

Kevin Bernie: A career in the ambulance service, 1981 – April 2020

I joined the London Ambulance Service in 1981 and was posted to Hackney Ambulance Station where my first major incident was in Regents' Park, where the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) killed 11 members of the Household Cavalry and the Royal Green Jackets and injured many others (seven horses were also killed).

This was the first of many major incidents I attended including the Marchioness (pleasure cruiser sinking with 23 dead); the King's Cross fire in November 1987 (31 people died and 100 injured); the Harrod's bombing where six people died (including three police officers) and 90 were injured; the Baltic Exchange bombing at 30 St Mary Axe, Canary Wharf in 1992 that killed three and injured 91; the Bishopsgate bombing in 1993 (one dead and 44 injured); the 1996 Docklands bombing (also referred to as the South Quay bombing) which killed two and injured over 100 more; the Aldwych bus bombing of 1996 which killed the bomber and injured several more; and many more similar incidents.

In 1987 I was promoted to Leading Ambulance Man.

In 1989 acted up to Assistant Station Officer and in 1990 started to work on the Paramedic Response Car, during this time I was silver at most of the major incidents I attended.

1993 promoted to Duty Officer (ASO renamed) joined the East central team of six DO's.

1998 LAS set up the Decontamination team where I was the operational lead.

1999 I took over the lead in taking responsibility for the expansion of the teams, training and delivery of response to the capital. During this period we had hundreds of decontamination jobs for the white powder episodes in the capital and several outside London.

2001 I was sent to Winterbourne Gunner to set up and establish the Police National CBRN Centre (PNCBRNC) and deliver training to the Police, Fire & Ambulance Service's Gold and Silver commanders. While at the centre we identified the need for a training course for Bronze Commanders. This was agreed by colleagues from the Ambulance Service Association (ASA) who took over the funding of my post.

2002 we ran a workshop including all ambulance trusts to develop and deliver a bronze commander course for ambulance services. We collectively looked at first responder's safety and introduced, Electric Personal Dosimeter's (EPD's) and Escape Hoods (EH20).

2003 seconded to the Department of Health to work on various projects and provide advice to various other government agencies on capabilities of Ambulance Services to ensure inclusion into their plans.

Some of these included the redesign of the current PPE (Chemprotect) to the new PPE replacement for the whole NHS (PRPS) where I worked with the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency (PASA) tendering, and then setting up a selection board, followed by trials to evaluate the sample suits. Once selected the suit was sent for protection testing at Porton Down. We designed a trainer and end user pack culminating in the delivery of the final PPE to all NHS Ambulance and selected primary care trusts. This part of the project ran for about three years and I held the budget of £12m.

Personally, I was aware of the need to deliver oxygen to many casualties so developed the Multiple Oxygen Delivery system (MP3). These and other smaller projects led me into many other intra-service projects/working groups involving PPE and CBRN response across all government agencies and other partners.

During my secondment in the DoH I was on an exercise at Bank Underground station when I was introduced to Mr Hatton, the then minister of health. I was explaining to him the various roles of the ambulance service and other agencies, when two firemen in gas tight suits came out of the tunnel, dropped a mannequin on the tracks and walked off, to the evident surprise of Mr Hatton.

He asked me why the ambulance staff had done that, to which I replied that they were firemen not ambulance as we had no capability to deal with patients until they had been brought out to us at the road side. His response was that it was an indefensible position for ambulance staff not to be able to treat patients where they fall. This became the strap line for the HART project initially with Assistant Chief Ambulance Officer Phil Selwood. I worked to Russ Mansford when he joined the DH in 2006 and when Russ started the HART project, I worked in several of the groups including specifying PPE, vehicles and equipment, as well as setting up the SOPs and even delivering the initial Physical Capability Assessments for HART staff.

2012-13 I transitioned into the NARU capabilities team bringing all the work-streams into the NARU capabilities programmes. I also had the responsibilities for the national reserve fleet of HART vehicles which is soon to include all NARU vehicles. I was involved with the National reserve stock of PRPS held at Bridgewater and Stanton, the national reserve stock and stores at Winterbourne Gunner as well as the National Capability Mass Casualty Emergency Vehicles restocking programme, MD4 (small shower mass cass) efficiency program and the Multi-Purpose Personal Protection System (M3Ps) looking at all the PPE for CBRN Hazmat and Urban Search and Rescue.

I recently passed a Portacount course (PNCBRNC) to enhance my knowledge of respirators and a competent person course (Hightec) for examining the safe working at height (SWAH) safety equipment to enhance my knowledge of requirements and also check the SWAH at Winterbourne pre and post USAR courses.

More recently I have been working on multiple projects, second and third generation HART fleet and equipment, including several trials for PPE, ergonomic and physiological testing of all the PPE, physiological testing for the Physiological Competence Testing (PCA's) including looking at fitness tests for MTA, HART etc.

In summary I am intensely proud of being in the ambulance service as I am of all the people I have met, far too many to list and as I approach my retirement after 39 years' service and a record breaking 19 year secondment looking back I have had a wonderful, happy and varied career starting on PTS at Hackney ambulance station, onto the relief rota, then onto a line, moved up to Leading Ambulance Man, then ASO renamed DSO.

I have worked on many stations in the LAS and met hundreds of staff over the years, all of whom had the same outlook - that we are here to deliver care to those in need to the highest standards possible.

In the latter part of my career my focus shifted to ensuring the staff have the best equipment and can perform their duties as safely as possible which has taken me across all ambulance trusts and manufacturers. I can honestly say that we all have the same desire to deliver the best possible care and treatment to patients wherever they are.

Kevin Bernie April 2020