

## 1960-1980

### Devastating fires in the 1960s

In the 1964-65 season, fires raged in the Snowy Mountains, Southern Tablelands and outer metropolitan areas of Sydney. The Chatsbury/Bungonia fire covered 250,000ha and destroyed the village of Wingello. Three lives were lost. In March 1965, the Tumut Valley fire burnt out 80,000ha. Three years later during the 1968-69 seasons, major fires in Wollongong destroyed 33 homes, five other buildings and devastated rainforest. During that same season, fires in the lower Blue Mountains were fanned by 100kph winds destroying 123 buildings. Three lives were lost. The end of the decade saw a savage fire in Roto, east of Ivanhoe which burnt 280,000ha over a three week period.

### 1970: The Bush Fire Council and Coordinating Committee

In 1970 amendments to the *Bush Fires Act 1949* made further provisions with respect to the prevention, control and suppression of bush fires. The Act provided for the establishment of a Bush Fire Council of NSW and the appointment of a Chief Coordinator of Bush Fire Fighting.

That same year, the Bush Fires Branch was established within the Chief Secretary's Department to provide specialised administrative support to the Council.

### 1975: The Bush Fire Service

In 1975 the Bush Fires Branch of the Chief Secretary's Department integrated with the State Emergency Services (SES). It was renamed the Bush Fire Service and was responsible for providing technical and general advisory service on bush fire matters and acted as the administration arm of the Bush Fire Council. Three years later the branch was subsequently separated from the SES and attached to the Department of Services.

### Large fires in the east and west

1975 also saw the most severe fire season for perhaps 30 years in the far west of the State with 3,755 million hectares burnt, 50,000 stock lost and 10,170km of fencing destroyed. One and a half million hectares were burnt in the Cobar Shire and 340,000ha in the Balranald Shire. At that time, the Moolah-Corinya fire was the largest fire ever to be put out by firefighters. The perimeter was over 1,000km. Three people died in the fire, 100 were hurt and 40 homes were destroyed.

In the late 1970s, the Blue Mountains endured two bad fire seasons. In late 1976, 65,000ha were burnt. The following year, 49 buildings were destroyed alongside of a further 54,000ha. Serious fires occurred in the Southern Highlands two years later in 1978-79. Major fires were widespread for the 1979-80 fire season burning over one million hectares in total across the State.

### Comprehensive firefighter training

The 1980s began with the transfer of the Bush Fires Branch to the Office of the Minister for Police and Emergency Services.

Around this time comprehensive training programs were being developed by the Service. Basic training modules were introduced in 1983, which began the formalised State-wide training system a system that would be adopted later by other bush fire services in Australia.

## 1980-1997

### Fires in the 1980s

The early 1980s saw some of the worst bush fire seasons since the 1950s. In the 1980-81 season, eight people tragically died and over 887,000ha were scorched. The following year, a pine plantation worth \$12 million was destroyed in Southern NSW. This fire was so hot that it burnt 24,000ha in just two and a half hours. Lightning strikes on Christmas Day in 1984 ignited more than 100 fires in the grassed areas in Western NSW. Half a million hectares were burnt as a result. That year 6,000 fires raged. Four people lost their lives and a total of \$40 million of losses was recorded. The decade closed as it had begun, with major fires burning in the eastern part of the State.

### Department of Bush Fire Services

In 1985 the Chairman of the Bush Fire Council became Executive Officer of the Bush Fires Branch. The position was held by Phil Koperberg.

The 1993-94 fire season saw the most protracted and largest firefighting effort in Australian history with 18,300 volunteer firefighters deployed at over 800 fires throughout NSW. Four lives and 206 houses were lost. The subsequent Coronial Inquiry eventually resulted in the Government introducing legislation for a single Rural Fire Service in 1997 with a single chain of command. Phil Koperberg as Commissioner was to head this single Service.

### The Rural Fires Act

The *Rural Fires Act 1997 No 65* was proclaimed 1 September 1997. The Act established rural fire districts, constituted around local government boundaries, as well as the NSW Rural Fire Service to be comprised of the Commissioner, other staff and volunteer firefighters. The operating capabilities and organisational structure strengthened by the new Act, laid the groundwork to simplify how the NSW RFS was to be run.

## 2001-present day

### A unified organisation

On 1 July 2001, Fire Control Officers became employees of the State Government. Service Level Agreements were developed to allow a Council to delegate any or all of its responsibilities, as defined by the *Rural Fires Act 1997*, to the Commissioner of the NSW RFS. Service-wide operating standards, procedures and a raft of associated business improvement programs were commenced under this change program.

### Legislation for the environment

In the following year in August, the *Rural Fires and Environmental Assessment Legislation Amendment Act 2002* amended both the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* and the *Rural Fires Act 1997* to provide a stronger and more streamlined system for building developments in bush fire prone areas.

Legislative amendment in 2002 followed on from the Joint Select Committee on Bushfires and the Report on the Inquiry into the 2001-2002 Bushfires. The amendments were specifically designed to strengthen the regulatory framework relating to prevention and mitigation strategies to minimise the impact of fire on the NSW community.

### New Commissioner

In October 2007 Shane Fitzsimmons became the second Commissioner of the NSW RFS. In April that year Phil Koperberg had resigned to begin a career in politics.

The year also boasted a remarkable number of members participating in a new online communication channel with 10,600 members registered using the MyRFS volunteer website.

### The NSW RFS today

The NSW RFS is the combat agency for bush, grass and structure fires in rural fire districts. It is also the lead agency for coordination of bush firefighting and prevention throughout the State.

For the year ending June 2009, the NSW RFS recorded a membership of more than 2,065 rural fire brigades and 70,701 volunteers who were equipped, supported, trained and operational across the State out of 50 control centres.

That same year the Service reported 4,000 tankers, 72 catering vehicles, 41 communications vehicles, 55 bulk water carriers and 2,000 qualified trainers delivering 314,680 local hours of training. Completed hazard reductions protected 118,021 properties and 2,773 community education programs were conducted across the State. In partnership with community and through the professionalism of its members, the NSW RFS continues to grow and to improve - while always promoting the ethos of volunteering.

# Our Service's story

Our Service's Story is part of the NSW RFS History Project. Stories are being gathered from volunteers and staff, as well as State Library, State Records, local council records and committee minutes. Newspapers and journals are being pored over for the rich personal memories of significant fires, brigade formations and equipment developments.

The graphic in this second *Bush Fire Bulletin* Souvenir Liftout is a reproduction of the commemorative mural in the foyer of the NSW RFS Headquarters. The timeline accompanying the mural is an excerpt from the history boards which are also displayed.

Much of the NSW RFS history is captured in photos and in many cases the source, the detail and facts of the photo have faded into folklore. The photo featured on the front page of the *Bush Fire Bulletin*, and seen here, is a classic example of how the history of the NSW RFS is pieced together with memories, official records, hearsay, conjecture and good old fashioned story telling.

We asked NSW RFS members if anyone knew who had taken this photo. Luckily, it seems that the photo was familiar to many members...

*The photo is reproduced courtesy of Fairfax Photos.*

Piecing together the information sent in by members, we discovered that the photo was taken on 17 December 1979 in the Terrey Hills district in Sydney's northern beaches by Sun photographer John O'Gready. It was first published in the *Bush Fire Bulletin* in 1980.

The photo was probably taken after a couple of days of heavy firefighting in the Terrey Hills area, possibly on the Larool Trail. A Total Fire Ban had been declared on Saturday 15 December 1979 and a Bush Fire Emergency was declared at 1300hrs on Monday 17 December.

Manager State Operations, Chief Superintendent Alan Brinkworth, also a long-time member of the Terrey Hills Brigade, provided us with his personal notes taken at the time of the fire:

### Warringah – Section 41f

Started East of Bobbin Head Road near Cowan Creek at approx 1524 Sunday 16th December, 1979;

Declaration 1310 Monday 17th December, 1979; 14,200 hectares (142 sq km); Losses: 15 homes, outbuildings, motor vehicles & caravan; Injuries: one broken ankle; Section 41f terminated 1600 Wednesday 19th December, 1979; All Units stood down 1930 Friday 21st December, 1979.

Duffys Forest captain at the time was Dennis Joiner. He recognised the photo immediately.

*"Possibly 1979, the rear vision mirrors on the Duffys AB160 are right for that time. Probably not in Duffys Forest, more likely in Terrey Hills. Duffys was working in Myoora Rd / Amuna Rd area, and on the Larool Rd Fire trail on the morning of the 1979 fires...."*

*In fact, they were overrun on the Larool Rd trail before being sent back to Duffys about 11am....where they got overrun again on Booralie Rd. I think most agree that the overrun on Larool Trail was about 1100hrs..."*

This photo could have been taken just prior to the overrun on the Larool trail. To test our theory Alan Brinkworth revisited the path to see if he could recognise the spot captured in the photo. The growth of the trees in the past 30 years made him unable to say for sure.

Dennis Joiner continued his observations:

*"The firefighter on the left walking down the drive looks very much like Col Turnbull...sleeves up, long boots, ex-Warringah, FCO Cessnock...now deceased, and very much missed...one of those old bushies that knew fires backwards..."*

*Most of the crew had been out all the previous day...The crew had been relieved about 2200hrs, and then had come back on at 0700hrs...By lunch time every available member was back in Duffys....and all manner of chaos had broken out..."*

In *Forty Flaming Years, a history of the Terrey Hills Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade 1942-1982*, author Robert Charteris drew on the Fire Control Officer's reports and eye witness accounts. At about 1100hrs:

*"Terrey Hills sped round the corner and along the trail, joining Duffys Forest and other brigades. Minutes later the fire jumped the trail. Members pressed themselves as close to the ground as they could as the inferno passed only feet above them."*

*For the next two hours...all brigades were on the move continuously as the fires surged in an uncontrollable fashion.*

*About half past eleven the first home was lost...from the city a huge pall of smoke could be seen covering the entire area."*

It is only one photo among thousands held in the NSW RFS archives, yet it turned out to be a story worth telling.



# The history of the Service 1960-2009



New South Wales  
 Rural Fires Act 1997 No 65  
 Bush Fire Council of NSW

