A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WOLLONGONG
BUSHFIRE BRIGADES

by

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Part two.

From 1954 onwards there was an invigoration of interest and activity in bushfire protection in localities not then served by established brigades. This led to the formation of new brigades in Stanwell Tops, Stanwell Park, Coledale, Austinmer and Yallah.

The brigades were hungry for equipment to increase their effectiveness and also provide for the increasing numbers of new members beginning to be attracted to the volunteer service. However, a shortage of funds allocated by the Bushfire Council's budget each year meant the supply of materials was restricted. Even though at that early period of expansion the equipment was limited to hand items - no vehicles, no radio, no pumps.

Funding under the Bushfires Act derived the amount for each Council Area each year from a formula involving the value of the unimproved capital value of the land outside the boundaries of the NSW Fire Brigades in each Council area. Such land outside these boundaries in Wollongong mainly comprised Water Board catchment land which was exempt from Council rating control. The amount of funds available for equipment to the brigades was therefore inadequate. Naturally the brigades were unaware of this restriction of funds and although mostly thankful for the equipment issued they could have and should have and really needed to have had much more.

The hard reality of wild fires and "blow-up" days was to change all that.

The history and advancement of bushfire control in 1950s and '60s in NSW was largely driven by major fire disasters. The recommendations made in subsequent inquiries led to these changes. In 1957 the tragic and devastating fire that hit Leura and Katoomba, sweeping in from national park land to the north, resulted in the formation of Fire Protection Associations.
These bodies, each comprising a number of Councils, combined to construct and maintain fire roads in the vast areas of State forests and national parks throughout the State. The purpose of these fire roads was to give access to fire tankers to attack fires burning in remote areas before adverse winds drove them, as uncontrollable wild fires into settled areas and townships, as had happened at Leura.

Wollongong City Council was a member of the Southern Highlands Association, together with Wingecarribee, Wollondilly, Mittagong and Crookwell Councils. The Fire Control Officer was the Council's representative. As such, Council participated over many years in the development of a system of fire roads throughout the areas, allowing the deployment of personnel and tankers into the remote areas in the early stages of a bushfire threat.

Along with this undoubted advance the Bush Fire Council was forced to review its policy on the non-provision of motor vehicles to the brigades. A decision was taken to make available ex-army 4x4 Blitz trucks to brigades. Wollongong responded and the FCO accompanied by Council's senior mechanic, after careful examination of scores at Holsworthy Army Base, secured five vehicles. These were allocated to Helensburgh, Darkes Forest, Bulli, Dapto and Stanwell Tops brigades. The provision of these vehicles gave the brigades mobility they had never had and together with the issue of HF radio walkie-talkies marked the entry of the brigades into the modern era of bushfire fighting. A small step to be sure, measured against the backdrop of today's highly sophisticated organisations, so capable of rapid and powerful response far beyond local Government boundaries.

At that time, in the late 50s and early 60s, the Bushfire Council thinking was still fixed upon second-hand ex-army vehicles. So much so that when Helensburgh raised sufficient finance to purchase an International Scout for the group captain's transport the BFC very reluctantly agreed to take it on provided it was not to be taken as a precedent!

The next advancement was made after the devastating fires that swept across from Goulburn and Marulen to Exeter and Bundanoon in 1962.
It was the first occasion when brigades from other areas including Wollongong were drafted to assist the local brigades. The battle raged for many days, the first real test of the co-ordinated use of vehicles in an almost military-type operation. The fact that Bundanoon and Exeter were burnt out was not a reflection on the strategy of mobility or the efforts of the brigade members, but upon the failure of the old 1942 type Blitz vehicles to withstand long periods of continuous hard use. The outcome? the decision to purchase new vehicles and the introduction of the 4x4 850 gallon Bedford tanker, which became the standard heavy brigade tanker for a number of years.

In 1968 New South Wales experienced a very dry winter and spring. Unseasonable, hot days in August further dried out the bush, setting the scene for the events which followed in late October and early November. Small outbreaks of fire, some deliberately lit, occurred, but were quickly contained by the local brigades.

Among the brigade group captains, captains, members and certainly the Fire Commanding Officer there were very few men who had experienced the fury and devastation of a wild fire on a "blow-up" day. There was not the sense of urgency that should have been evident. That is not to say the brigades were slack or dispirited. On the contrary, most of them had tanker trucks, HF radios for communication and considerable new equipment. Although their keenness was unquestionable the danger was not realised.

Furthermore, the FCO had been appointed City Health Surveyor in 1959. His duties and responsibilities to the Health Department had greatly increased with the position mainly due to the huge population growth in the Greater City of Wollongong since 1954. He had realised the position of FCO required a person of practical field experience in bushfire fighting with the abilities to organise and weld the brigades on a city-wide basis into a coordinated fighting force. For that purpose he had a person appointed as Acting FCO with the brief to prepare a comprehensive organisational manual with the FCO as a full time appointment.

Before these plans could bear fruit Wollongong was overwhelmed by the 1968 bushfires.
During the third week in October of 1968 a fire began to edge its way from the Water Board Catchment area, on the escarpment above Wollongong, towards the township of Kembla Heights. A small group of fire fighters, under the acting FCO, were holding the outbreak in check. This was the situation by Sunday 28th October with the City Health Surveyor still as the legal FCO in a supervisory role. Throughout the day Kembla Heights was secured but the fire had worked its way around the back of the mountain to the south side where elements of the Dapto Bushfire Brigade were brought in. By late afternoon the fire had been contained at the south side, but was burning on a fairly narrow front easterly towards the township of Farmborough Heights.

The single track railway from Unanderra to Moss Vale ran across the escarpment above the township, forming a natural firebreak. It was decided to make a stand at that point allowing it to burn, still slowly, until it reached the line where it could be held and brought under control.

At about 7pm, with the line established and conditions calm, a sudden violent westerly wind change roared down upon the waiting crews, picked up the fire and in a matter of minutes whipped it into an inferno forcing the fire fighters across the bridge over the rail line as it raced towards Farmborough Heights. Here they were joined by the NSW Fire Brigade from Unanderra and local residents with garden hoses and whatever they could seize. The fire was fought from house to house and street to street. On the northern side Kembla Heights and Mt Kembla townships were similarly hit with virtually no protection.

By 2 am a decision was made by the Mayor of the City, the SES Director and the FCO for the appointment of an Emergency Fire Control Officer under the provisions of the Bush Fires Act. Captain Tom Whitney an able NSW FB officer was selected and was on site by 6am. An emergency control centre was established at the Council's Unanderra office, extra telephone lines installed and the control room established.

In the morning conditions had eased with a wind drop giving a little time for planning. Those who had been on duty for 30 hours or so were able to get a few hours sleep.
By mid morning the wind increased to gale force and so began a day and night of terror with destruction engulfing almost the whole of Wollongong. The fire of the previous night, now regenerated, swept through Unanderra, Figtree Heights, Mt Nebo and Figtree. By evening it had reached Mt Keira, burning around the mountain.Viewed from the City centre the whole mountain appeared ablaze with fire and smoke. Meanwhile at about 11am a fire started at Bellambi Creek north of Wollongong, which in the violent wind conditions spread rapidly through Bellambi, Russel Vale, Woonona and Bulli right up to the Bulli Pass and into the rain forest under the Lookout. Further north at Thirroul a resident attempted a burn-off which went quickly out of control sweeping across open ground, jumping the South Coast railway heading on to Austinmer west of the rail tracks burning in a fury through housing areas then onto Coledale before reaching the foot of the escarpment under Sublime Point.

A fourth fire burning across from Cataract Dam in the north was fought by the Darkes Forest and Helensburgh Bush Fire Brigades assisted by Army personnel from Holsworthy. It was a desparate but successful fight to save the village of Darkes Forest and protect Helensburgh.

Tuesday morning 30th October dawned calm and still. A survey of the whole fire scene in the Greater City of Wollongong was undertaken. The devastation was enormous. Over 50 houses were destroyed together with fencing, outbuildings, equipment, etc. No loss of life attributable to the fires had occurred although one man succumbed to a heart attack.

Fires in the hinterland behind Wollongong continued in country too difficult to access and wherever possible were attacked during the following week. On Saturday 3rd November a repeat of wind conditions occurred bringing roaring life to almost extinguished fires. A hard fight, centred on Mt Ousley Road, was waged all day and throughout the night. By then we were well organised and the fires were finally put out at 5.30am on Sunday 4th November.

Much had been learned, so that in the aftermath, a report with recommendations was presented to Council on rebuilding of the organisation. The appointment of a full time FCO was left to the calling of
applications. From a field of some very able applicants Warren Robinson, Fire Captain of the Bulli Bushfire Brigade, was appointed. Thus commenced a career lasting for over thirty years in the position during which he brought the Wollongong bushfire fighting organisation to a state of effectiveness second to none in the State.

With the adoption of recommendations by the Council a special financial grant was made available by the State Government. Radio communication enhanced from HF to VHF frequency, the old Blitz vehicles fazed out and replaced by Bedford trucks and lighter vehicles for smaller brigades. The familiar bright orange overalls - the badge of membership - made its appearance together with a variety of equipment once hardly imagined but now readily available.

With the increase in population and residential spread into the bushland of the slopes of the escarpment, many more dwellings were at risk of bushfire. In the 1968 fires these were the very areas where there was least protection. Most vulnerable were the areas between Corrimal and Dapto. Public meetings were called covering the localities of Mt Pleasant, Keiraville, Mt Keira, Figtree Heights, Mt Nebo, Mt Kembla, Cordeaux Heights and Farmborough Heights. From these meetings Keira and Kembla Bushfire Brigades were formed which were soon incorporated into the organisation as fully fledged brigades. Later Farmborough Heights formed a separate brigade.

Wollongong shared in the general quickening of awareness of bushfire protection in the community and with the flow of new vehicles and equipment into the brigades followed an increase in membership and a corresponding increase in the effectiveness of the brigades. The men were proud of their brigades, their vehicles and their performance. This was shown by the shining state of the trucks, pumps and equipment and by their drill and training. This was no more in evidence than at the annual field days where after hard training they competed brigade against brigade in the individual events and for the Fred Luck Memorial Shield for the highest overall points. The real gauge of their effectiveness, of course, was seen in the action of fighting bushfires, hazard reduction work and responding to fire emergencies in treated areas outside Wollongong.
The 1968 Wollongong fires were followed by equally devastating fires in the Blue Mountains; with the aftermath far reaching and political. The NSW Government was forced to realise that no longer could the bushfire brigade movement be seen as local volunteer groups operating within their local areas, led by voluntary controllers in fighting local outbreaks, with resources utterly incapable of holding the line against wild fires that were indeed sure to come. This was clearly illustrated in that, despite the overwhelming nature of the fires around Wollongong, no outside help was received except for a detachment of the military at Darkes Forest.

This realisation by the Government, which was expected and supported by community sentiment, led to:-

1. The appointment of fulltime professional Fire Control Officers and necessary staff, appointed by Councils.
2. The establishment of bushfire centres with operational radio and telephone communications and planning facilities.
3. Training programmes for brigade members using the bushfire field days where competitive events, the meeting and mixing with other brigades and the involvement of women would enhance morale.
4. The provision of greatly increased funding on a state wide basis which would allow the continuing supply to brigades of new vehicles, equipment and bushfire stations.
5. The appointment of a Commissioner with wide powers under the Act.
6. The establishment of a State Bushfire Control Centre to coordinate activities throughout the State.
7. The active policy of drawing upon the strengths of other outside brigades to assist the hard pressed elements in threatened areas.

This policy was used to the ultimate in Sydney in 1994 when units from interstate came to the assistance of Sydney in its time of extreme crisis.

These measures led to the burgeoning of the bushfire fighting movement in NSW to the present day where it has reached the very high state of effectiveness in its own field of bushfire fighting and in other civil emergencies as they arise. The spirit of zeal is reflected in the confidence and pride communities feel for the work and presence of the young men and
women in the orange overalls riding the shiny fire tankers emblazoned with the name of their own community for all to see.

The Wollongong Rural Fire Service takes its place among the best of the State's rural fire services. This is one of the finest of community volunteer services rendering help to the people, together with the State Emergency Services and the Surf Lifesaving Association.

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