

## The Society for the Protection of Life from Fire

“Giving recognition to individuals who perform acts of bravery in rescuing others from fire.”

Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local communities were responsible for tackling fires in their neighbourhoods and depended on fire brigades made up from local volunteer firefighters. With the spread of domestic fire insurance, fire insurance companies set up their own brigades of professional firefighters in the major cities with the object of extinguishing fires at properties they insured - which they identified with their individual ‘fire mark’ shields, a few of which can still be observed on old houses. Whilst their primary objective was to protect the insured buildings as much as possible, these brigades and their fire engines were inevitably involved in the rescue of occupants trapped in the buildings and acts of great bravery were performed by firefighters with the primitive equipment at their disposal - some of which incidentally can be seen in the museum of the Chartered Insurance Institute.

In London, the insurance companies got together in 1833 to amalgamate their fire brigades and engines into one body and to this end, in 1836, they set up the Society for the Protection of Life from Fire. The society enjoyed Queen Victoria’s patronage from 1837 until the end of her reign and consequently the society assumed the title “The Royal Society for the Protection of Life from Fire”. Whether the actual paper work to formalise this was completed is a matter of doubt but Queen Victoria herself approved the design of the Society’s medal bearing this title and she donated the then not inconsiderable sum of ten guineas annually to its funds so presumably she recognized it as such. The society extended its firefighting activities to other major towns and cities and in addition financed research and development of fire engines and rescue equipment. From its earliest days, the emphasis of the society’s objects was on life-saving and it awarded its own bronze and silver medals which Craig described yesterday in recognition of acts of bravery both by its own professional firefighters and by members of the public.

The responsibility for fighting fires in London was transferred again in 1867 to the Metropolitan Board of Works (and in 1899 to the LCC) to whom the society transferred all its fire stations and engines as well as the brigade of professional firefighters. The London Fire Brigade of those days together with its Chief are immortalized by W.S.Gilbert in the operetta ‘Iolanthe’ where the Fairy Queen sings “O Captain Shaw, type of true love kept under, could thy brigade with cold cascade quench my great love I wonder”.

Over the next 15 years other local authorities followed suit and, with the transfers of the society’s professional fire brigades, it fell to the local authorities to make awards for acts of bravery to their professional fire fighters, in the same way as local police authorities recognized acts of bravery by police officers. Thus, by 1881, the main activities of the society had, as it were, been nationalized but there remained a desire to continue to recognize individual acts of bravery by members of the public and the society reformed itself with this objective.

Today this recognition takes the form of the award of framed certificates recording the act of bravery and, in cases of exceptional heroism, the award of a bronze or silver medal. Where the hero is a child under 17 a cash award of £50 may also be made. The medals are inscribed "DUTY AND HONOR" and the archaic spelling of HONOR without the U, together with the date 1843 reproduce the inscription and design of the medal adopted in that year (albeit with the omission of the word 'Royal').

More anachronistically however, the emphasis on DUTY follows the pattern established when we made awards to fire fighters in our own employment. This is no longer the case. Today, we make awards to recognize spontaneous acts of heroism motivated by a sense of humanity rather than a sense of duty. We take the view that in the course of duty professional members of the fire and police services knowingly expose themselves to life-threatening situations and in doing so act bravely to save lives - and such actions are recognized by the authority concerned. For our part, we do make awards in cases where members of the fire or police services who are 'off duty' involve themselves in acting to save lives or, if on duty, perform acts of heroism beyond what might be expected in the course of duty.

The important point I want to make is that our awards recognize acts of bravery 'over and above the call of duty' notwithstanding the wording on our medal! The submissions we receive from police and fire service authorities invariably report acts of bravery committed by individuals spontaneously or impetuously and without consideration for their own personal safety. Very often these are 'Have a go' actions in circumstances where in these days of 'Health and Safety' consciousness the official advice would be "Leave it to the professionals".

Whilst our approach echoes that adopted by the Home Office in relation to the Albert medal, we have perhaps created our own construction of heroism. Thus we do not indulge in the lengthy correspondence process described by John yesterday, instead the Trustees meet regularly to discuss each submission so that we do not have the same difficulties of construction as caused the Home Office officials so much heart-searching. The result speaks for itself: Over the years we have received 27,000 such reports vouched for by senior Fire Service or Police officers and, in the majority of these, we have awarded certificates and occasionally medals.

Most of the fires reported to us nowadays arise from one of four main causes: motor vehicle accidents, discarded smoking materials, chip pan fires and explosion of escaping gas - happily nowadays there are far fewer reports of electrical fires than in the past. In the case of domestic fires, one criterion we adopt in considering submissions is: Did the rescuer actually enter the burning or smoke-filled premises, as opposed to rendering assistance from outside. E.g. placing a ladder up against an upper floor window.

Persons rescued are, more often than not, young children or elderly and disabled. Smoking in bed is a frequent cause of fire, as are 'chip pan' fires' when the person

concerned has left a cooking pan on a stove and dozed off whilst watching TV or after having had a few drinks. In some cases the rescuer's attempts are impeded by the victim and resistance by persons under the influence of alcohol or drugs increases the danger to which the rescuer is himself exposed. The occasional case of a person attempting suicide by dousing himself with petrol and setting fire to himself poses a very serious danger to a rescuer - the last thing that person wants is to be 'rescued'!

Perhaps I can conclude by detailing three typical cases where awards have recently been made based fairly literally on the reports we received from police forces and which tend to be written in their own particular form of officialese:

#### Motor vehicle accident

Two cars collided on the A6 road north of Luton. A passing motorist stopped to help and found one of the drivers trapped by his legs and feet in the foot well. Assuring himself that medical help had been called, the motorist dealt with the other car but then heard screams coming from the first driver.

He returned to find smoke and flames invading the foot well but, with great bravery and disregard for his own safety, he leant into the car and managed to extricate the trapped driver's feet. He dragged him out through the driver's window and to a safe distance from the car just as it burst into flames behind them. In the course of his actions, the rescuer suffered burns to his hands.

*Recommendation from Bedfordshire Police*

#### Chip Pan Fire

Late one night in August, in South Wales, an elderly lady fell asleep at home after lighting a chip pan. She was fortunate that two passing police officers, on patrol at 2.00am, noticed the fire in her kitchen. They acted immediately, alerted other emergency services, and without regard for their personal safety forced an entry to the premises.

They woke and rescued the occupant from her home and used wet blankets to extinguish the blaze. Their prompt actions not only saved the life of the occupant but also stopped the spread of fire to adjoining premises in which families were asleep. The actions of serving police officers, when on duty, are not normally recognised by the Society for awards but in this exceptional case the officers were presented with certificates for their meritorious actions. *Recommendation from South Wales Police*

#### Explosion of escaping gas

One summer day there was an explosion and fire in a semi-detached house in Birmingham. The occupant was an 89 year old lady who was virtually housebound. Her next-door neighbour, who did shopping and cooking for her, rushed round to find a scene of devastation. The windows had been blown out and she had to climb over debris to enter the house.

She found the elderly lady in the hallway, badly shaken, took her to the least affected room, went into the kitchen, turned off controls on the gas hob to cut off the gas escaping from unlit rings, used water from the sink to extinguish small fires in the kitchen, and then used a wet towel to tend burns suffered by the elderly lady.

*Recommendation from West Midlands Police*

