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 Batlow/Bungonia fire covered 250,000ha and destroyed the village of Wingello. Three lives were lost. In March 1966, the Turon Valley fire burnt out 80,000ha. Three years later during the 1968-69 season, 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 100km/h 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 Department of Services. The branch was to provide specialised administrative support to the Council.

1975: The Bush Fire Service
In 1975 the Bush Fires Branch of the Chief Secretaries 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 a 3,759,756 hectares burnt, 55,000 stock lost and 10,000 homes destroyed. On the other hand, a half million hectares were burnt in the Cobar Shire and 300,000 hectares in the Barmah Forest in a matter of minutes in that year. The Corolah- Tumut Valley fire was the largest ever to be put out by firefighters. The perimeter was only 24km and a total of 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, 15,000 hectares were destroyed 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 formed the basis of the state-wide training 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 1960s. 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.

1975-1980
Between 1975 and 1980, a million hectares were burnt as a result. That year 6,000 fires started and over 887,000ha were scorched. The following year, a pine plantation worth $12 million was destroyed in Southern NSW.

1990: Bush Fire Bulletin
In 1990 the Chairman of the Bush Fire Council became Executive Officer of the Bush Fires Branch. The position was held by Phil Kopereberg.

1997: The NSW RFS Act 1997
In 1997 the Bush Fire Service became part of the Department of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment, taking the name Rural Fire Service (RFS). The RFS was responsible for coordinating bush firefighting and prevention throughout the State. It is also the lead agency for structure fires in rural fire districts. It is also the lead agency for combating fire on the NSW community.

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 Fire 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, the Rural Fires and Environmental Assessment Legislation Amendment Act 1998, the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 and the Rural Fires Act 1997 to provide a stronger and more streamlined framework for action in the management of environmental matters and for the protection of wildlife.

New Commissioner
In October 2007 Shane Fitzsimmons became the second Commissioner of the NSW Rural Fire Service. In that year Phil Kopereberg had resigned to begin a career in politics.

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 volunteer firefighters who were externally 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, 58 bulk water carriers and 2,000 qualified trainers delivering 314,680 local hours of training. Compliance with L Box 12 years of L Box 35 years in L Box 4 years O Box 17,773 community education programs were conducted across the State. In partnership with community and through L Box 1, members of the NSW RFS continues to grow and to improve - while always promoting the ethos of volunteering.

The RFS Act 1997
1997: The Rural Fire Act 1997 No 6 was proclaimed 1 September 1997. The Act established rural fire districts, constituted around local government boundaries, as well as the NSW Rural Fire Council, the NSW Rural Fire Control Officers and volunteer firefighters. The operating capabilities and organisational structure strengthened by the Act had the groundwork to simplify how the NSW RFS was to be run.

Piecing together the puzzle
On 16th December, 1979; Saturday 15 December 1979, the fire on the NSW community.

Completed hazard reductions protected 118,021 properties and 2,000 qualified trainers delivering 314,680 local hours of training.

The Rural Fire Act
The Rural Fire Act 1997 No 6 was proclaimed 1 September 1997. The Act established rural fire districts, constituted around local government boundaries, as well as the NSW Rural Fire Council, the NSW Rural Fire Control Officers and volunteer firefighters. The operating capabilities and organisational structure strengthened by the Act had the groundwork to simplify how the NSW RFS was to be run.

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 former members. New photos and items relating to the history of the NSW RFS are being cared for by the RFS archives, yet it turned out to be a story worth telling.
The history of the Service 1960-2009