

NEWS REPORT



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25 YEARS ON: WHY WE MUST NEVER FORGET THE LESSONS OF KINGS CROSS

*By Sian Griffiths,
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ON 18 NOVEMBER, it will be the 25th anniversary of the Kings Cross fire, the worst incident I have attended in my career. Thirty-one people, including highly-respected Station Officer Colin Townsley of Soho red watch, lost their lives. Many more suffered physically and mentally.

At the time, I was at my first posting, Manchester Square, and had less than three years' service. That night, I was in the mess, cooking supper (I was mess manager) when the bells went down at 1936 hours. Only the pump went, with the station officer (who rode pumps back then) in charge. Those left behind didn't think anything of it.

After less than 15 minutes, the bells went down again. We were mobilised to the same incident—make pumps six, Kings Cross station. As we proceeded on the bell, down the Euston Road, a distance of about two miles, several urgently-transmitted priority calls came over the radio, one after the other, making pumps eight, then 10, then 12. This was alarmingly unusual, and on arrival the sight that met us was one of

complete horror and devastation.

There were plumes of smoke belching from every underground orifice, into a night that was eerily lit by the yellow street lights. Fire engines were abandoned and breathing apparatus tallies strewn everywhere. The respective firefighters were nowhere to be seen, apart from the two pump operators who were running around like demons. An assistant divisional officer appeared out of the smoke and quickly briefed our officer-in-charge. I and my partner were ordered to rig in BA and start-up. Our ominous task was to descend the stairs, down into the thick, acrid smoke, and to assist crews already down on the concourse.

Just as we were about to go down into the smoke, a crew suddenly appeared coming up the stairs. They were carrying a casualty, who they hurriedly laid on the floor. I didn't immediately realise that this person was a firefighter. But then the smoke cleared and his tunic was visible. It was ripped open, and the crew commenced CPR. It was incredibly shocking, and as I walked past to descend the stairs, into what appeared to be a living hell, I recognised the casualty as Station Officer Townsley.

I didn't know what to think. The conditions underground were horrendous and confusing.

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There was thick smoke, no visibility, screaming and shouting, increases in temperature as the trains went through the tunnels, and bodies all over the place. It was truly awful.

I was later tasked with collecting and removing bodies to the street where they were officially pronounced dead, put into body bags and removed to the temporary morgue. It was an experience I was loathed to repeat.

The whole incident was uniquely horrifyingly and shocking, and has left its mark on so many, including me, both physically and psychologically. Everyone in attendance that night, especially the initial crews, was completely grief-stricken and distraught and none had ever seen anything like it. The absolute heartbreak of Colin Townsley dying while trying to save a woman left everyone shocked and stunned. Colin was a fair and approachable man, one of the old-school governors, fiercely loyal to his watch and his family and tough as old boots. Returning back to our stations that night, knowing that Colin never would again, had a devastating effect on everyone.

However, like most tragedies, some good comes from bad, and there was a public inquiry that guaranteed improvements in many areas, including fire safety, health and safety in the workplace and the banning of smoking on London Underground premises.

MR DESMOND Fennel QC, who chaired the public inquiry, said poignantly: “The message is that nobody responsible for safety can be complacent that all potential hazards have been identified or that the cumulative effect of individually unlikely events can be predicted, let alone ignored.”

This legacy of improvement in safety is now being treated with contempt by those who manage fire and rescue services throughout the UK, with the misinformed notion that we are now so “safe” we can afford to close stations, cut jobs and rest on our laurels. This attitude is especially disrespectful to Colin and all who have lost their lives, both firefighters and members of the public, over the years in further catastrophic incidents—

incidents that have provided the service with dreadful but valuable lessons that have continually made our job safer.

But we all know that our job is so unpredictable and at any moment all hell can break loose, no matter how many home fire safety visits we complete and smoke alarms we fit.

Improvements in safety and spreading the word is of great importance, but it can never take the place of fire stations and bums on seats.

It is vital that we remember the lessons of Kings Cross and the words of Desmond Fennel. Station closures and job losses are short-sighted and dangerous. They should not be the price we pay for bailing out the banks. It is a recipe for disaster that cannot be reversed once implemented, and will only lead to death and destruction for many, including more firefighters like Colin Townsley.

JOIN THE RMT DEMONSTRATION TO REMEMBER THE LESSONS OF KINGS CROSS

THE RMT UNION will hold a demonstration outside Kings Cross station on Sunday 18 November at 11.00am to commemorate the Kings Cross fire on its 25th anniversary and to highlight the continued need for a fully-staffed and safe tube network.

The demonstration is especially important in light of London Underground documents, seen by the RMT, which plan an unattended network. This would include automated trains and would necessitate the ripping up of the safety regulations, including minimum staffing levels, which came about in response to the tragedy.

The RMT is encouraging FBU members to attend the demonstration, which will be addressed by FBU general secretary Matt Wrack, RMT general secretary Bob Crow and Labour LFEPA member Andrew Dismore.