

The Star, Monday, 15th December 1941

“Flirted With Death a Thousand Times”
Former Sheffield Fire Chief’s Lead in Big Blitz Fire
(From a Special Correspondent)

This summer I saw the biggest fire I ever wish to see. German bombers were the cause of it, and they kept coming back to feed it. Day was turned to night and night to day. Filthy black smoke blotted out the heavens.

Under that black canopy I saw heroes die. I saw fire spread terrifying - so much so that the whole population - men. Women, girls and boys - were all called in to help.

This reached such a pass that a radio call for help was circulated and the blaze was overcome but many good men died. When the outbreak started only local fire brigades were engaged, but finally the firemen were numbered in hundreds.

The Home Office were consulted and they sent down a man to take supreme command.

That man now Chief Fire Officer Tom Breaks, of the Northern Region, and formerly Chief of Sheffield Fire Brigade, proved a dauntless and indomitable leader. He flirted with death a thousand times.

Risk and adversity thrilled him, and his firemen pulled with him all the time. Water from the hoses turned to steam.

Firemen Collapsed

Men literally frizzled as they toasted before the blaze. They stood to their hoses, gaunt, blackened figures, until they collapsed, they ate while they worked, sucking chocolate or milk tablets.

Casualties grew. Over the radio an appeal for clothing brought more than tree tons within a few hours.

Men went for treatment, burned and injured... some by fumes, other by flames and many by machine-gun bullets, for the raiders had gunned them down as they worked.

Amateur nurses - Florence Nightingales all of them - went without sleep. They made tea for the exhausted firemen and handed over lighted cigarettes. Then they provided clean clothes.

A few hours sleep and they were back again at their tasks. Hot meals were provided... Bacon and chips... steak and onions... stewed apple and custard... pies... cheese... veal and lamb.

Hoses Burned

Hoses were burned, but the men persevered and led new hose lines back as soon as they were available.

Tragedy came when five brave men lost their lives. Next day their bodies were recovered charred beyond recognition.

But the fight went on. More Nazi planes came over and there were more casualties.

Then came our aircraft... that was the end of the raiding. But not before a direct hit had shattered a building in which firemen were resting.

Never Gave Up

To safeguard his men Mr. Breaks instructed every man to acquaint himself with the avenues of escape.

Lanes were prepared cleared of all obstacles and outlined with petrol flares at all strategic points, for day was still as night with the clouds of smoke.

Yet with gum boots burned and feet blistered and fingers scorched. These firemen of Britain never gave up. They stood at attention and held on until relieved.

Everybody, firemen and civilians behaved throughout with bravery and generosity. There were tears and there were prayers.

Chief Fire Officer now wears the O.B.E. There were other awards - 13 George Medals, two British Empire Medals, and numerous commendations.

Sheffield Service

Mr. Breaks was the Chief Fire Officer at Sheffield from April 1923 to April 1937.

In 1937 he was appointed by the Home Office as the first inspector of the fire brigades division, later becoming deputy chief inspector.

On the formation of the N.F.S. he was appointed to Newcastle as Chief Regional Fire Officer, No. 1 Region.

As well as the O.B.E. he holds the King's Fire Brigade Medal for distinguished service while in charge of Sheffield Fire Brigade, and has on four occasions been awarded the silver medal of the Society for the Protection of Life from Fire.