

Bushfires 2019/20

Bugtown Complex and Orroral Valley Fires

My context

My name is [REDACTED]. I am 54 years old, and with my wife and four children aged 12 to 19, manage a 660 hectare family farm at Yaouk, in the Snowy Mountains. The terrain in our area is typified by open grassed valleys at 900-1100 metres surrounded by rugged inaccessible mountains up to just under 1900m. The NSW/ACT is the northern boundary of our Brigade area.

My Rural Fire Brigade is Shannon's Flat where I learned fire fighting the old fashioned way in 1983, as a 16 year old volunteer, on the ground during the ACT Gudgenby fires. I worked with the NSW NPWS over seven years from the late 1980's and spent many weeks at numerous fires all over NSW, principally in remote areas. I have been a Deputy Captain and Captain of Shannon's Flat RFB and was [REDACTED] during this recent fire season.

Our brigade has five fire appliances, 2 Cat 9's, 2 Cat 7's and a Cat 1 tanker (the Cat 1 was seconded to Bateman's Bay in December 2019 and we never saw it again til March this year). We have over 140 financial members, normally a core of eight to twelve 'regular active' members, and something like 35 we'd normally be able to call up when needed. This season we had over 50 volunteer members crewing our trucks with many more manning the shed and running errands.

The build up to the fires in our area was daunting. We know the fire season approaches the Monaro from the north and this year was no exception, but to watch the relentless southward march of blazes that turned into mega fires was unsettling.

It was eventually our turn. Our crews helped out at Braidwood and Bungendore and of course we spent time at The Badja. Dunn's Road kicked off but that was half way to Wagga, that was not of concern to us... Until it ran 100 or more kilometres SE, through Tumbarumba, and sat at the bottom of the mountain below Cabramurra, waiting, building up enough steam to burst over the ranges up wind of us all.

And then lightening started the Bugtown complex, 3km due west of our farm in Kosciuszko National Park, and we knew this was us. I won't go into detail,

other than for mentioning that when that fire let go on January 4th I was involved with fire fighting the likes of which I have never before seen in my career. We lost two houses, a couple of sheds and kilometres of fences. This fire spotted and ran over private land to the south of our farm, Nalyappa, and then became established on Yaouk Bill Range, initially in the Yaouk Nature reserve to the south of Nalyappa but also running toward communities further down wind.

We worked on this fire for the best part of three weeks, trying to contain its spread out of the Range into the Bolaro Valley to the west, the rural subdivision of Ashvale to the south, the community of Shannon's Flat to the east, and into the Yaouk Valley to the north. We were conscious of keeping it out of the Australian Capital Territory too.

For some three weeks we continued fire fighting, back burning, mopping up, patrolling along something like a 50km perimeter around the Yaouk Bill Range. Our flank of the Bugtown Complex in the Yaouk Valley was predominantly done by local farmers with their utes and slip-on units, while RFS Strike Teams from all over eastern Australia and New Zealand, the NSW NPWS and ACT Parks did a great amount of valuable work.

Over about one week the fire did burn northwards down hill and into the wind, from Yaouk Bill range onto our farm, Nalyappa. We finished this with a back burn and eventually lost about 200ha of bush and several kilometres of fence. In amongst all this my wife was juggling her work, our kids and my elderly parents who needed to have safe lodging with a local respite care facility that refused to accept them while ever there was no local 'emergency' declared. Her story is also worth hearing!

We did well, we were typically well resourced and supported by the Monaro IMT in Cooma and years of fostering cross border relations with the ACT fire Agencies served us well.

Next thing was the Orroral fire started in the ACT, 15km to our north and the long term locals who'd been through 1983 and 2003 knew how this was going to play out. This was going to be a more significant threat to all of our communities than the fires we'd had to date.

As we assumed, the Orroral fire worked its way west, upwind toward the Cotter and Kosciuszko National Park. It also crept south toward Shannon's Flat along a 15km flank. And of course it went like a train south east, down wind,

toward and Bredbo and Cooma. This was when we lost our ever dependable strike teams from the ACT as their priority was all of a sudden to protect Canberra in the ACT, not Shannon's Flat in NSW.

Long story short, cross border communications disappeared over night, we planned and strategised as best we could and the fire kept on encroaching ever so slowly. We thought we were going OK but then it spotted onto Sentry Box Hill on the ACT border at Yaouk, 4km from Nalyappa, and very soon we had fire back in the Yaouk Valley which triggered a major backburn strategy. Before this was completed and largely unbeknown to us, the western end of the Ororrall Fire burned south from the ACT into the northern end of the Yaouk Valley, north west and directly upwind of all the country we worked so hard to protect for a month and a half. This was the body blow for the community and Brigade as a whole, and for me particularly, to know that we had worked hard, we had done well, but here we were back at Yaouk, only three kilometres north of where the Bugtown complex started for us six weeks earlier. So anyway, we went through the motions again, strengthen containments, redo asset protection, plan back burns and fall backs. I worried and became sick as the farm was directly down wind from Mt Morgan, where this fire was going regardless of what we did. As much as my family, my kids, my brother and his son, my wife had done an enormous amount of work to beef up the farm's defendability, massively pruning and trimming the through gardens, roof sprinkler system built on the house, sheds enclosed, stock mustered, horses, dogs and parents evacuated, we all knew we were going to burn this time.

But then in the second week of February it rained. And it rained again and kept on raining. The fires were basically over.

I often look back on this period now with mixed feelings. I have done enough fire fighting in many different situations to understand that an amount of mayhem and chaos is to be expected when there is a big campaign fire running. There were mistakes made, bad calls, miscommunications etc that happened for any number of reasons but that all considered we did well. Few injuries or near misses, no significant vehicle incidents, nobody burnt. 'Our fires' were contained to basically where we wanted them. The community pulled together in a way I've not seen before.

It was tough though. I don't know how many times I got off a shift at 3 or 4.00 am, to then go back to the shed for a 7.00am briefing the same morning. I wasn't looking after our farm most of the time, that was mostly being done by

my brother and my 16 year old son. My 19 year old daughter served in our Div-Com at the Shannon's Flat fire Shed, my 14 year old son spent days preparing the house, removing important items to safety and trimming the gardens around the house. My 12 year old daughter took responsibility for the welfare of all the livestock and working animals, the horses and dogs. My wife held us all together while trying to do her work as Multicultural Support Officer as well as keeping my 90 year old parents safe.

I still say this episode was a bit surreal, the fire fighting was just fire fighting, we've all done that before. Yes we did and saw some things this season that have not happened before but hey, that's what we do. We didn't do anything 'heroic', we were just doing what we needed to do with the training and gear we had. What was hard was the relentless threat from fires that just grew, in terrain that was not accessible and in some instances hadn't burnt for 70 years. It was simply relentless, we had fire threatening us, circling anti-clockwise, burning the southern part of our farm, and ultimately spot onto the mountain directly upwind of everything we'd saved to that point and threaten the entire community all over again. Despite our pretty impressive efforts, it was ultimately the rain that saved us.

Fuel Loads and Hazard Reduction

Much has been spoken in recent times about hazard reduction (HR), particularly in regard to burning. I believe HR burns are a necessary activity but too much faith is being put in them. I expect most seasoned fire fighters will agree that areas having been HR burned generally offer some strategic advantage but cannot be relied on.

I believe we'll find out in years to come that 'land use' is the critical missing piece of the HR puzzle, and I refer not only to the very topical National Parks and State Forest lands but the vast areas of privately held 'bush' that is also essentially unused. There is increasing acceptance that the first Nations peoples undertook a great deal of deliberate and insightful land management prior to European settlement, and while much has been written in recent times by the likes of Gammage and Pascoe, I don't think we'll ever truly understand the intricacies of those practices. I also believe that we would be foolish to think we could ever replicate even what we do know and accept of Aboriginal land management because we do not have the people who in turn have the time to truly understand the land they may try to manage.

What is clear is that the land was in fact managed, utilised, interfered with, used. And periodically burned, as and where deemed necessary, when so to speak, all the proverbial planets lined up. Now days we have a situation where the land is periodically burned when the spread sheet says so, when staff are available, if funding allows, and if it doesn't rain, snow, blow or get too hot. And after all that, not one deliberate management activity disturbs that land until either the next bush fire or HR. No maintaining of foot paths, no burning of grasslands, no tilling for murrumbidgee, no clearing fence lines, no grazing of livestock, no rabbiters burning fallen timber, nobody even boiling a billy. One day I'm sure we'll learn that all the ground disturbance done by the small marsupials like the Bandicoot, Bilby etc was also central to the broader health of ecosystems.

I am not an advocate of simply bringing back grazing by domestic livestock into National Parks, and as mentioned this is an issue for private bush areas too, which ran large mobs of 'bush wethers' when the economics were favourable and wild dogs didn't preclude it but I find it difficult to see how else to break the HR-massive regrowth-major fire cycle.

State government land management agencies have been charged with undertaking HR on their estates, which is entirely reasonable. What is totally unreasonable is the continual and blatant stripping of funding from those agencies while increasing their responsibilities. I was once a proud NSW NPWS employee but I have no idea why any of their staff remain, given the pathetic management structures developed over the almost nonstop restructure process that commenced in the mid 1990's. The fact that NPWS staff do remain despite being set up to fail by the State Government is testament to their dedication.

Also unreasonable is the ever increasing 'hectare targets' per season as we have seen more burns attempted during unfavourable conditions, and in many instances creating similar damage to the bush as the wild fire that the burn was intended to prevent. This almost invariably leads to massive vegetation regrowth in the subsequent seasons, resulting in vegetation structures that are highly flammable and dangerous within 5 years.

Compensating volunteers

Volunteers are just that, volunteers. They do what they do for all sorts of reasons and financial gain is by definition not one of them, however the volunteer compensation arrangements introduced this season which required such a massive and sustained commitment were necessary and commendable.

One of the great inequities in the fire fighter compensation arrangements was that some of the most sustained and committed fire fighting was done by people who were not members of the RFS, and were not in 'red trucks'. In my own Brigade area some of the most critical work was done by local landholders in their private 4X4 vehicles with their own pump and tank equipment. These people were not just protecting their own property as I have heard argued, but their whole local community. They spent the same 40 odd days surrounded by fire on three different fronts of two separate fire complexes, they used their own diesel, damaged their own vehicles, provided their own food, generally coordinated themselves, out-numbered the local RFS brigade 2:1 most days and saved us an at least proportionate amount of work. None of these people were eligible for compensation.

As a volunteer I have long held the view that some form of recompense for volunteers has been needed. This is not just due to the amount of time

committed by individuals in responding to incidents but also for the amount of professional responsibility and additional administrative time expected, especially from office bearers.

Many fire fighters are routinely 'stood up' or are required to 'stand by' during elevated periods of threat and I feel strongly that these volunteers should be paid at least the minimum wage hourly equivalent rate for that stand by period. Payment should cease once an actual response is initiated. This should particularly apply to RAFT and RART type crews who have already invested a great amount of time in specialised training and are often required at short notice to travel to an airfield and await immediate deployment, should that be required. These crews have proven themselves invaluable on numerous occasions and have saved the rest of us an enormous amount of fire fighting in the past.

Fire fighters try to save peoples lives and assets, but in doing so we are reducing the payouts insurance companies are called on to pay. Not once did I hear any calls for the Insurance industry to contribute funds for compensating fire fighters and I don't believe this burden should have necessarily on the Governments shoulders.

Fire trail maintenance and fire mitigation works

Our fire trail network is essentially adequate to cater for normal fire management but does need more regular maintenance.

The program that funds construction of fire trails to a high standard across private land needs to be scrapped as the construction specification is ridiculously high and in many areas would exceed that of the shire maintained public roads.

Essential in our region is upgrading all fire trails to have 'hard crossings' in all creek and swamp sections.

State Mitigation Crews need to be equipped with appropriate equipment to undertake realistic fire trail maintenance works. It is embarrassing to see the ridiculous amount of waste and inefficiency deemed normal by the RFS management of the mitigation crews by insisting on centralised rather than local control and not allowing them to have serious equipment. A 120 plus hp 4X4 tractor fitted with over axle angle/tilt blade and slasher, much like those

used by NPWS in years gone by can do 80% of the regular maintenance required.

Mitigation crews need to be able to be involved on the ground with hazard reduction burns to support the Rural Fire brigades. I feel strongly that mitigation crews could even be expanded and tasked with implementing hazard reduction burns, with the support of the brigades, rather than the other way around.

I also feel that Mitigation crews should be first response fire fighters during the fire season. Having the rapid response capability of the RAFT teams has is greatly appreciated for the amount of fire fighting their efforts save the rest of us and I see great additional benefit in the mitigation crews having a vehicle based role along similar lines.

RFS Staffing – Operations Officers

I'm aware that there is a particular level of RFS staff, I think called Operations Officers, that is required as part of their work contract to be relocated to a different region each two years. To me and most RFS 'veterans' this continual relocation is detrimental to the ability of that Officer to properly support the brigades within the region. The Monaro RFS team invested an enormous amount of time and effort in ensuring one of our experienced long term volunteer, RAFT crew leader and mitigation team leader, who then gained an Operations Officer position, was not required to relocate as otherwise required. This Officer, being a Monaro local and having a great depth of diverse experience was invaluable in his role to our entire region during this summer's fire season. If we'd had a new Officer recently from another region, with little local knowledge acquired, their ability to operate effectively during such a critical time would have been severely compromised.

Additionally, I know of many skilled people who would be very keen to apply for those Operations Officer positions, could certainly win those positions on merit and serve The Service well, but will never apply for those jobs while ever there is an expectation they'll relocate their family etc every two years.