

'WELL ALIGHT, AND GOING WELL!'

Blitz Fire Service Bravery: 1940

ROY KEMP was a company director who ran his family's hosiery business in Leicester. Two days after the Munich Agreement in 1938 Kemp volunteered for the AFS, becoming a Divisional Officer, in what would become an eight-year fire service career. Until then, Leicester had only been raided once, during which the city's AFS sole call was to a burning gas main. In just over a fortnight, they would face a sharp learning curve, and in the shadow of the Blitz's mass destruction it seems strange to know that for the first month of the Battle of Britain, both Britain and Germany strenuously avoided bombing each other's inland cities and large centres of population. Not particularly for humanitarian reasons, but largely to avoid retaliatory attacks. But, on the night of 24 August 1940, several Luftwaffe bombers attempting to attack the Thames Haven oil tank farm on the north bank of the Thames, became lost and accidentally bombed London. This prompted the RAF to mount a raid on Berlin the very next night. Meagre though this attack was, more significant damage had been inflicted on Hitler's prestige. On 5 September, Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to step up their bombing campaign: no longer would London be inviolate from air raids. On the day Hitler gave his order, the Luftwaffe had another go at Thames Haven – and this time, they found it, setting fire to five 2,000-ton oil tanks.

Wise pre-war planning by the government and the Petroleum Board meant Britain was well-stocked with oil. The fuel was vital for everything from keeping the war factories running to Spitfires flying. Indeed, the nation's reserves were so great, there were even plans to use it as an anti-invasion measure, to 'set the sea on fire'. However, Germany was aware of Britain's valuable asset and began systematically attacking the nation's oil depots, most notably at Pembroke Dock, Wales, on 19 August 1940. Other oil farms at Jarrow, Oulton Broad, Avonmouth, Barton and Newport were also hit, but oil was >>



'WELL ALIGHT GOING

ABOVE:
Divisional
Officer Roy
Kemp, of
Leicester
Auxiliary Fire
Service, in 1944
[ROBERT KEMP]

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HT, AND ING WELL!!

When the huge oil depots at Purfleet were set ablaze on the first day of The Blitz the Auxiliary Fire Service was at full stretch. Bombed, blasted, machine-gunned and at risk of burning alive in oil, local AFS units were reinforced by units from as far away as the East Midlands. Austin Ruddy describes the conflagration which resulted in ten gallantry awards and the birth of the National Fire Service.

'WELL ALIGHT, AND GOING WELL!'

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NATIONAL FIRE SERVICE

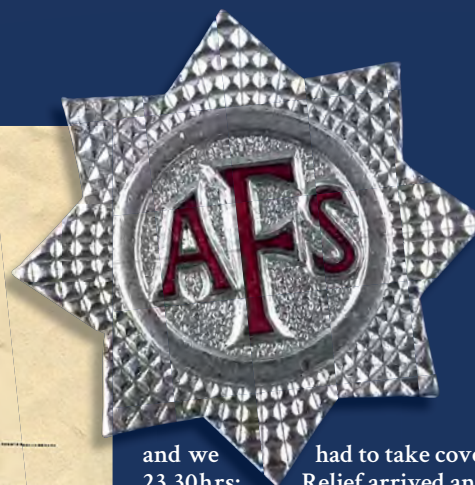
CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

Name (in full) Roy Kemp
 National Fire Service No. 144503 Date of discharge 6.9.46
 Rank on Discharge Column Officer
 Cause of Discharge Released - Reduction of Establishment

	WITH LOCAL AUTHORITY FIRE BRIGADE	WITH NATIONAL FIRE SERVICE
WHOLE-TIME SERVICE	from <u>31.8.39</u> <u>7.4.41</u> to <u>15.10.39</u> <u>17.8.41</u>	from <u>18.8.41</u> to <u>30.9.45</u>
PART-TIME SERVICE	from <u>1.10.38</u> <u>16.10.39</u> to <u>30.8.39</u> <u>6.4.41</u>	from <u>1.10.45</u> to <u>5.9.46</u>

23rd August 19 46
 (S.O.A.7422) 48757 3/46 680/2

E. B. Beattson for Fire Force Commander.
 H.F.P.



and we had to take cover. 23.30hrs: Relief arrived and we were told to return to Brentwood for rest, a journey of about 15 miles. On way, we were caught in an air raid and had to run for a ditch. A.A. guns were in action and bombs were dropping. The noise was terrific. When things got a bit quieter, we moved off again, arriving at Brentwood at 01.30hrs Monday morning, where we were billeted at the New Ursuline Convent. Had supper of bread and cheese with tea or coffee and purchased card from nuns to write home. 02.00hrs: turned in for sleep in air raid shelter with about 100 other AFS men from all over the country.

ABOVE:
 Divisional Officer Roy Kemp's AFS/NFS service certificate, showing he served from 1938-1946 [ROBERT KEMP]

ABOVE RIGHT:
 An Auxiliary Fire Service cap badge [AUSTIN J. RUDDY]

RIGHT:
 A Dornier 17 high over the Thames Estuary, summer 1940.

only of use to Britain if it could be safeguarded. So, on Saturday, 7 September, a regional fire call was made for assistance to Midlands AFS units, from as far as Nottingham, Derby and Leicester. AFS Divisional Officer Roy Kemp was based at Leicester's Church Gate auxiliary sub-station. The station's fire crews had very little to do, as the war had barely reached them: that was, until the day the call-room telephone rang. The following entries are verbatim from the log:

'MOVE OFF AT ONCE...'

'Log of first Regional Fire Call from Division 3 HQ.
 Saturday, September 7th, 1940:
 20.30hrs: Received telephone message to report to Brigade HQ with crew, for instructions and rations for Regional Call to Cambridge. 21.00hrs, moved off with No's 1, 2 & 4 Divisions under Divisional Officer Kemp. Received puncture at Desborough. After repair, we moved off again, but had not gone far when we were informed that another of our cars had ditched and could not proceed, so carried on without them, arriving at Huntingdon at 23.30hrs, just as sirens were sounding warning. Stopped at Fire Station and had a cup of tea.
 00.30hrs: Left Huntingdon on side lights, for Cambridge, arriving at 04.30hrs Sunday morning. Had tea

and biscuits at Fire Station (had to buy biscuits). Filled up with petrol and oil and were then taken to Queen's College [Cambridge University] for a rest. Received mattress, but had no chance to use it, as we were informed we had to move off at once. Returned to Fire Station immediately and joined convoy of about 100 units.

Sunday, 8th September, 1940:
 06.15hrs: Convoy moved off for Thames Haven, arriving at 11.45hrs to find oil tanks like gasometers burning fiercely. Counted eight tanks on fire. At 12.15hrs, we went into action, when another tank caught fire. Had not got the pump to work, when the sirens sounded warning and we had to run for cover under a stack of timber, while Jerry circled round and round. A.A. guns went into action above us. We were told that Jerry was machine-gunning the men during the morning.

12.50hrs: We got to work with pump at 150lbs pressure on tank that was well alight. 16.30hrs, tank exploded and everyone ran for their lives. We were now feeling very tired and hungry, so found mobile canteen and had tea and a pie - first real meal since leaving Leicester. Then took it in turns for an hour's rest in back of car.

17.45hrs: Started work again until 20.00hrs, when sirens sounded again

'THE HEAT WAS UNBEARABLE'

Sunday, 9th September, 1940:

07.30hrs: Woke up and breakfast of bread, marmalade and coffee.

09.00hrs: Took car to depot for petrol and left punctured wheel to be repaired. 10.30hrs: Left Brentwood for another fire at Purfleet, about 30 miles away, arriving at Anglo-American Petrol Wharves at 12.00hrs to find petrol tanks burning fiercely and a large margarine factory extensively damaged by bombs. Bomb craters were everywhere, making it very dangerous to walk about, owing to train lines etc being under the water and bomb craters not being visible. An AFS station had received a direct hit by an HE bomb, but there were no casualties.

12.30hrs: Got to work. Received orders to get branches on tank to keep cool. Had to trace hose from branch to pump and get water on. We had to crawl under and climb over train wagons, up to our knees in charred debris and water. We found that the pump and breeching pieces were missing, so decided to go back to Thames Haven to fetch our own pump, reaching there at 16.15hrs. At



Thames Haven, we noticed that the two tanks we had been keeping cool the previous day were now alight and going well.

16.30hrs: We left with pump for Purfleet, the pump having been run all day and night at 150lbs pressure. We arrived back at 17.30hrs during an air raid. A.A. gunfire was all around us. Fixed up pump and got branches and a monitor to work on a tank that was going well – too well, in fact, for as I walked round the other side of the tank, I noticed two AFS men in difficulties with a branch. I had just time to kick the branch out of their hands, when the tank blew up. We had to run for our dear lives away from it, as the heat was unbearable. On going round the other side of the tank, I noticed an AFS man lying in the water. With the assistance of Auxiliary Fireman George, I got him on my back and carried him to safety, leaving him in the care of a First Aid Party. After a break for a cup of tea and a bun with the lads, we returned to operations.

A TERRIBLE NIGHTMARE

At 20.45hrs, a tank exploded with a deafening roar. Flames leapt to about 50ft and spread all round. Leading Fireman Midgley and Auxiliary Fireman Gregg were at the monitor and were very fortunate to get clear in time. It was a hectic time for a few minutes. I was reversing the car in a very rough enclosure, when the whole place lit up and I could feel the heat in the car. I noticed Auxiliary Fireman Day waving his hands and running for shelter. I didn't stop to ask what was the matter: I switched off the engine and scrambled out to hear the sirens sounding as well, leaving the headlights on. Leading Fireman Midgley noticed them on his way to the shelter and switched them off. It would have taken a greyhound to have caught us up at that moment!

At 23.15hrs, we contacted our relief crew from Church Gate and after giving them the position of our pump and branches, we left for Brentwood. It had been a hard and exciting day and we had had enough. We had >>

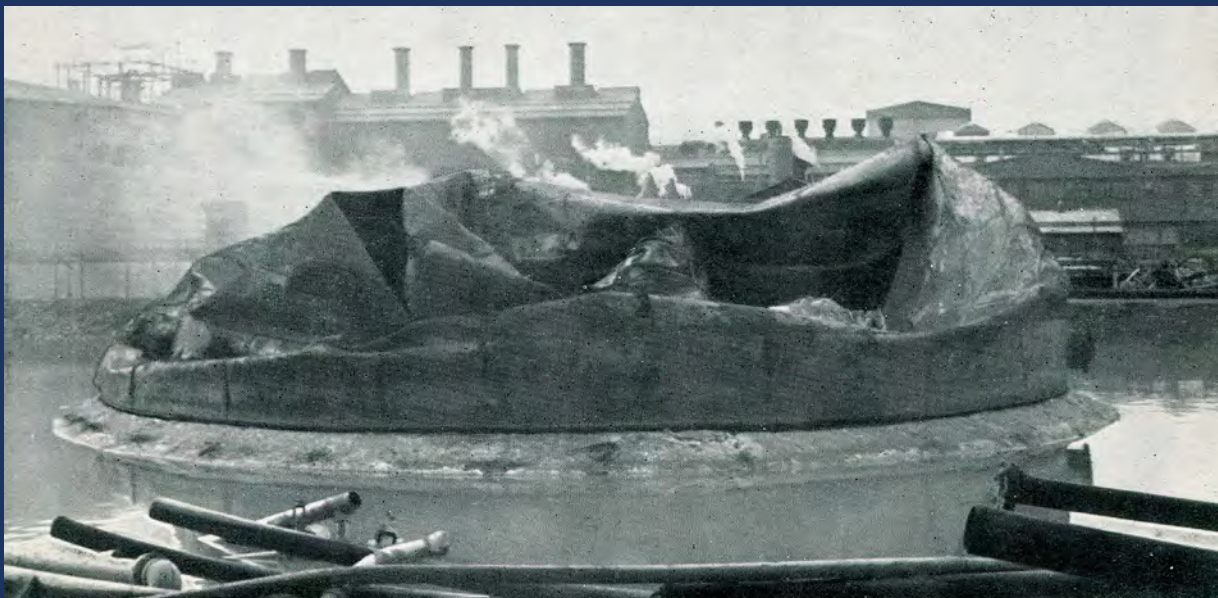
ABOVE:
The fires caused the rails to warp at the Purfleet oil depot
[PETROLEUM AT WAR, 1946]

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Blitz Fire Service Bravery: 1940

RIGHT:

A collapsed steel oil tank at Purfleet, warped by the fire [PETROLEUM AT WAR, 1946]



RIGHT:

A close run thing! This incendiary bomb just failed to penetrate an oil tank during the Blitz [PETROLEUM AT WAR, 1946]



BELOW:

A high explosive bomb penetrated an underground oil storage tank at Purfleet - fortunately without igniting its contents [PETROLEUM AT WAR, 1946]

not gone very far, when action started above us and we had to drive without lights. We soon lost our bearings and switching on our lights to pick up our road, Jerry must have

spotted us. We had just time to get out of the car and reach the ditch, when we heard a rushing sound and a bomb dropped not very far from us. It shook the ground we were laid on.

Under these circumstances, we decided to stay put for a while and searched for somewhere to get down. We knocked at a cottage, but got no answer, so decided to look round the back of the place, where we spotted an Anderson shelter, so dived in. It was well-equipped inside and was like a drawing room to us, after being perished with cold and starving hungry. Finding an oil stove and a kettle of water, we naturally thought of a cup of tea. So, putting on the kettle and opening our emergency rations, we looked like getting a bit of comfort at last.

But, alas, before the kettle had boiled, someone's great feet had kicked it over - and were those biscuits hard.

We soon went off to sleep after our meal, but were awakened suddenly by knocks on the door of the shelter. Sorting ourselves out, I found my pen and diary on the floor. I must have dropped off while writing my log. On opening the door, we found the owners of the house. They had been roused from their beds by the ceiling dropping on them and wanted to get under cover. After a little explanation and a few apologies, we handed over our bedroom and looked around for somewhere else.

Leading Fireman Midgley and Auxiliary Fireman Day found shelter in a house nearby, where the owner, a Scotswoman, let them wash their





LEFT:
A formation of Do 17 bombers approach their target, 1940.

feet and gave them clean socks to wear. The rest of us packed into the back of the car, where we remained until 05.00hrs, when we moved off for Brentwood, arriving at the convent at 05.30hrs, to find all the beds occupied! Had tea and bread and cheese while the Father woke up some of the AFS men who had not yet been into action.

At 06.00hrs, we eventually got our beds and settled down to it, after a terrible nightmare.

ALL CLEAR

Monday, 10th September, 1940: We woke up at 11.00hrs and had breakfast of cold porridge, bread and an apple and were ready for anything again. At 11.30hrs, we received instructions to return to Purfleet for our pump, as fire was well under control, Leading Fireman Midgley and crew returning, while I stayed behind to look after kit etc. 12.55hrs: Sirens sounded warning, so had to don full kit again in readiness. But no action, the all-clear going at 13.15hrs. Leading Fireman Midgley and crew returned at 15.45hrs with pump, minus seven lengths of hose, but four extra branches and one stirrup pump! Had dinner of warm potatoes and meat - first warm food since leaving Leicester on Saturday [three days]. Leading Fireman Midgley and crew had been taking cover at Purfleet since 13.30hrs.

16.15hrs: Took car to depot for oil and petrol and joined convoy of about 50 units for home. Had just moved off when sirens sounded warning, but decided to keep going, the all-clear going at 16.20hrs. Reached Woodford at 16.35hrs and had to detour owing to unexploded bomb in side street. 17.30hrs: Arrived at Barnet as sirens were sounding warning. Stopped for cup of tea and noticed people with their bundles sat on roadside. 17.45hrs: All clear sounded, so moved off again, stopping at Market Harborough for a break. 20.35hrs: Left for Leicester, arriving at Brigade HQ at 21.35hrs. Reported to Chief Officer Winteringham and left for Church Gate, where we were put on exhibit amid great gusto. ¹

BRAVERY REWARDED

The adulation they received was well-deserved - and their deeds were noticed at a higher level, too. Leicester AFS Fireman Henry Bernard Neale was awarded the George Medal for bravery, as the London Gazette reported: "On 9 September, during operations at Purfleet Oil Depot, it became necessary to stop a serious leak of oil from a hole that had appeared in the top of a tank which had been on fire. The flames had been extinguished, but the oil spouting out of the tank was very likely to catch fire again.

Fireman Neale was a member of a support column sent to this major incident. Enlisting the aid of two firefighters from another unit, he secured a thirty-foot extension ladder and a wooden plank. He then climbed the iron ladder which was secured to the side of the tank and with help hauled the extension ladder to the top. >>

BELOW:
The fires were so intense at Purfleet, even the bricks of the surrounding bund wall began to melt [PETROLEUM AT WAR, 1946]



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"Neale was joined by a Senior Officer and the Depot Engineer and with the ladder now fully extended, he was dropped over the other side of the tank, where he opened a lid on the top of the tank to ascertain the depth of oil, which was found to be roughly eight-feet from the top. The senior officer then descended the ladder and with some difficulty, plugged the hole in the tank with soft wood. The whole of this operation, from start to finish, was an extremely hazardous undertaking. Apart from fires in the vicinity and the likelihood of certain gases being given off in the tank, one slip on the top would, without doubt, have proved fatal.

"Neale also played a major part in saving another tank which had been holed about four-feet above the base, from which burning oil was pouring. The crews played two very powerful jets at the leak, driving the flames away, whilst two further jets were brought into action to divert the flow of oil at the base of the structure, creating a passage between the tank

and the fire. Neale and another firefighter bridged the gap between the tank and the bank with a ladder and proceeded to plug the hole with wood. While this operation was in progress, two more jets were directed

above the heads of the two men, creating both a protective water curtain and providing some degree of cooling to the tank. If at any time the two cross jets had failed to beat back the burning oil, both men would



ABOVE:
1kg B1E German incendiary bombs left the Thames-side oil depots ablaze [AUSTIN J. RUDDY]

ABOVE: RIGHT:
A Leicester AFS Morris Commercial Heavy Pumping Unit appliance in 1940. The firemen had their baptism of fire when they went to assist fighting the Thames-side oil blazes [LEICESTER MERCURY]

RIGHT:
A Luftwaffe reconnaissance photograph of the Thameshaven tanks burning after the attacks on 7 September 1940.



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most certainly have been seriously injured by the flames, possibly fatally so.

Also at Purfleet, London Auxiliary Fireman Cyril Alfred Reeves entered a retort house where petrol was flooded on the floor, when a flash-over occurred, igniting the petrol vapour. Another auxiliary fireman became entangled in a chain and was in imminent danger of being burnt to death. Reeves, despite the extreme heat and the very obvious prospect of becoming fatally trapped by the surrounding flames, displayed outstanding bravery in remaining to assist in the release of his comrade. For their gallantry and devotion to duty during these difficult and extremely hazardous operations, Neale and Reeves were awarded the George Medal.

A MASS OF FLAMES

But Neale and Reeves were not the first to be awarded the George Medal for gallantry at Purfleet. The previous day, a number of petroleum tanks caught fire and blazed furiously. When one of the tanks exploded, Patrol Officer

Arthur Swansborough, of Southend-on-Sea Fire Brigade, immediately gave orders for the firefighters to abandon their equipment and run. One unfortunate firefighter, in scrambling over oil pipes, fell into a large hole containing oil and water and, owing to the slippery nature of the crater's sides, found it impossible to climb out unaided. Swansborough, despite the extreme danger of further explosions and fire, immediately turned back and rescued the man from the crater, which a few seconds later, became a mass of flames from the burning petrol. The heat had been so great, both men received burns on their necks and hands. Patrol Officer Swansborough's life-saving courageous act resulted in him being awarded the George Medal.

Other gallantry medals were also awarded at Purfleet. Using a 30ft extension ladder, Patrol Officer George Payne, of Ilford AFS and Sub-Officer Joseph Warren, of Chelmsford AFS, made a precarious climb to the top of a tank holding 6,000 tons of Benzene, to extinguish a fire. All this time, fumes were escaping from a manhole on the tank. The tank was also in a very dangerous condition, leaning to one side. If the contents had

overflowed onto the burning valve, the whole tank could have blown up, incinerating the firemen on top. All three firefighters were awarded the British Empire Medal for their courage.

ANKLE DEEP IN PETROL

Leading Fireman Charles Saitch and Patrol Officer Cecil Hearn, with other members of Brentwood AFS, were operating ankle-deep in petrol, in an area where pipelines were alight. Flames were spreading rapidly and it became necessary to drive a piece of wood into a pierced tank from which petrol was pouring. Saitch mounted a ladder to reach the hole, but was saturated with petrol. Patrol Officer Hearn assisted him, while he plugged the hole with the wood. The remainder of the crew fought the fire to prevent it reaching their comrades, thus this and several other tanks were saved. Saitch and Hearn were also awarded the British Empire Medal.

Another British Empire Medal for gallantry was also awarded to District Officer John Unwin, although he had been recommended for a George Medal for his work at the Thames Haven incident and other major fires. Unwin was based at London Fire Brigade Headquarters, on Albert Embankment, and was regularly sent to major incidents to provide specialist advice, drawing on his 28-year service. In his supporting statement for an award to Unwin, Superintendent W E Norwood stated: 'His devotion to duty has been mainly responsible for the saving of lives, and appliances endangered by enemy action.' >>



ABOVE:
Leicester
Auxiliary Fire
Service uniform
breast badge
[ROGER MILES]

ABOVE LEFT:
The George
Medal
[WIKIMEDIA]



LEFT:
Leicester
AFS Fireman
Henry Bernard
Neale was
awarded the
George Medal
for bravery
[LEICESTER
MERCURY]

'WELL ALIGHT, AND GOING WELL!'

Blitz Fire Service Bravery: 1940

FAR RIGHT:

The well known 'Fire Bomb Fritz' public awareness poster of the Blitz period.

FIREWOMAN'S BRAVERY

And it was not just firemen who were rewarded for their bravery. Twenty-six-year-old Auxiliary Elizabeth Emery, of Station 7, Carmelite Street, London, was driver to a London Fire Brigade superintendent, attending many serious fires. The London Gazette recorded: "Her conduct has been remarkable for her unchanging composure and coolness in all circumstances and the entire absence of any fear, even during heavy bombing attacks. She has invariably carried all duties assigned to her without the slightest hesitation, and in addition to her driving, has many times during severe raids acted as a runner to her Superintendent and conveyed important messages.

During the raids on Thames Haven, Auxiliary Emery "showed a brave and highly-developed sense of duty. Whilst bombs fell, she carried fire extinguishers, climbing over fences and rough ground, extinguishing incendiary bombs which had fallen near to oil tanks. Her actions most probably avoided one or more tanks

from being involved. For the next five nights, Emery was on duty, sometimes for as much as 14 hours. Following the oil fires, she attended many more major incidents. Her senior officer recommended she received the George Medal, however, Emery was awarded the British Empire Medal for her outstanding service.²

MISTAKES OF EPIC PROPORTIONS

It should also be remembered that Petroleum Board staff also risked their lives at incidents, assisting and advising the fire service: indeed, in the first list of George Medals in July 1940, three were won by oil installation staff.³

As for Leicester AFS Divisional Officer Kemp, two months after he had helped extinguish the flames at Purfleet and Thames Haven, the Luftwaffe paid him a personal visit. During Leicester's 'Blitz Night', on 19/20 November, 1940, his hosiery business was completely burnt out by incendiaries and a high explosive bomb.⁴



However, on a national level, the two Thames-side incidents had greater, long-term and far-reaching significance for Britain's fire service. When the Luftwaffe first accurately attacked Thames Haven on September 5, 1940, the resultant fires proved too large for the local brigades to handle, so, for the first time, outside help was requested from London Fire Brigade.

But, in a farcical mistake of epic proportions, when the 40 fire pumps finally arrived, they were accidentally sent away by a local AFS officer. It would take several wasted hours and much administrative wrangling to get them back again. Not only that, but when AFS appliances from other cities also arrived to help, it was discovered many had incompatible hose couplings, plus different equipment and methods, much to the frustration of attending Senior London Fire Brigade Commander, John Fordham.

John Horner, the General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union later wrote: "I believe that the idea of a national fire service was born in Fordham's mind that night at Thames Haven. ⁵ Less than a year later, the National Fire Service was created: a more effective, organised, experienced and professional force, which helped forge today's fire and rescue service. ○



RIGHT:

Two months after he helped extinguish the flames at Purfleet and Thames Haven, the Luftwaffe paid Leicester AFS Divisional Officer Roy Kemp - seen here in the grey suit and trilby hat, centre left - a personal visit. During Leicester's 'Blitz Night', on 19/20 November, 1940, his hosiery business was completely burnt out by incendiaries and a high explosive bomb

NOTES

1. Manuscript courtesy of Robert Kemp
2. Arthur Lockyear, *Warriors In Fire Boots* (Jeremy Mills, 2011) pp.84-87
3. Petroleum Board, *Petroleum at War* (c.1946) pp.36
4. Austin J Ruddy, *Tested By Bomb and Flame* (Halsgrove, 2014) pp.100
5. Francis Beckett, *Firefighters & the Blitz* (Merlin Press, 2010) pp.26