through I was in the dormitory, on getting the call I got up and got into my work wear, I went down to the Watch Room and then went to get my firefighting tunic, leggings and boots, helmet etc. then straight onto the vehicle so that you are ready to go as soon as you get off the fire engine. I could tell straight away by the amount of radio messages and the number of appliances that this was a major incident. There were a large number of machines being sent to the scene and the amount of radio traffic taking place gave us an indication that something big was going on.

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2018

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As we were driving closer to the scene you could get a glimpse of the building. It gave you a bit of an idea of the scale but these are only fleeting glimpses. From where we parked you could see the tower was fully alight, there was lots of falling debris and there were panicked members of the public around us. You could hear a lot of screaming and calling out, it was an unbelievable sight of devastation. I do remember that there were some problems initially getting to the scene as there was some road works and some vehicles had to turn around. There was lots of communications between vehicles to provide details of the best way into the scene.

Parked the machine, it was indescribable scenes. Lots of people lots of things going on all around. We got off the machine and CM GRAY went to get a brief as to what we might be doing. There was not a long time between the CM leaving to get briefed and being ready to go. I remember that we were busy with getting the EDBA sets off the vehicle and grabbing as much gear as we could and getting ready to move to the tower. We grabbed as much equipment for breaking into properties as we could carry. We picked up axes, hammers and Thermal Imaging Cameras (TIC). Some of these items we took from other Pump and Pump Ladders that were parked up as we passed. I can't remember exactly what I was carrying, other than my EDBA kit, but I would imagine that it was some of the breaking in gear. From where we were you could see that the tower was fully alight, it was quite a long approach walk.

I had a feeling of anticipation, I just wanted to get started and do the best I could and get as far forward as you can to do a good job and do your best. I was not really thinking of much else at that point. I don't really remember much about what the CM briefed us on but I remember that he told us that he to get to a point closer to the scene and then we followed the CM off to the RVP.

The walk to the scene, as marked on exhibit BWH/3, was a surreal walk. I could not quite comprehend exactly what was going on, you can see there is a lot of panic with people running around, it felt like the walk took forever to get to there. It was a scene of panic and something that you can't really comprehend the scale and it was like watching a scene of devastation in a bad movie. My only focus was to get there and get on with the job.

I exhibit a map which shows the route of our journey to the scene as BWH/2. On this map I have marked the location where we parked the appliance, X marks the spot. As best as I can recall our route to the

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2018

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scene was from Shephard's Bush roundabout onto Holland Park Avenue then Ladbrooke Grove and then Lancaster Road. We parked on Bramley Road and got off the appliance. I also exhibit as BWH/3 a further map of the route that we walked to gain access to the tower. It indicates that we walked along Whitchurch road, Tregold Street and then onto Grenfell Road towards the tower.

When we got to the RVP we waited for instructions. Bearing in mind that the initial crews were on their way out by now and we were EDBA crews, with bigger cylinders and used for deeper set fires and longer wear. We got ourselves ready and into standby and prepared to go into the building. There were two areas where EDBA and SDBA wearers were held and there was an area which was the main control area. I exhibit a map of the area as BWH/4. Marked on this map as position number 3 is the location for the EDBA wearers. Marked on the map as 2 are the SDBA wearers holding area. Marked on the map as 1 is the main control area, which was on a grassy area.

I could not give an exact time but we were detailed to go into the building, we had to go under the cover of riot shields held by the police officers. We made our way to the holding area marked, on exhibit BWH/6. This is area one on BWH/4. This is close to the sports centre which was behind us and we were looking at the south east corner of the tower. It was fully alight in a cone shape with the bottom of the cone at the base of the tower and the rest of the tower was fully alight with lots of debris coming down and landing on the floor. The debris was all shapes and sizes and some was on fire. I was thinking we just need to get in and get on with the job. Whilst in the holding area we were getting info and briefings from senior officers, I can't remember who these senior officers were and I can't remember the specific briefings.

We moved from that first holding area across the front of the building, under the slight overhang and then moved through to the WEST side and went in through the windows that had been opened. I just remember that I had my head down and was just following those in front of me, I remember that we were under the riot shields held by the officers and there was loads of debris on the floor, lots of trip hazards and you could hear the sounds of the fire above. It was a surreal moment being in that situation, my only thought is just getting there.

We got to the Entry Control, there were fire fighters coming down with casualties and there was lots of fire fighters in that area getting ready to be deployed. It was quite a quick process of getting into the

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2018

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building and then being tasked and going through entry control and up the stairs.

Entry Control is way of recording your movements at any scene. You take a tally out of your body set and that goes into an electronic board. You start up your sets and get ready to be deployed. The board records your duration of wear and breathing rate. Entry Control is at the bottom of the stairwell, just to the left of the stairs just below the mezzanine floor. Entry Control is responsible for the BA wearers at any incident or those BA wearers in a sector at a major incident.

It was surreal, there were FF coming down with some casualties there was lots of noise and some screaming. You can picture these things in your mind but until you are there it is very difficult to describe. Even though all this was going on it was a very controlled environment and almost clam with people going about their tasks. People were still logging in and out through entry Control normally and although a lot going on it was controlled. There were lots of senior officers at that point, I think we were spoken to by Pat GOLDBORNE. All I recall him saying to me as I was about to leave the area was look after yourself and your colleagues. I know that the CM had been briefed about our task, I am not sure if that was by Pat GOLDBOURNE or someone else.

I recall that our brief was to go to the ninth floor and start to search, it was as simple as that. We knew what we needed to do so we just got on with the job. The CM lead the crew up the stairs, I was the fifth person so right at the back of our crew. I remember that we went up about four flights of stairs and my heart was really pounding. I remember thinking that my heart is almost coming out of my chest, I just had to snatch a thought and get on with things. It was hard work climbing the stairs. The stairwell felt about being 2 meters wide in a spiral with the hand rail on the left. You went up a flight then there was a flat section and then up another flight to the next section. On the flat sections this was the access to the floors. As we were going up the stairs were wide enough for us to head up without any issues. They were concrete stairs and the handrails were metal.

We got to the ninth floor and start the search, this seemed to calm down a bit and gather myself as I was able to concentrate on the job of searching the flats and rooms. The walk up the stairs was a real heart pounding moment not just from the exertion levels but going into the unknown. The conditions in the stairwells was not that great, I remember that after the first few floor it just became smoke logged.

Signature: Benjamin HOLEHOUSE  
2018

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Visibility was really poor, you are relying on feeling your way. In some places you probably would struggle to see a few feet in front of you.

Some of the flats on the ninth floor that we went into were not too badly smoke logged and you could get away with coming off the wall. The lobby area on the ninth floor was very smoke logged, we came out onto the lobby of the ninth floor and did a left hand wall search. This means that you stick to the left wall. You would find a door, enter the flat and search it then back onto into the lobby and onto the next door. You could not see the numbers on the doors and the only time you could get any visibility was when you got into one of the flats that was not badly affected. On the ninth floor it felt that we were continually at work, we made our way into several of the flats. We were searching each room and shouting and calling out for people. The crew and I were taking turns at breaking the doors open. I remember one door that we could not get into. I was using the yellow enforcer to try and break the door open, I worked until exhaustion and then handed the enforcer over to a colleague who also worked on door and could not get it open. All the time we were calling out to see if anyone was still on the floor or in the flats.

The CM got a broken radio message to go to the eleventh floor. I like to be the last man so I think I was the last to leave the ninth floor and we went up to the eleventh floor. I am pretty sure that we kept pretty much the same formation throughout the whole incident. The stairs were completely smoke logged, you could not see a thing, apart from the odd bit of stairs in the torch light. The temperature was rising at the time and it was getting noticeably hotter. Overall the conditions were deteriorating quite badly. Once we were up on the eleventh floor that was when the heat really starts to kick in. There is a slight gap between your tunic and helmet which is covered by your smoke hood, It is around the back of your neck and ears. I could feel the general wave of heat hitting me in those areas. It is not like a burn hitting you but a wave of heat, it is very hard to describe, and your face and things start to tingle. It is important to know that at this point enough is enough. If it got any hotter than people would start to be in trouble as things would start to breakdown. The heat was so unbearable I remember that the CM was touching the back of the door with his hand and him saying that the heat was unbearable. I was a few feet away and I thought that the heat was unbearable. We have to make a decision about how far to go on that floor. I personally said that was enough and I am happy with that decision. It was then that we turned around and went to the 10th floor as a crew. I struggled with that decision for a bit after but in reality it was the right decision as the conditions were very hostile.

Signature: Benjamin HOLEHOUSE  
2018

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We had done as much as we could on the eleventh floor and we could do something on the tenth floor. It was very poor visibility in the stairwell and when we got onto the tenth floor we did a systematic left hand search. I exhibit a map of the tenth floor as BWH/7. At the front of the crew someone said that there was a noise coming from one of the flat. One of the crew heard the noise, I think this was FF HUDSON and alerted us to the noise, we all went to the flat and found that one of the crew was in the flat and there were four people inside. The flat were the four people were found is marked on BWH/7. We made sure that was all the people in the flat and we escorted them out of the flat.

I never entered the flat, in which we found the four people. I remember that I was in the doorway and I think FF HUDSON was the one who was talking to the people. There was some initial reluctance on behalf of the people to leave the flat with us but they overcame this quickly and we then all left the landing and headed down the stairs. I remember that the overriding feeling from all of this was one of massive relief that we were able to help them get out of the fire. I will never forget that feeling it was close to feeling elated that we have actually achieved something by saving these people. They were all mobile so it was a case of just shepherding them down the stairs with us leading them out. As we led them out the visibility was getting better the lower we got in the building.

I can't really remember anything distinguishing about these four people, they had their faces covered. I would guess that they were over 50's in age. They were all about the same size and build and I think they may have been of Chinese heritage. I don't even remember them speaking to us apart from the initial calls to us through the flat door.

Upon getting to the bottom of the stairs I collected my tally which I put into my bodyguard and we shut down the BA sets and we are all logged out of the system. We had worked really hard and I was getting close to feeling very tired, it is important to release the heat after an incident like this so we opened our tunics and took off our flash hoods. We were taken fairly quickly out of the building under the police shields and then made our way to the safe area. We broke down our BA sets and serviced them in the safe area, after they have been worn you need to change the oxygen cylinders and make sure that the sets are not damaged. We also rehydrated and prepared ourselves for going back into the building. I am not sure if it was the adrenalin leaving my system but I felt exhausted not only because it was a physical job but also

Signature: Benjamin HOLEHOUSE  
2018

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the realisation of what we had just done.

When I was at the EDBA holding site the tower was fully alight and there was falling debris, it had not deteriorated at all. I remember counting the floors and looking up at what was going on, I was in a state of disbelief that I had just come out of that fire and a feeling that others were still working inside. Looking at the fire was a surreal moment, it was an incredible sight one which was hard to fully take in and comprehend at the time.

Whilst we were waiting we got all our BA sets ready and made sure we were ready to go. All we wanted to do was go back in and do our job. I am really vague on times but after some time we went round to the playground area, this was another holding area for the crews. I have marked the playground on exhibit BWH/6. I couldn't tell you which way we went round the building to get to that point. I remember that we were not there for long when CM GRAY and I tried to set up a branch on the balcony overlooking the South Side of the tower. We set up the branch, which is a hose ready for others to use to put water onto the upper floors of the south side of the tower.

We then went back down into the holding area, then after a short time we then went to the holding area readying ourselves to go back into the building. I was then escorted back into the building under the Police Riot shields. We made our way into the Tower and were taken into the basement holding area. I was there for a good few hours and was then stood down, I was not needed and did not start up my BA set. I was taken out of the building and under the shields back into the playground. By the time that we exited the building it would have been about 1300hrs maybe a bit before that. We could see Blue Watch crews were coming in and taking over from us.

We got all our stuff together and we saw that all three of our appliances were at the scene. We then knew that everyone from our station was accounted for and was alright. We got back to our appliance and then we drove back to Paddington Fire Station where we met with a number of other fire fighters and we had food and water as well as making our notes about what we saw and did on the night. I exhibit these notes made at PADDINGTON Fire Station as BWH/1.

We also met with the counsellors and had some time to chat over a few things. We then got back on our

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2018

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**OFFICIAL**

Statement of: HOLEHOUSE, BENJAMIN

Form MG11(T)

Page 9 of 9

appliance and made it back to HESTON where we called family, had showers and got ready for work that night. I have to say that the help offered to us following this has been very good, there has been no pressure on us from anyone.

I have not been back to Grenfell Tower since this incident, I often thought that I should go back for my own piece of mind and to try and come to terms with some of what happened on that night.

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