

2009 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES ROYAL COMMISSION
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STATEMENT OF ALLAN FRANCIS MONTI

I, Allan Francis Monti, of 2 Ridge View Court, Somerville, Victoria, say as follows:

Introduction

1. My name is Allan Monti. At the time of the Black Saturday fires I was an Executive Officer of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) and later acted as Chief Executive Officer in support of the Board of the VFBV for a number of months in the absence of Andrew Ford VFBV CEO. I am authorised to make this statement on behalf of the VFBV and do so in the place of Andrew Ford, the current CEO of VFBV.
2. The purpose of this statement is to provide to the 2009 Victoria Bushfires Royal Commission information in relation to the training and utilisation of volunteer fire-fighters.
3. Unless stated otherwise, this statement contains information from my own knowledge and experience.

Qualifications and/or experience

4. Prior to my current employment with VFBV, I worked for the Department of Education in Victoria and various TAFE colleges throughout Victoria as a technical teacher in engineering for in excess of 27 years.
5. I have a Bachelor of Education
6. I have been a CFA volunteer for over 22 years.
7. I currently hold the rank of 1st Lieutenant at Somerville Fire Brigade. I am also currently
 - i) a Level 2 Incident Controller under mentoring;
 - ii) a qualified and endorsed Level 3 Planning Officer; and
 - iii) a qualified and endorsed Level 3 Logistics Officer.
8. Previously I held the rank of Deputy Group Officer at Western Port Fire Brigades Group in CFA Region 8. While in this role I held responsibility for the establishment, preparedness and operation of the Level 3 Incident Control Centre at Moorooduc. This ICC had assignment responsibilities for the greater part of south east Melbourne and the Mornington Peninsula.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria

9. The submissions made on behalf of the VFBV to this Royal Commission set out in detail the brief history of the organisation. For present purposes it is sufficient to summarise those submissions by saying that VFBV is the amalgamation of the Victorian Urban Fire Brigades Association and the Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association. Both of these associations enjoy statutory recognition under the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*. Section 100(1) of that Act established these two associations for the purpose of enabling brigades to consider and bring to the notice of the

CFA all matters affecting the welfare and efficiency of brigades. For all practical purposes, and to take advantage of economies of scale, VFBV exists to perform the functions given to the two associations and has done so since amalgamation in 2008.

10. The VFBV, and the predecessor associations referred to in the Act, have consistently represented the interests of volunteer member brigades to the CFA.
11. This witness statement sets out some of the matters that relate to the welfare of volunteers and the efficiency of the fire service as a whole. The fire service model is heavily dependent upon the involvement of volunteer fire fighters and volunteers performing a range of leadership, community safety and support roles. The volunteer fire fighters represent the largest resource available to the CFA in any emergency scenario. Where the involvement of volunteers is so fundamental to the provision of the fire services it is obvious that an efficient utilisation of the volunteer resource is a major factor in the overall effectiveness of that service as a whole. The fact of the matter is that the fire fighting in rural areas and the existence of volunteer brigades are inextricably linked. There is no reason to think this situation will change in the future. In one form or another it is the model adopted in all states in Australia. Indeed, the existence of volunteer brigades is a major contributor to life in rural areas as they are often a focus for social interaction which occurs through a range of community programs and projects, including fund raising and the like. The exposure of the broader community to fire awareness issues through the social networks established by the presence of CFA volunteers in local communities is an important part of the preparation for a fire season and the response to an incident. Given the fundamental and important role of volunteers in the system and in the community it is critical to ensure that the volunteer resource is managed and utilised in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

12. The purpose of this statement is to bring to the attention of the Royal Commission issues of concern to the VFBV that relate to the effective utilisation of the volunteer resource.
13. The volunteer fire fighters that are members of VFBV are commanded by the CFA. There is a strong feeling of loyalty amongst the membership of VFBV towards CFA which has been created over many years of fighting fires together.
14. The VFBV notes that in many respects the CFA does a great job, but it notes that, as in all things, there is room for improvement. The purpose of this statement is to outline some of the ways in which a more effective utilisation of volunteers might significantly improve the State's readiness to meet the challenges ahead.
15. Over the years VFBV and its predecessors have made a number of submissions to both government and to the CFA in relation to matters affecting the efficient utilisation of volunteer fire fighters. I have been advised that this part of the Royal Commission's hearings is focussed upon training issues and the operation of IMT's and so I have limited my comments to these topics so that I can be of most assistance to the Royal Commission at this time. But note that it is likely that the VFBV will seek to introduce evidence in relation to its other issues of concern at stages of the hearing process that are more appropriate.
16. I have read the statement of Alan Small (WIT.7529.001.0001) which has been filed in these proceedings.
17. I can say that from my position at VFBV, from anecdotes that have been relayed to me directly and from my own observations, the situation outlined by Mr Small is one example of a broader issue that affects the way in which the volunteer resource is utilised. This broader issue has been raised by VFBV and its predecessors many times in the past.

18. There are matters that need to be addressed:
- 18.1 acknowledgement that the large group of volunteers comprise people with valuable skills that can be employed in the service of the State to fight fires and respond to other emergencies;
 - 18.2 accessibility to training opportunities to ensure that the maximum contribution of volunteers can be achieved; and
 - 18.3 universal recognition that people who have trained and obtained competencies to the required standard are to be regarded as capable to act and should be utilised in those roles regardless of whether they are career staff or volunteers.
- 19 If these matters can be adequately addressed it will mean that volunteers will be able to give the system all that they have to offer, rather than leaving valuable skills underutilised. It will ensure that the morale of volunteers, at all levels of the organisation, remains high as they will know that they are making a valuable contribution.
- 20 I have spoken to many VBFV members about their experiences of the Black Saturday fires and the fires that continued to burn for several weeks after. These members served Victoria in the field on Black Saturday and during the subsequent fires, as well as in management positions in various Incident Management Teams (IMTs).
- 21 Evidence at this Commission has also demonstrated that there was insufficient resourcing of ICCs on Black Saturday and in the following weeks. Some are interpreting the evidence to suggest that there is a lack of trained staff available to fulfil necessary positions within ICCs. I suggest it is more a result of an underutilisation of volunteers who were available, and insufficient effort to train and prepare experienced volunteers who are capable and willing to perform these roles.

- 22 It is clear to me from my experience, from talking to colleagues and volunteer fire fighters and from the evidence given in this Commission that volunteer fire fighters have been systemically under utilised as a resource in response to bush fire incidents.
- 23 In my opinion what has emerged over many years is a culture where volunteers, although actively used as fire fighters on the ground, are routinely overlooked in terms of the positions they are able to hold and, in fact also, their input into issues affecting the efficiency and welfare of volunteers. I have no doubt that the Victorian community suffers as a result. Further, I am certain that this culture has damaged the morale of volunteer members of the CFA, who have often spoken of their frustration caused by the fact that they remain underutilised or that they are not listened to. These are people from diverse backgrounds, but the common thread that joins them is that in their personal life they have developed personal skills or held positions of responsibility that make them perfectly suited to management positions in emergency response organisations such as the CFA. Alan Small is one example of such a person. Alan represents a number of dedicated volunteers who have persisted in pursuing their personal advancement in the organisational structure. I am aware of many people in Alan's position who have been discouraged by either the lack of access to training opportunities, or the prevailing culture in the CFA to the deployment of volunteers in senior roles.
- 24 CFA needs to be proactive in developing its volunteer resource pool. It should seek out those volunteers who have extensive experience, the skills and the capability to undertake more senior roles. A 'training path', the equivalent of a career path for career fire fighters should be developed for volunteers. There should be consistent and clear criteria for how individuals are chosen for training to avoid any perceived biases. This would assist volunteers in knowing what opportunities are available and

what they need to do to gain certain qualifications. It would also assist in inspiring volunteers to take on these roles, sending the message that CFA values volunteer resources.

- 25 Feedback I have received from volunteers also indicates that a preference is given to career staff over volunteers in performing the role. This has two dramatic effects. Volunteers begin to feel that their skills are not as highly valued as paid staff, even though they have the same qualifications and in many cases, more experience. Volunteers accept there is a need to ensure that the pool of experienced staff is wide, hence the decision to place a less experienced person into a position at times to build their experience. However they feel that this concept should apply equally to volunteers. A wider pool of experienced volunteers can only be developed if they are given the opportunity to perform these roles. The feedback received by VFBV indicates that this is not happening.
- 26 Many volunteers feel that this is part of a culture within the organisation that devalues volunteers. This culture also has a flow on effect to other organisations that might be present in an ICC. Many volunteers have expressed the view once the volunteer patch on the shoulder of their uniforms is noted they are treated as less than equal in skills and experience, with ICC members bypassing volunteers and deferring to less experienced or qualified career staff. This break in the chain of command is not desirable.
- 27 There are two key areas that I would like to address in this statement to illustrate the broader points already made:

27.1 Planning; and

27.2 Training.

Planning

- 28 I have received feedback from volunteers that indicates that fully qualified volunteer fire fighters, endorsed as Level 3 Incident Controllers and other key IMT roles were not utilised on Black Saturday. Similarly, I have received feedback from the VFBV membership that senior volunteer fire fighters were simply not contacted in the planning phase to ascertain their availability to assist in managing the fires that continued to burn for weeks after Black Saturday.
- 29 It remains unclear what system if any the CFA has to plan or program for the deployment of people to IMTs, which addresses how many IMT personnel are likely to be needed in an emergency, which identifies appropriately qualified and experienced personnel and their location, and which deploys those personnel (whether career or otherwise) at the appropriate time and place.

The Kilmore fire

- 30 The underutilisation of the volunteer fire fighters is highlighted by a review of the Kilmore fire.
- 31 From a quick analysis of information available to me through CFA I calculate that there were approximately 18 CFA endorsed Level 3 Incident Controllers within a 50 kilometre radius of the Kilmore fire ICC, comprising both career and volunteer fire fighters, that is, within half an hour's drive. At the time of the fire there were approximately 35 CFA endorsed Level 3 Incident Controllers within a 100 km radius of the Kilmore fire ICC.
- 32 The Kilmore ICC L3 Incident Controller appointed for the day shift travelled from Wangaratta to perform the role - over 150km away.

- 33 The Kilmore ICC L3 Incident Controller appointed for the night shift travelled from Wodonga to perform the role - over 200 km from the ICC.
- 34 In the context of the Black Saturday fires and its aftermath this is, in my view, unbelievable. The strain on resources at that time can only have been exacerbated by this kind of approach.
- 35 It is not only the resourcing issue that is of concern. There are advantages to ensuring, where practicable, that local fire fighters manage and fight fires in their area, having regard to their contacts, local knowledge and familiarity with the area.
- 36 In my view, there are several explanations for this kind of approach:
- 36.1 First, the CFA's system for identifying individuals within the organisation that possess necessary skills, or to locate and deploy them when and where necessary is inadequate. The CFA do not, for example, have a database that can inform those planning for an impending emergency situation of who, in a particular area, is qualified for a specific management role and whether they are available;
 - 36.2 There is also no statewide, widely available or real-time accessible system to track the incident deployment status of human resources assets during incidents, or in advance of emergencies. This tracking exercise is undertaken manually at a local level, and communicated to Regional Offices for dissemination. The consequence is that sometimes it is done very well and at other times it is done very poorly;
 - 36.3 Where an incident response requires the deployment of a person with higher level training, the culture of the CFA is often to respond by calling upon volunteer personnel as a last resort, looking first to career staff resources, then external agency

sources and sometimes to resources imported from interstate or overseas before deploying accredited volunteer personnel. This approach often leads to career staff being dragged further distances to take up a post than a volunteer of equal qualification might have to travel and the associated delay in ensuring a suitably qualified person fills the position.

Training

- 37 It is also clear to me based on feedback from volunteers that willing, capable and experienced volunteers experience difficulties in undertaking CFA training at senior levels. Without this training they cannot be used in vital management positions during an emergency. As a consequence there are fewer people (whether career or volunteer) who are able to be turned out.
- 38 The information currently available to me indicates that for 2009 to 2010 fire fighting season 10 volunteers are endorsed as a Level 3 Incident Controller, whereas there are 60 career fire fighters who have attained the necessary training and have been endorsed.
- 39 This means that only 1 in 6,000 volunteers are currently endorsed as a Level 3 Incident Controller.
- 40 If it truly is the objective of the CFA to ensure that the volunteer base of the organisation is encouraged to develop so that it can be more efficiently and effectively utilised it needs to direct its attention to the fundamentals.
- 41 If the objective is to have well trained volunteers and a depth of experience and training in those volunteers, there is no point offering programs at times or in formats that put them beyond the reach of volunteers. Training programs need to be offered and promoted in a way that creates incentives for volunteers to remain involved and highly

trained. VFBV has raised these matters with the CFA on numerous occasions over many years - the need for flexible, volunteer focused training programmes. This has not yet been adequately addressed.

- 42 While volunteers are keen to undertake training, the training needs to be delivered at times that take advantage of when volunteers are most likely to be available. For example they could be held at the time that brigades hold their regular weekly training or via flexible delivery modes where possible. Training courses could be held in modules so that shorter periods of absence are needed or courses could be held at night in the local area.
- 43 Many of the decisions made by CFA about how these courses are run relate to the number of available trainers, both volunteer and paid staff. Increasing the number of trainers will significantly improve the opportunities to deliver volunteer focused training. In particular the use of volunteers as trainers needs to be increased. Volunteer trainers, present in a local area, negate much of the need for travel and provide opportunities to design delivery modes around local needs.
- 44 The history of this issue reveals many years of tension between competing interests. The United Firefighters' Union ("the UFU") has for many years expressed the concern on behalf of its members that volunteers who are trained to fight fires side by side with its members should be trained to a standard of competency that ensures the safety of its members. The VFBV agrees that volunteer fire fighters should be well trained. The UFU has successfully negotiated into successive Enterprise Bargaining Agreements ("EBAs") conditions which require UFU's agreement regarding the selection, employment and deployment of paid trainers and, therefore, control over CFA regarding the manner in which operational training will be provided to volunteers by paid personnel. The VFBV is not and has never been a party to the EBA negotiations.

Over time the real effect (whether deliberate or coincidental) of the clauses negotiated into the EBAs has been to:

- 44.1 Reduce the availability of training to volunteers;
 - 44.2 Restrict CFA's ability to develop a training delivery capability and flexibility required to train volunteers;
 - 44.3 Restrict CFA's ability to engage suitably qualified and experienced volunteers into paid training roles either as full time instructors or sessional instructors, thereby limiting both the number of available instructors qualified to deliver training and simultaneously limiting the gross number of places in training courses available for members (whether volunteer or paid);
 - 44.4 Facilitate the entrenchment of a preference for career staff to take up the limited training opportunities at senior management levels by the timing and mode of delivery of those training modules, eg. weekday, business hours etc;
 - 44.5 Diminish the appetite of volunteers to continually improve their skills through training; and
 - 44.6 Diminish the overall depth of the fire service as a whole.
- 45 In a modern industrial relations context the issues surrounding the management and deployment of an overwhelmingly volunteer based emergency response service are complex. Often the lines of demarcation contained in an EBA are played out at a micro level in a fire station in ways that were simply not intended when the clauses were drafted. In any event the effect is real enough whether intended or not.
- 46 The breadth of experience among volunteer personnel is almost limitless. There are engineers, teachers, police, former CFA career staff, ex military,

active MFB staff and many, many more from all walks of life. There is no plausible explanation for the underutilisation of qualified volunteer staff in training or any other roles.

Dated: 23 November 2009

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Allan Francis Monti