

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE
ON
RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES



Kuipo SA January 1995

SUBMISSION BY

COL ADAMS

COL ADAMS AERIAL SERVICES P/L

TERMS OF REFERENCE

*** (G) THE ADEQUACY OF CURRENT RESPONSE ARRANGEMENTS FOR FIRE FIGHTING**

INTRODUCTION

The January 18 bushfire catastrophe in Canberra is the most recent in a long list of devastating fires that have resulted from the NSW Rural Fire Service's failure to effectively deal with bushfires in their early stages. It is a truism that big fires start as small fires and it follows that if these small fires are dealt with aggressively from the outset, there is less risk of big fires developing. The NSW Rural Fire Service has a long history of virtually ignoring fires that have started in remote/inaccessible locations only to have them break out days to weeks later causing massive damage. If the lightning strike fire that was the precursor of the Canberra disaster was appropriately dealt with when it was first detected on January 8, it is likely that it would have been contained well before it even reached the border of the ACT. The resources to do it were available – the Rural Fire Service just failed to utilize them!

This submission outlines the failure of the RFS to adequately attack, with all available resources, the initial fire that developed into the Canberra firestorm. It also relates some of my experiences in dealing with the RFS in regard to the use of fixed wing agricultural aircraft in firefighting. Rather than re-invent the wheel, I have appended copies of previous submissions I have made to other enquiries as well as pertinent correspondence with the RFS – these provide both a detailed account of the role of fixed wing aircraft in firefighting as well as an insight into the mindset of the RFS hierarchy on this issue.

BACKGROUND

Fixed wing “firebombing” aircraft are an integral component of the firefighting strategies employed by most advanced firefighting authorities worldwide. Under Australian conditions (and increasingly, overseas), suitably equipped large capacity agricultural aircraft are regarded as the most cost-effective fixed wing aircraft to deploy. They can deliver large volumes of retardants quickly to a fire site more economically than any other aircraft and have the capability to operate off basic airstrips near the fire site. Requiring very little infrastructure for their operations (a portable retardant mixer, retardant/foam supplies, fuel and water), they can be rapidly deployed to areas of need. While their most appropriate role is in the initial attack on fires – containing fires until ground crews can reach them, they can also be used effectively in assisting to control established fires.

The Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) has over 30 years experience in using fixed wing aircraft in firefighting and has developed a system that should serve as a model for other Australian bushfire authorities to adopt. South Australia and Western Australia also place heavy emphasis on rapid deployment of fixed wing aircraft to fires. The NSW RFS on the other hand has steadfastly refused to embrace the concept of using fixed wing aircraft as a first line of attack on fires. Despite over 20 years of advocacy by others, and myself the RFS continues to ignore its potential and denigrate its proponents.

While there has been some increase in use of fixed wing firebombers in NSW over the last couple of years, this seems to have been more for window-dressing rather than a serious attempt to fully utilize their capabilities. There is little corporate knowledge within the RFS on aerial firefighting using fixed wing firebombers and apparently

little desire to acquire such knowledge. There is also little enthusiasm for the idea that total aviation costs in fire control could possibly be more than halved if aircraft were used proactively rather than reactively.

Despite being one of the most experienced and best equipped firebombing pilots operating in NSW, my attempts to get an effective system in place have been met with accusations from the upper echelons of the RFS of self-interest and not being a team player. Most other operators of fixed wing firebombers hold similar views to mine about the capabilities and organization of firebombing in NSW but are unwilling to voice their concerns publicly for fear of losing contracts or casual work with the RFS. This is not an unfounded fear – I have been virtually sidelined for the past few fire seasons with preference often being given to inappropriately equipped aircraft flown by pilots with no firebombing experience. There are also a small number of casual contractors more concerned with keeping their aircraft flying and the dollars rolling in who don't give a damn about their effectiveness.

THE CANBERRA FIRE

No doubt other submissions have dealt with the chronology and the progression of the fire that eventually reached Canberra on 18/1/03. By the time the fire reached Canberra, its size and the prevailing weather conditions were such that no fire fighting strategy was likely to have any effect on the final outcome. This Enquiry should be able to ask and answer two fundamental questions: - what failures in fire management allowed small fires that started in NSW on 8/1/03 to progress to a major fire 10 days later? what needs to be done to minimize the risk of this happening again?

My understanding is that the main initiating fire was the result of a lightning strike in the McIntyre's Hut area on 8/1/03. A landholder adjoining the McIntyre's hut fire has reported observing that fire burning against a southerly wind for a number of days before it broke out – the only control measure appeared to be sporadic helicopter water bucketing. Despite the fact that the situation was tailor made for fixed wing firebombing, no attempt was made to really hit them using fixed wing aircraft. While there were 9 fixed wing firebombers engaged at the Kosciusko National Park fires, another 11 fixed wing firebombing aircraft were available for firefighting in NSW. (It should be noted that the plethora of planes available at this time was due to the drought – in normal seasons aircraft of this type are spraying cotton and are not available for ad-hoc fire fighting). These 11 aircraft were available to NSW RFS from the onset of the fires on 8/1/03 and it was not until the 17/1/03 that these aircraft were finally tasked (to other locations in NSW). Perhaps the ACT fire authorities were not aware of their availability when the fires eventually crossed into the ACT? A list of the aircraft and their locations is as follows:

January 17th 2003 tasking

- 5 fixed wing bombers (3 Thrush and 2 Air Tractor 802) tasked to Lithgow.
- 1 M18 Dromader tasked to standby at Wagga – was unable to respond to a fire on 18/1/03 as there was no loading equipment.

- 1 M18 Dromader tasked to standby at Goulburn – no loading equipment for 3 days – it was only when the pilot asked, “what if there is a fire?” that loading equipment was supplied.

January 18th 2003 tasking

- 2 M18 Dromaders tasked to standby at Camden.
- 2 Air Tractor 802 (with proper fire doors) sent to Victoria on contract by the owner he had “had enough of the inaction in NSW”. One of his AT 802 had not moved since 12/12/02 whilst ill equipped and inferior aircraft flown by pilots with little or no firebombing experience were used in preference.

As previously mentioned the aircraft on “standby” at Wagga Wagga and Goulburn had no retardant mixers or loading equipment to allow them to respond to a fire – were they just there for window dressing?

There are 5 agricultural airstrips suitable for firebombing operations within 10 nautical miles of the site of the original fire. These strips would have been adequate for the operation of M18 Dromader aircraft carrying 2,000 litres of retardant with a turnaround time of less than 15 minutes. There are also three larger airstrips (Tumut, Tralee and Canberra) that could accommodate larger capacity turbine aircraft (e.g. Air Tractor 802’S carrying up to 3,000 litres). The aerodrome at Tumut currently has the best set-up for firefighting in NSW and the turnaround time using turbine aircraft from this strip would have been in the vicinity of 25 minutes.

If the RFS had taken the situation seriously and efficiently utilized just half the aircraft available (e.g. 3 Dromaders from local strips and 2 Air Tractor 802’s from the Tumut, Canberra or Tralee), these aircraft could have delivered up to 36,000 litres of retardant mixture per hour to the fire front. This volume of retardant roughly translates into over 2 kilometres of retardant line (a chemical fire break) per hour. In remote or inaccessible terrain, no bulldozer/grader can build a fire break with the speed and effectiveness of a fixed wing aircraft. It should also be noted that an aerially applied retardant fire break leaves no lasting environmental impact on the landscape it is applied to – compare this with the loss of vegetation, soil disturbance and subsequent erosion resulting from a physical fire break. In the early stages of this fire, 1 or 2 aircraft could have contained it in a short period of time.

Even after the fires escalated and it became apparent that they were uncontrolled, no fixed wing aircraft were used while a fleet of expensive helicopters was paid to water bucket the fire front with little impact on its progress. By the time the fires reached the outskirts of the urban area of the ACT on 18/1/03, nothing but an “Act of God” could have stopped them and it appears that God had more pressing matters to attend to.

CONCLUSIONS

The people of NSW are being deprived of a highly effective firefighting capability through the stubborn refusal of the NSW Rural fire Service to utilize fixed wing firebombing aircraft for early fire suppression. Like "Baghdad Bob", the hierarchy of the RFS seems to be in a state of denial as they repeatedly assure the citizens of this state that they are completely on top of bushfire management. The evidence of this is often to the contrary.

It would be beneficial for the Members of this Enquiry to familiarize themselves with the Victorian methods of aerial firefighting and to determine if this approach would be applicable nationally. I am certain the taxpayers of NSW would benefit enormously from such a system – the only problem I envisage would be getting the RFS to embrace it and to put in the effort to get it working properly.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Col Adams", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Col Adams April 26, 2003