

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: BLOXHAM, GEMMA

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: G.BLOXHAM

Date: 06/02/2018

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

The content of this statement constitutes a comprehensive summary of an interview conducted by DC Ade AKINKUNLE and Civilian Investigator Ivan AGNEW with myself at Lambeth Fire Station, Albert Embankment on 12.12.2017 between 10:10 and 12:29. Also present throughout was my Fire Brigade Union representative Dave YOUNG.

Throughout the course of this statement I will refer to a document entitled Contemporaneous Notes, which I exhibit as GEB/3. I have marked in biro pen a drawing provided to me today by Police showing the building's 4 elevations to explain the extent of the fire. I refer to this exhibit as GEB/2. I also marked in pen on a map provided by Police titled 'Grenfell Tower- Elevation Location Plan' the position of Grenfell Towers main entrance, a playground and the grassy area where we collapsed post exit from our rescue mission. I used the initials 'TL' on this map which stands for turntable ladder to show its position during the fire. This colour map is referred to by me as Exhibit GEB/1.

I have been a fire fighter for the past 8 years and am currently attached to Red Watch at Lambeth Fire Station which acts as our base station for the purposes of mobilisation. My training was up to date on the 14th June 2017 and I was classified as competent within the role.

On the 13th June 2017 I started my night duty shift at 8pm. Roll call took place in the Watch Room for the two on call fire crews' call signs Hotel 221(H221) and Hotel 222 (H222). After that I tested the BA kits which is short for Breathing Apparatus kits for correct pressure and then checked over my assigned fire engine H222 to make sure everything was ready for a call out. Happy that all was well I went upstairs to have dinner. As we hadn't any call outs I took the opportunity to watch some TV before retiring to the

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female dormitory situated beside the Pole House to sleep. I was still fully dressed apart from shoes in the event of a call out, which we refer to as a shout.

I first became aware of the Grenfell Tower Fire when I was awoken at 01:30 on the morning of the 14th June 2017 by a fire call on the fire station tannoy alerting me to a shout. I quickly pulled on by shoes then slid down the pole to crew up our fire tender H222 which we call a Pump. From the outset I was told that we would be attending a 25 pump fire which I found difficult to believe as this was the largest call out I'd known in my career. H221 was also assigned to the call. I had never been to the Grenfell Tower before. I could hear from the on board radio that there were a non-stop flow of Fire Survival Guidance (FSG) calls being relayed from London Fire Brigade Control Room. These FSG calls emanate from people trapped within a building that's on fire. Our fire crew of 4 quickly manned our Fire Engine. Our Crew Manager (CM) Ben MCALONEN who I've known for 4 years sat beside the driver Fire Fighter (FF) Richard EVANS who we call Rich for short. I sat on the nearside of the Pump directly behind the CM. FF HERRERA was seated to my right in the back of H222. I don't know his name as he'd only recently arrived at the Fire Station. The Pump has a Mobile Data Terminal (MDT) fitted which provides an exact location of the fire along with GPS to provide an updated road map to the scene, where water hydrants are located and a direct radio link to the control room.

The driver put on his sirens and flashing blue lights and turned right out of the fire station crossed Lambeth Bridge then turned left to avoid the traffic caused by the one way system at Vauxhall. We followed the river Thames to Chelsea, turned right towards Earls Court and used our mobile phones GPS Application to verbally update our driver with the best route. We arrived in the vicinity of the Grenfell Tower about 01:45. Our progress to scene of the actual fire which we refer to as the Fire Ground was hampered by the sheer numbers of Fire Engines and ambulances already parked up at the scene. This meant we had to park our Pump behind other fire appliances in Sidhar Road near the Church well to the South of Grenfell Tower a 5 minutes' walk away. It was at this point I had a first view of the tower block. It was already well alight. A quarter of the East and North faces, approximately 15 floors were ablaze above the first few floors. I felt even at that stage the building itself was lost to the fire.

As we exited our Fire Engine I could see other fire crews donning their BA kits and walking quickly towards the fire. A group of people in the road were shouting that people were trapped in Grenfell Tower. The officer in Charge CM MCALONEN told me to don a BA set and quickly make my way with the crew to the holding area located on the South side of the Tower to await further deployment. I did as instructed. Between us we had breaking in gear to force entry into the flats and a Thermal Imaging

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Camera (TIC) to detect heat sources in our path. As we got closer to the building line I could see and hear debris falling from the outside of the building mostly huge sheets of metal cladding on fire. We remained at the Holding Area for about 10 minutes still wearing our BA kits, during which time more fire Fighters joined us. The 'Command Unit' a large lorry stroke mobile office used by senior fire officers to take command of large fires still hadn't arrived. At this point the fire ground had not been sectorised. As we waited we could see several casualties being helped out of the Tower by Fire Fighters. Eventually FF EVANS and I were sent into the building by WM BROWN armed with a TIC and an enforcer which is a heavy metal battering ram with handles at either end which when swung by the handler smashes the locks off interior doors gaining access to people trapped within the flats. Due to the fast falling debris we were forced to dash between the Holding area and the main entrance on the South side of the building. We moved from the lobby on the ground floor to the first floor and from there a senior officer instructed us to go to the mezzanine on the second floor to receive a briefing. We were told that the building had very tight corridors on the stairs which could cause difficulty in rescuing people back down the stairs. From entering the building about a further 10 minutes had elapsed before setting off to the Bridgehead which by now had moved up to the 3th floor. I took this to mean that the fire would now be located at the earliest point on the 5th floor as the Bridgehead is always at least 2 floors below the fire.

I was paired with FF EVANS who I've known for 4 years. We were wearing Short Duration Breathing Apparatus (SDBA). This meant that depending on factors such as exertion and fitness levels we would have about 25 minutes air supply. On reaching the Bridgehead we were shown by a senior fire officer a drawing on a wall portraying the layout of the building to assist us in smoke logged areas if and when visibility became an issue. Our initial tasking was to proceed via the stairs to the 12th floor to carry out fire survival guidance and get the occupants out and down to safety. This tasking changed before being committed. Our second briefing was to ascend via the stairs to the 23rd floor to carry out fire survival guidance and bring the occupiers down to safety. We were armed with a TIC, an enforcer, a length of 45 millimetre hose with a branch. A branch is essentially a metal nozzle that can be connected to a fire hose coupling instantaneously to produce a jet spray of water.

We handed in our Electronic Tallies to the Entry Control Officer (ECO) who placed them on the Entry Control Board. This allows the ECO to remotely monitor our remaining air supply via telemetry and to know who and when Fire Fighters have been deployed. Should visibility become non-existent through smoke logging he can then radio us via a headset worn by at least one of the pairings or via my hand held radio. If the (ECO) doesn't receive a suitable response he or she can mount a rescue mission to trace and

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rescue the missing fire fighters. Our ascent was delayed for a couple of minutes due to other firefighters waiting to go ahead of us and other firefighters evacuating casualties down the narrow stairs. Once clear we turned on our BA and masked up. FF EVANS led the way as we began the ascent, counting out the floors as per our training. Each floor had two flights of 7 steps with a split landing between them. The staircase is windowless, constructed of concrete with barely enough room to let someone pass. The split landing is only about a metre square and lit from above. There were hose lines and other kit underfoot which acted as a further obstacle. By the time we reached the 6th floor the stairs were smoke logged with zero visibility which meant we couldn't read the floor numbering. We continued to climb with me holding on to FF EVANS from behind. Around this time FF EVANS radio within his facemask stopped working and he reminded me to count the floors. I only had a hand held radio which I couldn't operate due to the smoke. We were now very much on our own. When we reached the 10th floor the smoke had reduced to 5 on a scale of 1 to 10. It was around this time that I discarded the heavy enforcer as I was using up a lot of air and we still had a long way to go. I took the view that we could kick in the flat doors if needs be. Due to the exertion of the climb I was now struggling to focus. The smoke thickened as we climbed and returned to zero visibility. We were now up around the 20th floor and I was physically exhausted.

Suddenly out of the smoke came two people grabbing on to us. We physically pushed them back into the landing. We hoped the air quality would be better in the lift lobby and allow us the opportunity to assess and speak with the casualties. Fortunately it was. We managed to get the man who was Italian looking and the elderly female to sit down on the floor to assess the situation. The elderly female who spoke poor English was hysterical begging us to save her family. The other male was also foreign and spoke poor English. The woman was talking on her mobile phone to the rest of her family on the 23rd floor in in her native language. When I realised that there could be children up there I made to leave to rescue them. FF EVANS called me back and reminded me that our priority was now to get the two people in front of us down to safety. FF EVANS decision was of course the correct one. He tried his radio again to gain further help for the people trapped on the 23rd floor but his head set radio had no signal. This barrier set couldn't transmit far enough downstairs to the Bridgehead on the night. Faced with this dilemma we decided to descend with the two casualties FF EVANS led the way down the stairs with the Italian male in front of him. I held and supported the elderly female beside me as we went down the stairs which are steep and an angle of about 45 degrees. The smoke in the staircase was still quite thick and as we descended I could see my casualty was struggling to breathe. At one point the smoke returned to a 10 on the scale and the

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woman collapsed taking me with her. As we both fell on the stairs I twisted my ankle. I struggled to tell if she was breathing due to the zero visibility. I shouted to FF EVANS to help me. As he made his way back up the stairs the Italian male ran off down the stairs. FF EVAN realising that I couldn't physically help my casualty picked up the unconscious woman over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. He led me limping down the stairs. I couldn't tell which floor we were on at this point through the smoke and lack of signage.

When we reached what I thought was the 10th floor we met another firefighter who handed me a discarded firefighters yellow helmet. I don't recall what if anything was said but I knew that a firefighter never leaves his helmet behind in a fire unless he's unconscious or worse. I shouted to FF EVANS to try his Barrie radio set again to alert the Entry Control Officer that we may have an injured firefighter nearby. As we continued our descent out of the smoke came a firefighter without his helmet. His face was smoke stained particularly around the nostrils. He was clearly confused and unable to speak coherently. None the less he instinctively wanted to help us with our female casualty even though he was in no fit state to do so. He offered to pick the woman up when we first stopped with him. When I quizzed him as his identity he couldn't answer my questions. In this state was now something of a liability. I assessed he was suffering from oxygen deprivation so decided to treat him as a casualty. It meant I had to forcibly grab him in a partial headlock to get him quickly under control and pull him with me down the stairs. FF EVANS led the way with his casualty over his shoulder. When we reached the 6th floor we met a senior fire officer who instructed us to take the delirious firefighter to the Bridgehead on the 4th floor as there were fresh supplies of oxygen for him. Upon our arrival the Bridgehead was organised chaos in that it was bustling with firefighters preparing to ascend. I picked up my tally from the ECO and pushed through the crowd to the lift lobby where having picked up an oxygen cylinder I administered my casualty the oxygen. FF EVANS meanwhile carried on down with his casualty to hand her over to the LAS waiting outside the building. I saw him return a few minutes later minus the lady. He picked up his tally from the ECO and briefed him as to our actions and the fact that there were people still trapped on the 23rd floor. When he came back to me FF EVANS told me to continue down stairs with my casualty who was reviving somewhat although still struggling to breathe properly probably through smoke inhalation. On our way down we were told to exit a different way to which we entered the tower due to the main entrance being compromised. We came to a room with no doors to exit except floor to ceiling glass panels. Two of the other firefighters smashed their way through on of the glass panels with

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sledgehammers which afforded everyone an exit route to the outside of the building on the West side. My casualty was led away by the other firefighters whilst FF EVANS and I walked around to the East side of the building where we both collapsed in a heap on a grassy area. We couldn't remain on the West side as the air quality was too poor. We rested there for about 20 minutes and were told by control to drop off any SDBA kits at our fire appliance as they weren't going to be deployed any longer. FF EVANS and I walked back to our fire engine which was still parked up in the same position. I put my SDBA kit in its appropriate slot on the pump, had a drink of water and then approached a local householder asking to use her toilet. She kindly allowed me to do so. I walked back to the fire engine which was about 5 minutes' walk away I was approached by members of the public who offered to help in any way they could. Some offered to carry our BA kit. We politely declined their offer and offered them as much reassurance as we could.

We were told to collect all available oxygen cylinders and take them to casualty handling. As we walked back to the Grenfell Tower it appeared to be 100% ablaze from the first few floors to the top. What did stand out was a male resident standing by a window looking out. This window was about a quarter way up on the East side. It struck me that this man was looking and acting extraordinarily calm in that he would come to the window look out then walk slowly back into his flat then come back to the window and look out as if nothing was wrong. I then realised that the LFB turntable ladder situated on the East side of the block was keeping a near constant jet of water on or near the outside of his window which obviously afforded him protection from the fire raging around the outside of the adjoining flats. All the while the fire was roaring and wrapping around North and East sides of the building with large pieces of metal cladding crashing and banging as they hit the ground. My crew and I were seated on a low wall about 100 yards from the block at this point and I was aware via the radio traffic that Command knew about the man at the window. Our crew were told to wait where we were by Command so we stayed at this location for a few hours watching the building burn which to me as a firefighter caused a great deal of frustration. We filled in the time by helping the other exhausted EDBA kitted firefighters as they exited the building. It was at this point FF EVANS, FF HERRERA and I took it upon ourselves to pick up some spare BA kits and go round to the West side of the block in order to go back inside. As we were just about to be committed back into the building we were pulled back by a senior fire officer who told us that only fresh firefighters were being allowed into the building. We could see that fresh crews were arriving all the time so we decided that there was nothing left to do but to return to our fire engine. By this stage we were joined by FF Mike WORMAN and FF Steve PAGE who are also attached to Red Watch at Lambeth Fire

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Station. We remained with the fire engine for about 2 hours during which time family and friends of the residents were coming up to us asking for updates about what was going inside the building. We told them that we couldn't comment. I felt mentally drained by the whole event. It was like looking at a disaster movie when all you wanted to happen was to hear the director shout 'cut'. As I looked back at Grenfell Tower it was now burnt out and smoldering.

I had lost complete track of time but I estimate it was now between 10am and midday. Along with our H221 we were instructed by Command to make our way to Paddington Fire station. There we were given a drink and a snack, and a welfare check. On our arrival we were met by senior fire officers who enquired about our health. We were offered individual and or group counselling. I completed contemporaneous notes covering my recollection of the night's events which I have already referred to as my Exhibit GEB/3. I travelled back with my crew to Lambeth fire station in our fire engine arriving about 3pm when I booked off. My twisted ankle has healed since the incident and I have made a full recovery.

I have asked to describe in detail the man and woman we rescued on the night. Unfortunately my memory of these people are vague. The Italian looking male was about 6 feet tall and spoke better English than the older lady. He was about 35 years old, black hair and was wearing a T shirt and jeans. The older lady was 50 to 60 years of age with black hair and wore some sort of jacket. Sadly that's all I can remember about her.

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