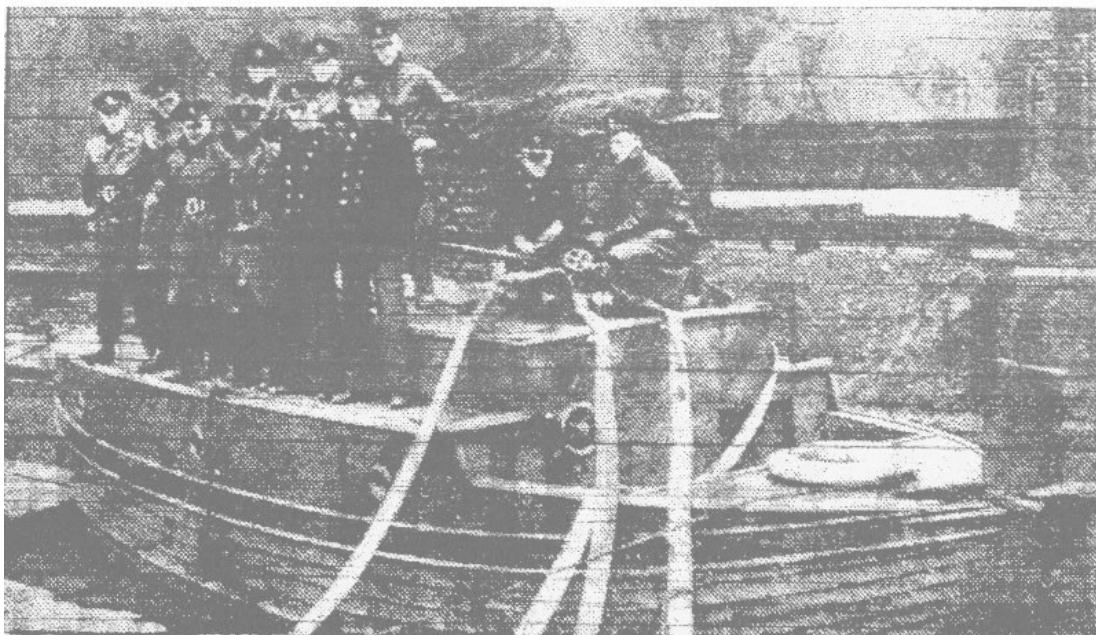


ALL ABOARD AND READY FOR ANY EMERGENCY



An up-to-date fire-boat attached to Sheffield N.F.S. The boat can pump 1,000 gallons a minute

Fire Fighting Heroes of the Blitz

By T. H. CRAMB, "STAR" REPORTER

There are several details of the Sheffield blitz, December 1940 which have never come to light. Some never will, but one service which had many heroes during the rain of fire and destruction on the city was the Fire Service.

Some of the work which the Auxiliary Fire Service - as it was then known - performed that night can now be told.

Heroism, devotion to duty, service under difficulties, undaunted spirits, and hard work all rolled into one aptly describes those firemen's night way back in 1940.

They were called and not found wanting. They answered the call of the sirens, they stood their ground, and they did their best.

Appliances got stuck in bomb craters. In some cases the crews managed to get them out; others had to be left as they were damaged.

One pump received a direct hit as it was working and three of the crew were killed and another injured, while another pump was wrecked by the blast of a nearby bomb.

Five Men Killed

During the night five members of the Service were killed and 56 injured, 12 of them seriously - a very small number considering the total number of personnel actively engaged during the raid.

Information had been received earlier in the evening that Sheffield was likely to receive a strong visit from the Luftwaffe that night, with the result that as much preparedness as possible was made.

Machines, equipment and men stood at the ready -

Those personnel consisted of approximately 860 full-time members of the A.F.S. and pre-war firemen, and they had over 200 appliances.

When the alert sounded between 900 and 1,000 volunteer or part-time members of the A.F.S. answered the call, and reported to the 27 stations in operation.

Call for Help

Within a very short time all were engaged on fires raised by the enemy in all parts of the city, and a district call was sent out for additional help.

That help first came from Rotherham, Barnsley, Doncaster, Mexborough, Wortley, Kiveton Park, Cudworth, Thorne, Wath, Hoyland and Wombwell, but as the raid developed a regional call brought assistance from Chesterfield, Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, Manchester, Nottingham, Lincoln, Sleaford, Birmingham and Grantham.

Owing to the system then in force, all the outside brigades had to report to the Headquarters in Division Street, Sheffield, and it speaks well for the authorities when it is said that all reported safely, and were immediately dispatched to fire zones without loss, or incident.

The first calls were to Hounsfeld Road and to the Neepsend district.

Within a short space, however, no fewer than 550 calls were received by telephone at the control room in Division Street.

Many other despatches were sent by messenger, with the result that as fast as reinforcements arrived there was a task waiting for them.

Much of the smartness of the outside brigades in arriving at their allotted fire zones was due to about 20 members of the Sheffield Transport Department.

Tram drivers, bus drivers, and conductors unable to do anything with their own vehicles, offered themselves as guides to outside brigades and directed them to the incidents. Those few can be classed among the unsung heroes of the night.

Thousands of fires were breaking out in various parts of the city, and many an engine and pump crew dealt with several outbreaks other than the one they were sent to.

Half an hour after sounding the alert the A.F.S. met their first big set-back. Water ceased to be obtainable from the mains, and quick thinking had to be done to keep most of the machines supplied.

Water from the Don

Public baths and the few emergency tanks in being were tapped and the water relayed. Water was also relayed some distance from the river Don.

Many fires were kept in check by water which had accumulated in bomb craters adjoining burst mains, and many lines were kept operating by the fire float on the canal.

It is estimated that well over 36 miles of hose were in use that night, in addition to several miles attached and operated by industrial fire brigades.

Those industrial brigades pulled their weight, and gave useful assistance in all sorts of ways to the A.F.S.

One remarkable feature of the whole night was the fact that the telephone system of the fire brigade continued working throughout the whole raid, this despite the fact that two stations received hits, these being Sharrow Vale and Hoyle Street.

Brave Canadian

What few civilians were about in the streets in the thick of the raid gave useful assistance to the pump crews in helping to run out hose and in many other ways.

Tribute must be paid to the Canadian soldier who perched himself on the dome of the Empire Theatre and played a hose on the raging fire at Campbell's furniture store - which, incidentally, was the first real big fire of the raid.

Another problem officials had to face was the supplying of petrol to keep the pumps and appliances going, but this was overcome by the loan of a corporation petrol tanker which, driven by corporation employees, visited all parts of the city and filled up the appliances.

Hundreds of fires were reported by people who had seen reflections of other fires in house and shop windows, and calls were also received for fire engines to stand by at business premises "just in case."

Nurse Fought Fire

Nether Edge Hospital received a bad hit, and fire was raging in one quarter - yet the firemen found a small nurse tackling it on her own with a bucket of water and a stirrup pump.

Two small boys, acting as volunteer messengers in one part of the city, put out numerous incendiaries, and then curled themselves up by a pump and went fast asleep - tired out and oblivious of bombs dropping in the vicinity.

Food Problem

One woman, with sandbags under her arms, followed the firemen into one building and dropped her sand on every little outbreak she passed and then went outside for more sandbags.

She would not listen to orders to get to safety.

The following morning another problem faced the authorities - food for the crews. Certain arrangements had been made but these were planned around the city receiving the all-clear.

Anyway, one station was immediately turned into an eating house, volunteers arrived and in a very quick time all had a hot breakfast.

In addition, several large houses - businesses and private - devoted all their time to supplying food to the A.F.S., while the Y.W.C.A. in Division Street immediately opened the premises as sleeping quarters, crews falling asleep in their soaked and mud spattered clothes.

What few women had then joined the A.F.S. stuck to their tasks throughout the night, and refused to be relieved when the raid was really heavy.

Civilians Helped

A feature of the two raids, as seen by A.F.S. officers and men, was that whereas on the first night civilians were under cover as much as possible, they were out and about on the Sunday night, ready to give the brigade any assistance they could.

As one officer put the position the first night: "When the all-clear sounded the earth seemed to belch forth thousands of people, just like ants coming from underground."

"They were silent and the only noise was the roaring of the flames and the crunching of the broken glass under the peoples feet.

"It was uncanny; those silent thousands emerged from apparently nowhere."

The Sunday was the opposite. Those same people came out and offered to brave all the dangers in their anxiety to lend a hand.