

The Bells went Down, September 1940.

On the evening of the big Saturday night blitz, I felt rather heavy and tired, and while lying in bed trying to read, I fell asleep. The time must have been about eight thirty, and my roommates and some visitors were playing cards amidst a haze of smoke and chatter. I slept until awakened by the air raid siren just after eleven o'clock. The few hours of sleep had refreshed me and saved me from the worst part of an air raid: the highest nervous tension that grips one during the last hours before dusk, and which are laid only by the sound of the siren itself.

I awoke, that evening, without any such feelings. I actually felt quite pleased with myself for feeling so refreshed and mentally placid. I quickly donned my firefighting kit and went to the watch room. Everybody seemed to share the feeling that we were in for a night's active work. Already the noise of falling bombs could be heard, but the barrage was not yet heavy. As is usual with me on such occasions, I suddenly felt I had an acute stomach pain which demanded instant relief. I dared not answer this natural call, for fear of missing my appliance, should the bells go down, and find me unprepared.

The noise outside was, by now, deafening, and it was obvious that London was in for a heavy night. Somebody came in and said that the sky was already well lit up in several directions. The 'shout' could only be a matter of minutes.

I was riding the first heavy unit, with our station officer in charge, so my pump will be the last one out of the station. The phone bell rang. Heavy tense silence gripped us. Mrs N., our newly married D.I., lifted the receiver and scribbled the message on a pad. In a quiet matter of fact voice, she announced: 'three pumps to standby at 37 Shoreditch', and then she pulled the bells down. There was a little running and shouting as we repeated the call, and the crews made for the appliance yard. The engines burst into a roar, and the fire bells clanged as they made their way into the, by now, well-lit streets.

By this time, the demands of my bowels could no longer be ignored, so I appealed to H. my driver not to leave without me and dashed off to find some relief. I barely resumed my clothes, when there was a terrific crash nearby, and the electric lights failed. I dashed back to the washroom just as the bells went down again. My heavy unit was now the last appliance left on the station, and we were assigned to the British Museum. Most thankfully I jumped onto the suction and clung to the ladders as we bumped out of the yard. I was in good time and felt fine and fit for anything. I looked into the red haze above, and, I suppose, because of my preparation for the night's work, did not feel unduly perturbed by the uneven drone of 'Jerry' above.

The streets were full of rushing, clanging vehicles all bent on different jobs, we made good speed down Gower street. We passed several small fires which were being attended to by wardens and firewatchers, and in a few minutes swept into the forecourt of the British Museum. The resident firefighting staff had already run out some hose up the broad steps into the front entrance, but the fire was not yet visible from the front. We hastened to connect to a hydrant in the forecourt, while our station officer ran inside to size up the job. We had some difficulty in connecting our pump, because of the awkward position in which the hydrant was placed on a low wall facing away from the building. In a short time, however, this was neatly accomplished, and I ran into the museum to get to grips with the fire.

The section alight, was the library that encircled, tier by tier, the vast domed reading room. The smoke was pouring out from a corridor to the left, and taking up positions at the entrance, we directed our jet into the glow at the far end. With the pang, I realised that it was books that were

burning. Who knows what stored up treasures of the past, what rarities, perhaps altogether irreplaceable were being destroyed before my eyes? What the flames did not eat, the water spoilt, and a feeling of nausea and despair held me for a moment. After about 10 minutes, no more flames could be seen, although dense smoke and steam were still pouring out.

We transferred our branch through some swing doors nearby and directed our jet at flames that seemed to be high up and quite a distance from us. A little more pressure was needed, so S. my companion on the branch went back to see if he could get it for me. I jammed my branch against what seemed to be a shoulder high partition, and from there the water just managed to reach the flame but had little effect upon it. Except for the flame that lit up a few bookshelves, the room in which I stood was in pitch darkness. Instead of increasing the pressure, it was suddenly reduced and all I had was an ineffective trickle. I shouted for assistance to drag the hose nearer the flames, and some chaps from another crew helped me forward some dozen yards, and so used up all the slack available. I was now almost directly underneath the fire, but my jet was not strong enough to reach it. I could now see that there was a railed balcony above me, and some bookshelves on this were alight. The flames here seemed to be isolated from any other fire in the building, and I felt that it was essential that this little fire should be given no chance to spread and connect up with the general body of the fire. I handed the branch to one of my helpers, climbed onto a table, and so, just managed to reach the railing above my head. Heavily clothed as I was in full firefighting kit, I somehow managed to pull myself up, and clamber onto the balcony. I hauled up the hose after me and found that I had lost a few feet by lifting it, and my jet still did not reach the flames which by now were burning quite fiercely.

Jamming my finger over the nozzle, I obtained a finer jet of longer range, with which I could just reach the fire and play over it. This damped it down considerably, but I had to attack the books and the shelves with my axe, pulling them down and stamping on the burning embers, before I could say that the fire had been satisfactorily dealt with. I notice that this section was filled with German volumes, and one shelf that was completely gutted had held the 'Work of Strauss.' 'Ironical' I thought.

I wandered round around the balcony and found that there was apparently only one staircase down, and that was burning and was being attacked from below. I had, therefore, to lower myself over the railing by the light of my torch which I gripped in my teeth. I hurried outside to see how we were getting on with the main fire. It was as light as day, and over in the direction of Southampton Row, a large area was belching flame and smoke. A policeman, standing in the shadow of one of the huge columns come, told me that he'd seen a land mine sail across the rooftops, and explode, it seemed, right in the middle of that inferno. 'Heaven help our lads who were detailed to that fire', I thought.

On the steps I banged into F., he was one of our crew. Our pump had 'knocked off', and we went to take our branch to the roof. I helped him lay the hose up flights and flights of steps, that went around a lift shaft, and then across two rooftops to a parapet that overlooked the burning wing. The wind was blowing in our direction, and it was difficult to face the flames, as the smoke and burning cinders choked and blinded us. F. left me to give word that we were ready for water, and I crouched down at the bottom of the parapet where I could breathe with greater ease. Across the other side, a branch was playing a desultory jet into the flames, so I suppose if the water supply was not all that it should be. This was really my first 'breather' since I arrived on the job, And I now had an opportunity of taking stock of my surroundings.

In all directions large fires were burning, but there was nothing very near to the museum. The nearest seem to be one in the direction of Southampton Row. Bombs were dropping incessantly,

and the heralding crescendo of their downward approach, gave no pause. I found myself listening and judging their distance. That night I did not duck or fall on all fours as the bombs whistled down. I found myself alert and tense, ready for anything, although I knew full well there was nothing, I could do to save myself.

I crouched there for some twenty minutes, getting more and more impatient as the perspiration cooled on my body, and I began to feel the sharp edge of the wind that was fanning the flames. Deciding to find out what had become of the water, I jammed my branch in between some sandbags and groped my way back to the heavy unit. I found H. standing there alone, helpless. Our hydrant, which was the sole supplier of water for the museum had lost all its water. 'We're ----ed', he said, and so it seemed, we were.

We went to find our station officer, who had not seen since we arrived. Turning the corner of the building we saw a sight that made us catch our breath. The flames had burst through the roof and were leaping upward in a wild frenzy of waterless freedom. We came upon our station officer with the ex L.F.B. man who had charge of the Museum Brigade. They seem to be at a loss as to what to do. The latter was in a highly excited condition. 'Save my museum, save my museum', he cried, 'I won't forget you; I'll leave you all something in my will, only save my museum'. With one wing now well alight, and no water available, it seemed a hopeless task. Where were we to get water?

H. and I took a hydrant key and bar, and tested all the hydrants in the vicinity, but could get no results. We consulted the emergency water supply book, but for some reason or another, could find nothing nearer than Charlotte Street, which was too far away to be practicable. We took the book back with us and reported to our station officer. Just as we got back, a staff car swept into the forecourt and out of it jumped a little man with brass epaulettes on each shoulder, a tin helmet supported on his ears, and a toothbrush moustache. It was Superintendent A., my 'bete noire' in the fire service. 'Who's in charge here?', he barked. Our St/Officer stepped forward and saluted. He gave his rank and his station number and said, 'we are just about to relay water from Charlotte Street, Sir'.

'Don't you know where your nearest emergency water dam is?' shouted the superintendent furiously. 'Where's your book? You'll find one in Bloomsbury square. Hurry up for God's sake get the ----- fire out, or you'll lose the whole building'. Abashed at being told by his superior officer what he should have known and seen two hours before, our station officer meekly answered, 'Yes Sir', and the Superintendent jumped into his car and drove off.

With the assistance of a crew of regular L.F.B. men, we loaded our heavy unit with as many lengths of hose as we could get hold of, and proceeded to Bloomsbury Square, dropping off at intervals of 50 feet a length of hose. The distance to the dam was quite short, and in next to no time we were 'set in' and pumping water at high pressure from our pump to that of the regulars who relayed it directly to the branches on the fire. The operation was completed in less than half an hour, but it was already too late to save that wing. I stayed with my pump, and as I was now not needed at the fire, and it was high time I relaxed a little. Time was drawing on and by now it was half past four. Dawn was still an hour off, and the vicious fury of the raid had somewhat abated. The drone overhead could still be heard, but bombs were not dropping with the same frequency as earlier on.

After half an hour I thought I would go and have a look at the big fire I had noticed Southampton Row way. At the further end of the square I turned left and came into full view of a scene that would have delighted the soul of a Nero. I could see right the way down Theobald Road, and then narrow turnings running off it, all of which converged on Southampton Road. On every side, every building

was given over to an orgy of flame. The roads were limited with masses of bricks, concrete and twisted ironwork, and a thin line of firemen were pouring water at irregular intervals into the blazing mass. There was not a building in this huge area that was not affected.

I hurried forward, as there seemed to be quite a lot of work for a temporarily disengaged fireman to do. I saw a branch with a powerful jet, being held by a policeman and a sub officer. They seem to be having some difficulty in holding it as the pressure was very high. I came to their assistance, and we pushed the resisting branch forward into a café, the back of which was burning, but whose doorway was not yet affected. We were about to advance still a bit further, when I noticed that the cracks in the floorboards were a bright yellow. I yelled a warning and pulled back onto the solid pavement. 'Can you hold it for a minute?' I yelled into the ear of the policeman. He nodded, so I let go the branch and attacked the floorboards near the entrance with my axe. I soon made a hole in between two crossbeams and flame and smoke pour through. We jammed the nozzle through the hole and kneeled on the hose to keep it down. The policeman grinned. 'That's the stuff,' he said. 'Rather this any day, then directing traffic on point duty. That's what I'm supposed to be doing now'. His tunic was soaked through, but he was happy and exhilarated from his struggle with the branch. Evidently it was a novel experience for him. Now being a freelance, I left him and went further afield.

So fierce were the flames, that, of the burning buildings, only flaming shells remained. There could be no objecting pouring water on these as they were well beyond saving. Quite rightly, therefore, it seemed the most effort was being made on the outskirts of the affected area, to prevent the spread of the fire. I picked my way back to the middle of Theobald's Road, guarding my eyes from the heat and the cinders.

I had almost got through when I was brought to a complete and abrupt stop by a cinder lodging itself in my right eye. I quickly held my handkerchief to it and made my way across to the Arts and Crafts building, and, leaning against the wall tried to rid my eye of his unwelcome visitor. I shed copious tears, but to no avail. I tried all the known devices but was still left half blinded. I enquired the way to the nearest first aid post and was directed to the Kingsway tube station. There, a sympathetic porter let me down flight upon flight of escalators, which had just begun working, through interminable tunnels where I had to pick my way over recumbent, still sleeping forms, into a brightly lit first aid post. Here in the bowels of the earth was a fully equipped miniature accident ward, and in a trice, a very efficient nurse had cleaned my eye, and applied a soothing lotion. I was most gratefully relieved, and after expressing my most inadequate thanks. I went back through the nightmare of sleeping shelters, to the smoke-filled world above me. The time was now five thirty, and it was already quite light. There were many people out although the all clear had not yet been sounded. In fact, some bombs fell just then in the distance, and there was a little gunfire, but this was evidently the Luftwaffe's swan song. 'What a nerve? Still hanging about unsatisfied.....' I thought. 'That pilot is certainly looking for trouble'.

Back in Bloomsbury Square, I found my crew preparing 'to make up'. Instead of being told to go home to a well-deserved rest, we were ordered to Ludgate Circus. The smug announcement that all the fires were under control by dawn, that always followed a night of blitz, evidently would not apply to Ludgate Circus. Before leaving, I went to have a look at the museum. The fire here was, evidently, under control. No flames or smoke could be seen from the street, only gaping windows, with the sky showing through.

On the way to Ludgate Circus, we passed St Clement Danes at the top of Fleet Street and saw what was left of it. A shell of outer walls, and a mass of fallen burning timbers inside, open to the sky.

We pulled round into Farringdon Street, and while Mr. J. went to see to which of the many jobs going we would be posted, we had a few moments to see the extent of the havoc wrought here during the night, and watched the fire still spreading, for lack of water to deal with them. Saint Bride's Street, which forked to the left, was a mass of flames on both sides of the road. Both sides two of the road leading up from the viaduct to Saint Pauls were gutted and still burning in the basements. The flames were spreading to the huge block on the corner which, I remember housed David Cope's offices on which was displayed the big brass sign of the Isle of Man--- 3 legs running around a circle---- which had always fascinated me. A tower at the further end of the building was already blazing fiercely, and, as far as I could see, there was yet nobody working on that block.

The trouble here, seven hours after the commencement of the raid, and within sight of the Thames at Blackfriars bridge, was lack of water. To me, this was incomprehensible. Where was the alleged efficiency and foresight of the London Fire Brigade and the L.C.C. Everything was provided for fighting fires except that most essential element, water. I could just not see why, and have not since found out, how it was that's so great a part of the world's greatest metropolis was destroyed by fire for lack of water, when an ever present, constant, and in my opinion, always reachable supply, flowed right through the centre of it. Surely, it was not beyond the ingenuity of a country, famous for his engineering, to solve the problem of lifting water even at low tide, to dams on the riverside, from which, in a matter of hours at the utmost, a plentiful supply could, by series pumping, be relayed to any required centre in London.

And here we were, seven hours after the commencement of the raid, with fires raging unchecked on every side, and still no water. It made us, the humblest in the hierarchy of fire fighters, feel exasperated, thwarted, and above all disgusted with the heads of our brigade for their lack of foresight and preparation. We remembered with bitterness, the September Golden Lane fires, the December fire of the City of London, now, in those quick moving times, matters of history, and now, six months later, a repetition of the same story. Destruction for the lack of water supply. We thought of the hours, running into working days, spent in polishing brass, scrubbing floors and other such useful, productive occupations, in preparation for inspections by the self-same officers, who time after time, were letting us down. What use was on much publicised 'courage', our grit and 'guts', in the face of such ineptitude.

Some time elapsed before Mr J. came back. His instructions were to set into a hydrant and get to work in Saint Bride's Street. What little water the mains possessed, was all being used, so we lifted a sewer grating in the gutter, hoping to obtain our supply from the water pouring back into it. Supply was, however, too small for the powerful sections in our heavy unit, and we lost our water after about one minutes pumping. During the rest of that long morning, the only water we obtained, was from two water lorries, whose supply lasted us about five minutes apiece. We could do nothing else but watch the spectators who are watching us. Now and again, the Divisional Officer North, came along to have a look at the progress of the flames. I was standing at the corner of St Bride's Street when he came along munching a ham roll, accompanied by a lesser light come up with two brass epaulettes. The flames were then spreading across a narrow roadway to an as yet untouched block. Waving his hand roll nonchalantly in the direction of the flames, he said, 'see to that, B. or you will involve this block too'. He then walked off 'Anybody see that' I thought 'how do you propose doing it', apparently, there is no answer to this query as no additional supply of water was made available.

Eventually, we set into a hydrant which had become free, and S. and I were directed by Mr J. to drag our branch and hose over the fallen debris between the burning shells and either side of the road. We had previously warned that the walls were considered unsafe, but Mr J. thought that they will be alright. We took our stand on a pile of bricks and sent word to send the water through. I eyed the

wall in front of me and thought that we would be just out of reach if it were to fall outward. I looked back at the burning building in our rear and dubiously eyed a massive crane fixed to the third floor. This appealed to me still less than the wall in front. The water came through, and we had a surprisingly good pressure. Mr J. stood next to us directing the jet. Our foothold was precarious on the loose rubble, and when the wall in front began, without warning to fall outward, our startled steps backwards, landed us on our backs, still gripping the branch. I had a vision of falling masonry, disintegrating in mid-air, and rushing towards us. It seemed an age before it crashed at our feet and covered us with a thick cloud of dust. There was another roar in our rear, and the wall there, fortunately for us fell inwards. The water was 'knocked off' at the hydrant, and we struggled to our feet. Mr J. had received the full impact of the jet on his jaw as we fell, and it had flung him drenched in a heap. Bruised and shaken, we clambered back to the road. We were all greeted on all sides with expressions of relief our safe emergence and most uncomplimentary criticism of our officer who had taken us into such an obviously unsafe area.

Just then, there was a terrific explosion, louder than I had ever heard before. Everybody ducked and ran; manhole covers flew in the air. What fresh horror was this? Smoke coming up from the manhole, gave us the answer. It was escaped gas exploding in the sewers that was the cause. Feeling down and exhausted, we returned to our appliance to recover. There were plenty of refreshments to be had in the shape of tea, cake, and even chocolate, supplied us from canteen vans: but it was sleep that we craved more than food. We sat about on the footboards of our appliance and leaned against the granite plinth near the crossing. Our Station Officer said he would go and see about relief but returned without any definite news. Agreed, that the raid was of large and unprecedented proportions, but surely it was possible, with so many outlying brigades available, to have bought relief crews by midday after a night of the blitz? Of what use could we be if 'Jerry' would follow up and repeat his performance on the following night? Had it not happened before in the autumn blitz? The result then had been a huge sick list, and a lot of discontent. Would they---could they---never learn?

At two o'clock there was still many fires raging, one in particular, we could see shooting its flames high up into the air, somewhere over the back of Farrington Street. Mr J. decided that we ought to lend a hand in tackling it. The building was at the rear of premises in Old Street in Old Bailey, and the idea was to get a branch to work from the back windows on the top floor onto the flames. We accordingly laid out some twenty lengths of hose, hoisted the branch up the front of the building to where it was wanted, and leaving Mr J. on the branch. I started back to give word to the pump that we were ready for water. Going down the stairs, I noticed smoke coming out of a room below the one we were proposed to get to work. I went in and found that the window frames and the wooden beams on the ceiling were well alight. I immediately returned and informed Mr J. that we'd better see to this fire first, as it endangered the whole building, and we could easily be trapped on the top floor. There was a stirrup pump handy, and we used it to good effect. There being nobody there to go refill the bucket, we attacked the burning woodwork with our axes. Soon the window frames fell into the courtyard below, and in a short time the fire was completely under control. A prompt action undoubtedly saved the whole building, and ourselves too, from what might have been as a serious predicament.

Apart from rolling up a few lengths of hose, I did no more work that day. We were eventually relieved and, weary to the bone, we arrived back at the station, after sixteen hours of almost continuous effort.