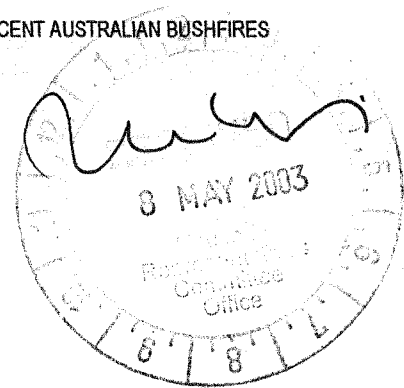


The Secretary  
 Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires  
 House of Representatives  
 Parliament House  
 CANBERRA ACT 2600.



Dear Sir,

This submission is lodged on behalf of Ferntree Gully Urban Fire Brigade.

The authors of the submission, and the two Fire Brigade members who assisted in researching data for its compilation (together with individual after-hours contact telephone numbers) are -

- Authors: Captain Shane Broadfoot (Officer in Charge) (03) 9758 3307  
                   Secretary Peter Tomlinson (03) 9758 5533
- Research: Firefighter Bill Watson (03) 9758 0936  
                   Ops Support Terry Potter (03) 9758 1693

The above persons (whose contributions received input from the officers and firefighters of the Brigade) would be pleased to clarify any aspect of this submission.

**Inquiry Term of Reference addressed:**

This submission addresses one term of reference -

- “(j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors”

**Summary of submission:**

The following is an outline of the Fire Brigade's submission:

- Introduction:
  - the Fire Brigade's structure, composition and operational environment
  - the choice of term of reference (and its relevance to this Inquiry)
- The term of reference addressed and discussed -
  - economic and social factors:
    - . changes experienced and trends observed and anticipated
  - management practices:
    - . current and anticipated or projected changes
  - role of volunteer firefighters:
    - . day-to-day operations and major fires and other emergency incidents
  - contribution of volunteer firefighters:
    - . value to community; the impact upon the individual volunteer
- Summary and Recommendations

## Introduction

- Ferntree Gully Fire Brigade : Structure, Composition and Operational Environment

The Ferntree Gully Fire Brigade - a wholly volunteer body - is established, and functions, under the Country Fire Authority (CFA) Act of Victoria. The CFA has responsibility for fire prevention and suppression in country Victoria, and in the outer metropolitan areas of Melbourne.

Ferntree Gully is located within the City of Knox on Melbourne's eastern fringe, at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges. The Ferntree Gully Fire Brigade has responsibility under the Act for the protection of a designated fire district, or primary response area, and forms part of the Knox Fire Brigades Group within the CFA thirteenth fire control region. The Fire Brigade's emergency operations are co-ordinated, through a pre-planned support arrangement, with neighbouring brigades, in one of which career firefighters are employed.

The Ferntree Gully district has an extensive range of service, retail and commercial establishments which, with a variety of light industrial enterprises, support a population of some 25,000 persons. The fire district shares a common perimeter with the Dandenong Ranges National Park, which forms part of an acknowledged environmentally sensitive and bushfire prone area.

The Fire Brigade has an establishment of 44, including support personnel. The firefighters, who are summoned to emergency duty by electronic pager alarms, are all residents of the district. Volunteer firefighters in the CFA Service are unpaid.

During the present financial year, the Fire Brigade has received to date a total of 365 alarms for fires and other emergencies. This represents, on average, an emergency response every 28.4 hours. The number of alarms to which the Brigade has responded during the preceding four years are recorded in Appendix A.

The Fire Brigade's commitment to major bushfire operations, in addition to those in our own and surrounding fire control regions, is demonstrated by the fact that personnel from Ferntree Gully were involved not only in the 2002/2003 bushfires in New South Wales and the north-eastern and Gippsland districts of Victoria, but also in the operations around Sydney and other parts of New South Wales during 2001/2002.

This commitment is detailed in Appendix B.

- Term of reference chosen for Fire Brigade's submission

Given the extent of our commitment, as outlined in the preceding paragraphs, the Fire Brigade is, quite naturally concerned about the issues to be canvassed in each of the Inquiry's terms of reference. However, as we do not have precise data to submit about those matters, we have directed our observations to the term of reference relating to the role and contribution of volunteer firefighters.

Our observations, then, are not confined to the deployment of volunteer firefighters in bushfires, but extend to the need for maintaining and sustaining the volunteer fire service, as a whole, in the future.

It is our experience that bushfire operations generally require the input of significant numbers of volunteer firefighters. For the most part such volunteers can only be effective if they possess the level of training, and the resources and organization available through a structured body such as the fire service. It follows, then, that the maintenance of the volunteer fire service ensures that a trained, well-equipped force of firefighters will continue to be available to combat the seasonal menace of bushfires, in addition to meeting their ongoing responsibilities in the day-to-day protection of their local communities.

### **Term of reference**

The roles and contributions of volunteers, both now and in the future, might be examined in the light of prevailing economic and social factors and it is these aspects that we first consider.

- economic and social factors

Experience and observation indicate an increasing tendency during the last decade or more for greater emphasis upon striving for personal wealth. This has been evident in the dramatic increases in property values, the pre-occupation of the corporate sector with annual increases in profit, at the expense of any semblance of service, the collapse of corporate enterprises as a result of fraudulent practices and mismanagement, and the curtailment of numerous services in the community for the express purpose of achieving profit targets.

These trends have impacted in particular upon small communities which have experienced losses in social, welfare, banking, hospital, education and retail services and facilities that have now become concentrated in the larger district centres - simply the logical outcome, it is argued, of market forces at work.

The effect of such changes upon society, especially in the smaller community, is quite dramatic: for example, the collapse of retail services as a direct consequence of the establishment in the nearby district centre of supermarket, variety store and hardware chain outlets, and the withdrawal of banking and other facilities create a spiralling effect in the reduction of employment opportunities, and the consequent loss of population as people are compelled to follow employment prospects.

It is apparent, too, that families must increasingly rely upon dual incomes to achieve their goals, and there emerges a general perception that society measures success simply in financial terms, that individuals are becoming increasingly self-centred, and that there is little time for, or interest in, the welfare of the wider community. Sadly, for many young people in particular, this attitude becomes accepted as natural, and therefore as good and worthwhile.

Viewed from another perspective, there have recently emerged some quite alarming changes in society: a perceived threat of terrorist action that, with its potential impact upon the community and upon essential services in particular, may become reality.

This, then, is the social and economic climate in which volunteer fire brigades - and, of course, all other community activities - must work and survive.

- management practices

The management of the volunteer fire service, as experienced by this Fire Brigade, is the function of the Country Fire Authority, which has responsibilities and powers under Victorian state legislation.

The CFA works in co-operation with the state's other fire services, the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board and the Department of Sustainability and Environment. From the Fire Brigade's viewpoint and the experiences of our fire-fighters, the level of co-ordination of effort, and the degree of mutual goodwill demonstrated during the major incidents of the recent summer was commendable.

Essentially, the CFA organises, supervises and regulates the work and activities of volunteer (and career) fire brigades, funds the development, provision, replacement and housing of equipment, directs and oversees the training of fire-fighters (to nationally prescribed levels), and measures and tests the level of operational efficiency of fire brigades.

The CFA receives 75% of its funding from that part of the fire insurance industry underwriting risks in the country area of Victoria, and 25% from the state government. Given the prevailing economic situation, the CFA's operations could well be exposed to reductions in the level of government funding (should there be an extension of the present rationalisation of medical and welfare services in the community), or - and this is the more likely scenario - a significant loss in insurance funding could occur if further difficulties are experienced in that industry.

In either eventuality, a reduction in funding would reduce the provision and replacement of equipment, and is likely to have the effect of placing increased reliance upon the volunteer service due to its cost-effectiveness.

- the role of the volunteer firefighters

The volunteer firefighter's role is to provide an effective and efficient emergency fire service, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This requirement places upon the volunteer the responsibility of being available and ready for duty, day and night. In brigades with similar or heavier operational workloads to our own, this commitment will invariably reduce the time available for leisure pursuits, and will frequently conflict with the volunteer's obligations to family and employment. The volunteer, being on call around the clock, can often respond to a higher number of emergency alarms than his career counterpart whose involvement is limited to his workshifts.

As a prerequisite to participation in extended shifts of duty in operations involving major bushfires, such as those experienced during the recent summer, firefighters in this Fire Brigade are required to be appropriately skilled, to have the concurrence of their employers to their likely absence from work, and to have made any necessary arrangements for their domestic affairs. Their involvement in the fire-fighting operation is structured, in that they will work in a composite crew formed by personnel from district brigades, have a pre-arranged role to perform, and are transported to and from the scene of operations.

Before reaching operational status, the new volunteer firefighter undergoes an extended recruit training program designed to provide him or her with basic skills and sufficient knowledge to work effectively and safely under close supervision.

The level and variety of skills required of firefighters are determined by the nature and extent of the risk each fire brigade confronts. Accreditation in each aspect of the quite comprehensive listing prescribed for this Fire Brigade involves the firefighter in considerable study and practical work in order to demonstrate competence through a rigorous testing process.

The training and accreditation process has been developed by the Australian Fire Authorities Council, and is adopted as a standard by firefighting agencies throughout Australia.

The "minimum skills" prescribed for this Fire Brigade are detailed in Appendix C.

Training is regularly updated to meet current situations. For example, the anthrax threats encountered in the United States produced a number of "scares" throughout Australia. Three suspicious substances encountered on separate occasions in a mail processing plant in Ferntree Gully necessitated the isolation of the substance by the Fire Brigade, and the decontamination of affected personnel. (It transpired, in each case, that the substance was non-threatening, but this could not have been determined without chemical analysis.)

The Fire Brigade's training and equipment maintenance schedule demands a commitment to a minimum of two sessions each week.

- the contribution of the volunteer firefighters

The volunteer's contribution to the local community is difficult to quantify. Obviously, the fire brigade's emergency response capability is critical to the survival of the small country community, for the struggling small business destroyed by fire tends not to be rebuilt - with consequent implications for that community's livelihood. The same reliance exists in larger centres but the economic consequences are not as far-reaching.

The prevention of fire, and the minimisation of fire damage can impact directly and significantly upon the local, state and national economy. This point was stressed in the statements of the national and state government leaders in the aftermath of the recent bushfires.

The volunteer firefighter's contribution can also be considered from his or her personal standpoint. It will generally entail the regular sacrifice of quality time with family, and of social and recreational pursuits in order to maintain availability for emergency duty. It requires the constant balancing of commitment to family and to employment with the volunteer's obligations. It will often mean sacrificing the prospect of opportunities for increased income through additional employment.

It will frequently mean the requirement to work in a hazardous environment. It will require a positive commitment to an extensive course of study to gain the necessary skills to gain accreditation for operational purposes and, over and above all the foregoing, a commitment to constant, ongoing, time-consuming training and maintenance schedules, and untold hours occupied in a host of planning, administrative, educational and promotional activities.

The constant increase in operational workload experienced by the larger volunteer fire brigades naturally places a heavier burden upon the firefighters. A growing problem also emerges in that, due to commitments to their employment, firefighters have been unable to respond to duty on occasions during conventional working hours. A pre-arranged response sequence (involving neighbouring brigades) overcomes this shortfall, but, in the prevailing economic climate, the problem may well be symptomatic of a growing conflict between obligations to the community and the volunteer's personal economic survival.

The younger volunteer firefighters in particular will endeavour to fulfil their obligations in the face of derogatory and often scathing comment from their peers who, themselves being loathe to accept the concept of work for the good of the community, tend to disparage all such people as "losers".

This attitude does nothing for the self-esteem of the volunteers, nor for their standing in the community, nor indeed for the prospects of recruiting the new generation of firefighters needed to carry the volunteer fire service into the future.

### **Summary**

The economic and social factors discussed in this submission, and the trends identified, appear unlikely to change to any significant degree in the immediate future. While these factors will impact upon the structure and management of the volunteer fire service, and upon the attitudes and outlook of society as a whole, they are determined or influenced by causes lying outside the scope of this Inquiry, and consequently any comment would be irrelevant.

There does appear, however, to be good prospects for encouraging participation in the volunteer fire service that, among other positive outcomes, will ensure the survival of an effective, efficient and organised force available to respond to the seasonal requirement for the suppression of bushfires.

The measures envisaged would express in practical terms the acknowledgement and recognition of the value of the volunteer firefighter's contribution to the local community, to the state, and to the nation.

These measures, which might be classified as economic support and community recognition, form the basis of our recommendations.

## Recommendations

It should be stated that volunteer firefighters in Victoria have a proud tradition of honorary service, and that this submission does not propose the system of payment that prevails in some other states. At the same time, however, honorary service does not mean, nor can it reasonably be equated with, financial disadvantage to the person rendering such service.

It is to remedy such disabilities that we recommend a degree of economic support to help sustain volunteer firefighters. These recommendations are based, of course, on the supposition that a realistic and verifiable basis for any entitlement would be devised.

- Economic support

- Education support and assistance program

- . extending to the volunteer firefighter and his or her dependants
- . subsidise education expenses at higher secondary level and base tertiary level, eg, Years 11 and 12, and 1st Year.
- . provision of subsidised accommodation for isolated students having to attend institutions in centres remote from home.

- Discounted or subsidised local rates and fees program

- . reduction in the annual rates levied on the firefighter's actual residence (This would constitute practical acknowledgement by the immediate community. An interesting "precedent" was created in Pennsylvania, USA, with the development of a scheme for discounted state taxes for members of the state's volunteer fire service which is of similar size to the CFA.)

- Discounted services and utilities fees program

- . utilities such as telephone, electricity and gas services
- . registration and TAC (insurance) fee for volunteer's private vehicle
- . volunteer's household fire insurance premiums
- . ambulance service subscriptions

(This could be regarded as direct acknowledgement of the volunteer's work in minimising damage to utility plant and assets, to state infrastructure, and to safeguarding the economic performance of the insurance industry.)

- Subsidy for loss of income arising from firefighting duty

- . a subsidy would be applied, at a standard rate tied to CPI variations, and with appropriate eligibility and safeguard clauses, to three categories -
  - direct to the firefighter whose pay has been stopped during period of absence
  - direct to the employer who makes up the absent employee's pay to its normal level
  - direct to the firefighter who is self-employed.

In submitting the foregoing points, consideration has been given not only to the nature of the financial disabilities experienced, but also to a comparative study of the benefits accruing to the Army Reserve, and to the assertion, in recent months, by federal government leaders, that the fire service renders the nation service that is equivalent to that provided by the Defence Force.

- Community recognition

With the object of countering disparagement, of reinforcing the value of the volunteer fire service in the eyes of the community, and of restoring some self-esteem for the volunteers themselves, it is recommended that a suitably named medal, subordinate to the National Medal, be created within the Order of Australia, to acknowledge volunteer emergency service (e.g., fire service or state emergency service) for a period of less than the present qualifying period.

The National Medal is awarded for diligent service rendered by police, ambulance, fire service and state emergency personnel, whether paid or unpaid, upon completion of 15 years service. A clasp to the medal is awarded for each ensuing period of ten years.

To the volunteer emergency worker, especially the firefighter contributing the commitment level described in the foregoing pages, this qualifying period for public recognition is quite excessive. There have been numerous instances in this Fire Brigade of highly competent and committed firefighters who, being unable to maintain such a level of input for that period, were obliged to leave without the community recognition their contribution surely merited.

Volunteer firefighters in Victoria are further disadvantaged by the fact that the prescribed qualification for the National Medal of "diligent" service has been varied by the CFA to require service that is clearly above and beyond the level required. This has precluded from consideration those volunteers who consistently, regularly and faithfully apply themselves to their duty: those firefighters who are, in fact, the backbone of the Brigade.

It is recommended then that -

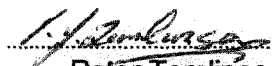
- . the National Medal be retained in its present form
- . a subordinate medal recognising ten years voluntary emergency service to the community be created
- . the criteria of "diligent service" be retained, but that it be interpreted as "faithful commitment to maintaining the required standards of efficiency and effectiveness in performance", or similar.

### Conclusion


As indicated in the introduction to this submission, we would be pleased to furnish any further information required in support of our recommendations.

Dated this sixth day of May, 2003,

(signed)

  
Peter Tomlinson  
Secretary

(signed)

  
Shane Broadfoot  
Captain



## APPENDIX A

**NUMBER AND CLASSIFICATION OF EMERGENCY ALARMS  
RECEIVED BY FERNTREE GULLY FIRE BRIGADE  
1998 - 1999 TO 2002 - 2003**

	<b>1998/99</b>	<b>1999/00</b>	<b>2000/01</b>	<b>2001/02</b>	<b>2002/03 (part)</b>
<b>Fire or explosion</b>	140	152	153	124	140
<b>Hazardous condition</b>	47	41	50	51	14
<b>Motor vehicle accident, Rescue</b>	36	59	40	53	39
<b>Automatic alarm (major building)</b>	81	90	122	109	92
<b>Service call</b>	20	19	16	7	14
<b>Other</b>	--	18	8	6	30
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>365</b>
<b>AVERAGE ALARM FREQUENCY (Hours)</b>	<b>24.3</b>	<b>19.6</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>22.3</b>	<b>20.2</b>

## APPENDIX B

**MAJOR FIRES AND INCIDENTS  
INVOLVING FERNTREE GULLY FIRE BRIGADE PERSONNEL  
1998 - 1999 TO 2002 - 2003**

YEAR	NATURE AND LOCATION OF FIRE OR INCIDENT	NUMBER OF FIREFIGHTERS	AVERAGE INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENT
98-99	Gas plant explosion, rupture and fire, Longford, Victoria	15	60 hours
99-00	Bushfire, Yea District, Victoria	6	12 hours
	Bushfire, Mount Evelyn, Victoria	11	12 hours
	Power station fire, Traralgon, Victoria	20	24 hours
00-01	Bushfire, Traralgon, Victoria	7	12 hours
	Bushfire, Stawell, Victoria	8	12 hours
	Grass fire, Colac - Beeac, Victoria	9	12 hours
	Bushfire, Singleton, NSW	1	72 hours
		1	36 hours
01-02	Bushfire, Sydney and District, NSW	15	5 days
02-03	Bushfire, Warburton, Victoria	8	12 hours
	Bushfire, Tenterfield, NSW	2	5 days
	* Bushfire, Northeast district and Gippsland, Victoria	17	5 days
	* Bushfire, Lysterfield, Victoria	14	10 hours
	* Bushfire, Lysterfield, Victoria	15	10 hours
	* Bushfires, Mt Martha, Gembrook, Victoria	3	12 hours

(\* concurrent operations)

## APPENDIX C

**MINIMUM SKILLS REQUIRED FOR ACCREDITATION  
OF VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS, FERNTREE GULLY FIRE BRIGADE  
(SPECIFIED BY COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY)**

**SUMMARY OF SCOPE OF COURSE AND INSTRUCTION/STUDY REQUIREMENTS**

No	Module Title	Module Scope and Content	Instruct -ion (Hours)	Self- Study (hours)
2.16	Hazardous Materials 1	Recognition of dangerous substances; numbering/labelling systems; legislation; Australian codes; containment, recovery; decontamination; information systems; incident policy; standard operating procedures	10	30*
1.05	Alarms and Sprinklers	Types of fire alarms; VESDA; manual systems; sprinkler systems: water supply, controls, gauges, alarms; activation; wet and dry and special risk installations; activating devices	10 to 15	8
1.06	Occupational Hazards	Identifying and handling hazards - structural failure, electricity, chemicals, flammable liquids and gases, heat and smoke, explosions, wildfire, aerial retardants	20	20 to 40
2.06	Personal Protection 2	Types of chemical protective clothing; protection levels; protective clothing: use, function, testing; administrative requirements; standard procedures; OHS considerations	4	4 to 6
2.15A	Salvage and Overhaul	Salvage techniques to minimise property loss; equipment; overhaul operations	5	20**
2.15B	Ventilation	Purpose; positive/negative venting techniques; natural ventilation; air-handling systems; hydraulic ventilation - manual and automatic; gas detection equipment	5	20*
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>(MINIMUM TIME REQUIREMENT SPECIFIED)</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>143</b>

\* Supervised activity or self-study

\*\*Supervised activity

Acquisition of the above minimum skills equips the firefighter for fireground duty. To enhance operational effectiveness, he or she proceeds immediately to an extensive and more intensive course of instruction/study to acquire advanced skills. Specialist, leadership and command courses develop skills beyond this advanced level, and are undertaken by appropriate personnel.