



HOT TOPICS

Celebrating our network

February 2020

NT lends a hand

This year to date, 24 Bushfires NT volunteers travelled to New South Wales and 10 staff firefighters travelled to Queensland and New South Wales on deployments to assist our counterparts on what has been one of the worst fire seasons the country has witnessed. They worked long and hard days and represented the Territory wonderfully well. This edition of Hot Topics will be dedicated to sharing stories and thanking all of those who have been involved.

Large Air Tanker Coordinating Officer

Lee Gleeson, Senior Fire Management Officer

In early January I departed for Canberra to assist the National Aerial Fire Agency in coordinating the arrival of an additional 4 Large Air Tankers (LATS) and Very Large Air Tankers (VLATS) into Australia.

Once in Canberra, I was to meet my fellow teammates who would provide the operational briefings for all new air crew and maintenance crews coming to Australia for the first time. The expectation was that the first VLAT would arrive by Wednesday that week.

The first component of my role was to assist with the induction of a new company (Erikson Aero Tankers) into Australia for the first time, work with the jurisdictions in the ACT, SA and WA to provide answers to their questions given they were now supporting one of these tankers full time, and to work with the RAAF Bases who were hosting LATS at Edinburgh in SA and Pearce in WA. Although LATS and VLATS have been used in Canberra, SA and WA before they have never been permanently based there.

We completed inductions for about 15 personnel and then the fun began – we were running a book on when the first aircraft would arrive in Australia. Given these aircraft had just completed a Northern Hemisphere summer they were in hangers awaiting maintenance. This maintenance was conducted and as aircraft were departing the States some were hampered by Tornados, Volcanos and weather systems that prevented Visual Flight Rule (All aircraft operations are carried out without instrument flying which means they must be able to see whereas commercial flights utilise instruments to guide aircraft when visibility is poor) flying to ensure all maintenance checks received the final tick off. The first of the 4 aircraft arrived in Adelaide on Friday 17 January and was operational by

Saturday 18 January. The second LAT arrived in Perth on Monday 20 January and was operational the next day. The first VLAT arrived 4 days later in Canberra and was quickly operational and the last VLAT arrived on the 8 February. All 4 aircraft are operational. Additional Pilot briefings were conducted in South Australia and Western Australia as required.

I assisted with the delivery of 5 operational briefings, attended meetings and inductions on to the RAAF bases at Edinburgh and Pearce and met on numerous occasions with jurisdictional staff to effectively calm their nerves and encourage them to think about these aircraft as “Single Engine Air Tractor's on Steroids”!

Thanks to Bushfires NT for releasing me and thanks to the Alice Springs staff and the Captain of the Alice Springs Volunteer Bushfire Brigade for holding the fort in the middle of our summer.



Lee Gleeson with the DFES Commissioner Darren Klemm and Minister for Emergency Services Hon. Francis Logan at Pearce Airbase with Bomber 103



Lee Gleeson conducting a pilot and crew briefing in Canberra

Alice Springs Volunteer Bushfire Brigade

Simon Casey, Captain

I was honoured to have recently participated in an NT Fire and Rescue Service (NTFRS) Strike team deployed to Nowra NSW, and I can honestly say it was one of the most awesome – though taxing - experiences that I have ever experienced.

Tasking wise, I went in with the mindset that we were there to do whatever was required - there was plenty of the standard 'hurry up and wait', and then we were assigned to whatever was required in the moment - including clearing roads of fallen trees, blacking out and, chasing smoke sightings. It was humbling to think that any hour that we were on the ground, it gave one of the locals a chance to rest or check in with their family and friends.

I think all of the crew members were prepared for the expected physical aspect of the deployment, but I suspect that the emotional and mental toll came as much as a surprise to others as it did to me. Personally, the hardest part was seeing all of the devastation first hand. The enormity of the number of homes, infrastructure and environment destroyed – often as far as the eye could see. The pain of watching people sifting through the remains of their homes, their lives, desperately trying to find a little piece of something.

Watching them queue up for supplies to be able to access the most basic of living requirements. The stories that they had to tell – so recent and so raw – were truly heartbreaking.

Our deployment crew were hard working – everyone got stuck in and attacked the jobs at hand with enthusiasm. I was honoured to also have my son on this deployment with us and he fitted in really well and contributed unreservedly (he and his “2 Dads” – the ongoing crew joke).

The week wound up with a Cricket game with some of the local kids on our final day – it was a really fun way to finish up the deployment, and a bit of a de-stress for everyone involved.

As tough and mentally draining as this assignment was, I'd be on a plane again tomorrow if the opportunity arose.

Strike team 2

Nathaniel Staniford, Fire Management Officer and Team Leader fro the strike team

On 6 January, 10 Bushfires NT (BFNT) personnel joined a composite strike team with 10 NT Fire and Rescue Service (NTFRS) personnel.

We were travelling to New South Wales to assist with the fires burning in the Shoalhaven region. Together we formed the Strike Team 2 (or officially NT 398) and relieved the initial NTFRS deployment of 20 members on Strike Team 1.

This was the first deployment from BFNT as an on-ground strike team since having assisted with the Black Saturday fires in 2009.



Strike Team 2

Strike Team 2 was made up of 2 BFNT staff, 6 Top End volunteers and 2 Alice Springs volunteers. After flying in from either Alice Springs or Darwin, the whole crew met up in Sydney, ready for deployment to Nowra the following day.

As the travel from Sydney to Nowra was fairly short, there was some free time for crews to experience the Fleet Air Arm Museum at HMAS Albatross, as well as a meet up with some Fire and Rescue NSW staff, including Deputy Commissioner Jeremy Fewtrell.



BFNT crew and NSW Deputy Commissioner Jeremy Fewtrell

The vehicles assigned to us were a mixture of old and very old NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Category 1 Tankers (Medium Attack Vehicle), a Category 7 (mid-sized tanker) and a Personnel Carrier (command car), including some that were recalled from the disposal line. When we made it onto the fire ground, we were working in and around Milton on the NSW South Coast.

This included towns like Lake Conjola, which lost 189 homes to the fires. Crews were predominantly tasked with mop-up and patrol duties to ensure that there would be no further spread of the fire in this area during our watch. We also responded to a number of 000 calls throughout the deployment, ranging from active fire spread in paddocks to minor smoke sightings in the burnt ground.

On Thursday 9 January, the whole NT 398 Strike Team was involved in a back burn to close a potential gap ahead of increasing winds on the following day. This was a different burn for most of the crew with heavy timber, thick understory and very little grass. Due to the rain that morning, the smoke was thick, and hung in the air for the entire duration of the burn making conditions pretty difficult.

One of the most rewarding aspects and tasks of this deployment, was the interaction with the local RFS brigades and the broader community. This was achieved through working alongside RFS volunteers, assisting landholders to gain access to their properties or even a game of cricket to lift the spirits of children (and their parents) who have been impacted by the fires. Everyone was so thankful that we were down to lend a hand, and were always very welcoming and hospitable, despite the losses and hardship that they had endured.

After a long 5 days of mopping-up, we then headed back to Darwin, richer for the experience, and having had an opportunity to play with some new toys, we most especially enjoyed the foam branches.

Young artist with a heart of gold

Wonderful local artist Georgia Wild, 16 years of age, completed a painting which was auctioned by Mix 104.9. A total of \$600 was raised and Georgia donated these proceeds to the Marrakai Volunteer Bushfire Brigade (MVBB). These proceeds will be used to support those Volunteers who went to attend fires in the Eastern States. A huge thanks to you Georgia!



Ralph Dean and Georgia Wild

In grateful appreciation

The shocking toll of Australia's summer bushfire season has been devastating to say the least. With countless properties and wildlife lost and more than 30 people killed, 9 of whom were dedicated fire fighters, the season labelled as 'Black Summer' has simply shattered a nation. Our thoughts go out to all those impacted and we honour those who have fallen. The selflessness, courage and strength shown by Australians and the international community has been heartening and fundamental in helping communities restore resilience and hope. The community support and generosity has been overwhelming and deeply touching, even for us here in the Territory.

Bushfires NT would like to thank the organisations, businesses, individuals and community for their care and support of Bushfires NT, particularly of the Bushfires NT members recently deployed interstate across QLD and NSW to assist with the fires. Your support means a lot with special thanks to the NT Thai Association, Darwin River Tavern, Georgia Wild, The Bell Bar and Bistro, Woolworths, Coles, McDonalds, Darwin Horse and Pony Club, Gray Primary School and Telstra for their generous donations.

NT Thai Association took a hands on approach to fundraising!

The Northern Territory Thai Association is a very active community organisation that brings together Territorians with Thai heritage and connections. In January the Association decided to recognise the sacrifices made by those Territory volunteer firefighters who travelled to the fire grounds of NSW.

The Association organised an event that they called 'Hands On' – they set up a monster massage stall at the Gateway shopping centre one Sunday in January.

The deal was 15 minutes shoulder and neck massage for \$15 with all proceeds to go to the volunteer firefighters. A total of 10 professional masseurs volunteered their time from 9am to 5pm. In one crazy, hectic day the hardworking masseurs raised over \$5,000. The money is now being distributed directly to the volunteers who were deployed. It was not intended to be a payment for work done, it is a small token of one community's appreciation for the sacrifices made by our often-overlooked volunteers.

Thank you NT Thai Association, and especially your amazing volunteer masseurs, your fantastic gesture means more than we can ever explain.



NT Thai Association and Acacia Hills brigade members

Woolworths

To say 'Thank You' to volunteer firefighters and emergency services personnel across Australia, Woolworths offered a 10% discount across their stores as a kind gesture of thanks.

The discount was valid from Tuesday 21 January to Friday 31 January 2020 and was well received by our network.

Coles

In response to the devastating 'Black Summer' fires Coles reached out to rural fire brigades across the country to say thank you to each and every brigade for the incredible bravery and commitment of volunteer fire fighters.

Coles presented each brigade with a \$500 gift card donation.

Coles have generously donated more than \$3m in gift cards to over 6,000 rural fire brigades across Australia including us here in the NT.



Katherine Volunteer Bushfire Brigade with their generous donation from Coles

Telstra

In addition to Telstra's long standing assistance package available to customers impacted by natural disasters, they announced on 1 January 2020 that Telstra would cover the cost of mobile phone bills for volunteer firefighters over the period of December 2019 and January 2020 who were actively fighting the 'Black Summer' fires or directly supporting the bushfire efforts.

This included volunteers supporting the bushfires working with - the Victorian State Emergency Service, New South Wales State Emergency Service, Queensland State Emergency Service, South Australian State Emergency Service, Tasmanian State Emergency Service, Australian Capital Territory State Emergency Service, West Australian Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the Northern Territory Emergency Services, including Bushfires NT.

Volunteers working for these organisations can register by calling 13 22 03.

Customers who have had to evacuate their home, or have sadly lost their home due to the bushfires can call 13 22 03 to register for the customer assistance package.

Darwin River tavern

Thank you to the Darwin River tavern for their generous support of our Darwin River Volunteer Bushfire Brigade. Their efforts on Australia Day raised a whopping \$1,378.

Thank you also to all the amazing locals who helped make this possible.



Darwin River Tavern

Vale George Thompson

29.04.1927 – 04.02.2020

It is with great sadness that we note the passing of one of our own, George Thompson. George was a long time member of the Katherine Volunteer Bushfire Brigade and Fire Warden from 1988 and later an advocate for the establishment of Edith Farms Volunteer Bushfire Brigade.

George was nominated as first Captain of EFVBB and gazetted in December 1999, as well as being a Fire Warden for Edith Farms VBB having changed from Katherine VBB when the new brigade was established. George remained Captain of Edith Farms VBB for many years.

George was also a Katherine Regional Bushfire Committee member during his active years. George maintained an exceptional local knowledge having lived in Edith Farms area, owned and worked in the area for most of his adult life. His connection with the land and people of the area ensured many years of sound fire management and community engagement in the Edith Farms area.

Such was his dedication to local fire management, George donated the land on which Edith Farms VBB HQ now stands, and the brigade has honoured him with naming the shed after him. George was a recipient of the BFNT Long and Meritorious medal in 2010, and is also a life member of Edith Farms VBB.

George is a true Territorian and great community man.

Sincere thank you to all Territorians who have generously donated and provided their support to those effected.

