

Australia:

Concerns raised by deaths of volunteer firefighters

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Five volunteer firefighters died on December 2, trapped in their truck in a small bushfire at Linton, 25 kilometres from the Australian regional city of Ballarat. Their deaths have aroused deep shock and disquiet, particularly as the youngest of the victims, Mathew Armstrong, was a 17-year-old schoolboy fighting his first bushfire. Three of the crew—Jason Thomas, Chris Evans and Stuart Davidson—were in their twenties, while the fifth victim, Garry Vredeveltdt, was 47.

The crew came from a Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigade in Geelong West, dispatched to the Linton fire as part of a strike force that also included a truck from Geelong City fire station. The Geelong West team died horribly when a fireball rolled over their truck after a wind change late in the day that turned the fire front in a completely different direction.

Their truck was left a charred hulk, strewn with burnt fittings and melted plastic components. Tragically, their truck was stranded only 12 metres behind the Geelong City truck, whose team was helpless to do anything to assist them, such as the intensity of the inferno.

The Geelong City crew was escorting the Geelong West team out of dense bushland when flames twice engulfed both trucks within seconds. The Geelong West truck had exhausted its water supply while involved in mopping up operations. The Geelong City truck still had water in its tanks, and the firefighters were able to douse themselves and envelop their truck in a lifesaving mist of water vapour.

Under CFA procedures fire trucks are not meant to allow their water tanks to fall below a quarter full, so that crews have water left to protect themselves in an emergency. Yet the CFA's often-ageing firetrucks are not equipped with automatic devices to warn when this limit is reached. Instead they have external gauges.

The Linton fire was only a minor fire, on a day when conditions were not particularly bad. Before the wind change, a number of crews were involved in a controlled backburning situation. Five trucks along a bulldozer line

were making their way out for water from different positions. Three had already left the line to refill. The remaining two were the Geelong City and Geelong West trucks.

CFA radio communications have been strongly criticised. A radio warning was broadcast to crews, alerting them to the expected wind change at 7pm, but they evidently did not receive it. The media asked the driver of the Geelong City truck, Malcolm Stepnell, a professional firefighter with the CFA, whether they were given enough warning of the imminent wind change. He answered, 'Not at that time.' He said he did not hear any radio warning.

A local CFA volunteer, Greg Harrison, whose truck, several kilometres from the Geelong trucks, was engulfed three times when the fire changed course, said that better communications would have prevented this danger. Only the firefighting experience of a driver Percy Nunn, a 60-year-old, saved Harrison's crew. Nunn drove at full speed through fences, trees and mine shafts to escape the blaze.

ABC television reported that a firefighting exercise in the area several months ago involving 50 trucks revealed serious radio communications problems, and that the terrain may have made Linton a radio shadow area.

The inadequacy of the CFA's central communications has long been known. John Schauble, a senior newspaper journalist and CFA volunteer, commented: 'The suggestion that the communications system might again have been found wanting will be greeted with knowing nods: it has been found wanting in every major fire for the past 30 years.'

The Linton tragedy comes at the beginning of the summer, and Victoria is the third highest risk area in the world for bushfires, with more than 60 lives lost and 5,000 buildings destroyed in the last 20 years. Yet the Victorian state government, like its counterparts around the country, relies on the self-sacrifice of volunteers.

In most cases, these volunteers also have to raise the cash for their own equipment. Modern technology could

revolutionise much firefighting, introducing the use of aerial water bombers, for example. But, like all brigades, the one in Geelong West has had to crimp and save for rudimentary equipment. The contrast was highlighted last year when CFA crews battled fires in the hills near Melbourne that killed three people, while Visyboard's billionaire owner Dick Pratt used helicopters to douse a fire in his Somerton plant.

The Geelong West crew typified the ordinary working people who routinely carry out tasks requiring enormous courage and endurance. Matthew Armstrong was a Year 11 student at Western Heights Secondary College. His father, uncle and grandfather had all been volunteer firefighters before him. He spent five years as a junior member of the CFA before he enlisted as a volunteer at the minimum legal age of 16. Of the other men, Evans was a taxi driver who kept his firefighting gear in the boot of his taxi, Thomas was a computer graduate and Davidson an electrician. Vredeveltdt had his own small business in fire safety installations. They devoted their skills to the local brigade in their spare time.

That their deaths occurred while a professional firefighter drove the Geelong City truck in front of them underlines the fact that the CFA is based on an army of voluntary labour with only a small core of full-time firefighters. Statewide, it has 67,653 volunteers led by a career staff of just 750, of whom only about 280 serve in fire stations. It serves all rural private property outside the Melbourne metropolitan area but has an annual budget of merely \$90 million, of which only 22.5 percent is contributed by the state government; insurance companies pay the rest from fire insurance premiums.

And just \$7.6 million of the CFA's budget was spent this year on volunteer and brigade support, including a pitiful \$1.5 million for training. Another \$1 million was spent in concert with the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board on developing a joint training ground south east of Melbourne, where natural gas is used to simulate real fire emergencies. These are miniscule amounts given the responsibilities that regularly devolve on the shoulders of the volunteers.

The Linton tragedy is not the worst in CFA history. In the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983, a crew of 12 CFA volunteers died fighting a blaze at Beaconsfield, on the outskirts of Melbourne, and two other volunteers died elsewhere. The underlying question raised by these deaths is why such a vital and dangerous service depends on volunteers. Their lives are risked to cut the costs of the government and big business, including the insurance giants. In its last annual report the CFA calculated that at the most conservative estimate, the services of the volunteers save approximately \$600 million annually.

At the same time, the government and the CFA management are increasingly gearing their operations to meet the demands of big business for highly specialised firefighting services. In 1997 the government launched industry brigades, whereby the CFA will form partnerships with commercial pine plantation owners. CFA brigades participated recently alongside other emergency services personnel in fighting the fires caused by the giant gas explosion at the Esso plant in Longford.

The dangers facing CFA firefighters have also intensified because of the growth of outer metropolitan areas into high fire risk zones. CFA crews could easily have perished in the January 1997 fires that tore through the Dandenong Ranges, near Melbourne, killing three residents. Then too, serious communications problems erupted, in that case involving the collapse of the privatised Intergraph system.

To bolster its image and public support, the CFA has appointed 27 Community Support Facilitators to work with volunteer brigades in outer metropolitan Melbourne and provincial centres. In keeping with the drive to slash costs, these facilitators work under contract from the body hire company Skilled Engineering Limited. Another 30 will soon be appointed.

With much fanfare eight Youth Crews were added to the existing five this year, as part of the state government's Victorian Youth Development Program. There are 320 Year 9 and 10 students in these crews, who over two years gain accreditation as recruit firefighters. In other words, the conditions are being created for further tragedies.

A coronial inquiry is to be held into the Linton fatalities. Yet, the inquest will not examine the root cause: the use of under-resourced volunteers to undertake perilous work that should be performed by well-paid and highly-trained professionals armed with the most sophisticated technology available.



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