

Firefighter Fleur Lombard QGM

27th May 1974 to 4th February 1996

The story of Fleur Lombard and her ambition to become a firefighter began in Derbyshire, when she was accepted to serve on one of their retained fire stations at Whaley Bridge, in the north of the County.

Seeking to achieve a full-time career in the fire service, twenty-year-old Fleur was to be accepted by Avon Fire Brigade, becoming one of only eight women amongst Avon's 700 serving firefighters. At her graduation ceremony in 1994, Fleur received the Silver Axe Award as the most outstanding recruit on her Training School.

Just two years had passed since Fleur had enthusiastically joined her colleagues on Blue Watch at Speedwell. However, on 4th February 1996, a normal routine day on duty at the station, was soon turned into tragedy, courtesy of an arsonist who for some reason decided to set a fire at the local supermarket.

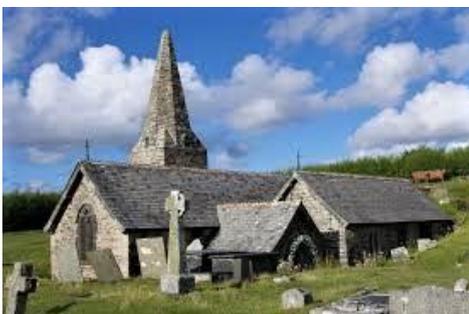
The initial call of "smoke issuing" at Leo's in Staple Hill, Bristol was attended by appliances from Speedwell and Kingswood Fire Stations, whose crews arrived to find the building was already heavily smoke-logged and with persons possibly reported to be still in the building. Two breathing apparatus teams were immediately committed to conduct their search.



With the fire rapidly growing in intensity, the Officer-in-Charge gave the order to implement evacuation procedures. The first team had already reached safety, but as the second team neared their exit point, a massive and unexpected flashover occurred, trapping Firefighter Lombard inside. Despite the risks to their own safety, Leading Firefighter Seaman and Firefighter Foley immediately re-entered the building, only to find their colleague had sadly sustained fatal injuries.

In recognition of their brave actions on this fateful day, Leading Firefighter Rob Seaman was awarded the George Medal and Firefighter Pat Foley received the Queen's Commendation for Bravery. Fleur Lombard was the first female firefighter to die on duty in peacetime Britain and in recognition of her bravery, was posthumously awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal & Chief Fire Officer's Commendation.

Fleur's funeral service took place at the Cathedral of All Saints, in the family home town of Derby on 13th February 1996. Traffic came to a halt and shoppers stood in silence as more than 1,000 uniformed firefighters came to pay their respects, forming a guard of honour as a turntable ladder bearing her coffin moved slowly between their ranks. Draped in the Union flag and bearing her fire helmet, Fleur's coffin, was carried into the Cathedral by six of her colleagues.



Family holidays were always spent in a special part of Cornwall and it was therefore only fitting for Fleur to rest in the place where her family had spent so many precious and happy times together.

The tiny Church of St. Enodoc, Trebetherick, stands on a hill overlooking the Camel Estuary and there in a secluded corner of its Churchyard, a memorial plaque marks Fleur's final resting place.



Tragically, two days before we lost Fleur, Retained Firefighter's Steve Griffin and Kevin Lane from South Wales also lost their lives whilst trying to rescue children from a house fire. Following this tragic loss of life, and in their memory, the Daily Mirror and Sun newspapers spearheaded a fundraising campaign to raise money for firefighters badly injured in the line of duty.

Jubilee House Rehabilitation & Therapy Centre was built by The Fire Services National Benevolent Fund (now the Fire Fighters Charity) in 1995, providing physiotherapy facilities, hydrotherapy and nursing care, for injured firefighters.



Some £68,000 in donations were received from the newspaper appeal and in memory of Steve, Kevin and Fleur, their families presented a cheque to the Charity, to help finance a new £250,000 state of the art gymnasium at the Eamont Bridge Centre, near Penrith in Cumbria.



Meanwhile, back in Avon, the Bristol Evening Post, Fleur's family and members of Avon Fire Brigade were supported by Bristol residents in raising a further £50,000 in her perpetual memory.

A project to provide less abled facilities and the conversion of two bungalows at the Charity's Harcombe House Convalescent Centre in Devon, was jointly funded by The Fleur Lombard Trust and the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund.

At a special presentation on 2nd March 2002, Benevolent Fund Chairman Jim

Connor (pictured left) gratefully receives a cheque for £25,000 from Fleur's parents and sister. A plaque dedicated to Fleur can now be found in a quiet part of the garden known to everyone as "Fleur's Corner".



The life and death of Fleur Lombard will forever be imprinted into the minds of our "Fire Brigade Family" and in her memory, this memorial stands in Broad Street, Downend, Bristol, where each year, on the anniversary of her death, local Bristolians and Emergency Services colleagues attend a remembrance ceremony. Standing together in a minute's silence, we pay our respects and remember her in our own way.

Fleur left us before her Fire Service career had the chance to flower and blossom (as befits her name) so maybe it is only proper for those who knew and loved her the most to continue her story.

Penny & Chriss Deverill MBE
Avon Fire & Rescue Service Pensioners Association



"Article copied from the Mail on Sunday. February 11, 1996"

ALTHOUGH I have never said so in print, there are times when I have found myself questioning the motivation of parents who display themselves not once but almost day after day on TV bemoaning the death of a loved child from accident to misadventure and proclaiming their willingness to lead a crusade to prevent other children suffering the same fate. I have sometimes even wondered whether their love for their lost child had been as great as their liking for seeing themselves on the box.

I felt nothing of that, quite the reverse, when I saw the father of 21-year-old Fleur Lombard, the firewoman who died when the roof of that supermarket fell in on her. Mr Lombard was clearly moved. He had to fight back the tears. But his message was a brave and noble one. 'She died doing what she wanted' he said. 'I hope that what happened to her will not deter other women from joining the fire service.' His daughter was a brave as well as a lovely girl who must have been just as proud of her fine father as he clearly was of her.



BRAVE: Firewoman Fleur Lombard

Fleurs Birthday. May 27th, the “Day of Driven Dedication”.

Reflections by Roger and Jane Lombard



She's sitting at the dining room table surrounded by the papers of homework but gazing out of the window. Mum sticks her head round the door to ask if everything is OK and gets a surprising reply. "Yes, fine ... except how would you and Dad feel about me becoming a firefighter?" This takes a bit of shuffling in the brain cells for Mum and Dad who had, until that moment, thought Fleur's plan for post-school was university and a career in law.

The first attempt, an application and interview with Derbyshire Fire and Rescue Service didn't go too well. The feedback was that they thought a bit "head girlish". Fleur neither agreed with the assessment, nor was deterred by it. As several people in more than one fire service were to subsequently learn the hard way, discouragement wasn't on her agenda and indeed was more likely to result in a determination to prove the person wrong.

So, it was that persistence led to her getting a job as a retained firefighter based at the Whaley Bridge station in north Derbyshire. The problem was that she lived some way from the fire station and when there was a "shout" the pump was already full and on its way by the time she arrived at the station. Indeed, the local garage got some panel beating business when Fleur, in an ancient MG Midget, was on the way in and the pump on the way out, met in the entrance of the station, to the minor detriment of both MG and gate post, but not, of course, the pump.

This wouldn't do at all so Fleur took on a part time (unpaid) job as a volunteer classroom assistant at the primary school she had herself attended 8 or 9 years previously. Why? Because the school was only 100 yards or so from the station. This had two immediate effects – her seats on the pump went up dramatically and the kids at school had regular excitement as Miss Lombard who had run out of the classroom, bleeper going, came past on the pump to the waves and cheers of the kids (and probably irritation of the teachers!).

As it happened Fleur was already physically well-built and fit and this helped in her training. The sound home-office philosophy (which I hope still exists) that there should be no gender differentiation in the requirements for physical strength and stamina were less of a challenge to her, never the less I remember her gleefully reporting that she had struggled with carrying the dummy over the shoulder up/down the 15m ladder until the training officer had offered a choice of "Do it Lombard or f*** off home". That may have been politically incorrect then, it may be now, but the training officer was obviously sharp enough to understand what would motivate her to achieve the task – which she did!

The ability she developed came in handy amusing friends. She would carry her 16-stone dad over her shoulder up, three flights of stairs in our house and still be less breathless than her old dad when he had to climb the stairs himself!

The desire to be a full-time firefighter was undiminished and during her time as a retained firefighter she certainly attended interviews with (at least) North Yorkshire Fire Service, Avon Fire Brigade and of course Derbyshire. In the end, she received simultaneous offers from Derbyshire and Avon. With no disrespect intended to the worthy officers who man the station at Buxton in North Derbyshire a major factor in her decision to opt for Avon was that she would have a busier time in Bristol.

Fleur was not a feminist and rigorously rejected any suggestions that she might be (remember that in 1994 female firefighters were much rarer creatures than they are now). She would say that her gender was irrelevant – she was a firefighter pure and simple. She had (like her Mum and Dad) little time for political correctness and was impatient if her male colleagues appeared to be expressing concern for her in a fire situation. Her view was that there was a job to be done and it didn't include worrying about her safety any more than the safety of the rest of the team.

Winning the Silver Axe Award was a source of pride both to her and to her Mum and Dad but she recognised that the achievement was just as, or more, likely to draw teasing or mischief from her station colleagues. And indeed, it did. She no doubt went through the full gamut of tricks and challenges which confront new recruits on station and maybe one or two besides. She was particularly amused by taking off her helmet after a fire threat had been eliminated at a school to reveal not only her blonde hair but (unknown to her at the time) the ring of bootblack that had transferred from the inside of her helmet to her head.

There is an almost inevitable differentiation between male and female firefighters in that whilst they apply the same skills and training there can be a difference in mental attitude and behaviour and the trick is to recognise and make the most of those differences where they exist.

Several letters we received after the loss of Fleur cited how her behaviour in particular, had helped a situation. As an example, her watch attended a minor fire at an old folks' home at night, one Christmas. The residents were obviously upset and distressed but Fleur took her helmet off, sat down at the piano and led a Christmas carol singalong.

In complete contrast one of the most offensive articles by a well-known female journalist in one of the daily papers, after her death, suggested that it showed there was no place for women firefighters. The writer said that when she was trapped in a burning building she wanted to see a burly male firefighter coming in through the window. Fleur might have replied that supposing the journalist's child was trapped under a lorry as a result of an RTA, would that distressed child be more reassured by the sight of a strange man or someone who looked and sounded like mum wriggling in to rescue them?

The conviction of Martin Cody for setting the fire in which Fleur lost her life was another demonstration that the law can be an ass. The poor lad clearly needed help with a mental disorder which the legal process denied him. As a result of which, although he now lives in another part of the country, he has apparently continued to be a nuisance to the local fire service.

Those who have attended the funeral of their own child will know that there is little to recommend the experience. Inevitably you look to find positive outcomes to offset the negative and whilst Fleur's ambition had been to become the first female CFO we, her parents, are reassured that she debatably made a greater contribution in death than she could have hoped for in life. The high-profile nature of her loss brought about national changes which have increased the safety of those who still serve us so well in preventing and, when necessary, defeating fires.

Following her death Fleur was hailed a hero/heroine. She would have regarded this as bizarre, she would have said that she wasn't any braver than the next person and that it was just about getting an admittedly dangerous job done. She would also no doubt have added that she wouldn't have gone into the building (or been asked to) if she'd known she was going to be killed.

Following her death there was an astonishing outpouring of generosity from national media and the public alike. The Daily Mirror and the Sun both made generous donations in memory of not only Fleur but the retained firefighters Kevin Lane and Stephen Griffin who had died two days earlier in a house fire in Blaenau. A majority of that money went towards the improvement of the gymnasium facility at Jubilee House, the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund rehabilitation centre near Penrith. We were deeply moved by a diverse range of financial donations we received in the post. The Post Office itself demonstrated extraordinary initiative. Letter addressed to - for example - "Firefighter Fleur's parents, Derbyshire" were delivered routinely.

"The Sequel" by John D Terry OBE. Trustee

During 1996, funds rapidly accumulated from a variety of sources local to Avon Fire Brigade. Generous donations were received from members of the Public and fellow colleagues together with tangible sums from Chambers of Commerce, individual Businesses and Newspapers the total of which were used to establish a Fleur Lombard Trust Fund and a separate Fleur Lombard Bursary Fund.

The Trust Fund was used to make a substantial grant towards the cost of converting two separate apartments in order to cater for the special needs of disabled Fire Fighters and their dependants whilst attending the Benevolent Fund facility at Harcombe House, Chudleigh, Devon for rehabilitation/recuperation. Other local memorial tributes were also funded.

The Bursary Fund was set up in Fleur's honour to perpetuate her memory in the Fire Service by providing an opportunity to ensure that lessons are learned from tragedies and that 'Best Practice' prevails. These objectives to be achieved by the grant of Bursaries to volunteer junior members of both operational and support staff desiring to develop their vocational education by travelling to study relevant Fire Service topics at units based elsewhere in the U.K., Europe and beyond.

Take up has averaged at least one award each year and some very worthwhile research has been obtained and presented from around the world on such diverse activities as Public fire safety education, command and control of incidents, dealing with disabilities, operational tactics using helicopters and equipment and methods for animal rescue. All participants have found the experience both enlightening and very beneficial,

It is hoped that this facility will be available for many years to come.