

A Boy and a Green Goddess

I walked into Dundonald Auxiliary Fire Station in Cumberland Drive in 1958:

‘Why do you want to join the AFS?’ A Leading Fireman asked me.

‘I want to drive a fire engine,’ was my honest reply.

‘Have you got a licence for large vehicles?’ The fireman looked at my boyish features.

‘Oh, I’m not sure.’ I just had my first driving licence; anyone over 17 could buy a car licence in Northern Ireland just by filling in a form: Name, address, date of birth, hand over seven & sixpence; no driving test.

‘Your licence doesn’t allow you to drive our fire appliances; you have to have an HGV licence but you can drive a PC.’

‘What’s a fire appliance and what’s a PC?’ I asked naively.

The elderly fireman aged about 35, groaned and explained:

‘Do you see all those big green vehicles with ladders over there in the garage?’

I nodded, there were about eight of them jammed in with barely any space around them. ‘Those are what YOU would call fire engines but WE call them fire appliances or SPP’s for self-propelled pumps.’ I nodded dumbly whilst the great man continued:

‘A PC is a Personnel Carrier. It can carry 20 adults in the seats in the back, a bit like a bus without windows. You could drive one of those if you can pass our test.’ He looked doubtful.

Soon after I joined, a fireman took me for a driving lesson in a PC in the Belfast Docks. I climbed up into the cab and flopped down in the big seat, like a pea on a mountain; it was massive compared to a car. The driver’s cab was high up; the box-body behind where the passengers sat, much wider than the cab.

‘OK Son, check that you are in neutral then start it up!’ he ordered.

I turned the ignition key to the ON position and pushed the button to start the engine. There was a deep growl and the vehicle began to shake. The rear view mirrors, sticking away out like a prince’s ears, vibrated in tune with the engine. The steering wheel was enormous and impossible to move when the vehicle was stopped. Power steering hadn’t been installed in this 1953 Bedford so the driver needed arms like a gorilla to turn the steering wheel. Gear changing was the hardest part; it had a crash gearbox with no synchromesh. I tried to select first gear but, amid a loud grinding noise coming from the gearbox, my left arm vibrated like a road drill.

‘Wait for it!’ warned the expert, ‘you must get the revs right.’

I had to learn to double de-clutch, whether moving up or down a gear, listening for the engine revs or it simply refused to move into another gear and made the rasping sound of mangling steel.

Starting off was slow and jerky but before long I was driving around the quiet roads in the harbour estate, the trembling in my body easing as I began to enjoy it. About twenty gear-changes later, each better than the previous one, the driving lesson was over.

‘You’re a natural driver, not everybody passes first time.’

I was elated as we returned to the fire station, people congratulated me as I was informed that I had passed my first driving test. The AFS really must have needed drivers badly!

After that, I went to the Station early every Wednesday evening, jumped into a PC and collected volunteer firemen from their homes, driving them to the fire station for training and returning them safely home afterwards. I often wondered what the car owners would have thought if they knew that I tucked in my elbows and held my breath as I drove past their cars parked in the narrow Belfast streets.’

I did get the chance to drive a Bedford fire appliance on a drill night but only on the private roads at the docks; they were much easier to drive than a PC. It was still a thrill being driven through East Belfast to the docks in a convoy of fire appliances on training evenings.

At the docks we were taught practical hose and ladder drills, most of these timed. Pairs of firemen raced along, one unfurling a fire hose. Seawater would be discharged from the pump in each green Appliance when the order “water on” was shouted. It took the combined strength of two firemen to keep the nozzle pointing in the right direction due to the high pressure. On more than one occasion, a hose I was trying to control, swung wide drenching several people in its path and knocking two guys over like skittles.

Ladder drills were more daunting when they included rescuing a man from the roof of a building. I soon learned to climb ladders swiftly; I had no problems with height even the flat roof over 30 feet above ground level. I was not so happy stepping off a roof onto a ladder with a man draped over my shoulder in a fireman’s lift.

One problem was the particular man; the only volunteer to be rescued must have lacked fear or more likely, needed to be wanted!

The request was always made anyway; ‘Who wants to be rescued tonight?’ Nobody in their right mind would want to be carried down a ladder off a high roof by young nervous recruits.

We were probably lucky to have a volunteer called Hammy but he wasn’t built right for carrying down ladders. He was short and fat.

For me there was the unforgettable moment on the first rainy evening, up on the roof in the dark when I tried to hoist him up onto my shoulder in a fireman’s lift.

‘Are you OK up there, Hammy?’ I enquired aware that I was breathless with the effort.

‘Aye’ he muttered. For Hammy this might have been an eloquent speech.

Most people being lifted in a fireman’s lift would drape across the fireman’s shoulder, feet dangling in front and most of the rest of their body hanging down the fireman’s back.

Hammy was shaped like a 14 stone bag of cement perched almost on top of my shoulder. Stumbling under his weight to the edge of the roof, I gripped a vertical upright with my right hand as I stepped off the roof into the black space of a winter’s evening. I reached out my left hand to find the ladder and stretched my leg across the sheer drop as my foot felt for a rung.

I was not allowed to drop Hammy or my round helmet, either of which might have injured somebody standing below. Indeed the loss of such a willing volunteer could have badly affected future training. I had just succeeded in getting us both onto the ladder when I felt him slip. It was ONLY a little slip but I nearly panicked. I became frightened to straighten my arms as I’d been taught. I desperately wanted to lean close to the ladder and resist the need to straighten my back in an upright possession. I leaned forward, hugging the ladder and inched my way down with my left foot and arm leading all the way to the bottom. The next time I got it right!

We had just one callout to a fire in my time in the AFS. Theoretically that meant that we were at war because that was why it existed. I think that was done to add a note of realism. When we heard the alarm we nearly collapsed with fright because none of us thought that it would ever happen, this was just a hobby.

“There must be some mistake,” a young fireman said in a tremulous voice. It was me!

“Get in quickly,” It was an unusually stern command from the driver in the cab.

Seven of us scrambled up into the nearest green Bedford Fire Appliance, ordered in by the Leading Fireman who was already in the driving seat starting the engine and switching on the bell and winking orange lights above the windscreen.

We trundled with engine revving out of the fire station, clanging and flashing, trying but failing to cross straight over the busy Upper Newtownards Road where traffic largely ignored us because they didn’t recognise our green appliance as a fire engine. We eventually managed to get

across and started to climb up the twisty Ballyreagan Road towards an incident high up in the Holywood hills.

There is something incongruous about being in a fire engine rushing to an incident doing about 5 mph in first gear up a hill. Apart from the old Bedford engine, this appliance was carrying 400 gallons of water and a lot of firemen. The Leading Fireman switched off the bell in embarrassment when a cyclist, ascending the same hill, passed us. He turned on the bell again when the road levelled out, to warn the cyclist that we were about to pass him again.

Some time later we arrived at the scene of the incident too late because a red fire appliance from the retained fire station in Holywood had already put out the fire in the hedge and the firemen were packing up and go home.

I left the AFS after that and joined the Territorial Army for some real adventure.

In modern times those old fire engines are called "Green Goddesses" mostly used by the army during strikes but fitted with blue flashing lights and sirens.

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