

What's in a nickname?



Recollections of a somewhat notorious sleepy night!

By “Rip” Smith

I have over several years had the privilege of having some articles published on the Avon Fire Pensioners' website either under the name of R L Smith or my fire brigade nickname of Rip. There are still a few pensioners who refer to me as Rip, so I thought it might be appropriate to put on record as to how this nickname came about.

As a new recruit I was posted to Blue Watch (Sub. O Bob Owen, L.fm Ted Ball) A3 Avonmouth in March 1964 and had no idea of the actual practicalities of dormitory life, other than I recall being issued with two/three blankets (marked with your name and kept in the blanket-room).

The recruits' course other than two night-time exercises did not really prepare you that well for the actual psychological reality of instantly getting out of bed

(in the days of yore you could have gone to bed circa 8.00pm after supper) from being sound asleep when the bells went down!

For my first night shift I went equipped with a pair of pyjamas which caused hilarious laughter, and I very quickly got into bed in my pants, with my trousers/shoes laid out on the floor. I did not sleep a wink being afraid I would miss my first fire call. A3 was noted for being a quiet station and so it was, however in the morning I was shattered by not having any sleep whatsoever.

It was during the second night on duty that my first night's readiness for an instant response to a fire call resulted in me being nicknamed 'Rip'! After my first night staying awake, the next night proved to be a disaster. I can recall being shaken awake in my bed near the blanket room by someone who I think was Len Tovey (fire boat coxswain). To my utter horror the remainder of the watch had responded to an incident and I had slept through both their departure/return!

Frank Elson the station officer became aware on the fireground when he asked where the new recruit was, only to be told of my non-appearance. On their return I heard the expected message over the tannoy: "Fireman Smith to the station officer's office".

I apologised most profusely and said that it would not happen again. He left me in no doubt that if I had purposefully not responded to the fire call he would have taken disciplinary action. Writing this some 56 years later has jogged my memory into recalling visiting a chemist to find if there was anything I could take during a night shift to avoid a similar episode.

For the following 35 years until my retirement in October 1999 it did not happen again as my body clock became accustomed to the day/night shift patterns of duty. So, that is how I became known as 'Rip'. It was because of my slumbering inability to respond to my very first fire call. Blue Watch decided on the nickname of "Rip" with reference to the fictional character "Rip Van Winkle" who accepts the offer of a drink of liquor and awakes some twenty years later.

Note:

Rip Van Winkle was the hero of a story in Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* (1819-20), who fell asleep in the Catskill Mountains and awoke after twenty years to find the world completely changed.