

'Like Peas In A Pod' - My Alerter & Me!

“Damn it! I’ve got to go!”, I said to the young lady who had dressed up for the evening and had just sat down at a quiet table in the corner of a busy pub and was about to take her first sip of a large vodka and lemon. ‘Why?’, she asked, with a puzzled look on her face. “Because I’ve got a bloody ‘shout!’”, I answered. ‘A what?’, she responded. “Oh! I forgot to tell you, didn’t I? I’m a Retained Firefighter!” And, with that, I turned around and was looking for the nearest exit - just about remembering to turn back, chuck a *tenner* on the table and blurt out, “Buy yourself another round, Shaz, and if I’m not back in an hour or so, then call yourself a taxi!”

And, basically, that’s the way it has been for the best part of three decades! Like a man with a gambling addiction, nothing, but nothing, comes between my alerter and me - to the point where, like many of the retained crew members on our station, I check it at least ten times a day, am constantly touching my right hip to make sure it is there - as though I have some kind of nervous tick - and still plan my whole working week around our Drill Night, which, like church on a Sunday to a devout Christian, cannot be missed - unless stricken down by some form of the bubonic plague!

And, even in my small flat, wherever I go, my alerter follows – lounge, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. If I pop into town, then only shops within range of my being able to get back to my car quickly will be frequented, long queues for anything are avoided at all costs and lovely scenic walks through woodlands and forests are put off until the designated times that I know the station is manned and, therefore, I am not needed to ensure a ‘pump’ is kept ‘on the run’. But, why still go to these lengths after so long in the Fire Service? It is not my main employment, nor have I needed to rely on any salary earned from fire duties since 2003. Yes, my medals are on display inside my grandfather’s old cabinet in my lounge, but I am a very low-key, private person who lives alone in one of the most economically deprived areas in the country and have done so for the past twenty-three years with my car parked outside and ready to reverse and swing back around and out, straight onto the main road and then accelerate away. Training shoes are always worn inside the home, a black t-shirt is next to my front door and my keys are visible on the floor at all times. I could afford a comfortable two-

bedroom flat in the suburbs, but that would take me out of range of the all-important first 'pump'; so, why bother to move? Well, when I look at the only two photos I have on display of other crew members with whom I have served since 1991, not one of them is still in the Retained. Of the six, three have gone Wholetime, two have left and one has retired. So, I do wonder, at times, if, in fact, I have been 'left behind', so to speak, especially as I never married, and, because of what happened fourteen years' ago - dating a lady who lived out of range from our station, which damn near cost me my job because I missed so many night 'shouts' - I haven't committed to anything serious that takes me outside of my station radius for fear of not making my quota of call-outs.

So, what is it about these all-important 'shouts' and serving in the Retained that keeps us motivated to plan our lives around a tiny black rectangular box that only takes one A4 battery and both vibrates and bleeps whenever it is sounded by Control? Well, that is a question that differs according to each particular individual; so, at my time of life and current circumstances, I can only answer from a personal perspective.

In my case, it is, without question, the *camaraderie* on station and the sense of belonging that the Retained Service has offered me throughout my adult life. I am not one for ceremonies, I am not used to any fuss being made of me and, being only five feet seven and built like a solid, sturdy Welsh coal miner 'back in the day', I look ridiculous in my dress uniform – to the point that when I visited Downing Street to represent my Fire Authority for Remembrance Day a few years' ago, I didn't bother purchasing the photo taken of me standing on the Prime Minister's doorstep - through the sheer embarrassment of looking like a bespectacled Norman Wisdom! And, also, I am fully aware that I am not the best firefighter on station by a long chalk, as I'm short-sighted, not especially practical or dexterous, and, to make matters worse, almost certainly on the Autistic spectrum. But, nonetheless, nothing has deterred me from training hard physically, remaining competent as a firefighter and 'mucking in' with all crew members, underpinned by a steadfast determination to be 'first in and last out' of any incident, which, when one is based on a station that prides itself on offering the local community the best possible standard of any emergency service,

it is, indeed, a very tall order to keep and maintain on a part-time basis – especially when one is over fifty-five.

And, yes, that type of wholehearted commitment has been restrictive at times, especially when I was younger and wanted to travel and discover the world, and it has also been inconvenient, in disrupting my ability to take off and roam this country in a camper van with a beloved ‘soul mate’ and ‘sleep under the stars’, so to speak. But, being ‘on call’ has had its rewards in offering a regular routine and sense of discipline that has kept me focused and on ‘the straight and narrow’ during my serving decades, as letting down the Fire Service in some way or another, would be sacrilege and tantamount to disgracing one’s own family name.

But, it must be said that there are also times when the wretched alerter can be a nuisance (!) as, like a new-born baby who wakes up at all times of the day or night and needs to be attended to – no matter how one feels – duty calls! It’s as simple as that! And, more alarmingly, the one difference in that particular analogy is that babies do eventually grow up and develop regular sleep patterns, whereas an alerter never does (!) and continues to disturb retained firefighters who have taken on the responsibility of ‘answering its call’ for however long they, themselves, continue to choose serving!

I think every retained firefighter will confess to enjoying the sense of exhilaration when their alerter goes off – especially during the first one or two years. But, at the same time that it is sounding, there is always a split-second thought about how long the ‘shout’ will last and if other employment will be impeded upon. This is true whether one is an employer, employee or, indeed, self-employed – where income can be greatly affected by long call-outs. Other factors on the home front also include: always making sure the cooker is off before leaving one’s abode, if living alone - as we once went on a ‘shout’ only for another appliance to be called to the property of a crew member whose own kitchen was on fire! Also, taps should not be left running – I have been in a shower before and, in haste, have forgotten to switch off the water as I raced out the door, half-dressed and soaking wet – only to face a much larger-than-usual utility bill at the end of that particular quarter! Also, for retained firefighters who are married, it is even more difficult, as family routines, babies and young

children play a major part in having to plan life around an alerter, as getting kids ready for school, picking them up, meal times, shopping trips, a partner's other employment, sleep patterns and school holiday arrangements have to be planned out, well in advance.

And, nowadays, while the majority of 'shouts' occur when I am sitting comfortably at my computer in my lounge or relaxing - book-in-hand - there are still many occasions when it hasn't quite been so convenient, as, for example, being half-way through a shave, sitting on the loo, soaking in a bath, brushing one's teeth, or, even having a haircut and having to wear a beanie hat to the station as the stylist has only got half-way through – and hoping that, for once, the 'pump' has already gone out, in order to avoid the ritual humiliation! And I am sure that, like me, many Retained have been part-way through a large weekly shop at their local supermarket – only to abandon their trolley mid-aisle and run like hell for the exit with perplexed security guards looking on in anxious bemusement! As for spoilt meals: well, I only eat when I'm hungry now, and even Christmas Dinners have 'gone for a Burton' in the past, when the alerter has sounded and the dash for the front door becomes far more important than tucking into a delicious plate of Roast Turkey and cranberry sauce or, indeed, pulling a Christmas cracker with the family. And, if you add to that, the fact that I have not touched a drop of alcohol whilst carrying my alerter since I very first joined the Retained almost thirty years' ago , then I think you can gauge the type of commitment that is offered when one joins the Fire Service with the intention of serving one's community.

So, the next time somebody calls out, "Oi! Mate! Can you move your car quick, please! I need to get out - I've got a 'shout'!" - do spare a thought for the sacrifices he or she is making in order to keep the public safe.