

## *Section Leader Winifred (Freda) Adelaide Tribe B.E.M.*

*November 1914 to May 1997*



In 2003, when it was decided to create an exhibition commending those who had selflessly served the fire community, often making the ultimate sacrifice, that the true story of a remarkable woman was revealed when Mr & Mrs Clifford Hughes presented Avon Fire Brigade with a package containing personal items, letters, newspaper cuttings, photographs, legal documents and a precious British Empire Medal belonging to Mrs Hughes' late mother.

Years passed, numerous people walked through Reception with maybe just a cursory glance at the exhibits in the cabinets, they probably looked at the British Empire Medal and read how it was awarded to Section Officer Winifred Adelaide Tribe, Bristol Women's AFS during WW2 and thought nothing more about it.

Whilst writing Winifred's story has not been easy, it has none the less been a very interesting journey. Tracing her family roots from Public Records has been a joy, learning about her bravery during the Blitz an honour, whilst trying to fathom out her personal life an enigma worthy of Bletchley Park.

Winifred (or Freda as she was known) was born in Glastonbury, Somerset on 29 November 1914, although her parents James and Elsie Morrison both came from Leeds where her paternal grandfather, Nathaniel Morrison, was Lord Mayor in 1929. James, who served his Country in the war to end all wars, came home only to suffer the effects of gas attacks for the rest of his life, was a Leather Trade and Analytical Chemist for Moorland Sheepskin, creating a special way of tanning the hides for slippers and gloves.

At the age of six Freda was sent away to boarding school in Howells, Denbighshire before progressing to Cheltenham Ladies College where she gained distinction in her matriculation. However, by the age of nineteen she held a full driving licence and appeared to be frequently moving between various addresses in North Bristol, until 1937 when she was living with her parents in Priory Road, Clifton.

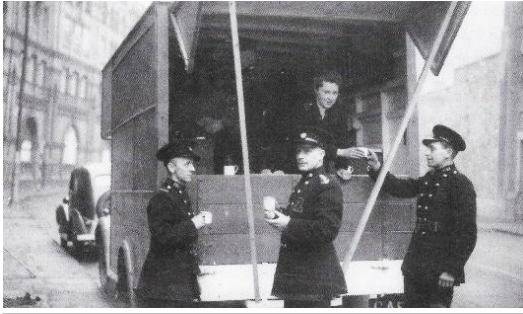
On March 27<sup>th</sup> 1937, the Western Daily Press announced her forthcoming wedding to local solicitor Alfred Ernest Donald Tribe (always known as Donald) and when they married at Christchurch, Clifton on April 3<sup>rd</sup> the aforementioned newspaper headlined it as an "Interesting Wedding". Interesting, no doubt, because not only did Freda's parents host a Reception at The Royal West of England Academy for some 250 guests but also that it coincided with their Silver Wedding Anniversary. The newspaper then treated its readers to details about their "Society Wedding" from how Freda and her five bridesmaids wore "specially designed gowns" down to what both mothers were wearing. Following the reception Freda and Donald left for their honeymoon motoring in France and Switzerland before returning to set up home in Queens Mansions, Arlington Villas, Bristol.

Nothing is known about their early married life until the outbreak of War when the couple were living in Stoke Lane, Westbury on Trym, Bristol where, according to the 1939 Register, Freda was described as having "*unpaid domestic duties*" whilst in fact she, along with her best friend Mary Wardle, had been ARP Wardens and Casualties Ambulance Drivers since 1938. Following her resignation from the Ambulance Service Freda became a paid member of the Auxiliary Fire Service in charge of the Mobile Canteen. Amongst her papers is a glowing letter of thanks from The Ambulance Officer for The Bristol Public Health Department expressing words to the effect that the Fire Service' gain was their loss.



Badges and brooches were presented by the Lord Mayor of Bristol to another party of A.R.P. wardens at the Central Police Station, Bristol. Above, Mrs. Winifred A. Tribe is receiving her brooch.

As the bombing raids increased and the blackout intensified so Freda, along with her Messenger Guide and only a torch with which to read the map, drove her Mobile Canteen “*where danger was greatest with complete*



*Freda serving refreshments during a rare stand-down*

*disregard for her own safety*”. Called out during a daylight raid at Filton Aerodrome on September 25<sup>th</sup> 1940 the side of her Van was virtually demolished when a bomb exploded nearby and, although everything was covered in debris, she cleaned herself and the food before carrying on with her journey to offer firemen much needed refreshments. Two months later, on November 24<sup>th</sup>, as the city burned she again spent the night actively providing food and drink to hard pressed fire crews. Throughout December, as the city once again endured heavy raids, Freda and her team could always be found at many of the worst incidents.

Later that month, during their visit to the bomb-damaged City of Bristol, their Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were finally able to thank Freda and all members of Bristol’s Civil Defence Units personally, when they paraded before them. There must have been a particularly heavy raid towards the end of that month because Freda received a letter from a fireman at Station A1 Jacob Street, thanking her for the kindness and care shown to him on December 24<sup>th</sup> which, he says, proves what he had always thought of her and that is “*a perfect lady*”. He signs it “*Yours Semper Fidelis (Always Faithful) H Harris, AFS 1548*”.



In January 1941 Freda was at Avonmouth, during what was later described as “*one of the worst raids ever experienced*”, when an exploding bomb seriously injured several firemen. With no ambulance available, she tended the injured until a First Aid Party arrived, before returning to her Van to “*see to refreshments*” Two months later she was back in Avonmouth during a raid on the oil tanks where, with bombs falling all around, she not only deliberately took her Van as close as possible to the blazing tanks but actively sought out firemen to make sure they knew refreshments were available.

Within days of the raid on the Avonmouth Oil Tanks Freda was in Plymouth where she spent three days and two nights (ignoring orders to take “*required rest*”) as part of the Regional Reinforcements. On her return, she received three lovely letters: -

From “*The lads of Station B1, Coronation Road, Bristol, AFS*” signed by W H Stevens, thanking her for the way in which she looked after them during the Plymouth raids, especially for the breakfast she personally cooked for them on the Sunday morning and the chocolates and cigarettes she gave them. The letter ended with a touching offer of help should ever she be in need at any time as “*nothing will be too much trouble for them after your wonderful devotion last Friday*”.

From “*Station A1, Jacob Street*” signed by Section Officer E Godfrey on behalf of the Officers and Men of Central Division, came thanks for “*the wonderful job you did at Plymouth*” which enabled them to “*carry on and keep up the prestige of the Bristol AFS*”, ending with “*There is no compliment great enough that we can pay you, so all we can do is to say, Thank You, Mrs Tribe*”.

From “*Redland Divisional HQ, 2, East Shrubbery, Redland*” came a similar letter from Harry C Aldridge pointing out how the crews worked for three days and two nights without rest during which time Freda fed and cared for them. Harry went on to quote that “*an army marches on its stomach*” and how a constant supply of food and hot drinks enabled the fire crews to continue their work “*under conditions which, to say the least, were far from pleasant*”.

Back in Bristol Freda continued to support fire crews during further bombing raids until, towards the end of April, back in Plymouth she stubbornly refused to move her vehicle to a safer position as she took refreshments to all parts of the city during a very heavy enemy attack, her one thought was to provide sustenance for the firemen.



According to her daughter, Freda rarely spoke about this time in her life except to say she was always incredibly happy doing the job as it was *“exciting, though terrifying but rewarding”*. In fact, Winifred was *“in her element”*.

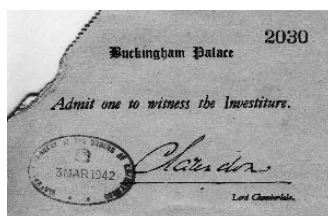
Freda resigned from the Women’s Section of the Bristol Auxiliary Fire Service on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1941 and almost immediately an application, supported by glowing reports from Mr S F Willey, Regional Fire Brigade Inspector and Joe Kirkup, the Chief Constable and Director of Bristol Fire Brigade, was submitted to Mr Herbert Morrison at The Ministry of Home Security, Whitehall, via the Town Clerk of Bristol, recommending she be considered for the British Empire Medal, citing her *“splendid courage and indefatigable devotion to duty”* during air raids.

Meanwhile, once her resignation was known, Freda received several personal letters including one from Sgt H. Humphreys, speaking on behalf of all ranks at Avonmouth, when he said they would miss her *“inspiring manner and self”* and how her *“presence and coolness”* had enabled them to carry out their difficult job with a lighter heart. He said he would personally miss her smile and wished her the best of health in her *“new venture”*, he also sent his kind regards to Mr Tribe and thanked him for allowing *“us to have known and worked with you”*.



At the beginning of September Freda received a letter informing her that *“His Majesty the King was graciously pleased to award you the British Empire Medal, Civil Division”*. On Friday 5<sup>th</sup> September 1941, the name of Winifred Adelaide Tribe appeared in The Supplement of the London Gazette announcing her appointment to The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and the award of The British Empire Medal, prompting a personal handwritten letter from her Fire Force Commander Joe Kirkup, in which he says *“I am proud to have known you and felt it very much when you decided to leave us”* he also says, in a roundabout way, how her job would always be there should she ever wished to return.

When Freda (accompanied by her proud mother) received her British Empire Medal from King George VI at a Buckingham Palace Investiture on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1942 she was living at Kings Keep, Putney Hill, London.



Arriving at Buckingham Palace

Life after the AFS saw Freda returning to live with her parents in Putney and working as a sound continuity girl for the BBC responsible for ensuring people

from other countries were heard. Her daughter recalls Freda saying how she once worked with Edmund Hockeridge and all they could do was *“speak poetry”* to each other to get the sound levels right. Her father, meanwhile, worked for De La Rue as a chemist and was one of a very few people given petrol to drive to work due to his poor lungs.



In August 1943 Freda joined the Women’s Auxilliary Service and was posted to Saltburn on Sea where she was responsible for making sure all new recruits were happily settled in their barracks and were well looked after.

NATIONAL FIRE SERVICE (No. 17 Form)  
Certificate of Service

Name (in full).....  
National Fire Service No.....  
Rank on Discharge.....  
Cause of Discharge.....  
Service as date of discharge.....  
Whole-time service from..... to.....  
Part-time service prior to whole-time service from..... to.....  
(Signature)..... Fire Force Commander..... (Date) 28/1/44

By June 1944, Winifred had been promoted to Second Subaltern (equivalent to an Army Lieutenant) and was writing to Fire Force Commander Kirkup requesting her Certificate of Service. By the end of hostilities, Freda had gained the rank of Junior Commander (equivalent to an Army Captain).



The British Empire medal, (pink ribbon) was awarded to Mrs Winifred Tribe (British Women's Auxiliary Fire Service) in 1941 for Meritorious Service.

The Civil Defence medal (green/orange/black) (1939 -1945). The green represents 'our green land', the orange symbolises the flames of enemy attacks and the black stripes commemorate the black-out.

The Defence medal (red/white/blue) (1939-1945) awarded to all personnel who had served 28 days in the armed forces during the war.

Sadly, Donald and Freda divorced in 1945 and so the marriage that had begun with such an elegant, sophisticated society wedding was over. Freda, still living at Glen Almond House, chose to revert to her maiden name of Morrison.

Freda met Henry (Steve) Dallas Wells towards the end of the war and the couple married on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1947, during the worst winter ever!!!, briefly returning to Glen Almond House prior to living in various addresses in London. Their daughter Jennifer was born on 17 June 1948 in East Sheen and can remember moving house many times: - 1950 found them in a top floor flat in the Royal Crescent, Bath with Freda the School Secretary at Oldfield Girls School: - four years later they were in Widcombe, Bath and then The Seven Stars Inn, Winsely, Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire. When they left the Seven Stars in 1966, Freda worked for the MOD in and around Bath. She spent her later years in a ground floor flat in Pultney Street, Bath before moving to Duke Street, Bath. Steve died in December 1990, Freda followed him in May 1997,

“And here our story comes to a close”. Winifred (Freda) Adelaide Tribe was a truly remarkable woman who chose to purposely risk her life night after night in support of the equally brave members of the Civil Defence and Fire Services, who selfishly put their lives on the line for the sake of others during those dangerous days of the Blitz.

### *Avon Fire & Rescue Service - Chief Fire Officers Presentation*



*Daniel Coen, Otis Coen, Laura Coen, Clifford Hughes, Freddie Coen, Jenny Hughes, Monty Britton, Mick Crennell, James Hughes*

On Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> November 2019, Winifred's daughter, Jenny Hughes and her family were welcomed to a special presentation at Hicks Gate Fire Station by Chief Fire Officer Mick Crennell and Representatives from Avon Fire and Rescue Service Pensioners Association.

Handing Winifred's memorabilia back to Jenny, the Chief Officer referred to her medals having sat proudly on display at his Headquarters for many years but it was now time for them to return home to their rightful place with her family, saying "Winifred was clearly an exceptional Firewoman and one who went above and beyond in the line of duty". He also emphasised the importance of the Fire Service family, adding "whilst Freda's story was truly remarkable, so were those of all Fire Service Personnel who served and made the ultimate sacrifice during those dark days of WW2 and in the years that followed".

Amongst Winifred's treasured possessions were many personal documents and photographs, now displayed in a specially prepared photo album which, on behalf of the Avon Fire and Rescue Service Pensioners Association, Chairman Monty Britton said how it gave him immense pleasure to present the album to Winifred's grandson James Hughes. Monty recalled how his father-in-law had been in the Fire Service during those fateful bombing raids at Bristol and Plymouth and had later spoken to him about this young lady who was always there providing them with food and drink, later realising that this was Winifred and her girls with the Brigade Canteen Van.

On behalf of her family, Jenny thanked all those who had made it possible to receive her mum's medals and memorabilia, adding how it had been fascinating to learn about what her mother did during her time with the Fire Service during the war, as she rarely talked about it and as a family are immensely proud to have had her as a mother and grandmother.

*Chriss & Penny Deverill*

*AF&RS Pensioners Association.*