

Tuesday 24th April 1973

Dallas Road Bedford

It was 1245 on a normal routine day; I was due to go on duty at Dunstable Fire Station at 1800 that evening for the nightshift which would finish at 0900 on Wednesday 25th April. At about 1250 I made my way down to the Mulberry Bush public house for a glass of beer, my plan was to return home for lunch then rest before going on duty that evening. Although I was now stationed at Dunstable I was still on call for the Bedford area and would report to Kempston if and when required.

I never did return home for lunch that day, I ordered my glass of beer and carried it to the table, sat down and raised the glass to my lips; I did not want to spill my half pint of best bitter. My radio alerter sounded and that was 1304, I made a hasty exit and jogged to the fire station which was just 3 minutes away. "It's a make up Mick; where?" "Dallas Road Kempston" We were soon away and within a few minutes arrived at the Cornelius Company, straight away we could see this was a serious fire. It was a single story building 110ft. X 150ft. The fire appeared to be towards the rear of the building, but thick acrid smoke was issuing from part of the roof and several exit doors and high windows around the building. In the initial stages of the fire there was a shortage of men and machines, but they were on their way. Nowadays more sets of breathing apparatus are carried on machines but in 1973 there were only 2 or 3 sets to each pump. I did not get a set to use so was more exposed to toxic fumes, however we managed to find a good supply of water on the Bedford Road.

After some initial hose running I was ordered to man a branch and position myself in a doorway to hit any fire visible, there was very little to see as the whole area was completely smoke logged. I held this position for about an hour before taking a break outside the doorway to get some fresh air, my face and ears were smarting and I felt dizzy. "Hey Mick are you alright?" "Yes" "No you are not, stay there do not go back inside." I then heard another voice say. "Get him off to hospital; there is an ambulance in attendance." I remember trying to climb a grassy bank but slipped or had another dizzy spell; I was soon in the ambulance and ended up in the casualty department I had left less than two years previous.

To my surprise other firemen had already arrived at the hospital suffering from the same problems that I was experiencing. I was examined very quickly; I was suffering from occasional dizzy spells, sore eyes, coughing, and very sore face and stinging ears. A kind nurse placed some cold swabs on my ears and face, this action made me feel much more comfortable. I had the usual tests which included x ray, blood tests, and blood pressure. I also answered a lot of questions. I was given oxygen and told I would be admitted for observations and further tests. The fire service would inform my wife. A little later I was admitted to Elizabeth Block which was the men's medical ward for heart and chest complaints, I was placed in an oxygen tent and reassured that it would not be for long. I was in the care of Doctor Riding a consultant physician; two other firemen had already been admitted to the ward. Fm. Fred Fox and Fm. Dave Cox. Sometime later, and to my relief, the Oxygen tent was removed and I was given a mask to supply my requirements.

I must have fallen asleep for an hour or so when I awoke the acting chief fire officer Mr. R.S. Drought was walking up the ward, he was still in his fire boots. "You are doing all right lad, your wife knows all about it, she is coming up to see you." "Thank you sir," to my surprise he then sat on the end of my bed. "Well lad tell me what happened to you?" I explained all my actions on the fire ground as best I could remember under the circumstances, after reassuring me again he moved on to see the other firemen that had been detained on the ward to get their story. Josie my wife visited me soon after, she mentioned Mr. Drought had visited her when he informed her that I was in hospital, she replied, "Oh I thought he may be involved, I have been listening in to the radio messages," Our wives very often did in those early days.

Late in the afternoon Dr. Riding visited me on his rounds, by this time I had been given a thorough examination by the house officer and another doctor, he read my notes and listened to my chest. "Tell me, I do not understand why you chaps go into such dangerous places when there are no persons involved"? "Well doctor that's my job," he made no further comment. But I thought at the time, I wonder what he might say if the building was his house on fire. However he was a nice chap, factual, easy to understand and thorough. I was to meet him again several times during the next 25 years. I was to be detained in hospital for the next four days.

The Cornelius Company built refrigerated units for the coca cola company, and in the main it was the insulation used in these units that caused our problems. Asbestos, plastics, expanded polystyrene and other materials, which when on fire gave off some very toxic fumes.

On Thursday the 26th of April sometime in the evening I was handed a copy of the Bedfordshire Journal, there was an interesting report of the fire. It was pleasing to note The Deputy Chief Officer had made a statement, it read: "*No praise is too high for the men who fought the blaze, they worked extremely well in very difficult conditions and I am very proud of them,*" He added, "*The main difficulty was not the fire itself, but the intense heat and thick black smoke which hampered the men's efforts. Some of the men overcome had gone into the building using breathing apparatus to try to extinguish the fire inside. Other men overcome by the smoke were outside the building.*" A spokesman for the Cornelius Company explained, "*The smoke damage in the factory is colossal and at a rough estimate I would say we have lost at least fifty per cent of our stock, the overall cost will be terrific, possibly hundreds of thousands of pounds by the time we have fully assessed our losses.*"

It was some years later when Doctor Riding visited Kempston fire station, he was making a study of firemen and their working practices. We were to perform some realistic drills for him to observe and he would give us a quick medical examination afterwards. Our drills were as real as possible in fire heat and smoke with breathing apparatus, then without a break we went straight on to ladder drills and combination drills. He had remembered the time he treated the firemen in hospital. After we had been examined one fireman asked, "What were your findings"? "Well, I can tell, you have all been working extremely hard!"