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NEW DIMENSION

There are many lessons to be learned from the 7/7 bombs in London. The most obvious is that cutting the number of firefighters will do nothing to protect people from terrorism.

THE FIRST reports of the Lockerbie bomb, the worst bombing atrocity ever carried out in the UK outside wartime, described it as a garage fire. Strictly speaking it was, but it had been debris from the exploded aircraft which had set the garage alight.

It was no real surprise then that the initial reports on the morning of 7 July in London described it as a series of accidents on the tube. It took the Underground control room close to 20 minutes to realise the incidents were the bombs which have killed over 50 so far and injured hundreds.

The Underground control had however already alerted the emergency services before they knew the precise cause of the incidents. Battersea's Fire Rescue Unit was alerted at 8.59 and 20 seconds to attend Edgware Road tube station.

Sub-officer Dave Moore, with 30 years service in the London Brigade, had been at his change of shift (Red Watch) although the crew were Blue Watch. The rescue unit, USAR capable and laden with heavy lifting and cutting gear, chemical suits and monitoring equipment made it from Battersea in south west London through the rush hour traffic to Edgware Road at 9.11.

Anyone familiar with London would know that was some feat of driving. In the rush hour, almost impossible.

"The driver had been belting it," Dave told Firefighter. "But we kept hearing more and more calls on the radio and we knew it was a major incident before we arrived at Praed St, about 200 metres from the tube station.

"Edgware Road isn't a deepline underground station like some of the others. We were the first rescue unit at Edgware Road and saw smoke coming from several exits but we knew what we were doing as we have attended other incidents on the tube.

"The first we saw were walking wounded. Then I saw a



JANE MINGAY/AP/EMPICS

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young Asian girl and at first I thought she had too much make-up on and looked like she was smoking.

"I then realised she was coughing up smoke and the dark marks around her eyes were caused by soot.

"The ambulance crews, underground staff and police were taking people out who obviously had burns. There was a stream of walking wounded, covered in soot.

"As soon as we went down we knew there had been an explosion. Our electronic personal dosimeters (which check for radiation) were not going off so we could rule out radiation.

"The thought of secondary devices went through my mind. I thought if they were evil enough to do this they could have planted secondaries.

"I didn't make a conscious decision, but my next thought was that I just have to get on and do the job. There were so many people injured, some of them badly.

"We carried out an initial survey. At Edgware Road there are four tracks, we checked the track current was off and put on short circuit bars as a safety measure.

"We had fire service emergency lighting, there was emergency lighting in the train carriages and we had our own torches. You have to be careful as you move along the track because there are lots of points on the under-

Emergency service workers at Tavistock Square (left) and outside Edgware Road Station (above)

ground and you have to watch your footing.

"The trains were about 50 metres up one of the tunnels and some of the carriages on one train were at an odd angle. We moved through four or five carriages of one train to the seat of blast.

"There was a hole in the roof and the floor about a metre and a half wide. The doors had been blown off the carriage. No one was trapped and we helped stretcher out the injured.

"We had BA and EDBA but we didn't need them. It was exhausting work and we kept going for an hour and a half but took turns at rest breaks.

"I stood down the crew and we managed our resources. A couple of the pumps that had been at Manchester Square would have come in handy though.

"The local shops were great. Marks and Spencer shut down and the staff could see we were exhausted and brought us water and sandwiches, although I wasn't too keen on the Goats cheese and coconut.

"We had a rest break at St Mark's church near Edgware Road and the vicar made us welcome. By this time we were truly exhausted and needed a break.

"I feel uncomfortable when the media try and make us out as heroes. We all did our best with the equipment we have which is what we always do. No more, no less than that."

Elsewhere there was a varied picture as London tried to cope first with three tube bombs then a bomb on a bus an hour later. There is no question the fire service – like the others – was very stretched by the attacks.

A biological attack would have been a very different matter. Although there has been training on biological detection meters, London firefighters have not been issued with them.

An attack other than one with conventional explosives and the outcome could have been very different. From the TV footage alone it could be seen that thousands of commuters, who could have been contaminated, were simply walking out and away.

There were reports that some of the decontamination equipment – although mobilised – was delayed on the gridlocked roads. It did not appear to have been a problem thrown up by the exercises at Bank Station, with only 60 casualties, and held on a Sunday afternoon.

Both exercises have been criticised by the FBU for how limited they were, the fact it was only one station with only one tube line (some have four) and that it took place on a Sunday afternoon. The 7 July showed up precisely how limited and unrealistic those exercises were.

But although they were very limited even they threw up the need for more personnel. That fell on then fire minister Nick Raynsford's deaf ears.

One firefighter explained to reporters: "We got called to smoke in the tunnel, which is a pretty standard call – we get a lot of that.

"It's usually a small trackside fire or the brakes overheating that sets the detectors off. We just sort of turned up expecting that.

"As we turned up behind another crew, they were throwing out hose. There were various people sitting down by the entrance to the tube station in various states of injury, and a lot of people milling around, blackened from soot. Some people had flash burns.

"At that point I thought, there is either a serious fire down there or there had been a train crash. We started discussing what to do.

"We were about to go into the tunnel. One of the walking wounded said 'There's no fire down there, mate.' He had obviously overheard me. He said 'there has been a huge explosion in the second carriage.' We shot down there with the crew.

"Hundreds of people were just walking, walking out in a column. Some had horrific injuries. Some were being carried by other passengers."



Dave Moore speaking at the London United memorial in Trafalgar Square

lighting the problems of dealing with a dirty bomb.

The firefighter who was at Aldgate explained: "The thing with decontamination is you have to contain everyone. They are not allowed to be exposed to anyone else.

"But the experience we had showed how difficult that would be. There is no way you could say 'Just wait there until the decontamination unit arrives.' There were just far too many people that needed desperate help.

"There were people that were obviously dying because of the state of their injuries – people with massive wounds, people with hands blown off that needed instant attention. You couldn't say 'I'm waiting for the traffic.' A lot of stuff wasn't getting through.

"You had hundreds people who have received some injury and an awful lot of people wanted to get out of that tunnel. We tried to contain them once they came out in the bus station for treatment.

"At the back of everyone's minds was 'we don't want them disappearing.' You couldn't say 'You aren't going to hospital' when there were people dying in front of us.

"Now that we have experienced an attack there are an awful lot of lessons to be learned."

One of those lessons is almost certainly the wisdom of the closure of Manchester Square fire station and moving pumps and personnel out of central London. London FBU called for an immediate halt to planned cuts in the central London fire service and for an immediate review of the IRMP.

The union said lessons needed to be learned from the fire service response to the multiple bomb blasts and asked for the fire authority to "press the pause button". The cuts include plans to axe 180 firefighter posts across London.

Acting Regional FBU Secretary Andy Dark said: "We were very seriously stretched by these awful attacks. But what we dealt with was nowhere near a worst case scenario, because it could have been many times worse.

"For months we have said we have major professional concerns about the removal of fire engines and firefighters from central London. Manchester Square Fire Station in Marylebone was closed and fire appliances from Central London were redeployed to the suburbs.

"The removal of fire appliances included those from

One lesson is almost certainly the lack of wisdom in closing the Manchester Square fire station and moving pumps and personnel out of central London

Unlike at Edgware Road, there were some people trapped in the wreckage and they needed to be freed. "There was no equipment, just first aid kits although we did have burns patches. The ambulances weren't getting through in the traffic.

"We stretchered people out on three-piece short extension ladders. People were dying in front of us. We were down there three or four hours, until the last live person was extricated."

But the real impact of the four relatively small conventional bombs placed at multiple sites was in high-

the fire stations at Bethnal Green, Euston, Westminster, Clerkenwell, Islington, Kensington, Knightsbridge and Dockhead. Alongside the closure of Manchester Square Fire Station these are in the immediate vicinity of the explosions that have occurred.

“The removal of two other engines from Acton and Greenwich, aside from the impact locally, will affect the availability of fire engines to backfill those stations which are attending major incidents in Central London.

“The threat has now become the reality. The fire authority needs to press the pause button on these cuts and changes and carry out a serious review to ensure we can provide the best professional response to any event in the future.”

Local Labour MP Frank Dobson raised the issue directly with Tony Blair during the Prime Minister’s statement to the House of Commons on 11 July. “The London fire authority has been planning for some time to withdraw some fire engines from three local fire stations—Euston, Clerkenwell and Islington—on the grounds that “the current location of appliances does not relate to today’s risks”. Thursday clearly demonstrated that they do relate directly to today’s risks. Will he join me in saying to the fire authority that there should be no sense of shame or embarrassment in learning from experience and reconsidering that proposal?”

Tony Blair replied: “I am aware of the issue to do with the local firefighting resources around King’s Cross and St. Pancras. I think that the best thing is to say that we

WORSE TO STOP THAN TO GO ON

FATHER Cawrse who was at St Mary’s church close to King’s Cross said: “I rushed to the scene where the emergency services were when I knew what had happened. The majority of people I came into contact with were members of the emergency services and in particular fire fighters.

“It was important not to be overbearing. I went around speaking to people, trying to comfort them. If they showed that they wanted to talk, I would listen. In circumstances like that it’s important just to listen, that is the key thing.”

“Some of the emergency services had seen quite harrowing things. What struck me was that a lot of the firefighters were very young, barely out of training. The firefighters were in deep shock, many had staring eyes and were totally exhausted, completely shattered, but they said it was worse to stop than to keep going.”

suggesting Manchester could be a target.

The fact is there are strategic targets of interest to bombers in almost every brigade. General Secretary Matt Wrack said: “We do need to take stock of where we are and where we are going in our response to such attacks. As devastating and as deadly as the four London bombs were, they were relatively small bombs using conventional explosives.

“There are far worst scenarios with bombs using conventional explosives and worst still with chemical, radiological, nuclear or biological weapons. Bad as it was in London, we could be stretched an awful lot more in other circumstances.

“The simple truth is that cutting fire engines and firefighters anywhere – never mind the centre of major cities which are obvious targets – will do nothing to protect people from terrorism. Too many corners are cut and too few resources are stretched.

“The national politicians may be unaware of the detail of the big picture of what is happening in the fire service: a shortage of frontline personnel, cuts in frontline personnel, cuts in some specialist equipment, inadequate training.

“The fire service is better prepared than it was two years ago but we are a long way off being best prepared. We need a serious



will obviously consider any points made, and I will get back to him.”

The wider issue has an impact way beyond London. What of our other major cities? What about other targets, of which there are plenty outside London and the south east?

Only last year Merseyside fire service refused a decontamination unit because it wanted to cut the number of firefighters. The entire centre of Birmingham – 20,000 people – was evacuated on the night of Saturday 9 July. Birmingham’s IRMP cuts 13 pumps between midnight and 8am.

In the last couple of years suspects have been arrested in Gloucester, Eastbourne, Luton, Manchester, Leeds and further afield. There have been alerts

Euston Blue Watch take part in the two minute silence

dialogue to ensure that changes and changes quickly.”

Pete Gallagher, West Midlands acting brigade secretary told Firefighter: “I have written to the fire authority telling them it is inappropriate to press ahead with the changes scheduled to start on 9 September. The West Midlands IRMP does not take into account the type of incident we had in London where there were multiple explosions and multiple sites where you needed the fire service.

“No one wants to worry people, but they do need some time to consider what happened in London and what can be learned. We need to know how many personnel and how much equipment we really need to deal with incidents of this kind, because no one believes we’ve seen the last of them.”