

The bleeps went down in the early hours of the morning. Instantly alert, I concentrate and decode the tinny message that crackles over the tannoy. One appliance Rickmansworth to attend a boat fire. Grand Union Canal. Hampton Hall Farm. That was an easy one. Knew exactly where that was.

The canal is the lifeline that runs right across Ricky and we'd often train on and around it. Practice how to deal with the variety of incidents that occur on its banks, of which a barge fire was not that uncommon.

Blue lights reflected on the lock gates as we trundled over the bridge by the White Bear and swung left down Moor Lane, rather than proceed on one of our more usual routes, up Batchworth Hill towards Mount Vernon Hospital. Rumor had it that someone on Blue Watch had once jumped out of the appliance and ran up the hill faster than the driver could motor; blues, twos and all.

We turned into the track that led down to the cut. Smoke billowed under the full moon; an iridescent haze hung above the moorings in the distance. Tonight though, there was one small problem. The Dutch barge on fire was on the opposite bank. Our training cut in. Go to Plan B. Bridge a ladder across, but the boats were too closely parked up – no gaps to fit the ladder. We try plan C - commandeer a rowing boat – but there are none available for hire tonight. Maybe plan D - Use one of the other boats as a pontoon, but they are all so heavily lashed to the bank, that too was impossible.

Now on plan E, we'd have to hare back, park up at the bridge and run down the tow path from there. Now that isn't as easy as you think as five minutes later, I'm wearing a fifty-two-pound breathing apparatus set, pushing a light weight pump laden with hose and other ancillary equipment past all the other boats. If I can explain something here. A light weight pump is far from light weight. Take a Coventry Climax car engine, weld it to a frame and add a centrifugal fire pump. It has four handles for, as health and safety demands – for a four-person lift. It does have a set of wheels you can hook on underneath for transporting it long distances and winding up the recruits getting them to try and bump start it. But here I am all on my Jack Jones pushing as fast as my little legs will let me.

I waddled along, back down my cycle route into work, unable now to admire the well-stocked planters and canal artwork of the narrowboats. Small mammals scurried out of my path, an owl hooted and the acrid stench of smoke grew stronger. I reached the barge and immediately set in the pump. Tightening the suction hose and basket and strainer, then launching them into the cut, I hand cranked the pump into life, it caught first time – a right result, then primed. Full revs, yank the priming handle down and listen for the engine to change tone and watch for the jet of steam that plumes out of the exhaust. Crack the delivery open and hey-presto water flowed.

I snatch a length of delivery hose from my colleague who's just turned up and run it out. It uncoils and snaps to life as the water pressurizes it. I have sometimes seen Adders swimming along the cut, but the hose was now an anaconda, hissing and spitting water onto the fire.

We start up our breathing apparatus and wrestle the hose into position. With a snap, a bolt cropper sees to the lock on the hatch. A good sign that no one is home. A volcano of heat erupts and we descend through it, down into the underworld. If you thought setting up was hard then think on. We had to search the barge. One to make sure no one was home and second to find the source of the fire. Inside, with the intense heat of an oven and zero visibility, we had to stay together and work our way along the length of the boat. All whilst dragging that anaconda along for the ride. Even this narrowboat with all its nooks and crannies was hard to search. Trust me, I've been lost in a toilet before, unable to orientate and find the doorhandle.

We found the fire, the log-burner stove had gotten too hot and cooked the surrounding wood panels, which in turn had moldered and smoldered before everything else combustible had flared up too. With the minimum of water, we put the fire out. I didn't want to sink the boat whilst we were still inside. All that steam made for a very uncomfortable life, still it beats paying to go to the sauna.

Job, jobbed and running low on air, we exit into the cool outside. Standing on the towpath, sweat, hanging round our heads and shoulders like the autumn mist that floated on the water; we briefed the guvnor who'd just turned up. No thanks, no recognition, just his directive – well don't stand around then – get on with it – all this equipment isn't going to make itself up.

We stand in the blueness of this moonlight moment and laugh. All in a good night's work.