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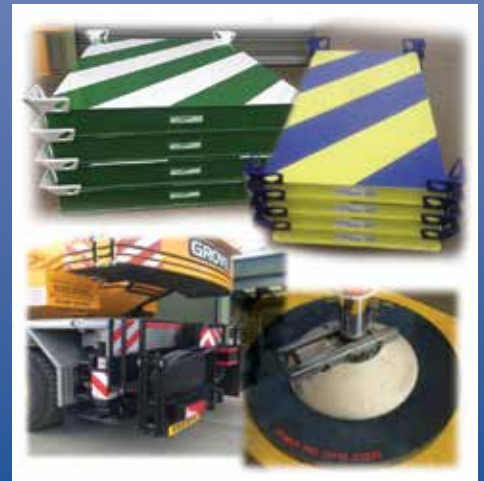
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Bigger platforms needed

Even though the media had a field day over the Grenfell Tower tragedy, it was several weeks before the BBC spotted the fact that London Fire Brigade had let down the people of London - particularly those living in tower blocks - through its utter failure to realise that multi-storey buildings constructed of steel and concrete can burn. **All Adorian - ex-IPAF managing director - gives his view on the subject.**

Looking at the number of high-rise residential flats in London - quite apart from the increasing number of high-rise office blocks - there can be no doubt that London Fire Brigade is seriously under equipped to deal with such fires and it is only a matter of luck that such an accident has not happened before.

When construction on these particular buildings commenced in the 1970's, I ran a company within John Laing Construction Group which was responsible for the marketing of a wide range of powered access equipment, hitherto used almost exclusively by local authorities for street lighting and fire brigades for firefighting and rescue.

At that time, the largest aerial platform in the world reached 45 metres (15 floors) and was available

in firefighting mode. I spent a considerable amount of time trying to persuade three successive chief officers of the London Fire Brigade to try such a machine for firefighting and rescue duties. At that time the largest machine available in the UK for firefighting and rescue would only reach 26 metres (8 floors).

There are now at least three manufacturers in Europe which produce machines capable of reaching 30 floors, all mounted on chassis which comply fully with UK road regulations. One of the manufacturers has been supplying machines in firefighting and rescue mode for years. There is no good reason why London Fire Brigade is not equipped with such machines. Its commissioner sounded so like her predecessors from the 70's, reeling out the reasons for not

doing something, instead of looking to take positive action to prevent unnecessary loss of life. Now, far too late for those who perished, she says they would be looking at the possibility of buying big platforms.

What more does it take for London Fire Brigade to wake up, demand the immediate finance from the Home Office and order two or preferably three machines for London. £3 million is petty cash on top of the total cost of this disaster.

Yes, the machines are large and heavy, but so are the thousands of lorries that deliver goods all over London every day of the week. Fire brigades worldwide use them successfully in far more constricted areas than London.

Watching the tower burning, it was obvious there was no pre-prepared plan for tackling such a blaze in that location, and I was shocked to see the commissioner wasting time talking to the press, when she should have been concentrating ways of extinguishing the fire than simply spraying water into a window almost at the base of the serious blaze. Knowing that these high-rise buildings were as liable to catch fire as any other building in London, why was a plan not in place to extinguish such fires and more importantly to rescue people on the floors just above the fire?

These buildings should have been subject to a thorough risk assessment by London Fire Brigade many years ago. A plan would have been prepared to include the method of tackling any fire - both inside and outside of the building - the rescue of inhabitants and limiting the danger to the fire crews.



It would have specified the need for equipment - routine and specialised - and set out how it should be set up and used for any conceivable fire situation. Access to the scene should also be clarified - quite clearly access for large vehicles to all sides of the building was appalling, if not impossible.

We are told that the fire started on the fourth floor in the early hours of the morning and from news film, it seems that the initial spread of fire upwards was relatively slow. However once it took hold on the outside panelling the highly combustible material gave off toxic fumes, which was almost certainly oil based. In view of the lack of appropriate firefighting and rescue equipment and the access problems to the site, a risk assessment would have shown that the best way to fight such a fire would have involved the use of foam cannons, such as those mounted on airfield crash tenders. Four portable foam cannons could have quickly been set-up around the building with the high-pressure water supply to each cannon fed from fire appliances parked well away from the building.

As long ago as the mid 1970's my company supplied two such foam cannon -mounted on scissor lifts attached to lightweight vehicles - to the BP refinery on the Isle of Grain in Kent to cover the tanker unloading

dock and the giant oil storage tanks. These machines were relatively small, lightweight and could be readied for action in minutes. Being mobile and small, they could be placed where they were needed.

Had London Fire Brigade done its homework on high rise building fires, they could so easily have had such equipment available at relatively low cost as once the foam cannon is in position it would only require two standard fire appliances to provide the water and foam. This apparatus could then discharge firefighting foam to a height of 60 metres (20 floors) and I believe that such an arrangement would have extinguished the flames at Grenfell Tower in minutes had it been available on site within minutes of the original call.

Why were there no fire water mains running up the building with an outlet on each floor? Why were there no hose reels on the landing of each floor? Why were there no smoke detectors connecting to an automatic call system to the fire brigade? Why was the fire alarm system in the building unserviceable? Why was the cladding not properly tested before fitting it to this building?

It is quite obvious that whilst money to buy appropriate firefighting and rescuing equipment is in short supply, those who currently run London Fire Brigade have failed to identify the need and pursue the Home Office and The Treasury to produce the funds to enable them to acquire the equipment necessary to deal with situations such as Grenfell Tower.

There is no point the London Fire Brigade commissioner now pointing out the risk of fire in high rise buildings, why didn't she and her predecessors draw the attention of the public to this problem years ago? My criticism of London Fire Brigade, Kensington and Chelsea Local Authority and Government is specific to the leaders of those bodies. As always the splendid fire men and women performed not only heroically, but quite superbly in conditions of toxic fumes, smoke and heat. These people were the real heroes of the day even though they were deprived of the very equipment that, had it been available, could have dramatically changed the horrific outcome of this inferno.



Adorian believes there is an opportunity for the truck mounted rental companies to work with the rescue services

An opportunity for the access rental industry

This tragedy opens up opportunities for the national truck mounted rental companies to talk with our fire brigades countrywide about setting up a scheme whereby a number of large truck mounted platforms - built with 'fire brigade standard water pipes' to the cage and fitted with a quickly attached monitor - could be used by any fire brigade in an emergency. This would take some planning as the units would need to be available at short notice, 24 hours a day, 360 days a year. Units would need to be based in or near the larger conurbations and their design would need to be a cross between a full fire fighting appliance and a working machine for the rental industry. This is a realistic idea and a design that works for all is achievable. A number of these machines stationed around

the country would bring platforms capable of reaching up to 30 floors at a fraction of the cost of having to buy them outright.

This was done in Dublin in the 1970's when EPL supplied a 45 metre platform built as a fire fighting machine for use by both the fire brigade and the Corporation for building maintenance, so it is not a matter of re-inventing the wheel! Nothing is impossible when the will and need arises.

My sympathy goes out to all those people who have suffered so much loss and misery. One can only hope that the Government, local authorities and in particular London Fire Brigade wake up and make the funds and necessary training available to restore London Fire Brigade's reputation to Second World War levels, 'The Best in the World'.

Paul. A. Adorian



Currently truck mounted platforms with a rescue height of up to 112 metres are available



In the mid 1970s a foam cannon was mounted on scissor lifts attached to a lightweight vehicle

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