

## The Auxiliary Fire Service

In the fifties, one legacy of the Second World War was the Auxiliary Fire Service.

One fire station was in Cumberland Drive, Dundonald. It had eight green fire engines.

I joined the AFS there in 1956 when I was 17. Volunteers were given a heavy black uniform which wasn't waterproof though we did have rubber leggings that meant only parts of our trousers got wet. The uniform material would offer some protection from heat should we get near any. We also had a big belt with shiny buckle and a small scabbard containing a vicious axe. We had a pair of ordinary black Wellingtons. The outfit was topped by a round helmet that looked like an upside down soup bowl.

There were few perks in the AFS, i.e. no pay but a weekly dance where uniform wearing was compulsory but without the helmet, axe and Welly boots of course. One guy called **Hammy** tried it once and he got very hot after one dance.

Some males joined the AFS to learn to drive a fire engine but all of us wanted the glamour, to be able to tell the girls "I am a fireman". There were a few firewomen too, another possible reason for joining.

Weekly training was at Belfast docks where we learned hose and ladder drills. The hoses delivered water at about 100 psi from the pump in each **appliance, that's the proper name for a fire engine**. Two firemen would quickly run out a hose then shout "Water on!" it took the full strength of two firemen to keep the nozzle pointing in the right direction due to the pressure. It was important not to let it swing round or the water knocked down anybody in its path like a set of wet skittles.

We learned to climb ladders quickly, firstly left hand & foot, then right hand & foot dragging the hose up by a handle on the nozzle. **Ladder drills were daunting when they involved a roof rescue**. I had no problem getting onto an office flat roof about 30 feet above the ground but I **was not too happy** having **to step off** the roof **onto a ladder** with a man draped over my shoulder in a fireman's lift.

This problem was greatly magnified by the man in question. When the request was made "**Who wants to be rescued tonight?**" there was only ever one volunteer who put his hand up. Nobody in their right mind would want to be carried off a high roof down a ladder by a succession of recruits. We were **probably** lucky to have **Hammy** but he wasn't properly constructed for carrying down ladders because he was a short version of Oliver Hardy in comedy films, being of rounded proportions.

I'll never forget the moment on that first rainy evening, up on that roof in the dark as I hoisted him up onto my shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"Are you OK up there, Hammy?" I asked him with some concern.

"Aye" he muttered; **an eloquent speech for Hammy!**

A normal-shaped man would have been draped over a fireman's shoulder with legs dangling in front and upper body hanging behind the fireman. Hammy was **more like a 13 stone backpack perched on top of my shoulder**. I had to **stagger** to the edge of the roof, grip the nearest **ladder-upright** with my right hand, then **step off the roof into space** stretching my left hand and leg over a sheer drop to **feel my foot onto** a rung of the ladder. I was not allowed to drop **Hammy or my helmet**, either of which could have injured somebody standing below. Damage to Hammy would also have **seriously affected future** ladder drills.

I managed to get us both onto the ladder when I felt Hammy start to slip. It was **only a small slip** but I felt panic. **I forgot to ask Hammy how he felt!** The only way I could redeem the situation was to lean forward gripping the ladder rungs with finger tips, **not strictly allowed** and inch down step-by-step, **left foot and arm leading all the way** to the ground.

There was only one callout in my few years in the AFS. When we heard the alarm bell **for the first time ever**, some of us thought it must be a mistake. **"What's that?" a young fireman asked in a tremulous voice. It was me!**

**"Get in now!"** An unusually stern command came from the cab of the vehicle we had been polishing.

Seven of us scrambled up into the green Fire Appliance. The Leading Fireman in the driving seat had started the engine and **switched on the bell**. **Yes**, it had a bell and flashing orange lights above the windscreen. In modern times these same old fire engines are called "Green Goddesses fitted with blue flashing lights and sirens, used by the army in strikes!"

We trundled out of the fire station, clanging and flashing, moving towards the junction with the Upper Newtownards Road. **We had to cross it but** traffic ignored us; **clearly unable to recognise a green** fire-engine. Eventually we **forced** our way across and started on a narrow road that **climbed up** into the Hollywood hills

**There is something incongruous** being in a fire engine rushing to an incident at **about 5 mph in first gear up a hill**. Apart from the old engine, this appliance was filled with 400 gallons of water and eight firemen.

The driver **switched off the bell** in embarrassment when a cyclist ascending the hill, **overtook us**. He turned on the bell again when the road levelled to warn the cyclist we were going to pass him.

Some time later we arrived at the scene of the incident, **too late**, a **red fire appliance** from the Hollywood fire station had already extinguished the fire in the hedge and the laughing firemen were packing-up to go to their station.

**I decided to join the TA after that!**

North Down & Ards U3A Creative Writing class.

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