

The Auxiliary Fire Service—A F S

Title 28

I had returned from Manchester to London in the spring of 1943, and after a few months at the South London Paint factory, I had obtained an excellent job [see below] in the autumn of that year. It became obvious that I should do more for the War Effort. Being in a 'reserved occupation' as a research chemist, I was ineligible for the Armed Services, quite apart from the fact that by then I had lost my German nationality, was stateless and as yet unable to become a naturalised British Subject during the War.

With continuing air raids on London, the Civil Defence Services had become highly efficient, and these were open to any citizen of good standing, without regard to nationality. The choice lay between becoming a Warden in the Air Raid Precaution Service and the Auxiliary Fire Service, the A F S. As all fires are chemical events of lesser or greater impact on their surroundings, I chose the AFS. I was accepted and issued with a thick woollen uniform and attached to Station 34 A 2 X, a converted Shell Garage in Pavilion Road at Sloane Square in Chelsea, which had a vacancy. It was apparently the nearest to Baker Street.

The Station consisted of two floors, the ground floor being occupied by the 'Appliances' and a small office, whereas the floor above had rudimentary sleeping facilities for the firemen on duty, but not fighting any fires. An Auxiliary Fire Woman was always on duty in the office, receiving telephone calls from fires and after consultation with the officer-in-charge, would ring the bells for action.

On that signal all firemen on duty would jump up, having slept if possible in their clothes and boots, would race down the narrow steps, jump onto their appliance, start the engines, and with a bell ringing loudly, would emerge into the quiet narrow Pavilion Road. After that, it was up to the Leading Fireman,—a rank I achieved after some months of service—and of course the driver, to find in the blacked-out London streets the address of the fire to which we had been ordered. This was often an exceedingly difficult task.

Once arrived at the correct site of the fire, the leading fireman reported to the officer-in-charge and was told from which angle or direction to fight the fire with his crew of three or four firemen. The hoses were then run out, the pump on a trailer behind the appliance was coupled to a nearby hydrant, and the real hard work started. Two men are essential to point a hose steadily in a given direction, as the high water pressure in the nozzle tended to move unpredictably owing to the reaction of the water jet hitting any solid object. Water spray was also inevitable and the woollen uniform soon became soaked and in winter exceedingly cold and uncomfortable.

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