

The National Fire Service: part 2

From early September 1940 until May 1941 the London area was bombed on an almost nightly basis. Some of these air raids are well known and documented: the bombing of the East End and the London Docks on 7 September 1940, the fire raid on the City of London on 29th December, and several particularly aggressive attacks in March and April 1941.

Over the same period there had been heavy bombing of provincial centres too with serious raids on Coventry, Liverpool, Bristol, Belfast, Hull, Manchester, Portsmouth and Southampton. The fire service's regional reinforcing schemes had been used extensively, with columns of fire engines travelling considerable distances to assist bombed cities. These moves both highlighted the practical problems mentioned in Part 1, to which could sometimes be added incompatibility of hose couplings in some locations, and broadened experience in fighting fires in differing conditions. Serious shortcomings were identified and in Liverpool where the Home Office felt obliged to draft in senior officers from London to take over the city's fire defences. All in all, by the early months of 1941 there were increasing calls from the fire service and from local and national government, for a radical overhaul of the nation's fire services to meet the challenges of the Blitz. The air raid on London on 10th/11th May 1941 brought this issue into very sharp focus.

The May attack lasted all night. High explosives and incendiaries were dropped and numerous fires were started, with nine reaching conflagration proportions. The reinforcing scheme was instigated on a grand scale. Support from Essex included pumps from the AFS at Benfleet and the Chief Officer of Chigwell Fire Brigade was present in one of the worst fire zones in the City of London (the 'Square Mile') near St Paul's Cathedral. The death toll from this raid was high, the damage enormous.

Some of the fires from this attack were probably still burning when a meeting took place between the Home Secretary, senior officials and senior fire officers. The latter were drawn mainly from the London area, but had made operational and fact-finding sorties into the provinces at various times and so had a picture of the situation nationally. In any event, it was the most recent attack on London and the capital's prospects should a follow up attack of equal intensity be made, that focused minds. The pressure for change had been building up and the decision was taken to form one fire service for the whole of Great Britain. The new organisation would cover the country from Shetland to the Scillies. Northern Ireland formed its own NFS.

The decision to form a nationwide fire service, to be named the National Fire Service (NFS), was quickly taken – some might say too quickly. It was legislated for and was up and running just over three months after the May air raid – quite a formidable achievement. A bit later however it was discovered that essential procedures in establishing the service had been omitted and Parliament had to pass retrospective legislation to rectify this.

Local government howled in protest at the move. It was said that the loudest complaints came from those who had devoted the least amount of money and effort to their peacetime fire brigades. There were later protests when the new service moved machines from localities that had originally purchased them to areas where the need for that type of appliance was seen as greater, or to replace vehicles destroyed in action.

Personnel in this fire service, both men and women, would be either full or part-time, the old distinctions of regulars and auxiliaries were disposed of and policemen would no longer double as firefighters. Initially a lot of effort went into devising a rank structure and insignia for the new service. In this context there was much focus on ranks incorporating military titles. In the end titles were derived that reflected individual roles and the overall purpose of the NFS – firefighting. Some of these were modified or dispensed with after the NFS was disbanded, but otherwise this rank structure served the British fire service well until it was replaced in the early years of this century.

The rather schizophrenic approach to women in the new organisation continued. It seemed that the widest use of AFS female staff had been in the London area and in some of the other conurbations and from the outset of the NFS there were moves to widen the roles open to women and to make big improvements in their training and welfare arrangements. Indeed, the NFS flirted with the idea of operational female firefighters, but this never progressed beyond limited experimentation and the lead roles of NFS women remained in telecommunications (moves to have control rooms staffed entirely by female personnel were largely achieved) and catering, with some expansion of driving and vehicle maintenance.

For administration and operations, the whole country was divided into Regions, sub-divided again into areas covered by a Fire Force. Some of metropolitan Essex was covered from London, but the rest of the county, with some small areas of adjoining counties, was covered by the NFS's No 11 Fire Force with its headquarters at Southend and its first designated Fire Force Commander, Mr P Garron, formerly the Chief Officer of Southend Fire Brigade. The breast badge, which had been a feature of the Auxiliary Fire Service uniform, was adapted now to show the firefighter's Fire Force. Appliances were identified by a code painted on the vehicle which indicated its type, its Fire Force and its station.

When it came to appointing NFS officers, an interesting situation arose. Many fire brigades, when directed to supply reinforcements to areas badly damaged by the Blitz, had often sent their AFS contingents, holding back their regular firemen and appliances. The rationale here seems to have been that the AFS had been formed, trained, equipped and was being paid by central government for wartime firefighting. The result was that many auxiliaries had had more experience of firefighting in six months than some regular firemen had had in their entire careers. This was often reflected in officer selection and NFS promotions.

The new service inherited a plethora of items ranging from pre-war regular fire engines, some very old and still running on solid tyres, to other more up-to-date vehicles, plus the equipment previously issued to the AFS. Second-hand and commandeered cars and commercials were also used, though they were often inadequate for the work and poorly maintained. It was claimed that there was at least one horse-drawn steam fire pump on the inventory of appliances taken over in 1941. The NFS added to this disparate fleet vehicles of its own, including mobile kitchens with their own coal supplies and mobile hose-drying units. The service set a high priority in keeping all its vehicles on the run and also set about trying to standardise the fleet. Here, its efforts certainly bore fruit – perhaps most obviously in the Austin Towing Vehicle (ATV) and its attendant trailer pump. This was an enclosed van, providing space for equipment and, much more importantly, covered accommodation for the crew (many pre-war fire engines, including some of the latest, had open crew seating). Hundreds of these were supplied to the NFS (there is an example in the Essex Fire Museum). and it is a testament to the vehicle that, with later modifications, it remained in service, often as a first line fire appliance, long after the end of the NFS. Like all NFS vehicles the ATV was painted in the grey livery previously used for AFS appliances, although many pre-war machines kept their original red, with NFS markings. Other NFS achievements on the appliance front included refining the Mobile Dam Unit, a 'Blitz' era vehicle, into the water tender, which subsequently became the basic post-war British fire appliance; and developing, in conjunction with the famous fire engineering firm, Merryweather, a 60' (18m) hand-operated Turntable Ladder, examples of this machine also remained in use post the NFS. Ironically many of the standard 100' (30.5m) TLs in service at the outbreak of war were of German manufacture. The NFS also operated a large fleet of fireboats on internal waterways, estuaries and the high seas.

In addition to a varied set of fire engines, the NFS inherited equally varied premises ranging from new, purpose-built fire stations opened just before hostilities, through requisitioned schools and garages to locations where previously no fire station had existed. Many peacetime fire stations were inadequate for wartime needs, where additional space was required for appliances and personnel – both male and female. The NFS opened new stations, some of these were built by firefighters themselves, established and expanded some with prefabricated buildings, but had in many cases to muddle through with some very sub-standard and unsuitable accommodation. One feature of the NFS was the dispersal of control rooms and headquarters accommodation to large country houses in rural locations unlikely to be bombed. After the disbandment of the NFS many of these became the headquarters of county fire brigades.

By the time the NFS had settled in, got its procedures working smoothly and expanded to its maximum capacity, the course of the war had turned so definitely in the Allies' favour that bombing on the scale of 1940/41 was no longer a prospect and so the service started to contract. Fire service historians look favourably on the NFS. Like all big organisations it wasn't perfect, sometimes being accused of being over-centralised and too bureaucratic. So, what did it achieve?

It raised the profile and prestige of firefighters, already enhanced by the Blitz. Both press and public took to the new service. When air raids did happen, out-of-area reinforcements spoke in glowing terms of the NFS arrangements for their reception, deployment, relief and welfare.

It brought high national standards to many aspects of the fire service, notably in the fields of ranks and responsibilities, training and appliances.

It consolidated the entree into the fire service that the AFS had given to women, although there was to be a long wait until the goal of operational female firefighters was achieved. In short it put firefighting on a much more professional basis.

Among its more unusual achievements were Operations "Harlequin" and "Colour Scheme"; the former a rehearsal for the latter. "Colour Scheme" involved dividing the country into areas. In some places normal NFS fire cover was maintained. In others, mainly in the north of England, it was felt that fire cover could be reduced. The surplus personnel and equipment in these areas was then moved to the south of England to greatly enhance fire cover where troops were massing for D Day and the risk of pre-emptive German air strike was thought very high. This was done most effectively and once Allied troops were well established in Europe, the NFS personnel and machines returned to home stations equally smoothly.

Another interesting NFS achievement was the formation of Overseas Columns to follow the Allied armies across the continent. These were to provide fire cover across the extended lines of communication and stores depots in locations where local fire cover was likely to be inadequate, or even non-existent, as a consequence of wartime conditions. Each column would be independent and was equipped with specialised appliances. Much of the training for the volunteers in these columns was carried out in Essex. In the end, the Columns were not deployed on the scale originally envisaged, but one left for the continent from Tilbury in January 1945 and served with the US and British armies across northern France, the Benelux countries and into Germany. It returned to an official welcome at Tilbury just after the end of hostilities. With final victory still some months away local government began lobbying Westminster to return the fire service to local control. However, central government was not to be hurried on this and the NFS provided fire cover for another two and half years. Indeed, there was serious talk about making it permanent. In Scotland this debate was quite intense and the NFS continued there for a short time after its disbandment in England and Wales. When it was returned to local control in Scotland it went largely to combinations of local authorities based on the old NFS structure and in 2013 the Scottish Government created a national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

For England and Wales, the new fire authorities were county borough councils – far fewer than the 1938 borough and district council structure. The government also took steps to ensure that the new form of governance kept the best features of the national structure in the form of standardised pay and conditions ranks, coordination of the development of appliances and training, and a centralised inspection system to ensure efficiency.

For Essex this meant that the county council was now in charge of the fire service from 1st April 1948 for the whole county, including what was then termed 'metropolitan Essex', excluding East Ham, West Ham and Southend-on-Sea, which now ran their own fire brigades. Southend could not resist a dig at the departing NFS, taking advertisements in the local press to reassure its citizens that all its fire appliances had been checked by local mechanics on hand-over from the NFS, and were in satisfactory order.

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