

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WOLLONGONG BUSHFIRE BRIGADES.

by
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In the summer of 1952, atop the Illawarra escarpment above Austinmer for almost a week, a bushfire slowly burned its way northwards from Bulli Lookout and under the vagaries of the wind just as slowly burned its way back to Sublime Point until summer rain put it out. To the residents below on the coast the fire provided quite a display at night, but the interesting point for this story is that no attempt was made to fight it; the fire was allowed to burn on until extinguished.

Such was the state of the bushfire fighting organisation within the City of Wollongong at that time up until 1954.

The brigades that did exist at that time were poorly equipped, with no central co-ordination, depending upon small numbers of dedicated volunteers each protecting their own little townships as best they could with what resources they had.

North of the city, Helensburgh Brigade led by Charlie Edwards, had been formed in 1940. An old Chevrolet 30 cwt truck was supplied by the Bulli Shire Council. It was equipped with a 100 gallon (450 ltr) tank and a petrol pump donated by the local publican. No doubt also possessing a supply of beaters and knapsack sprays. Quite importantly, they had a women's auxiliary, watched over by Grace Edwards, with tea, sandwiches and encouragement in the heat of bushfire fighting. These women also helped in fundraising for the brigade.

Prior to the early '50s Darkes Forest, Otford and Helensburgh were the only units functioning in the way that was to become the basic structure for all the brigades

to be formed or reformed in the future.

Darkes Forest, some 10 km to the south of Helensburgh, formed in the 1930s, also possessed an old 1937 Chevrolet truck with a small but effective brigade organisation with a women's auxiliary. It suffered the same acute problem of lack of equipment.

Otford as a bushfire fighting force with a keen and innovative membership, assisted by the Methodist Crusade Youth Camp, was also hampered by the same lack of equipment.

At Bulli, in the event of a bushfire in the area, the local Police Sergeant would recruit "volunteers" from the Bulli and Woonona hotels to go into action equipped with the ubiquitous beaters and knapsack sprays.

In the south of the City, dating from 1951 a brigade organisation was in place. Mr A B Sinclair, the Dapto Dairy Co-operative manager had been issued with a few lengths of canvas hose and standpipe. However, with no means of delivery of the vital water beyond the town supply. And after all, the bushfires are usually confined to the bush. This was a well organised group of local farmers who were very capable of protecting their properties had they received proper support from the Council.

Such was the precarious state of preparedness in the City of Wollongong with which to combat any bushfire threat which could be unleashed at any point at any time from August to April from Dapto to Helensburgh.

Prior to the amalgamation of the City in 1947 at least the Bulli Shire Council and the Central Illawarra Shire Council showed some interest in Bushfire Brigade activities. Whereas in the Wollongong City Council and the North Illawarra Municipal Council there is no record of any action. Following the amalgamation of the four Local Government areas in 1947 the Greater Wollongong City Council really had no policy on bushfire fighting co-ordination within the newly created City. Knapsack pumps and beaters were kept at the Bulli Works Depot and were issued when Brigades called for them, mostly when fires threatened. There was no allocation of funds or authorised officer to organise and supervise operations.

Bushfire control at that time was nominally under the care of the Health Department along with other fringe responsibilities such as stock impounding,

surf lifesaving clubs, allocation of sporting grounds and brass band rosters. But no specific officer was designated to take charge so leaving the brigades to operate independently.

A great advance in bushfire fighting control had been made by the proclamation of the Bushfire Act 1949 by the New South Wales Government. The New South Wales Bushfire Council was formed to administer the Act state wide. The Act provided for brigades to be formed into groups with brigade captains within each group controlled by a group captain. A Fire Control Officer responsible for all bushfire personnel, for planning, training, equipment and overall bushfire fighting control within the Council area. Without any comparisons with other areas it can be said that by 1954 Wollongong City Council had done very little to organise, equip or arouse and enthuse the brigades that did exist.

However, the year 1954 was to tell a different story. The Government concerned by the apathy and inaction of Local Government in New South Wales to implement the provisions of the Act seconded a NSWFB officer Jack Kinnear to the New South Wales Bushfire Council to move through the Shires and Municipalities of the state. The object was to encourage and quietly insist on the appointment of fire control officers with the promise of equipment and finance. The Wollongong City Council was no exception and the Deputy City Health Inspector was persuaded by him to be appointed as Fire Control Officer. Ironically, he, as a city born and raised individual had no experience in and no idea of bushfire fighting.

"Don't worry", said Jack Kinnear, "the job is administrative. A bit of organising and keeping the equipment up to the brigades". He was soon to find out that under the Act he was responsible for putting the fires out! - in control - on the ground at the fire front.

Nevertheless, a survey of the existing brigades was made, and communication opened with the brigade officers who were functioning, to establish the number of members and equipment held in each brigade.

It was here that the FCO were to meet men who would later become firm friends and with whom he worked in collaboration for many years. With these men the organisation, membership, equipment, training and the fighting spirit of the brigades were to be established.

To be continued in March/April 2002 issue.