

A WINTER'S TALE

By Mike Smith

Here is a story which, as far as is known, has no particular connection with Essex, but it tells of an incident in British fire service history which is interesting, not well known, and well worthy of recounting.

September 2019 saw the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, an event which has left an indelible mark on this country's fire service, and November 2019 saw the 80th anniversary of another war involving two European nations, both then neutral in the wider conflict – the "Winter War" (in Europe the winter of 1939-40 was particularly harsh) between Finland and the Soviet Union. The latter country, anxious to increase its territory and move its frontiers further away from its second city, Leningrad (now St Petersburg), invaded the former.

This was a David and Goliath struggle and, initially, the small but very mobile Finnish army inflicted some major defeats on the much larger Red Army. Perhaps in retaliation the Soviets began to bomb Finnish cities. In the democratic world there was much sympathy for the Finns and the British public contributed generously to funds to buy supplies for that country. This sympathy increased as cinema newsreels showed the bombed Finnish towns.

This was the World War II period known as the "Phoney War" when the Civil Defence services in Britain were coming in for a lot of ill-informed public criticism for their enforced inactivity. Perhaps in reaction to this a group of Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) personnel attached to the London Fire Brigade thought that a good way of showing solidarity with Finland would be to send a contingent of firemen and appliances to help fight the fires started by the Red Air Force..Public subscription raised enough money to send 8 AFS firemen with two fire appliances.

By early spring 1940 all arrangements had been made and there was a noticeable element of UK government approval and interest, which was shown by the fact that the firemen were to be accompanied by a station officer from the London Fire Brigade, whose role was described as an "observer". The firemen were to wear their British uniforms – traditional double-breasted fire tunic, trousers, waterproof leggings and fire boots with military style steel helmets carrying the words, "London Fire Volunteers". Their tunics were fitted with plastic buttons to prevent frost burns. There are few photographs of these firefighters, but some of those taken before they left for Finland show them wearing side caps rather than the AFS peaked cap.



Steel helmet of one of the 'Finland Volunteers' in the London Fire Brigade Museum Collection. Believed to be the only known London Finland Volunteer's helmet in existence.(Photo by M. Beale)

In spite of the war there was still some civilian air traffic, particularly by the airlines of neutral nations. The "London Fire Volunteers" left Shoreham Airport in March 1940 on a flight to Amsterdam. From there they flew to Copenhagen and then took another short flight to Malmo in Sweden. From Sweden they continued by sea to Finland. Their fire engines, believed to be a Bedford pump with a Dennis trailer pump, and a Bedford hose-laying lorry, left by sea for Finland via Norway and Sweden.

The "London Fire Volunteers" arrived in Finland just as an armistice ended the fighting. In spite of initial victories it was clear that Finland could not sustain and win a war against its much larger neighbour. The ensuing peace obliged the Finns to cede a lot of territory to the USSR, including a short coastline on the Arctic Ocean. From these territories the Finns resolved to take everything movable, including livestock and

industrial and agricultural plant, and all the population. Local fire brigades were charged with arranging this mass evacuation and the British firemen immediately pitched in to help with this huge task.

Whilst they were doing this Germany invaded and occupied Denmark and Norway and the British fire engines, having got as far as Sweden, were held there by the Swedish authorities. The German occupation meant that the Volunteers were more or less trapped. The LFB station officer, presumably acting on British government orders, left on one of the last ships to sail from Finland's main Arctic port before it was occupied by the Soviets, but the rest of the group elected to stay on in Helsinki. However, the Swedes were persuaded to release their fire engines and these finally reached the Finnish capital.

Now, at last, the Volunteers could do what they had been trained, and had come, to do, fight fires. They joined the Helsinki Fire Brigade. From then on the first attendance at fires in certain parts of the Finnish capital was a Bedford fire engine, flying a Union Flag and crewed by the "London Fire Volunteers" in their distinctive uniforms. If the fire was large enough to make the newsreels Finnish cinema audiences would stand to applaud the British firefighters.

In June 1941 Germany invaded the USSR. Nurturing thoughts of revenge for the earlier defeat and recovery of lost territory, the Finns strengthened relations with Germany and were pressurised into standing down the British firemen, although they did help them find alternative employment. But when Finland formally declared war on the Axis side against the Soviets the Volunteers found themselves interned as, "enemy aliens". However, they were allowed to leave Finland, with British diplomatic and consular staff, for Sweden. There, not having diplomatic status, they found themselves interned again, ironically in a camp administered by the local fire brigade!

There followed high level diplomatic discussions to allow the repatriation of the British diplomats and the "London Fire Volunteers" were included in these arrangements. In one of the war's more unusual incidents the party left Sweden for Germany and travelled through that country in a sealed train to Switzerland. From there they crossed into Unoccupied France and went on to Spain and then to Portugal. From there the last, dangerous and difficult, leg of their journey back to the UK was their own responsibility. It is reported that those who arrived, after the very risky civil airline flight from Lisbon, at Bristol Airport were interrogated at some length as to where they had been and what they had been doing!

The "London Fire Volunteers" and their role in the aftermath of the "Winter War" are still remembered in Finland. Their Bedford pump continued to serve with Helsinki Fire Brigade after their departure and is now believed to be in the brigade's museum along with the hose-laying lorry, although the latter appliance is understood to have needed extensive restoration.