

# MEDIA RELEASE



NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

## Volunteer firefighter receives highest Service accolade

4 May 2012

A man who helped save the lives of up to 45 people during the 2011 Queensland floods was today presented the NSW Rural Fire Service's (NSW RFS) Award for Valour.

NSW RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons presented Kendall Thompson, a volunteer firefighter based in Tamworth, with his medal along with 18 other award recipients at the annual St Florian's Day Ceremony.

"St Florian is the Patron Saint of firefighters, and today we are recognising the ongoing contribution of the men and women who selflessly put themselves in danger for the protection of others.

"Mr Thompson, like all of the recipients today, has demonstrated an outstanding commitment to both the Service and the community. The skill, professionalism and bravery he displayed whilst deployed as a Down the Wire Crewman during the floods was nothing short of extraordinary," Commissioner Fitzsimmons said.

"Mr Thompson was working out of a helicopter on the end of a winch, and even in the most treacherous of conditions he continued pull people to safety. For this tremendous courage Mr Thompson is being awarded the Service's highest honour – a medal that has only been presented three times since its introduction in 1999".

During the ceremony held at NSW RFS Headquarters in Sydney, Commissioner Fitzsimmons paid tribute to the versatility of NSW RFS members.

"Whilst the NSW RFS has a history in mitigating and fighting bush fires, as the recipients of these awards clearly demonstrate, our members are faced with all manner of emergencies on a daily basis.

"Some of today's awards are in recognition for extreme bravery whilst assisting at some of the most serious and tragic motor vehicle accidents," Commissioner Fitzsimmons said.

"This level of dedication to the community cannot be underestimated and the people of New South Wales should be most proud of the efforts of their RFS volunteers.

"I would personally like to thank all of today's recipients for their staunch dedication to both the Service and to the community".

**Media enquiries: NSW RFS State Duty Media Officer 9898 1855**

## **COMMISSIONER'S AWARD FOR VALOUR**

### **Captain Kendall Thompson, Kootingal/Moonbi Rural Fire Brigade, Tamworth District**

In early January 2011 severe flooding devastated parts of South East Queensland. A helicopter under contract to the NSW RFS, Helitak 220, with Captain Kendall Thompson from the Rural Fire Service as "Down the Wire Crewman", was tasked to assist people stranded by the floods in the Lockyer Valley West of Brisbane.

On January 10 and 11, Helitak 220 winched Kendall into positions to rescue eight people and extracted many others from the flood impact zone. Kendall was winched into extremely hazardous flood waters on at least three occasions and the people subsequently rescued, in all likelihood, would not have survived. These operations included the rescue of an eight year old boy clinging to a hay bale and an elderly couple trapped in their house that had been swept 300 metres downstream, and was still threatened by rising flood waters.

In all, more than 45 people were assisted by Helitak 220 during the two days. As the "Down the Wire Crewman" Kendall was an essential and vital member of the team in undertaking a number of life saving rescues. He operated in atrocious weather conditions and willingly and repeatedly placed himself in hazardous situations that were both mentally and physically demanding in the extreme. In the opinion of the crew of Helitak 220, Kendall's performance was well above and beyond the normal expectation of the capability of a crewman of his limited experience.

## **COMMISSIONER'S COMMENDATION FOR BRAVERY**

### **Group Captain Derryl Bain, Blighty Rural Fire Brigade, Mid Murray Zone**

Group Captain Derryl Bain has been a volunteer member of the NSW RFS since January 1975.

At approximately 05:55 on Friday 29 April 2011, Derryl was driving past a house on his family property occupied by his brother and noticed smoke billowing from the roof. He immediately rang 'Triple Zero' to report the incident.

He could not account for his brother, whose vehicle was in the shed. Knowing that it would take the nearest brigade up to 20 minutes to respond, he decided to enter the house to search for his brother.

He entered through the front door. The smoke was very thick but he found his brother unconscious on the bed and dragged him out the way he had come. As Derryl made his way out of the house a large light fitting fell and it was obvious that the collapse of the whole ceiling was imminent. They made it outside by which time his brother had regained consciousness.

Derryl's wife Sue, Captain of the Blighty Rural Fire Brigade, arrived on scene at 06:07 to find the house fully involved. Two more trucks and an ambulance arrived on scene at 06:35hrs to find the structure burnt to the ground.

Given his experience and training, Derryl was fully aware of the extreme danger of entering a burning building, but chose to risk his life to save his brother.

## **Firefighter Paul Simpson, Huskisson Rural Fire Brigade, Shoalhaven District**

At approximately 17:00 on Sunday 21 November 2010 Paul Simpson, a firefighter from the Huskisson Rural Fire Brigade, came across a two car accident on Jervis Bay Road near Woollamia, and stopped to assist.

Another witness was already attempting to remove a female passenger through a window of the overturned sedan. At this point the sedan caught fire. Paul got fire extinguishers from onlookers and attempted to extinguish the fire. He then went to attempt to free a male passenger. A knife was obtained to cut the seat belt and the man was forcibly dragged clear.

Paul then returned to attempt to rescue the driver who was trapped by his legs. The driver kept yelling at them to get away from the car as it was engulfed by fire. However, they continued trying to rescue the driver under extremely hazardous conditions until dragged away by bystanders.

At 17:13 the Huskisson Brigade arrived and found the two vehicles fully involved in fire, a section of grass paddock alight and a number of casualties about ten metres from the burning vehicles. Paul was using his body to shield the injured and the ambulance members from the approaching grass fire.

Paul had used his bush fire jacket to shield one of the passengers from the fire and sustained some burns and abrasions to his arms. His actions brought great credit on himself and the NSW Rural Fire Service.

## **COMMISSIONER'S COMMENDATION FOR SERVICE**

### **Captain Leon de Brabander, Inverell Rural Fire Brigade, Northern Tablelands Team**

Captain Leon de Brabander is a dedicated volunteer who joined the Inverell Rural Fire Brigade in 1981. He has a proactive attitude and approach to everything he does in his role as Captain and Vice President of the Inverell Brigade and President of the Inverell Support Group.

Leon has assisted with all aspects of the District Fire Control Centre tasks particularly over the past five years whilst Inverell Emergency Operations Centre and District Office have had limited staff members.

He is available to assist at all times and does so on almost a daily basis. Nothing seems to be too much for him. His contribution includes assisting with the annual RTA inspections for the entire Inverell District and conducting communication checks every Sunday. He also assists with the preparation of class work and training rooms, as well as coordinating catering for every District training course. He issues equipment and provides general support to all volunteers as well as assisting in the planning and preparation of inter-agency exercises.

As Captain and Vice President, Leon is pivotal in the Inverell Brigade. His roles over the years have included Permit Officer, Training Officer, Safety Officer and Equipment Officer. He is also very proactive in organising and delivering local brigade training.

Without Leon the service within the District would not have been as reliable or effective.

## **Firefighter John Gabriel, Wentworth Falls Rural Fire Brigade, Blue Mountains District**

John Gabriel has given continuous outstanding and distinguished service to the Wentworth Falls Rural Fire Brigade since joining the Service in 1957.

During the past 55 years John has been at every major incident in the Blue Mountains and to numerous incidents in other areas working in conjunction with other agencies. He continues to be an active member, has been a Deputy Captain and is currently President.

In 1991 John was honoured with Life Membership of the Brigade, for his distinguished service and his commitment to promoting the NSW RFS within the wider community. This he continues to do through his many contacts in other community groups. His commitment is reflected in the number of incidents that he has attended and that he has always maintained a high level of integrity, commitment and a readiness to fulfil the tasks at hand to the highest standard.

John has undertaken numerous roles with an unwavering commitment without expecting any praise for the work he has done. His understanding, knowledge and wisdom, gained from many decades as a firefighter in the Blue Mountains, has earned him a level of respect that is quite exceptional and well deserved.

Within the Wentworth Falls Rural Fire Brigade John has been, and continues to be, a mentor to the new and younger brigade members providing quiet guidance and reassurance following major fire incidents or challenging tasks which has strengthened the Brigade and consolidated the commitment of others to the NSW RFS.

## **Deputy Captain Joshua Robb & Firefighter Petia Gear, Dumaresq Rural Fire Brigade, New England Zone**

On 8 June 2010 Dumaresq and Gara Rural Fire Brigades were paged to a grassfire at Gara Road, Gara. The Dumaresq Pumper turned out with a crew of four, including Deputy Captain Joshua Robb and Firefighter Petia Gear. On arrival they found the fire had crossed Burying Ground Creek and was moving eastwards. The Pumper then relocated to Grafton Road and along with another truck began fire fighting operations.

At 13:20 they reported that the fire was spreading rapidly under strong westerly winds and requested further assistance. While chasing down the head of the fire the pumper crew spotted a vehicle alight in the nearby paddock.

The crew dismounted and got to work while Joshua checked the car. Finding the vehicle empty, he and Petia began a search of the area. A woman was heard screaming from an area ahead of the fire. They responded through the thick smoke and flames and found a woman uninjured but suffering from smoke inhalation and in severe shock. They led her to safety through the flank of the fire and helped her into the air-conditioned appliance. The crew then requested an ambulance and further tankers and withdrew to the main road.

Although Joshua and Petia were suffering from smoke inhalation and exhaustion, they continued to act in a sympathetic and professional manner while caring for the victim until an ambulance arrived.

The actions taken by these young members were above and beyond normal volunteer fire service duties and brought credit on them and the NSW Rural Fire Service.

Deputy Captain Robb and Firefighter Gear are worthy recipients of the Commissioner's Commendation for Service.

## **Senior Deputy Captain Alan Kerlake, Alpine/Aylmerton Rural Fire Brigade, Wingecarribee District**

Senior Deputy Captain Alan Kerlake has been actively involved with the Alpine/Aylmerton Rural Fire Brigade since its formation in 1953. During his teenage years Alan was a “runner” using a bicycle to advise neighbours of the threat of fire. On the bicycle complete with knapsack he would then attend the fire. When two pagers were obtained by the brigade Alan carried one.

For 17 years he held the position of Senior Vice Captain before being elected Brigade Captain, a position he held for 12 years. In 2003 he stood down and took on the role of Senior Deputy Captain. In 2009 after 56 years of dedication to the Brigade Alan was made a Life Member.

In the early days the Kerlake family truck was used to protect the village. The Brigade’s first tanker, an ex army blitz, was housed on the Kerlake property with Alan maintaining it for many years. Through Alan’s commitment to Brigade structure and training the Alpine/Aylmerton Brigade now have two fire fighting appliances both equipped with breathing apparatus.

Alan’s commitment to the Brigade was undertaken while operating a dairy and he often travelled to the dairy and incidents by motorbike. Alan has attended numerous incidents in and out of the Wingecarribee District and his knowledge and experience is irreplaceable. Alan nurtures and encourages young and new brigade members and is always aware of the safety of fellow crew members. With his many years of firefighting experience and extensive local knowledge Alan has mentored many younger volunteers.

## **COMMISSIONER’S CERTIFICATION OF COMMENDATION (INDIVIDUAL)**

### **Senior Deputy Captain Stephen Bishop, Dumaresq Rural Fire Brigade, New England Zone**

On 18 August 2011 Senior Deputy Captain Stephen Bishop, while off-duty, witnessed a horrific motor vehicle accident on the New England Highway south of Armidale.

On witnessing the accident Stephen drove off the highway to a safe area and proceeded to render assistance. It was established that two people had been thrown out of the vehicle in which they were travelling and a third was still trapped inside. He immediately notified ‘Triple Zero’ and then rendered assistance to the victims until emergency services arrived. The response included his Brigade, the Dumaresq Rural Fire Brigade.

Despite his best efforts and those of the Ambulance crews, two of the people died at the scene. The third was released by emergency services and transported to Armidale Hospital where she later died. This incident was all the more tragic as Stephen discovered that the people involved in the accident were off-duty members of the NSW RFS that had served with him. He remained at the scene to help his crew until they were relieved.

During the incident Stephen displayed exemplary performance in the best traditions of the RFS.

## **Peter Carter, Supervisor Learning & Development, NSW RFS HQ**

Peter Carter has been developing and delivering training courses enthusiastically for the NSW RFS for many years.

Peter's unerring enthusiasm and dedication has greatly contributed to the development of the new Command, Control and Communications course. The new course achieves the seamless integration of the initial reaction to an emergency incident into an evolving major, multi agency incident within the Incident Control System framework which will effectively assist in the decision making process during these critical incidents

This has been achieved through a combination of practical simulation and theoretical representation that breach the gap between the role of the conventional Communication Groups and Incident Operations. The critical analysis of the systems, processes and communications networks, along with the subsequent development of efficient and effective response coordination and management of resources, is clearly superior to previously established systems.

To supplement the Command, Control and Communications Course Peter, supported by staff from Learning and Development Systems and Operations, has also been instrumental in the development of the Incident Controller Major Incidents Course. He has worked tirelessly to prepare the documentation, tools and training aids so that this course can be introduced progressively over the coming years. This will enhance the skills of prospective Incident Controllers, ensuring that they have the necessary competencies to undertake this very complex role with the associated responsibilities and accountability.

For his dedication, commitment, enthusiasm and vision in the development of the Command, Control and Communications and the Incident Controller Major Incidents courses Peter Carter is a worthy recipient of the Commissioner's Certificate of Commendation.

## **Superintendent Steven Mephram, New England Zone**

At 12:35 on 18 August 2011 Superintendent Steven Mephram, the Manager of New England Zone, responded as the On-Call Officer to an horrific motor vehicle accident on the New England Highway south of Armidale. On arrival he was informed that there were two fatalities and a teenage girl was trapped in the vehicle. Shortly after his arrival it was established that the deceased were off-duty members from his Zone.

Steven demonstrated exemplary performance in his role by quickly gaining control of the situation. From the start he provided advice and comfort to the crews attending the scene who knew the deceased. His presence and prompt actions ensured that the local crews were relieved from duty by crews from a neighbouring Team. When calling for the additional crew, it was made clear that the pager message should request mature experienced volunteers.

By identifying early the stress imposed on the local crews as a result of attending the accident involving their own members, Steven ensured that additional assistance was sourced from a neighbouring Team. This reduced the stress on the local crews and provided a significant morale boost when it was sorely needed. Once relieved from his duty in the field Steven continued to check on the welfare of his crews.

His timely actions and clear thinking at this highly stressful incident displayed exemplary performance in the best traditions of the NSW Rural Fire Service.

## **Captain Neil Thompson and Firefighter Wayne O'Brien, Lawrence Rural Fire Brigade, Clarence Valley District**

With the roll-out of Automated External Defibrillators across the State, Lawrence Rural Fire Brigade Captain Neil Thompson, identified the importance of the life saving machine and, assisted by Firefighter Wayne O'Brien, formulated a plan to deliver instruction in the use, care and maintenance of the units to a number of village and a few rural brigades within the Clarence Valley Rural Fire District. News of the new life saving device spread with requests coming in from most of the rural based brigades and also a high percentage of the Clarence Valley's Rural Remote Brigades.

The back to basics, practical orientated workshops also drew interest from other volunteer organisations. The concept was extremely well received by the volunteers, with nearly all of the 37 Clarence Valley brigades accepting the offer. The end result was 10 workshops facilitated in the space of 12 weeks, instructing 224 Service members and staff in the use of the defibrillators.

Neil is also active in engaging the Clarence Valley area in community education initiatives and plays a leading role in delivery of the NSW RFS Cadet Program in the Clarence Valley District.

Wayne is a retired NSW Ambulance Officer and a relative newcomer to the RFS and after completing the mandatory courses was looking for a challenge.

Their tireless efforts and exemplary performance make Captain Thompson and Firefighter O'Brien worthy recipients of the Commissioner's Certificate of Commendation.

### **COMMISSIONER'S UNIT CITATION FOR SERVICE**

#### **Boggabilla Rural Fire Brigade, Namoi/Gwydir Team**

Adam McGowan  
Darren Fleetwood  
Garry Roberts  
Graeme De-Britt  
Morgan De-Britt  
Phillip Starling  
Royce Lowe  
Terry Hartin

The Boggabilla Rural Fire Brigade is an active and professional Brigade in the Moree District. Its members attend incidents as requested, participate in community activities, attend training events and most members commit to out of area responses at every opportunity.

Being a border town with a major highway passing through, the Brigade is often involved in joint response with New South Wales and Queensland emergency services and has developed a close and professional working relationship with them.

The performance of this outstanding Brigade was highlighted during April 2010 when between 20 and 24 April the Brigade responded to four calls involving multiple fatalities, injuries and vehicle fires. They also provided assistance to the other emergency services, assisted with search and rescue and provided lighting during police investigations.

Due to the remoteness of the incidents the crews were involved for extended periods. Following an incident on the night of 20 April they were called to a fatal incident on the night of 22 April which involved them for 11 hours and within 12 hours were called to yet another accident that involved them for a further 10 hours.

The Brigade was again called out on the night of 24 April but was fortunately called-off by Police and they were able to return for some well deserved rest.

These are examples of the Brigade's capacity as a professional and efficient Brigade, not just within the Boggabilla community but the NSW Rural Fire Service as a whole. It demonstrates a commitment beyond that normally expected of any volunteer Brigade.

### **Dumaresq Rural Fire Brigade & Devils Pinch Rural Fire Brigade, New England Zone**

Bevan Michel  
Joshua Robb  
Rohan Able  
Reece Fredericks  
Stephen Bishop  
Sean Bremner  
Christopher Wilford  
David Brunkhorst  
Elizabeth Ferris  
Michael Rooble  
Neville Ferris

Around midday on 18 August 2011, Dumaresq Rural Fire Brigade was responded to a motor vehicle accident on the New England Highway south of Armidale. When they arrived at the accident they witnessed a scene of devastation. Stephen Bishop, an off-duty member of the Dumaresq Brigade who had witnessed the accident, was rendering first aid to the victims.

The Dumaresq Crew immediately reacted in accordance with their training to deliver fire protection. The Crew Leader called for the On-Call Officer to act as liaison with other agencies. Subsequently Devils Pinch Rural Fire Brigade was responded at 13:00 to relieve Fire & Rescue NSW. The crew immediately established themselves to be able to deliver effective fire protection.

Around 13:10 it was established that two of the victims were local Rural Fire Service members. Despite the two crews knowing the victims, having worked with them over a number of years, they continued to stick to their duty and to provide fire protection. In these difficult circumstances, both crews displayed exemplary performance in undertaking their duties to a high standard.

Due to their training, their strong sense of community and professionalism both crews enabled other emergency service agency people to do their jobs in a safe, secure environment.

The crews involved displayed the value of 'One Team, Many Players, One Purpose', in the manner in which they conducted themselves and supported each other. Their conduct at the incident brought great credit on their Brigades and the NSW RFS.

### **COMMISSIONER'S CERTIFICATION OF COMMENDATION (UNIT)**

#### **Coonamble Headquarters Rural Fire Brigade, North West Zone**

Mark Byrnes  
Neal Coombes  
Trevor Gudgeon

The major flood event that occurred in December 2010 impacted on the Coonamble area causing prolonged flooding activity. The SES was preparing for the major flooding, which was predicted to cause several towns and villages to become isolated for an extended period of time.

An operations centre was established at the Coonamble SES facility to deal with the flood events and other situations as they arose.

In response to a request by the SES, the Coonamble Headquarters Rural Fire Brigade supplied support crews to the operations during the period from 1 to 13 December 2010. During this period the Brigade



also maintained its normal response capability within its area of operations. The NSW RFS crews were called upon to assist the SES with rescue operations, pumping and sand bagging in the local community of Coonamble.

The level of commitment shown by the Brigade over an extended period of time and dealing with the various tasks carried out was well beyond that expected of it and brought credit upon the Brigade, the North West Zone and the NSW RFS.

#### **Warren Central Rural Fire Brigade, North West Zone**

Barry Fogden  
Hugh Kennedy  
Leslie Fowler  
Mitchell Wilson  
Phillip Fuller  
Raymond Davis

The major flood event that occurred in December 2010 impacted on the Warren area causing prolonged flooding activity. The SES was preparing for the major flooding, which was predicted to cause several towns and villages to become isolated for an extended period of time.

An operations centre established at the Warren SES facility to deal with the flood events and other situations as they arose.

In response to a request by the SES, the Warren Central Rural Fire Brigade supplied support crews to the operations during the period from 1 to 13 December 2010. During this period the Brigade also maintained its normal response capability within its area of operations. The NSW Rural Fire Service crews were called upon to assist the SES with rescue operations, pumping and sand bagging in the local community of Warren.

The level of commitment shown by the Brigade over an extended period of time and dealing with the various tasks carried out was well beyond that expected of it and brought credit upon the Brigade, the North West Zone and the NSW Rural Fire Service.

#### **Goodooga Rural Fire Brigade, Barwon Darling Zone**

George Jackson  
Guy Darcy-Shillingworth  
Jamie Cubby  
Keiran Weider  
Leroy Lane  
Stephen Cubby  
Thomas Stanton  
William Pokarier

The community of Goodooga became isolated on 22 March 2010 due to flood waters that were making their way south from Queensland.

The SES placed a forward command post at the Goodooga Bowling Club with a limited number of 'out of area' crews from the SES. The Barwon Darling Zone was asked by the SES to supply personnel from the Goodooga Rural Fire Brigade to assist as it was expected that the town would be isolated for up to six weeks.

The Goodooga Brigade Captain William Pokarier indicated that an eight man crew was ready for any task that the SES would require of them. One of the first tasks that they were assigned was the setting up of a temporary store in the township so the community would have supplies while the township was isolated.

Fourteen tasks were assigned to the Brigade amounting to 96.5 personnel hours. These tasks included loading and unloading aircraft, pumping out the inside of the levee at Wellimoringle and wetting down the airfield to minimise damage to aircraft from dust and dirt.

Not only did the Brigade complete all tasks professionally and successfully, but also provided a few BBQ dinners for the out of town SES and RFS members in their own time.

The level of commitment shown by the Brigade over an extended period of time dealing with the various tasks carried out was well beyond that expected of it and brought credit upon the Brigade, the Barwon Darling Zone and the NSW Rural Fire Service.