

WITNESS STATEMENT

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

Statement of: MITCHELL, RICHARD

Age if under 18: Over 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: RICHARD MITCHELL

Date: 18/01/2018

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

This statement relates to my attendance at the Grenfell Tower Fire on 14th June 2017

This statement is a summary of a recorded interview on 27th November 2017 which took place at Paddington Fire Station. On this day I was interviewed by DC Judith Kaye and DC Paul Phillips from the Grenfell Tower Fire investigation team. I am a fireman currently posted at Soho Fire Station, and I attended the Grenfell Tower fire on 14th June 2017. I have never been to Grenfell Tower before although I have done Section 7(2)d visits to other similar high rise blocks. I also regularly complete high rise fire drills and refresh myself with policy updates. During the interview I referred to my contemporaneous notes. I made these notes on 14 June 2017 at Paddington Fire Station. I exhibit these notes as RPM/1. I have also signed a consent form agreeing for my statement to be shared with the London Fire Brigade investigation, the public enquiry into Grenfell Tower and with the Fire Brigades Union.

In this statement I will initially discuss my working history within the fire Service. I will also mention Fire fighter Oliver Desforges, from Soho red watch, whom I worked with at the Grenfell Tower fire.

I have been a Fire Fighter for 14 years. I joined the London Fire Brigade in 2003 and was based at Shoreditch Fire Station until 2015 when I moved to Soho Fire Station.

On Tuesday 13th June 2017 I came on duty at 2000hrs. We conducted a role call and I then did a

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by:

Breathing Apparatus (BA) and operational checks. After the checks I looked at the diary. Fire Fighter Oliver Desforbes and I then went to the gym and did a heavy workout. We then took some calls and eventually got into our beds.

At around 0130hrs we got the call, via the mobilising system, to attend the Grenfell Tower fire. I was in bed and when I came down the Turntable Ladder had already gone out. The screens on our appliance were not working so we had to call control in order to let them know we were attending. We were called on to make pumps 25. The call sign of the appliance I was riding was A242 and the crew were Crew Manager Andy Pearcy, driver Theresa Orchard, Fire fighter Terry Roots was behind her and I was sat behind Andy Pearcy.

We left shortly after the call. Terry Roots and I were in the back and listening to the radio for the fire survival guidance calls. We then got note pads out to take notes but there were too many calls So we couldn't keep track. All I remember hearing were flat numbers. I made notes but have been unable to find them since. Due to the amount of FSG calls we knew this was a serious incident. There were so many that we eventually had to stop writing them down.

We then made our way towards Grenfell tower and came in the back way. Due to sitting in the rear of the appliance I was not aware of the route we took. At the time I was just concerned about the equipment I would be using as I knew I would be wearing BA (Breathing Apparatus). We parked on the right hand side of the building although I am not sure exactly where. I think we followed pump ladder A241 which I think was driven by Fire Fighter Adam Johnson. We got to the scene around 0145hrs

As we got to the scene I thought how was this happening that a building could be burning on the outside. We sometimes get fire gas explosions when we attend a fire but nothing like this. As I looked at the tower there were lights on inside the building and fire spread up one side of the building.

We normally expect to see fire but compartments usually hold. We have no procedures for buildings burning on the outside. Usually building regulations make that impossible. I had previously been to a seven (7) floor fire at the Barbican where all the building was alight but this was something else.

As we parked up I put on BA and took some hose, branches and arms full of breaking in gear. I also shouted that we needed second set bags as people would need to breathe in order to escape the fire. I also

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by:

got the Thermal Imaging Camera (TIC) ready. I had the TIC in my first wear but didn't use it. There were members of the public on the street offering to help carry equipment to the fire ground.

The initial scene was very chaotic. Usually when you attend a fire as pump 25 there feels like there are more officers than fire fighters. Everything is locked down and generally you are firmly directed to do everything that is going to happen. To go to a 25 pump fire that is chaotic is unheard of where literally past entry control you are on your own. I heard at one point an officer, whose name im not sure of, state that we were so far out of policy that all we can do is trust the fire fighters are going to keep themselves safe. He hoped the fire fighters were ok. I thought there would be a high death toll.

Crew Manager Andy Percy told me to go to the Bridgehead and he would take the Nominal Role board. We then made our way towards the tower and the Bridgehead. We then entered the tower through the main front entrance. I then made my way to the mezzanine floor. Whilst waiting on the Mezzanine Floor I shouted down to the fire fighters on the ground floor that we would need secondary BA sets bags to assist people escaping the building. Secondary BA is carried on specialist appliances Terry ROOTS and I then made our way towards the Bridgehead. There were lots of fire fighters there.

At the bridgehead is an entry control officer and you are not allowed past him/her unless you have booked in. In order to do this you take your tally out of your body guard . The tally then goes off if you're not moving.

There is a radio signal between you and their board. They then check your set and they give you a time of whistle - your time to leave. This process is usually well managed on smaller jobs. Upon speaking to the entry control Officer I could see the situation was chaotic and beyond the point of being manageable. I could see two entry control boards and there were several people there. I had no idea who was in charge. The entry control officer was female. There were a large number of Fire Fighters were trying to get in. The entry control officer then stated she wanted a four man crew.

It just so happened that were four (4) of us Soho fire Fighters who were together at that time and we volunteered as a four (4) man crew. They were myself, fire fighter Terry ROOTS, fire fighter Adam JOHNSON and fire fighter Desforges. Although we all quickly decided that it was easier to work in pairs rather than as a four. It's a lot harder to keep track of four people. You are a lot more dynamic as a pair. I was paired with Oliver Desforges. We were asked to go to a flat on the 3rd floor and perform Fire Search

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by:

and Rescue. This location came from a Fire Survival Guidance Call. I cannot remember the flat number.

There was light smoke going up the stairs and on the third floor. The stairs were very narrow. The landing on the third floor was 'H' shaped with a lift shaft in front of you as you entered the landing area. There were maybe 4 or 6 flats on the floor. As I came out of the stairwell we went right and it was the flat on the left.

When we got to the flat there was a mobility scooter outside and a ramp. I knocked on the door and when it opened the flat was full of thick smoke. The family inside were very panicked. There was a male, female in a wheelchair and three children. I can't recall them that well. I think they were white English speaking. The flat was a lot smokier than in the hallway and the kids were panicking. We decided to take our masks off so we looked less intimidating and the lady said to take the children. We did so and the husband also came with us. The children were not older than 8-9. I told them to get low and also showed them my BA mask and stated there was air in there. No one was using the lift. Usually at high rise fires someone is delegated to commandeer the lift and take gear up and down the building. No one mentioned the lift to us.

We then gave the kids to other fire fighters not in breathing apparatus (BA) and went back to get mum. I picked her up out of her wheel chair. I then put an arm under her shoulder and, along with Oliver Desforges, carried her down the stairs. She was a strong lady. We then brought her down to the entry control point and then gave her to someone in breathing apparatus (BA).

Oliver Desforges and I then went back to the Bridgehead and we were told to go to floor 24.

Despite having already worn BA Oliver Desforges and I thought we would be able to get there. We then set off climbing the stairs again. We decided to take our BA masks off in order to conserve oxygen. I eventually put it back on when the smoke in the stairwell was getting thicker and I started to cough. The stairwell was very busy with a lot of people coming down in every conceivable condition. There were fire fighters with their masks on other people. Children wearing BA and other people self evacuating. People exiting the building have priority so we had to stop and let them past. This made it slow going up the stairs.

We were in Standard Duration Breathing Apparatus (SDBA) and after looking at the pressure valve were wondering if we were going to make it. After a few more stairs we both made a decision that we were not

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by:

going to make it to the 24th floor. This was around the 13th or 14th floor but it could have been anywhere between 10 or 15. I was on channel six (6) on the radio with is the BA channel. The radio traffic was very heavy so I could not update control on the decision to stop proceeding to the 24th floor. I then turned off my radio as I could not concentrate. I thought that if entry control wanted to get hold of us then they could just press the evacuate crew button on the entry control board.

As we were now between floors 10 and 15 Oliver Desforges and I decided to have a look at one of the floors to see if there was anything that could be done. Oliver Desforges then felt the door from the stairs to the landing and it was red hot. Unfortunately we had no hose with us. Oliver Desforges then opened the door and hot black smoke poured out. It was so hot it melted Oliver Desforges helmet. Oliver Desforges then asked if we should have a search around. I knew it was risky as we didn't have any hose. I thought it was best that I stay in the doorway so I knew how we could get out.

Fire fighter Desforges then laid down on his stomach and started to go to his Left and had a feel around in the hallway. I kept a hand on Oliver and then felt to the left of the hallway. I was mindful to keep the door propped open. I was also aware that by keeping the door open I was filling up the stairwell with smoke. Ollie then found something and passed it to me. It felt small. I then wiped my mask and saw it was a cat. I thought it was still alive. I then passed it to another fire fighter who was coming up the stairs. He looked at me disgusted that I had handed him an animal.

I thought that if we had found a cat alive then there may be other people alive. Ollie then went back in and I stayed close to him. Ollie then found a white female and passed her to me. I had a look at her and she was unconscious and not breathing. I then gave the woman to another crew on the stairs.

Ollie then went back to the left and found someone else. A black male adult of large build. He was also unconscious and not breathing. I cannot offer any further information about their descriptions.

Ollie then started to leave with the male casualty but I decided to have another look. I thought that if we had found a man and a woman then there may be children there. I went back in and the door from the stairs to the hallway started to close. I completed a left hand wall search up to the middle point opposite the door. I then became very aware that I was on my own, it was too hot, I had no hose and it was pitch black with smoke. The smoke was incredibly thick despite remaining low on my stomach. There was no way I was able to stand. I could hear Ollie struggling with the male casualty so I decided to leave the search and assist Ollie bringing the man down the stairs. I came out of the hallway and grabbed an arm and two other Fire fighters grabbed a leg each. It was difficult taking the male down the stairs as I was having to bend over and support his weight. There was also a lot of hose on the stairwell which made it

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by:

difficult to progress down the stairs. We then got to the bridgehead and another crew in front of us took the casualty. The casualty was then taken to the waiting LAS. I do not know if the male or female survived.

I then informed the Bridgehead that we didn't make it to the 24th floor. Someone may have written it on a wall. I believe the Bridgehead may have moved from its original position of the Mezzanine.

After that I felt exhausted. I then went outside. I could see there were bits of the building falling and a lot of leaking hose. The hose was like spaghetti. I would have shut some of it off but did not know which bit of hose was connected to what. I then met up with Oliver Desforges and we then sat down and decided to do an 'A' test which means to change air cylinders. We also did a leak test and cleaned our masks.

I then had an hours break and during this spoke with other fire fighters and we agreed there would be a high casualty rate.

I also noticed there were people on blankets being treated by the LAS in various states. After our 'A' test we then headed back towards the building. It was still dark. An unknown station manager then asked for someone who had already worn BA. Oliver Desforges and I then volunteered ourselves for the impending task. We then walked towards the building and in order to get in we were escorted by Metropolitan Police Territorial Support Group (TSG) who used riot shields to get us to the BA area as there was a lot of falling debris. We entered through the side of the building that was a lot less burnt. The bridgehead was now on the ground floor. We went to the BA area and despite being covered in soot we made it to the front of the queue. I then spoke with Group Manager Pat Goldbourne who said go to the 4th floor, get a working jet, then go to the 5th floor and break in doors and fight fire. A jet is 45m1 hose with a branch on the end of it. A branch being an on/off system to dispense water. This was to make sure there was no one left there who could be rescued. At that point the fire fighting operation seemed a lot less chaotic.

Oliver Desforges and I then made our way to the 4th floor. There was a large amount of hose all over the stairs. There were no lights in the stairwell at that point. We then found the hose but it didn't work. There was no water pressure. We then went to the 5th floor. Despite the jet from the 4th floor not working we took it with us. It was not connected to the riser. We got to the 5th floor and another crew had a hose which was also useless. That crew then left the 5th floor. On the 5th floor we entered the landing from the stairs and then went immediately right. We then put in every door moving anti clockwise. Some of the flats on the right hand side were totally burnt out. I could see Soho's Turntable Ladder through the

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by:

building which would be the front of the building. There was no wall or windows in some of them. Once in the flats we checked under beds and cupboards and shouted if anyone was there. I had no idea how structurally sound the floor was in some of the flats which did worry me. There were no grills on the doors. Some of the doors broke easily so we made holes in them and opened the doors from the inside. Some of the doors would have been open. I don't think they were self closing. I didn't hear a single fire alarm. Some of the windows in the flats were non existent. We then went to the 6th floor and did the same thing there.

We then got low on air so decided to come out. I then informed entry control what we had done and the fact the jets weren't working.

I then went outside, dropped my set and had a drink of water. I was exhausted. I then Walked to the pump ladder and spoke with some of my colleagues. No one knew where Theresa Orchard was. I was then informed she was pumping to the Turntable Ladder (TL) with water. It was now getting light. There was a male in the window of the tower and the water was being focused on him. Someone had tied a 6ft ceiling hook to extend the reach of the hose reel from the Turntable Ladder (TL). There should have been a monitor on the Turntable Ladder (TL) although we didn't have enough water pressure to use a larger diameter hose. He was eventually rescued but I have no idea why it took so long to get him. I did some pumping on the pump ladder watching dials. It was clear that the water was over running supply. I had to put more diesel into the pump ladder and had to use water bottles to funnel diesel into pump. Which was not ideal.

The Turntable Ladder (TL) was parked on the grass. There was a lot of debris falling on it but it was not too bad. I then stood there watching dials on the Turntable Ladder for several hours. It becomes clear that it would be more difficult to save people as it went further on. The amount of Fire fighters coming out of the building slowed down. On my first wear there were loads of people coming out.

At around 11am our Turntable Ladder was then relieved by the counties one. Soho Red Watch then went back to Paddington to write notes. After that I went back to Soho fire station and booked off at around 4pm. I received no injury during the incident but certainly strained a muscle or two.

I am aware of the "Stay Put" policy but the building was badly designed. I have been to other high rise

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by:

buildings since the fire to fit smoke alarms or offer advice. People have asked me since should I “stay put” if there is a fire in my high rise block. I have said yes as it’s a good policy. The policy was let down by the building. The policy may have changed on the fire ground but I am unaware if I knew that at the time. I thought that people needed BA in order to escape. I also believe that if I had had an Extended Duration Breathing Apparatus (EDBA) set then I would have made it to the 24th floor. I feel we need more EDBA sets post Grenfell Tower fire.

Another problem was the water pressure. There was a lack of it. I didn’t have working water the whole time I was in there. There was talk of speaking to Thames Water to try and get the water pressure increased but I do not know if this happened.

The access to the building was terrible. The fire engines couldn’t get close enough to the building which only allowed partial access.

I also feel the hose roll we use should be changed to Cleveland Roll as it is much better than Dutch roll. The London Fire Brigade also need a change in policy about taking your BA mask off and giving people air. Dozens of fire fighters were doing that

Signature: Richard MITCHELL
2018

Signature witnessed by: