

# HEADLINERS

## 999 emergency service

### Members of Children's Express went to Holloway fire station to meet Station Manager Bruce Davidson and members of White Watch.

We live on an estate off Caledonian Road where we often see burnt out cars left around. This is the kind of thing firefighters have to deal with all the time.

We wanted to find out what else they do, so we visited Holloway Fire Station and interview Station Manager Bruce Davidson, and Richard, a White Watch Firefighter. This is our report.



### How long have you been a fireman?

Bruce: I've been a firefighter for over 29 years now.

### How long did you train for?

Bruce: Initially when I joined in 1977 the training was for about 12-14 weeks. But I've continued my training throughout my career as a firefighter. When I first joined my training mostly involved use of ladders, procedures of abating fires, how to operate equipment like smoke masks and connecting hoses fire hydrants. We also do a first aid course as well.

### Can you describe your first ever call?

Bruce: As a matter of fact I can remember my first call. And it was a false alarm. We got a call that someone got trapped in lift and when we got there it was a false alarm.

### What was the worst call?

Bruce: To be honest – I can't think of just one incident. I've seen so much from traffic accidents, house fires, to people panicking in lifts. No I can't really say what was worse.

Richard: My worst 999 call was road traffic accident where a guy on a motorbike went under a bus. He died unfortunately.

### Have you ever had someone die on you when you tried to rescue them?

Bruce: Yes, we were searching for someone in the building which had caught fire. But when we found him he was already dead. He died for smoke inhalation.

### Was it hard to forget this and carry on?

Bruce: I guess you live with it for a while but then later on you have another fatality, then you tend to forget the first one. I guess it is like having a row with your partner or kids. You tend to remember the last one, but do you remember the one before, or the one before that, or the one before that. You tend to forget them, I suppose. You tend to remember the exceptional ones which are more dramatic.

### Does your job affect you partner or family?

Bruce: It does affect my wife and children. Sometimes it's not so good, sometimes it's for the best. Because there are benefits to being a fireman – I have time off to look after the children when she's at work I can take them to school and pick them up, so those are the benefits. But then there are days when I've worked Christmas day, or I've worked on their birthdays, work through the night. So yes it does have quite an impact on the family.

### Do you have many hoax callers?

Bruce: It has dropped significantly over the last five years. For example we would have so where in the region of 300 or 350 calls a year which is roughly one a day. But now we get about 50 a year which is one a week.

### What do you put this down to?

Bruce: I think there are two main reasons. One is that there are less phone boxes on the street, and the telephone companies have a policy now that if a phone box gets vandalised they don't replace them. And generally speaking the ones that got vandalised were from the areas where we got false calls from.

The other reason is that most people have mobiles now. And mobiles whether you withhold your number or not, we can still trace the phone. If you make two false calls on your mobile then you are disconnect. So it's mixture of them two.

### Are false calls dangerous?

Bruce: People call us to say there was a road accident when there hasn't been. So while they are out tending to a false call – if another fire occurs in this area there is no firemen in the area.



### Have you ever rescued a cat out of a tree?

Bruce: Rescue no, I've got cats out of a tree. But it's quite dangerous to send a firefighter up a tree to rescue a cat. A cat can jump out at you, or start panicking and lashing out with its claws. I would only send a firefighter to get a cat out of a tree if it was really trapped and it couldn't get down by itself. Other

than that a cat will always come down when it's hungry enough.

### Describe your average day at work?

Bruce: Nowadays I'm desk bound - mainly computer based. I check all systems in the fire station to see if they work. I check to see if records have been kept. I don't do fire-fighting unless it's a big fire, most of my day is office based.

### Is fire-fighting like what we see on the TV?

Bruce: It's not all getting people out of building, putting them on your shoulders and carrying them down ladders. It does happen but it's quite rare. I've never carried someone down a ladder - I've assisted people down a ladder and I've assisted people through buildings a lot. People have this idea that whenever we rescue someone it's big bold brave stuff, it ain't.

Quite often it's quite crude. We will get hold of someone and we will drag them. It's not like we see on the TV. When it's 700/800 degree centigrade and you can't stand up it's too hot and you can't pick them up. If you stand up in that heat your head goes so you have to drag them. You grab them by the leg or the arm and you drag them.

Often the people who are involved in the rescue are injured in the rescue attempt. You can't go up and pick them up especially when they are unconscious, because all their muscles are relaxed. There are ways to pick someone up and we are trained to do it but in reality an unconscious person is incredibly hard to pick and carry.

### Have you ever rescued people for lifts?

Bruce: Many, many times. Although we can laugh and joke about this a lot a people would rather be in a fire than trapped in a lift. Just recently there were children trapped in a lift and one of them needed medication. So sometimes there is a sense of urgency about it. Quite often it's people abusing the system. People jumping up and down in the lift thinking they can get it to stop.

### What types 999 calls would you respond to?

Richard: We do response service call which means anything from people stuck in lifts, people stuck in machinery - like a hand caught in a machine, Flooding, Fires, Road traffic accidents, train accidents anything really you can be called to.

### Describe you average day?

Richard: This is one of the busiest fire stations in London. We start 9am and carry out tests on the engine and our breathing apparatus and make sure that it working. By 10am we're waiting for calls. The White Watch shift is 9am-6pm.

### Do you like what you do?

Richard: I've done a lot of jobs but this is the best job in the world

### Bruce's safety tips at home...

- Make sure your smoke alarm works and check the batteries regularly.
- Whether you live in a flat or a house shut your doors to all rooms.
- Do not mess about with matches, lighters.
- When you are in the kitchen don't leave anything on the stove, or forget to turn off the gas.
- Always have an escape plan. So if the smoke alarm activates in the middle of the night you know what you're going to do.

### About this article

These interviews were carried out by Charlie, Lyndsey, Harley, Dominic, Veronica and Layla.

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