

THE CHRISTCHURCH FIRE-FIGHTING EPIC

WAR HISTORY OF N.F.S. RECOUNTED

Part time personnel stand down

C.T. August 18, 1945

FROM Saturday, the part-time personnel in No. 16 Fire Force Area of the N.F.S., which comprises West Hampshire, Dorset and South Wiltshire, will no longer carry out fire fighting duties on a war-time basis; and on this, the 4th anniversary of their formation, it is possible to recount the hitherto unwritten epic of local men who performed a vital war service often with only inadequate recognition, and who participated in front line dangers without the glamour traditionally associated with the battlefield.

During the Battle of Britain, the public realised for the first time that the Fire Service was very much more than "just another air raid precaution"; but in the shortness of memory, they soon came to take for granted an organisation, which, in absence, could have loosed chaos in the homeland.

Now in recognition of their great service to the Country, an appreciation can be published, which, it is hoped, may do something towards reinstating them in their honourable and proper place beside the fighting forces of Great Britain.

The story begins in those days of uncertainty preceding the war. In 1937, the Auxiliary Fire Service, as it was first called, came into being as the result of a Home Office Memorandum. The existing fire brigade equipment was reviewed and suggestions for improvement made. The geographical features of the Borough were closely studied in the light of the possible emergency of war. In this respect the physical severance of the Borough by the two rivers presented a difficulty, and with the possibility of bombed bridges in mind, it was found necessary to have fire stations at both ends of the Borough.

In 1938, to conform with the Fire Brigade Act, the Christchurch Brigade, from its early history a voluntary service, engaged two whole-time firemen. New accommodation was found at Quomps, and training of auxiliaries began in November of that year. By January, 1939, the first 33 members had qualified for their badges, which were presented by the Mayor on the completion of 60 hours' training.

EMERGENCY MOBILISATION.

Training, including the National Fire Brigade's Association Southern District Competitions, held on Whit-Monday at the Recreation Ground, continued until mid-day on the 1st September—then began the emergency for which they had been preparing.

Peace-time personnel were called by the previously installed system of house-bells, and within three minutes six men had reported for a duty, which was destined to last for four years. They proceeded to unpack and allocate gear stored away owing to lack of accommodation, and at 6 p.m. Chief Officer Bryant took over from Alderman Tucker the Children's Church in Wick Lane for use as a Fire Brigade store and billet.

At 6.30 a Home Office telegram arrived ordering full mobilisation, and all available auxiliaries, comprising 67 firemen, 5 messengers, and telephonists, were mustered. Two crews were forthwith made up, and despatched to Highcliffe with the necessary equipment under Sub-Officer Proudley; two more crews under Third Officer Tucker, a motor pump and foam apparatus, went to Somerford, and by 9 p.m. the Central Fire Station was also fully equipped. At ten o'clock all stations were visited by the Chief Officer and the Liaison Officer, and all personnel stood by until next morning, when 30 members were selected for whole time duty and the remainder stayed on call at their homes.

After the bustle of mobilisation came the period of anti-climax; but although the hour of need had not arrived, intensive training continued. There was a full scale exercise at Southampton, where Sir John Anderson highly commended the efficiency of local crews, and other routine

practices. In the meantime, the men found time during Christmas to entertain 600 children to tea, many of them being evacuees from Southampton and Portsmouth, and the Services Club in Barrack Road, for which the local N.F.S. were responsible, was started about this time.

In May of 1940, the service attended the first aeroplane crash and distinguished themselves by arriving on the scene within two minutes.

ENEMY ACTION BEGINS.

It was not until August that the first damage by enemy action occurred. Heralding the beginning of our part in the Battle of Britain, incendiary bombs fell in a farm lane at Highcliffe, and were controlled by firemen, who, in the absence of a proper main, extinguished the blaze with water carried in their steel helmets. On the 29th of the same month wide-spread fires occurred in the St. Catherine's Hill area. The fire began following the dropping of incendiary bombs on the tinder-dry heathland, and for three days continuously, the local N.F.S. fought the blaze. Just after midnight incendiary bombs were reported to have dropped round cottages on St. Catherine's Hill, and a pump was despatched. This was reinforced locally, and later the assistance of the Bournemouth service had to be called in.

Later in the day the explosion of a delayed action bomb caused another fire, which was only brought under control after three hours very heavy work. There was a further call on the 30th, when protective patches of furze were burned to protect cottages, and on the following day three crews relayed water from the river Avon for 15 hours to save Dudmore Farm from destruction.

On 1st September, the military aid which the firemen had been receiving had to be withdrawn at a time when all were completely exhausted, and additional personnel had to be drafted from Bournemouth and Poole. Finally, by courageous persistence, the fire danger was fully controlled.

BOMBS IN THE HIGH STREET.

While the St. Catherine's Hill fire was being fought, incendiary bombs had fallen in the High Street. Fires at three business premises were put out in a remarkably short time. Others were dealt with at the Air Compressing Station, the school out-buildings, in Castle Street, and Queens Avenue. The fire station yard also received its quota, these being effectively neutralised by Capt. Scarr and the women drivers who were standing by there.

In September incendiary bombs were dropped in Highcliffe, total destruction of a coal merchants and a holiday camp only being prevented by the Fire Service's timely aid. An oil bomb at Friars Cliff and further incendiaries at Walkford and Hinton Admiral were also dealt with.

Christchurch men were to see service more arduous and more dangerous than that to be met with in this comparatively fortunate district. On the 4th November, 1940, the first local contingent of 12 went gladly to the blitzed streets of London, affording relief and a rest in Christchurch to a similar number of exhausted firemen from the capital. The London men were entertained with social evenings at the fire stations of the Borough, at the Conservative Club, with a public luncheon at the King's Arms, free admission to the cinema, and a permit to fish for salmon, the Boroughs costliest sporting facility.

BLITZED LONDON.

Meanwhile the Christchurch men who had relieved them were enduring all the hardships of the then most bombed city in the world. Among many other duties, they were placed in charge of operations at a fire so large that it required the attendance of 20 pumps.

Those who went will speak very little of their experiences, but letters in praise of their courage and ability from the Clerk of the L.C.C. and officers-in-charge of a London station speak eloquently of the work they did there. A second crew was exchanged on the 18th of November. All

the men were transported by voluntary lady drivers who supplied their own cars.

From this time onward the men were scarcely ever at home. Until the nationalisation of the A.F.S. in August of 1941, they helped to bear the burden of nearly every severely bombed town in the South Coast. From 23rd November to 9th December they stood by Southampton in the hour of her need. The first crew pumped for over four hours at the blazing Fleet Air Arm Works of Woolston. On 1st December a crew under Sub-Officer W. Tucker had to pick its way through bomb craters in the road. That night they had to deal with three huge fires. At one, in the grain store on Southampton Docks, they had to draw water from flooded drains because the supply of hydrant stand posts had run out. One crew in three days duty dealt with no less than ten fires. They had the honour of being inspected by His Majesty the King.

During this period, continual reliefs were being organised for Southampton firemen.

From January to April of 1941, local crews went to Portsmouth, Bristol, Gosport and Exeter, and on one occasion as far as Plymouth.

INTO THE RIVER.

One large pump and Bedford van proceeding to Bath skidded on the ice-bound road at Codford St. Mary, and tearing down a length of cast iron railing, plunged four feet into the river Wyle. No one was seriously injured, and the pump and van was subsequently salvaged by a detachment of the A.S.C.

Two crews attended at the big fire caused at the Bournemouth Woolworths by an oil bomb.

Later in May and July of that year, the local service dealt promptly with four fires caused by enemy action in the Borough. These were the incendiary bombs dropped at Hurn airfield on May 9th, two loads of H.E. bombs (including unexploded bombs) at Airspeeds, and incendiary bombs at Gray's Farm, Highcliffe.

From the time of nationalisation, when Christchurch became known as C 1 sub-division, the severest testing time was over. Although the local service was continually in need, the helter-skelter days of the blitz were over, and the firemen were sometimes able to apply themselves to other occupations than fire fighting and rescue work. A building section was formed, and new stations, including that most commodious one at Pit, were built all over the area. One of the most homely and sympathetic of these diversions was the manufacture of over 1,000 toys which were distributed among the children of the Borough.

FOXWOOD AVENUE CRASH.

An analysis for 1944 shows that C Division received 1,003 calls during the course of the year, and attended 834 fires. Of these 10 were caused by aircraft crashes. This recalls the tragedy at Foxwood Avenue, where three fighter aircraft crashed successively on the same day, causing a heavy death roll among the rescue parties. The N.F.S. lost one man, Fireman W. Marshall, of West View Road.

These great occasions begin now to grow old in the memory, and although they remain untarnished, the service must now turn to other work—the less hectic fire fighting of peace time. Fewer men are required—that is why the part-time men are standing down—but volunteers are still required. During the war the "part-timer" had played a most important role in the service. By his or her efforts (for women have played their part as well as men) the national organisation has been enabled to meet the most terrible situations, and the experience thus gained will carry forward into peace time by personally volunteering for part-time work again.

This Saturday the occasion will be marked in the Southern Region by a pump competition, held at Reading, to be followed by a stand-down parade of part-time personnel representing all districts of Southern Region. A contingent of the local N.F.S. will, of course, be present.