

New and Old Rank Structures

Improvement or Deterioration?

A personal perspective by R L (Rip) Smith.

Recently I received an email from the pensioners' association informing us that the London Fire Brigade (LFB) has returned to a rank based 'Role to Rank' structure. Thus in the LFB: "Firefighters remain firefighters, crew managers become leading firefighters, watch manager As become sub officers and watch manager Bs become station officers. Station managers will become station commanders and group managers will become group commanders." This return to a well - established rank based service will according to the LFB and the London Region Fire Brigades Union be more efficient and improve fire cover.

I sincerely hope that the Avon Fire and Rescue Service (AF&RS) will follow suit and revert back to the aforementioned ranks which appertained when I joined the Bristol Fire Brigade (BFB) in January 1964. Then the ranks were: leading fireman (sorry firefighter!) sub officer, station officer, assistant divisional officer, divisional officer, senior divisional officer, assistant chief fire officer, deputy chief fire officer, and chief fire officer.



Some 55 years
later and it still fits!

However, all this changed in the AF&RS when the above traditional ranks were subsumed into their present status. In my opinion this was change for changes sake and had very little to do with improving the operational efficiency of the organisation. It is perhaps easy to see how these constant variations have been generated when visiting both the LFB/AF&RS websites which tabulate the continuous claims of improvements to both services.

These megabyte websites are surely inferior to the humanised skills of the late and lamented Barry Hook, who was largely responsible for the administration of the service from when I joined (he invigilated my entrance exam) to my retirement.

That historical stability can perhaps be encapsulated in the BFB's core functions to: 'Save Lives, 'Protect Property', and to 'Provide a Humanitarian Service'.

These under the AF&RS have become: 'Prevention (of what?), 'Protection' (of what?), 'Response and Resilience' (to what?) . My perhaps pedantic assessment of these statements is that the BFB version is exemplary in giving exact descriptions, whilst the AF&RS version is at best open to various interpretations. Therefore, it seems that saving lives had to go in favour of 'prevention'! This example seems to go hand in hand with the changes to rank structures which are still in place.

Those who think that constant progress is always beneficial might like to consider some words of an erstwhile City Editor (1970s) of The Sunday Telegraph, Patrick Hutber. Hutber's law stated that: "Improvement means deterioration". Just how 'Prevention' should have replaced 'Save Lives' eludes me, however I am sure that a website will provide an answer!