

**Independent Committee in relation to the
Fire at Wang Fuk Court in Tai Po**

Witness Statement CHAN Derek Armstrong

I, CHAN Derek Armstrong, Deputy Director of Fire Services, 9th Floor, Fire Services Headquarters Building, 1 Hong Chong Road, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon do say as follows:-

1. I am the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Fire Services Department (“**FSD**”) of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. I have joined the FSD for 26 years since 1998 and was promoted to the present rank on 24th May 2023. My main duty is to deputise the Director of Fire Services (“**D of FS**”) in the overall direction, operation and management of the Fire Services Department. I am responsible for overseeing the Operational Support and Professional Development Command, the operational Fire Commands and the Ambulance Command.
2. I make this Witness Statement specifically to explain my involvement and command engagement during the fire, the strategic rationale and tactical considerations behind the key decisions I made in my capacity as Incident Commander, as well as the difficulties and challenges encountered during the operation. Save where otherwise appears, the facts deposed hereto are within my personal knowledge or are derived from office files and records and sources to which I have access and are true to the best of my knowledge, information and belief.
3. In this Witness Statement, where reference to a document in the hearing bundle is made, reference to **[B2/A(I)/1/1]** is to **[Bundle/part/item/page]**.
4. This Witness Statement is divided into three parts:-

- (1) **Part A** provides a chronological account of my involvement and command engagement during the fire;
 - (2) **Part B** details the strategic rationale and tactical considerations behind key decisions I made in my capacity as the Incident Commander; and
 - (3) **Part C** outlines the difficulties and challenges encountered during the operation.

5. Before setting out my own account, I confirm that, by the time I arrived at Wang Fuk Court, I had already been fully briefed on the prevailing situation at the scene and had reviewed the contemporaneous information then available to me. In addition, I have read and I adopt, in so far as they are relevant to this Witness Statement and consistent with my own recollection and records, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd witness statements of Assistant Director (New Territories North) (“**AD(NTN)**”) TANG Wing-wah dated 16 January 2026, 19 February 2026 and 1 April 2026 respectively, and the 1st witness statement of then Deputy Chief Fire Officer (New Territories North) (“**DCFO(NTN)**”) WONG King-man dated 20 February 2026.

6. Throughout the incident, my overriding priorities were to safeguard lives, stabilise the rapidly evolving multi-block fire, and maintain safe, sustainable operations over what was clearly developing into a protracted engagement. In doing so, I adopted a structured, data-driven approach to command, under which I continuously reviewed the Fire Services Communications Centre (“**FSCC**”) mobilisation records, sector situation reports and assistance-call statistics, and adjusted our deployment and tactics so that resources were not only sufficient, but were also effectively positioned and coordinated across all affected buildings.

Part A: Timeline and operational engagement

Pre-arrival and early development

7. At 1451 hours on 26.11.2025, in response to a call reporting a fire with explosion involving external scaffolding at Wang Cheong House, a total of 7 FS appliances with 33 FS members were despatched by the FSCC based on the pre-determined attendance (“PDA”) with additional resources due to the contingency plan formulated for Wang Fuk Court under renovation dated 13.11.2024, and the shutdown of the Fire Hydrant/Hose Reel (“FH/HR”) System at Wang Cheong House.
8. At 1502 hours, I was informed by the FSCC that the fire had been upgraded to No.3 Alarm in light of the rapid fire development. At that time, the fire had spread from Wang Cheong House to Wang Tai House and about 50 assistance calls were received. A total of 13 FS appliances with 61 FS members were despatched to the scene.
9. At 1534 hours, in response to the fire spreading to Wang Shing House, Wang Kin House and Wang Sun House, and the increase in assistance calls, the incident was upgraded to No. 4 Alarm. A total of 61 FS appliances with 269 FS members were despatched by FSCC.
10. At 1545 hours, as instructed by D of FS, I responded to the scene from the Fire Services Headquarters to facilitate high-level communications, observe operational progress at first hand, and provide on-site strategic advice, instructions, and support to the Incident Commander in light of the scale and severity of the fire.

At the scene

11. Upon my arrival at 1610 hours, the fire had already spread to seven of the eight residential buildings, with Wang Chi House being the only block not yet directly involved by flame, and assistance calls were surging from multiple blocks. I promptly confirmed with Divisional Officer (“**DO**”) LAM Ho-chun that evacuation of occupants at all blocks was being effected, and with the duty Senior Station Officer (Control) that the deployed manpower at that time (i.e. 269 FS members) had already exceeded twice the PDA for a No. 5 Alarm (i.e. 110 FS members). I then clarified with the initial Incident Commander, Senior Station Officer (“**SStnO**”) HUI Kin-on, that the mayday signal was sent by the late Senior Fireman (Posthumous) 18469 HO Wai-ho (“**SFn HO**”) and that no other members were unaccounted for. In parallel, I confirmed the exact location where SFn HO was found and spoke with the crew of Light Rescue Unit of Shatin Fire Station (“**ST/LRU**”), to understand how and when he became separated from his team and whether he had paired up with other members, so as to further confirm that no other members were missing.

12. After appraising the situation, I identified that the scale and complexity of the fire involving simultaneous fires in seven high-rise residential blocks, each with its own fire and smoke behaviour and assistance demands, which would require a strengthened command structure. Consequentially, at 1635 hours, I instructed the Incident Commander Chief Fire Officer (New Territories North) (“**CFO(NTN)**”) TANG Wing-wah to implement a building-by-building command strategy by:

- (a) setting up 8 operation sectors (i.e. Ops 1 to 8), each corresponding to one of the residential buildings at Wang Fuk Court, and each to be commanded by a Senior Officer (Senior Divisional Officer (“**SDO**”) or DO) responsible for firefighting within that building; and
- (b) assigning one additional Senior Officer in each sector dedicated as SAR leader, to ensure that life-saving efforts were prioritised and coordinated at tactical level.

Furthermore, DCFO(NTN) WONG King-man was simultaneously assigned as the Rescue Officer to take overall charge of the SAR operation across all sectors at 1623 hours, thereby providing a clear vertical line of rescue command from task level through tactical level to strategic level.

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13. For clarity, the deployment arrangement under this **building-by-building** command strategy was that each of the eight residential blocks at Wang Fuk Court was designated as a separate operation sector (Ops 1 to 8), each under the charge of a Senior Officer responsible for firefighting, with a second Senior Officer appointed as the sector SAR leader for that block. Within each sector, all internal firefighting teams, BA crews, hose-line deployments and any supporting Turntable Ladder (“**TL**”) operations were directed through the tactical command, while the overall coordination, resource prioritisation and cross-sector reinforcement were exercised at strategic level by the Incident Commander and the Rescue Officer.
14. Once the 8 operation sectors had been established in accordance with this plan, I directed that the manpower deployed to each building was to be actively reviewed having regard to the prevailing fire conditions and the pattern of assistance calls, so that

resources would remain aligned with the areas of greatest risk and operational need. For example, in light of the fire development and surge in assistance calls in certain blocks, at 1730 hours, I assigned a DO, in addition to being the sector firefighting leader for Wang Chi House (which remained unaffected by flame), to also act as the sector SAR leader for Wang Tao House and Wang Sun House, and I redeployed an Assistant Divisional Officer from Wang Shing House to Wang Cheong House to assist the sector SAR leader in SAR operations. This dynamic redistribution of sector officers ensured that those sectors facing the highest life-risk and operational intensity at any given time had commensurate command resources.

Taking over command

15. By 1822 hours, assistance calls had escalated to 82 units, and a total of 171 FS appliances with 718 FS members had already been despatched to Wang Fuk Court, with every building under the charge of designated Senior Officers for both firefighting and SAR operations. In light of the reasons as referred to in paragraph 24 below, I upgraded the fire to No. 5 Alarm at 1822 hours and, in accordance with GO Chapter 41, assumed overall command as Incident Commander. Upon that, I continued to strategically review and deploy resources to meet the specific firefighting and search and rescue needs of each block, and to support the building-by-building command and floor-by-floor internal firefighting strategy. This helped to support a structured and coordinated operational framework throughout what had become a prolonged, high-intensity incident. It also enabled us to maintain appropriate relief and rotation for frontline crews, while reinforcing logistics and safety support across all sectors.

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16. At 2230 hours, 221 FS appliances with 989 FS members had been despatched, enabling us to maintain continuous firefighting and SAR operations across all sectors.
17. To maintain the sustainability of the protracted operation, I secured comprehensive logistical support through the following measures:
 - (a) **Breathing Apparatus (BA) Sustainability:** I maintained regular communication with the Breathing Apparatus Officer (“**DO(BA)**”) to ensure a continuous and adequate supply of BA cylinders. At the peak of the operation, we maintained a reserve of approximately 220 cylinders at the BA Main Control located at the ground-floor staging area to support the high volume of BA use;
 - (b) **Water Pressure Augmentation:** I directed that a quantity of Compact Portable Pumps (“**CPP**”) be stationed at the staging area for immediate deployment to various sectors. These CPPs were essential to boost the firefighting jet pressure required for effective internal operations on the upper floors of the 31-storey buildings, compensating for the height and the compromised building FH/HR system;
 - (c) **Aerial Surveillance:** Unmanned Aerial Systems (“**UAS**”) had been deployed since 1615 hours on 26.11.2025 for aerial surveillance, checking for re-ignition and relaying information to sector officers, thereby integrating technology into our command structure to enhance situational awareness.
 - (d) **Manpower Relief Arrangement:** Recognizing the physical exhaustion of the crews, we implemented a special relief

arrangement for frontline FS members. For Directorate Officers and Senior Officers, relief was arranged at 0935 hours and 0300 hours on 27.11.2025 respectively. For crew members, instead of traditional individual appliance substitutions, coach services were arranged by DCP to convey fresh manpower en-bloc from various fire stations to the scene at 0900 hours on 27.11.2025, ensuring a seamless changeover without hampering operational arrangements; and

- (e) **Fatality Management:** Upon the discovery of multiple casualties, I coordinated with the Chief Ambulance Officer (“**CAO**”) to establish a temporary mortuary on-site. This facilitated the dignified handling of the deceased and allowed for proper tagging and documentation prior to removal.
18. These resources were calibrated against the evolving resource picture, enabling us to sustain continuous operations over more than 40 hours without loss of operational capability despite the extreme physical and psychological demands on frontline crews.
 19. To expedite the operations, I considered deploying the Disaster Response and Rescue Team (“**DRRT**”) to remove the fallen bamboo scaffolding and burning debris that had obstructed building entrances and compromised the emergency vehicular access. This measure was intended to facilitate more efficient entry for firefighting crews and ensure safe positioning for Hydraulic Platforms (“**HPs**”) and TLs for aerial operations. However, I considered that the proposal was too risky because burning debris and scaffolding were still falling from upper floors from time to time. I therefore decided not to proceed with DRRT deployment at that stage to avoid imposing unacceptable risk on our personnel.

20. At sector level, attempts were also made to consolidate internal operations under the building-by-building command strategy. In particular, I tasked the sector officer of Wang Tai House at about 2200 hours on 26.11.2025, to make efforts to establish a bridgehead on the 10/F of that block to support a floor-by-floor advance. However, due to re-ignition of lower floor fires and the associated escalation in heat and smoke conditions beneath the intended bridgehead, the crews were required to retreat in order to avoid exposing themselves to unacceptable risk, and the bridgehead could not be maintained.

Handover of command and return

21. At 0935 hours on 27.11.2025, having managed the incident through the peak of the No. 5 Alarm period, I handed over the role of Incident Commander to Deputy Director of Fire Services (Public Safety and Corporate Strategy) (“**DD(P&C)**”) WONG Ka-wing. During the handover, we reached a consensus to maintain the building-by-building command strategy and floor-by-floor internal firefighting strategy, particularly as the operation transitioned into a protracted fire containment phase characterised by occasional re-ignition within residential units.
22. By 1500 hours on 27.11.2025, fires in four buildings were largely extinguished and the firefighting operation at the remaining three buildings was in good progress, although sporadic re-ignition in some units continued to require close monitoring and rapid intervention. At 2100 hours, in view of the continuing operational significance of the incident, I returned to Wang Fuk Court and resumed the role of Incident Commander from DD(P&C) WONG Ka-wing. By 2131 hours, the fire was declared “surrounded”, at which time the FSCC recorded assistance calls for 355 locations,

with 320 locations successfully attended by FS members through the combined efforts of all sectors.

23. At 0315 hours on 28.11.2025, the fire was declared “under control”, and among the assistance call for 364 locations, 356 locations¹ were attended by FS members, with 129 FS appliances with 541 FS members deployed. At 1018 hours on 28.11.2025, I delivered a “STOP” message, meaning further mobilisation of resources was no longer required, at which time 143 FS appliances and 635 FS members were still in attendance to complete the operation in an orderly and controlled manner and handed over the command to DCFO(NTN) WONG King-man at 1031 hours to oversee the final damping-down and investigation efforts.

Part B: Key decisions made at the scene as Incident Commander

Decision to upgrade the fire to No. 5 Alarm

24. At the time of my arrival at 1610 hours on 26.11.2025, the manpower at scene (269 FS members) had already exceeded twice the PDA for a No. 5 Alarm (110 FS members), and by 1822 hours a total of 116 fire appliances and 55 ambulances with 718 FS members had been despatched, such that the cumulative manpower deployed already exceeded 6.5 times the PDA for a No. 5 Alarm, which was considered sufficient at the material time. Nevertheless, upon my assessment, growing challenges at the fire scene were recognised, such as evolving fires in seven high-rise buildings, an increasing number of FS assistance calls, progressively reduced visibility due to the onset of darkness, and fully activated operation sectors in all eight blocks under their

¹ The remaining 8 locations, together with 9 additional assistance calls received after 0315 hours on 28.11.2025, were attended / handled by 1230 hours on 28.11.2025.

respective Senior Officers as described in paragraphs 12(a) and (b). Taking these factors together, I considered it appropriate to upgrade the fire to No. 5 Alarm at 1822 hours and assume overall command as Incident Commander, so as to provide a clearly defined strategic command for the whole scene and to ensure that firefighting and SAR operations across all sectors were coordinated under a single incident-wide framework.

Decision not to upgrade the fire to Disaster Alarm

25. A Disaster Alarm, the highest fire classification within the FSD, is activated in response to a widespread incident, or a series of simultaneous incidents, likely to engage the entire resources of the Service for a protracted period, potentially requiring the assistance of the garrison stationed in Hong Kong.
26. The criteria for upgrading a fire generally involve a requirement for “additional attendance as requested” in instances where standard No. 5 Alarm resources prove insufficient. Despite the severity of this incident, I assessed that additional resources were not required for the following reasons:
 - (a) The FSD had already despatched over 220 FS appliances and 980 personnel to the scene, a deployment that exceeded the standard PDA for a No. 5 Alarm by approximately nine times. This cumulative despatch represented a level of resource commitment that already approached the practical upper limit of what could be effectively deployed within the constrained circulation spaces at Wang Fuk Court;
 - (b) Due to the buildings’ structural limitations, including narrow staircases and restricted corridor space, as well as extreme heat conditions requiring a floor-by-floor advancement, there

was a practical limit to the number of personnel who could be effectively and safely deployed at any one time. In those circumstances, the marginal benefit of introducing yet further personnel, such as garrison support or cross-boundary reinforcements, would have been outweighed by the risk of congestion, different operational practice, communication overload and reduced effectiveness within staircases and corridors already operating at capacity; and

- (c) In the circumstances, I determined that upgrading the fire to Disaster Alarm as well as additional manpower, such as the garrison stationed in Hong Kong or the Fire and Rescue Corps of Guangdong Province (who were present at the Liantang Port between 2200 and 2300 hours), were not required.

Handling of fire assistance calls

- 27. To manage the substantial influx of fire assistance calls, several measures were implemented:
 - (a) The firefighting and rescue strategy, including the handling of fire assistance calls, was kept under ongoing review. In so far as conditions permitted, cases involving persons in immediate peril from heat or smoke, and units facing imminent fire spread, received prompt attention as far as possible. In practice, the sequence in which individual assistance calls could be acted upon necessarily depended on whether SAR teams could safely gain access to the locations concerned, having regard in particular to the status of firefighting progress, the availability of safe access and egress routes, the structural integrity and safety of the affected areas and the clarity of the location information provided by callers;

- (b) The smooth despatch of fire assistance calls was coordinated by the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (Fire Safety), WONG Sze-lut, Sunny, who communicated effectively with sector officers. Through this arrangement, fire assistance calls were accurately relayed to sector SAR leaders and taken into account the formulation of building-specific rescue strategies, which were then executed when tactical conditions allowed safe SAR operations to commence;
- (c) Furthermore, situation reports were obtained from sector officers and SAR leaders on a continuous basis, allowing for ongoing assessment of the situation and resources allocated to each block, and enabling adjustments to be made to firefighting and SAR deployments in response to changing conditions.

Decision not to broadcast evacuation warnings through the Emergency Alert System (EAS)

28. The EAS is a public dissemination system for time-critical [B2/A(III)/3/1318] messages via mobile networks. Activation criteria include territory-wide emergencies such as massive infrastructure breakdowns, large-scale riots or bomb disposals, rather than localised incidents. I considered the EAS unsuitable for this incident because, at the material time, this situation required localised, one-on-one communication with specific residents in the affected buildings rather than broadcast to the general public due to the unpredictability of the dynamic fire development. This specific need was met effectively by the Support Centre, which made approximately 1,500 callback phone calls to acquire updates of the conditions of trapped residents thereby lessening the burden of the FSCC in receiving duplicated calls and freeing up their capacity for receiving new calls from other trapped residents.

Part C: Difficulties and challenges encountered during the operation

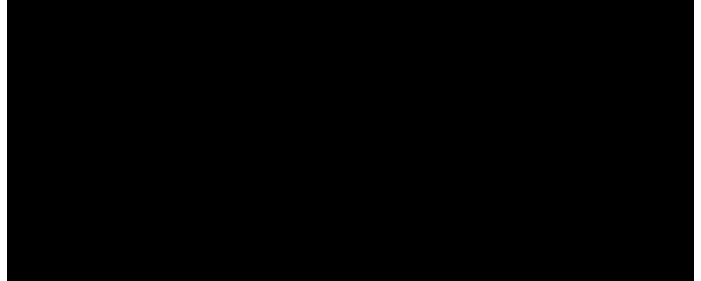
29. The firefighting and search and rescue operations at Wang Fuk Court were conducted under a number of exceptional difficulties and challenges. First, the fire developed and spread in an unusually rapid and severe manner: it is believed to have quickly spread upward through the re-entrant in a way similar to a “chimney”, trapping hot air, flames and flammable gases and allowing them to rise rapidly from lower to upper floors within individual blocks before spreading laterally as a result of unfavourable weather conditions to adjacent blocks, so that multiple units and façades in those blocks became involved within a short period of time and burning bamboo sticks and debris became detached and continuously fell from height.
30. Secondly, large quantities of burning debris fell and accumulated at ground level, particularly at the front entrances and rear exits of Wang Cheong House and Wang Tai House, engulfing ground-floor lobbies in flames and severely hindering both resident escape and firefighters’ access. Firefighters had to extinguish the fire and manually clear debris and fallen bamboo sticks obstructing the entrances/exits, progressively gaining access to the interior while continuously exposed to ongoing risks from further falling objects.
31. Thirdly, internal firefighting and SAR inside the blocks were conducted under extremely adverse conditions. Corridors and staircases, which are the primary escape routes for residents and access routes for firefighters, were invaded at an early stage by high-temperature smoke and flames from the exterior, resulting in very high heat, dense smoke and very low visibility. Firefighters could only advance floor by floor via the staircases from ground level, forcing entry into units for firefighting and SAR, while

reignition on lower levels at times threatened retreat routes and required repeated movement between floors to maintain safety.

32. Fourthly, during the fire, the building FH/HR system was under repair, so water supply sufficient for firefighting had to be secured by requesting the Water Supplies Department to boost water pressure and flow from street hydrants and by extensive deployment of compact portable pumps to support firefighting at upper floors. At the same time, multiple TLs were strategically positioned along all available positions around Wang Fuk Court and nearby roads to tackle fire spread and support internal operations conducted at height, adding a further layer of logistical and coordination complexity.
33. Finally, these conditions had a significant cumulative impact on frontline personnel. In certain instances, SAR team members accepted heightened levels of risk in order to reach persons reported in distress, including advancing through burning floors or delaying the use of BA while moving upward through staircases filled with hazardous gases. During the operations, a number of firefighters were hospitalised due to heat exhaustion, physical exhaustion, breathing difficulties, smoke inhalation or being struck by objects, and tragically one firefighter lost his life while operating on the upper floors of Wang Tai House at the initial stage of the fire, underscoring the extreme difficulty and danger inherent in the operations at Wang Fuk Court.
34. Taken together, these operational difficulties and challenges formed an important part of the context in which I exercised my functions as Incident Commander, and they informed the command decisions and deployment strategies described in Parts A and B above.

35. I confirm that the contents of this Witness Statement are true to the best of my knowledge, information and belief.

Dated this 6th day of April 2026.



CHAN Derek Armstrong
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Fire Services Department