

**WITNESS STATEMENT**

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

Statement of: GEAPIN, JAMES

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: JAMES GEAPIN

Date: 22/01/2018

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

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This statement relates to my involvement on the Grenfell Tower fire on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

Throughout my statement I shall refer to my other crew members with whom I served on the night, including WM Paul MEYRICK, CM Tom SHARP, FF Adam WILSON and FF Duane HARRIS all based from Peckham Fire Station, Red Watch.

I have served with the London Fire Brigade for 24 years and have been based at numerous stations across London. I am currently based temporarily at Eltham Fire Station but on the night of the 14th June I was based at Peckham.

Training is a constant part of a role in the fire service and is incorporated into our diaries on a daily basis. Training can be performed in a number of ways whether it be in the form of drills, lectures or computer based learning. The drills (practical learning) may evolve around our use of breathing apparatus (BA) and the maintenance of our sets along with refresher training on how best to use them. Every month we complete BA checks which must be passed as well as drills involving rescuing or firefighting. Training can take place either at our stations or for more realistic 'real fire' training we can go to Beckton or Park Royal. In circumstances however, Health & Safety guidance will only allow a certain amount risk for obvious reasons.

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We complete the drills either as a Watch or combined with other stations. For example we regularly complete training with the Old Kent Road Fire Station. Our Watch Manager is in charge of the allocation of training and decides how it will be undertaken. It will take place on weekends, work days and nights.

I have completed numerous high rise training packages and completed reading regarding the policies and procedures. As an example, we could complete 'On Arrival' tactics — what equipment is needed, where the water supply is, order of attendance, allocation of roles at scene etc. Each training need is different depending on the training need at the time. I am well aware of the 'stay put' policy and know that the advice given in a high rise is that if the caller is unable to leave they must go to a room away from the fire, lock the door and shout out of a window about a fire. I believe that after the Lakanal House fire people were told to remain in their flats.

All of the training that I do is using the Standard Duration Breathing Apparatus (SDBA). I am not trained in the use of Extended Duration Breathing Apparatus (EDBA), nor do I work on any specialist appliances such as Fire Rescue Units (FRUs). We would also undertake training on the use of cutting equipment in the event of RTCs and the 'working safely on road ways training package'. We are also fully trained in the handling of casualties.

We also complete familiarisation visits on high rise buildings within our own areas. These are completed in order that we can assess the access of buildings in the event of a fire and know where to park and what appliances are needed. The visits also allow us to know how best access hydrants and locate fire lifts and inlets. By also ascertaining the number of floors allows us to know how many lengths of hoses we would need. We also knock on residents' doors and offer advice on what to do in the event of a fire as well as checking that the fire keys are functioning.

On the night of the 13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> June, our shift started like any other. We carried out the normal equipment and kit checks and carried out any training that was required. At this stage I cannot recall the training, owing to the time lapse. I cannot remember the time of night that we got the call, but when the call slip came through to an incident at Grenfell Tower, the make-up of appliances had already reached 20 pumps. I had never heard of Grenfell Tower and therefore had no idea how to get there, nor had I attended any familiarisation visit so I did not know what we would be facing on our attendance. My initial thoughts of

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a 20 pump fire wee that they were very rare, and I could not think of another at a high rise so naturally you start thinking is it a hoax? Has it been misunderstood? Have the officers over estimated the number needed? Lots of things race through your mind. Hearing it was in west London, we knew it would take some time to get there on blue lights; at least 30 minutes I was told. But like any call, we followed our routine. We were designated roles by the WM MEYRICK who allocated 2 of us to be the initial BA wearers, CM SHARP and FF Duane HARRIS. In the appliance we were riding, a normal pump ladder based from Peckham, I was sat in the back middle seat, flanked by the 2 BA wearers and up front was the driver, FF Adam WILSON and the officer in charge, WM MEYRICK. Also riding the appliance was CM SHARP although I cannot remember where he was sat. Thankfully, Adam said that he was Ok with the route and we began to make our way quickly 'on the bell'. Thoughts continued to flash though my mind as to what we were going to be faced with and as such I did not pay too much attention to the route we took, other than coming in from the direction of White City. My radio was not turned on until we got close to the locality by which point we were working off unfamiliar channels, although I remember there was a lot of radio traffic. The messages were being passed to and from the fire ground but I cannot remember anything specifically.

I remember passing over a flyover when I got my first glimpse of the tower which was directly in front of us. I was completely shocked and surprised at the amount of flames coming from the block. Normally a fire in a tower block will cover a couple of rooms, but not to the scale that I was seeing. Immediately my thoughts turned to people that were inside and what we would be tasked to do when we arrived. When we would eventually arrive the protocol would be for the officer in charge to speak to the Command Unit and we would be given our directions. It would be no different on this occasion. I cannot remember any of the road names and I did not know the area but I remember there was understandable heavy traffic from emergency vehicles near to the building. We were concerned about being boxed in and as such parked some minutes away from the building. From where we parked I could not see the building because it was obscured by residential housing. Naturally there were a lot of people in the street looking on. Surprisingly however, I could not sense any tension. It felt quite calm. Sometimes we come across very irate neighbours or friends and family but on this occasion there was none of that. I cannot explain why.

From where we parked, it took at least 5 minutes to reach the initial staging point and speak to the Command Unit. We were conscious that if we were to be deployed almost immediately we would need

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all of our kit so we unloaded everything and took it with us. Ordinarily you wait to hear what your direction will be but in this case we simply ensured we had everything we needed. Despite the size and scale of the fire, strangely it did not really smell of anything or from that distance feel particularly warm. However, I remember as we got closer the heat increased and my thoughts turned to the structure of the building; was it safe? Was it going to come down? Having walked for about 5 minutes towards the holding area, through some narrow streets and close buildings, of which I cannot remember any road names, I got to see the scale of the damage up close. From the 4<sup>th</sup> floor upwards I could see from where I was standing that the fire had spread around the left hand side of the building but I could not take my eyes off the front. It was such an inferno that at that stage it did not occur to me to see if the spread had moved around. It was only later when we moved around that I saw the extent of the damage.

When we were in the initial holding area we were essentially back filling other fire fighters who had made their way inside. There was roughly about 50-100 fire fighters in the holding area all ready to go. I remember thinking that I thought that we would have been deployed from there and did not realise there was a further holding area closer. I did not know who was in charge of the holding area but an officer would come out periodically and say that further BA wearers were required. We waited in the holding area for several hours and during that time I could see fire engines pumping out water which was cascading down steps. It was still dark when we arrived at the holding area and there was a lot of radio traffic but none of which I can remember particularly. I think our delay in being deployed was down to them requiring more Extended Duration Breathing Apparatus (EDBA) wearers than us who were SDBA. Everyone was keen to get involved and being in the holding area was frustrating so when the opportunity arose for SDBA wearers my crew and I put ourselves forward. When we put ourselves forward we were under the impression that we would be committed however as it transpired it was to back fill another holding area inside and not actually to be committed. 2 'wearers' were requested so a fire fighter from Deptford I know as 'Steve' and I made our way from the initial holding area, moving under a covered walk way to the main door, but were then placed in the second holding area on a grassed bank with a 20ft wall behind it where there was approximately another 50 fire fighters present. Again, this was very frustrating.

Being on a different side of the building did offer a different perspective however. I could see that there was a ladder up to the first floor and a lot of debris was falling down. It appeared to be burning cladding

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as well as glass from the windows and we made sure to keep well back from it. I could also see the entrance that the police had been escorting people in and out of. This side was a lot louder and a lot of commotion and activity as well as hearing people screaming. I remember looking up at the state of the building and seeing a huge amount of damage and thinking about the people that were still inside and the chances they had of being rescued. I could see from that side that the fire spread had gone across and up and that that trend had carried on throughout other sides of the building. We waited to be committed again for a couple of hours. No one admits to being nervous but you could feel it the anticipation.

We eventually moved in to the basement area of the building, by which point I could see it was getting light but I really had no idea of the time. The basement was dark and wet and only about 20ft x 10ft. All there was, was a door that was occasionally opened by an officer calling people though. I could hear no alarms or anything of note in the room just dripping water. Strangely we could not hear anything from outside and just waited to be deployed. Eventually we were called through as a team of 2. I did not know the officer who called us through to Entry Control. Entry Control was located at the bottom of the stairs below a mezzanine floor. Entry Control was run by a Watch Manager but I do not know their name and recorded our air consumption which would have been a minimum of between 240-300 bar in pressure.

When we eventually made it through Control, we briefed to carry out search and rescue on floors 6, 8 and 9. We maned to get some breaking in gear together that included an enforcer, hydraulic ram and a halogen bar. The kit combined is heavy so we took it between us. There was some confusion initially because we understood that the mezzanine floor was the 1<sup>st</sup> floor when actually that was above us. However we were told by other crews which floor was which so we were able to make our way up. As we made our way up there was a huge amount of hose on the stairwell as well as other breaking in gear that had been left. Visibility was not great because of the thick smoke and the walls were very sooty but we could see, although we had to be very mindful of trip hazards.

The higher we went the hotter I remember it becoming and we were always mindful of our air consumption. We found further breaking in gear the higher we went and I could see through the communal doors that a lot of the flats were burnt out. Although we searched on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor I cannot now remember anything of our searches. We certainly did not find anyone. The same for the 8th The higher we went the smokier the stairwells became the poorer the visibility. As the visibility got poorer it was

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imperative that we remained with our other crew members. I was aware of radio traffic but cannot remember anything being said.

I remember the 9th floor more clearly although not for any particular reason. I remember that the lobby door was intact and no breaking in gear was required. We called out from the lobby to make ourselves heard before committing but nothing was heard. The door pushed open, away from us, and I could see through the glass panel in the door that there were flames on the other side. I followed my colleague through the door whereupon we were hit with a lot of smoke and glowing embers. The doors were burnt through and the smoke was black. However we could still see reasonably well albeit we used our hands on the walls to follow our path and checked the floor with our feet for trip hazards. Every flat we saw there were embers and pockets of flame. We had not been detailed to fire fight and had no firefighting media with us so there was nothing we could do with regards to that. We were briefed to search but we knew we would have to be quick because of our air consumption. In order to make ourselves known we had to be as loud as possible but we had to be quick. I think we only spent a couple of minutes in each flat if that. All the doors were burnt through and every flat was burnt out. If I am honest the chances of finding anyone alive in that heat was slim.

When going in to the flats we had no floor plans to work from and it was largely guess work as to what room was what. You could tell some by the furniture, for example an arm chair would likely indicate a living area of some sort. The real world compared to the training world is very different. In a training world, the environment is controlled and safe with more time to think. In the real world you do not have that luxury and you have to focus on what you can see and what you can hear, without any structure, before having to move on. With internal walls being burnt and windows blown out it made for tricky situations and you were constantly weary of the open windows as a hazard. The temperature inside the flats was really hot. I do not know the exact temperature but it really was hot- another reason why we could not stay in for too long. When outside you could not see the extent of the fire inside. Despite everything going on, it felt eerily quiet inside. Perhaps that was down to the amount of kit we were wearing but I could only really hear crackling from burning. I could hear no alarms nor sprinklers.

I then heard someone shout to us to get out. I am not sure if it was via radio or someone simply shouting but we made our way out. Perhaps it was due to our air consumption being registered. I am not sure. We

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still had about 10 minutes of air supply left and no alarms had been raised on our sets. We had searched 3 or 4 flats by that point but had to make our way back to the lobby door. I tried to keep the door closed and contain the smoke as best I could before we made our way back down the stairs. I spoke to the officer again at the Entry Control board and debriefed him on what we had done and the flats we had searched. We then made our way out of the building.

I remember walking back underneath the underpass and seeing sheets of blue tarpaulin covering what appeared to be bodies. I did not check them but it was obvious what was underneath. We were escorted back to the holding area by police, where we change cylinders, carried out any admin with our kit and were ready to be re-committed if we needed to be. There was still a lot of debris falling and a lot of people had congregated outside by that point. The rate of debris falling was still about the same as it was when I went in to the building. It was apparent that the fire was still spreading and therefore it was frustrating to have to come out, thinking that there were people that were still inside. We took on water and recovered and awaited our re-committal along with about 50 other fire fighters, some of whom were EDDBA wearers. We were then not sure if we were to be re-committed. We were asked by an officer if we were ready and we said we were but we were not used. There seemed to be a little bit of miscommunication from officers as to whether we would go back in. Initially we were told we would be, then told that we would not be and we were aware that Blue Watch were coming to relieve us. Our initial burst of adrenaline had been replaced by a feeling of, 'What do we do now?' The sun had begun to rise and the building was still alight in many places. I was not aware of any issue with regards to gas in the building, nor had I heard that the fire lifts were used.

I never saw any deceased bodies but I was aware that there were some about. As previously mentioned, I was aware of the body under the tarpaulin and I had been made aware of another that had landed on a riot shield and the leg had come off. I met up with my original crew and we were told to drive to Paddington to write statements of the events and receive counselling. The traffic to Paddington was heavy but we made good progress, better than I had expected. Throughout the journey I played the night's events back in my mind, assessing whether or not things could have been done better. We were each given a questionnaire to complete and carried out a group session of counselling.

From a personal perspective I believe that every fire fighter who attended did their best in the

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circumstances as did the entire brigade. It was an ever changing environment and under very difficult circumstances

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