

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: SONSON, METHUSAEL

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

Occupation: FIRE OFFICER

This statement (consisting of 8 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: METHUSAEL SONSON

Date: 29/01/2018

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

This statement concerns the day I attended the Grenfell Tower fire as a firefighter on Wednesday 14th June 2017.

It has been compiled from an audio recorded interview conducted at Brixton Fire Station, 84 Gresham Road Brixton London SW9 7NP on Monday 18th December 2017 with PC HOSSAINY, PC OMADOYE and DC BEACH. Also present at the interview was a Fire Brigade Union representative John BLAKEMORE at my request.

I have been in the fire service for seven and a half years, I am a fully trained fire fighter working from Brixton Red Watch.

On Tuesday 13th June 2017 I came on duty at 8 O'clock for Red Watch at Brixton Fire Station, we took over from blue watch as it was our night duty. We mustered in the station office / watch room. The Watch Manager in charge was John Paul Stevens. We were assigned where to sit on the fire engine appliance H241 and what our roles were to be, who was to be on BA entry control, hydrant location and BA comms, which means you have a radio attached to the face mask of your BA set relaying messages to the control room. I was detailed to be on SDBA (Standard Duration Breathing Apparatus) and in the watch room. Firefighter Nick WHITING was detailed to drive the pump ladder. Also assigned to our appliance were Firefighter Kyleigh HOLMES-LEWIS and Firefighter Nick KALIRAI and myself. The other pump

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appliance, H242, had Crew Manager Marcus Johnson, firefighter Richard KNIGHT, firefighter Dean LAWRENCE, firefighter Michael WOOD and firefighter Joe DEAN I'm not sure who was driving.

I can't remember that particular day as it is 6 months since the fire, but our general routines are that when we come on duty we check our BA sets. The BA set consists of a cylinder of air you wear on your back like a backpack, it weighs about 15kg. We do a breathe down to make sure there's no air leaking and it's got enough air in the set at least over 270 BAR up to 310 BAR. If it hasn't got enough air we have to change the cylinder. Around 85 BAR the whistle would go off to warn that there is minimal air left. My set was fine.

As I was duty to be in the watch room your tasks are to log all the bookings, recording whose is riding which machine and who is in charge as well as the health and safety checks that have been completed. Included in this is testing the mobilising equipment, i.e checking that all of the station lights and bells work including the call phone outside just in case a member of public needs to report an emergency. The watch room book is like a legal document so you write down anything that happens so once the Witness Signature health and safety checks are complete you write it in the watch room book and check everyone has filled out their BA book, writing down the test they did and the bar pressure recorded. I checked they were all filled out and where they were riding.

We also check the inventory checking every single item of equipment on each truck physically or visually. Whoever is duty to ride the pump, we call it the pump because it's not got the 135 ladder on it, just a pumping appliance, whoever is duty to ride that one is tasked to check all the equipment on that truck, and check it is full of water, likewise for the pump ladder that has a 135 ladder. I think we had dinner after that around 9pm. I don't recall any shouts that night.

I probably had a rest after midnight. I went and put my head down in the watch room where there's a fold down bed but I don't think I really slept much and I was awake when the station alarms went off at around 2 o'clock in the morning. As I was the person in the watch room I was the first one to see the call slip printout which comes from the control room. It shows the incident number, location, the time the call was made to brigade control and what other appliances are also going. A big red button also comes up on a computer screen that says "acknowledge", so I pressed it acknowledging the call coming through and

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got the call slip copies, one for each watch appliance and one for the station. It said both appliances were required. The drivers came to the watch room and I gave them the call slips. There is a map on the wall and they planned their route. I then got in my fire gear, which consist of boots, leggings and a tunic. Everyone jumped on the fire engines.

What I remember is that when it came through as a make up for a 40 pump fire which means 40 appliances were required. It was a makeup which means there are already appliances at the scene and they have requested additional resources to assist.

I remember thinking that it might be a warehouse fire or something like that, as there was nothing on the call slip to say what it was other than Grenfell Tower. I had no prior knowledge of the Grenfell Tower. If it had said people trapped in tower block it would have engaged a different part of the brain but there was nothing to indicate that. I was surprised when we got there and what we saw. We were out of the doors in under a minute. We always respond fast and hastily whatever the incident.

On the appliance was myself, firefighter Nick WHITING driving, the officer in charge Watch Manager Stevens and firefighter Kylie HOLMES-LEWIS was sitting in the back with me, which I have marked on diagram MES/1. I can't remember if there was anybody sitting between us. At the back of the appliance, you have four ride positions and at the front you have two the driver and the officer in charge.

As we drove to the incident, I remember seeing other appliances going in the same direction, the roads were clear. I don't remember the route other than we went over Vauxhall Bridge, I'm not familiar with that area. As we arrived, I am not sure what time we arrived, we opened the windows to get a smell as it's the first sense you use to see if we have anything. There was a general smell of smoke and burning.

I could hear sirens from other appliances arriving and lots of panic from residents running around and people screaming. I remember parking behind the leisure centre in a narrow side road around BOWMORE ROAD . Which I have marked on map MES/2. When we walked towards the tower I could see it on fire with the leisure centre to my right.

About the top third had lots of yellow flame and was a horrifying sight. I was surprised at what I saw and

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my first thought was how do we get to the tower. I remember asking my Watch Manager STEPHENS “do you want us in sets?” meaning our breathing apparatus.” He replied “Yes”. We all donned our BA sets which you do by putting them on in your seats as they are part of the back of the seat, you put your arms in the straps and secure it round your waist, and we made our way to Grenfell Tower. We all walked fast together the watch manager said we should stay together as it was a large incident. I was asking members of the public the best and quickest way to get to the Grenfell Tower and was directed a narrow walkway. I then saw lots of other firefighters in the vicinity maybe 20 to 30 which I have marked on map MES/2.

There was another officer in charge, I don't know his name, who said “I want you to wait here first and then I will let you know what I want you to do” after a short time maybe 5 minutes we were directed towards the entrance of the Grenfell Tower. I remember as we were walking down towards the tower we were seeing debris and things falling and floating down. It looked like sheets of material possibly insulation. Some of it was alight. It varied in size nothing massive. I was looking in disbelief, it was the biggest fire I had been to in my career. It was quite a panicked atmosphere, members of the public walking around screaming looking up, shouting at us to help. It wasn't a calm controlled environment.

We waited maybe 5 minutes outside the leisure centre then firefighters started making their way to the entrance so as crew we started to make out way towards the tower. We walked down a sloped walkway there was a little bridge and we all queued up outside Grenfell Tower in a long orderly queue. There were over 40 firefighters all in BA sets to go into the tower, under the walkway. The queue went into the building and into a lobby. Initially when I joined the queue I couldn't see the lobby. We met up with the other crew from the pump in BA sets We were talking about how bad it was and we were watching the debris falling and the way the fire was moving and how quickly it was moving

While I was waiting outside I saw people waving from the windows with white towels and one person with their mobile phone waving it. I was watching the fire moving across and the lights going out where the fire was spreading. You don't normally see a fire jumping across floors and engulfing flats with people in them. I didn't see anyone jumping or falling.

Where we were there was a bridge and members of the public were shouting out “aren't you going to help them” which was a horrible feeling.

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We went into the lobby which led to a corridor with a toilet to the right and then another reception area leading to the stairs were which went up into the tower. There was a couple of lifts there. We all stayed together I was drinking water to get fluids on because we knew we would be working hard. There was a holding area with fire fighters waiting to be committed upstairs, we were there for maybe 30 minutes. On a scale of 1-10 the smoke here was initially 0.

I saw unresponsive people being carried out both adults and children, whether they were deceased I'm not sure but they were definitely unresponsive. Every time a casualty was coming down the stairs, as there was a long queue of firefighters, someone shouted out "casualty" and everyone would split to make room for the casualties to be carried out.

As we were waiting my Watch Manager STEPHENS was helping other officers outside the building, I'm not sure what he was tasked with but I remember him come running in, some falling debris fallen inside his tunic and burnt his neck area, he flapped about a bit and asked for some water for his neck. Someone poured a bottle of water down his neck. I didn't see the guvnor after this for a bit.

After we were waiting there for a while there was some smoke coming down the stairs into our waiting area and we were told that the BA holding area for the firefighters would have to move outside. The smoke out of 10 was a 1. We didn't have our masks on they just got a whiff of smoke and they moved us. The bridgehead, which is the hub of operations where the commit firefighters into a fire, that's where you would have the entry control board. They moved the bridgehead to the 4th floor as the bridgehead can only be in a safe atmosphere it can't be involved in the fire.

We were moved out of the building in twos and threes under riot shields. Because of the debris falling from the building. We were moved to a park. Looking at the tower the park where we were was on the left and the walkway was straight ahead and the bridge was on the right. Underneath the bridge was a holding area for casualties. Firefighters with first aid kits were helping casualties with their injuries. So we waited there looking up at the building waiting to be committed. We were watching casualties it was a horrible feeling being there but not being able to do anything. I was watching people waving out of the window and the fire was moving so fast across the floors, the lights in their flat would go out, people

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waving towels and things out their window.

It was quite some time until we were asked to go in. Before we went in other firefighters were being committed, the officer in charge were asking for EBDA (Extended Duration Breathing Apparatus.) which means they have more air like a specialist BA team. We were just standard duration BA, the EBDA can penetrate the building further and work for longer.

When we were being committed it was just called out "I need four standard duration BA." I stepped forward, fire fighter WOOD, firefighter LAWRENCE and another guy who I didn't know Jim CUTHBERT. The officer in charge watch manager Paul MEYRICK, who I know as she used to be at Lambeth. When I was a was standing at the front of where the Firefighter were being held. The officer that briefed us to go in, another officer, said "I need four fit guys." I remember saying "yeh we're ready" I remember him saying be careful in there and stay with each other and things like that.

With the entry control board you have an entry control officer who controls and monitors the board, a communications officer and a crew manager or officer in charge who is directing and briefing the crews that are going into the fire. They have other equipment there at the bridgehead as well like a first aid kit etc. On your BA set you have a tally which you plug into the entry control board which tells you how much air the person has, the time his air will run out and depending on how hard they are working and how much air they have and their time to whistle, the amount of time they have until their whistle goes off if they don't have enough air left.

The conditions outside the building had deteriorated so much that to get in the police were holding riot shields to get into the building. We had to go in one by one under the riot shields. When we got in the building we were waiting in a little queue to go upstairs. When we got to the bridgehead, we were briefed to go to the 5th floor and search and rescue. We put on our BA masks and flash hoods. Normally when you are committed to a fire say a compartment fire in a normal house you would have a hose line with water and fire fight media, but there wasn't any hose so he said be very careful, search and rescue do what you can. So myself, firefighter CUTHBERT, firefighter wood and firefighter LAWRENCE made our way up the stairs. As we were on our way up I saw some casualties coming down with other firefighters. A couple of firefighters were struggling with a casualty. I think they were exhausted so

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firefighter WOOD and Lawrence went down with the casualty and met us afterwards as we were searching the floors. Firefighter CUTHBERT and myself made our way to the 5th floor. The smoke here on a scale of 1 to 10 was about 3 or 4.

Our normal searching patterns are either directional or compartmentation , so we either be on the left hand wall or the right hand wall making our way round on that particular wall. The brief didn't specify a particular wall so we made our way through the flats as quick as we could. I remember searching with Firefighter CUTHBERT but I can't remember flat numbers. We were calling out "fire brigade is any one there", searching behind doors, cupboards.

In the initial flats the conditions weren't that bad. I could feel radiated heat coming down from the ceiling, it was quite hot. Then you would go into another flat and the conditions would be fine you wouldn't feel any heat.

I recall going round to the right and seeing blue flame coming down from the ceiling and quite a lot of flame in other areas. The lobby and quite a lot of the flats were smoke filled. We were using our torches and our senses - sight and touch to clear the rooms as far as we could.

We were joined by firefighter WOOD and LAWRENCE. Firefighter WOOD and I searched the 5th and some of the 6th floor together and then firefighter WOOD ran out of air. Firefighter WOOD and firefighter LAWRENCE exited and firefighter CUTHBERT and continued to search together.

I remember going round to one flat and the whole wall had gone and the room was alight, it was very unpredictable. I can't remember if we had a thermal image camera with us which indicates how hot the things are, hot spots, can take pictures and readings. I don't remember having it so I think Jim might have had it.

We searched all the flats on the 5th floor and didn't find anyone and carried out firefighting activity. We then went up to the 6th floor The stairs were running with water from the floors above and were covered in hoses. You also had firefighters coming down the stairs with casualties you had to move for them to get past. There was a bit of smoke and it got smokier as we went up. We had no firefighting media just

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our torches

We then got a radio message from entry control. The fire brigade has a thing called "fire survival guidance" if a person is involved in a fire and calls the fire brigade control, a member of control stays with them and contacts control on the incident ground who relays to the officer in charge exactly what flat this person is in and where they are. The message we received said that there was a member of public on the 8th floor in the 84th flat. So we started to make our way up to that particular flat. There was quite a lot of water on the stairs and quite a bit of smoke I remember getting to the 8th floor or what we thought was the 8th floor, someone had written the number 8 on the wall, but that was the wrong floor because somewhere we saw the flat numbers and the 84th flat would have been a good few floors above that. We continued to make our way having tried to radio control, but our radios weren't working as we had no signal. It was quite daunting as we had no contact with entry control or anyone and no firefighting media and we were literally running through the building trying to search for people.

We got to about I believe the 10th or between the 9th and 10th floors on the way up to find these people on the fire survival guidance call. However, we found an obese person apparently collapsed face down at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Her legs were on the bottom couple of steps on the mezzanine where the stairs go down and her head was on the mezzanine. We shouted out to her and tried to pick her up, one of us on each arm, but she was too heavy I remember we sort of turned or rolled her on one side and I then saw blood and stuff on her face where it looked like she had fallen down the stairs and hit her face on the floor. We tried to revive her by shaking and I tried to find a pulse but there was none. We tried to carry the person but they were way too heavy to carry. We tried to radio the entry control but at that time we had no signal to tell them we had found this person. In my opinion, having dealt with a few dead bodies, she was apparently dead.

My dynamic decision making re this female was that we were using air and if we tried any longer we might not have had enough air to go to the other casualties. Also the incident had been going for several hours and it wasn't like she was on one of the higher floors like say the 20th where she might not have already been found and reported. Loads of Firefighters had seen her, I spoke to firefighter CUTHBERT and we both agreed there was no way we were moving her. There is no firefighter policy re a situation like this it was a dynamic risk assessment of what we had in front of us in this ever- changing

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environment. We were with the lady on the stairs for about 2 minutes.

We decided to push on and try and get to the casualties that they had radioed us about initially. We continued up the stairs, firefighter Cuthbert was in front of me, we got to a lobby area, I think it was on the 11th floor, which was smoke filled and there was some flame punching out sporadically above us.

We heard screaming. We found two females in the lobby area of that floor trying to make their way through the smoke. I think they were shouting for help. We took one of them each and tried to reassure them saying things like "we are going to get you out." I said to the lady I was with "Hold me tight we are going to get you out of here, you need to hold on tight to us, stay calm and we are going to get you out." I was leading us out as quickly as possible with the lady on my arm and holding her as well. She was coughing a lot as the smoke was quite thick up there. On the way down her steps became slower, I tried to keep her going, and calm, but her feet started to drag on the stairs and then her legs gave way, I'm not sure what floor it was or whether it was from the smoke inhalation or what she had been through, but she collapsed on me and I had to carry her down the rest of the stairs. We got to the second floor near to the exit, the smoke had cleared and a firefighter was there to help me carry her the rest of the way. We closed down our sets and took our masks off the officer in charge said "well done" and we briefed him where we had been and where we had cleared search wise. We couldn't give flat numbers because there was so much smoke and things like that. We closed down our sets, turning the air off and taking our masks off purging the set of air of the last bit of air pressure. I took my tally out of the BA entry control board and plugged it back into my set your set which puts it in standby model didn't see firefighter CUTHBERT again.

I went out of the Grenfell Tower turned to the left where there was an area near a leisure centre. There were many firefighters there. I had some water and a sit down by myself, I rested for maybe 20 minutes half an hour by myself taking back on fluid. I was thirsty and happy to be out of there because I had thought I wasn't coming out alive. Looking up at the flames and the unpredictability in the building made you feel you would not come out. It heightened all your senses, I was however working and just doing my job. I didn't know what time it was but there was now daylight. There was an area on the grass near the leisure centre where there were full BA cylinders. So I went and changed my cylinder and did a fire ground aid check the same check I would do at the change of shift. I felt fit and well enough to go back

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into the tower again. After about 20 mins and taking on fluids I went back round to the holding area where firefighters were waiting to go into the building to be committed and I saw a couple of members of my crew I'd been split up from who I had been detailed to ride with initially and we sat and waited for 2 to 3 hours. The officer in charge of that area was asking for firefighters who hadn't been in yet, obviously it is better to have fresh people in there.

I was waiting with firefighter Kylie HOLMES - LEWIS, Joe DEAN and one other firefighter. There was like a queue system and we were waiting at the bottom of the stairs on the ground floor, Smoke in the lobby the second time was still a 0 but there was a lot of water like a waterfall. We waited there for about 40 minutes. They asked for four more people to go in and we went up to the entry control point where we waited to be committed for another half hour or so. They then said they needed a couple of us and Kylie and myself stepped forward and we were briefed to go to the 8th floor to liaise with the team that were already there and search on from there. The conditions were better than when I had been in earlier but the building was still alight. We donned out BA sets so we were under air with our masks on. On our way up we found bits of equipment that had been left on the stairs including an enforcer used to break down doors. The stairs were covered in water and a lot of hose. The 6th floor had smoke to a density of about 5 to 6 on a scale of 10.

We saw the deceased lady again between the when we were trying to get the hose down but I think she had been moved closer to the wall as before she had been blocking the stairs although we still had to walk over her.

We met the crew already up there and then started to break our way into flats We both used the enforcer to gain entry to three flats. We didn't open any windows. We continued communicating and searching flats much like the first time I had gone in. I think we had a thermal imaging camera. As part of the fixed installations they had a dry riser and an outlet to plug into on every other floor on the 8th there was no dry riser. We looked for a hose to put out fire and found one on the floor above which we tested to make sure it was working. We managed to work it down the stairs and started to fire fight in flats on the 8th floor. At first the pressure wasn't good but then the pressure built up.

We were aware that there were firefighters in the flats above and below us, so we put out the fire and

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searched at the same time. There was some smoke on the 8th floor but I just remember flame from different areas and different flats. There was one flat that had been burnt to a crisp and you couldn't see any furniture just rubble, flames were still punching out in there and in the lobby area. I also saw a front door that was alight. Initially I used the hose and then we swapped. We would point out to each other things that were alight. We searched and cleared the 8th floor finding flame in three flats. We were on this floor for approximately 25 minutes.

I used my air quicker than firefighter HOLMES-LEWIS so it became time for us to exit. You can read on your BA set something called a body guard and it tells you how much air you have left. We went back to entry control and told the officer in charge what we had done and where we had searched as well as the areas where there was flame. I then exited the building.

I went and put my set down. I was feeling quite tired after the two BA wears as I was working quite hard both times. We made our way back to the leisure centre and I saw a dead body lying there that had been covered up. I think the wind had blown the sheet off and I could see the body only had one leg. I would say it was about a minute walk from the entrance of the Grenfell Tower. I was speaking to someone and Kylie said "look at that". I only saw a glimpse she told me what she saw. There was no one with the body.

Halfway up on the West side of the building it was on fire diagonally to the left side for about 10 floors to the top (Exhibit MES/3 graphic of West Elevation). On the South side there was a lot debris falling. When I arrived at the East side for a rest it was on fire but it wasn't as bad as the West. I didn't notice any wind, it was raining and drizzling. Kylie and I went and dropped our BA sets and went to the grass verge near the leisure centre. My watch manager Stevens said we would be leaving soon; we must have been there for 45 minutes. I didn't know the time but it was daylight outside and I had been working all night. I went to Salvation Army van to get some food and drink with firefighter Holmes-Lewis and we met up with the rest of our crew. It must have been early afternoon by this time and then we were told we could leave. Virgin gave us dry t-shirts to wear. We went to Paddington Fire station and gave our initial account and made notes which I exhibit as MES/4. I have referred to these notes during the interview to refresh my memory.

We then drove back to Brixton around 4pm. We went out for a meal and had a rest for a bit before our

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next shift which started at 8pm that evening.

I would describe the females we rescued as follows: - One of the females had a veil on. Both were quite young but not teenagers the other one had a towel on her head.

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