

RESPONSE

RESILIENT AND READY FOR THE PEOPLE OF QUEENSLAND

QUEENSLAND'S OFFICIAL FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES MAGAZINE EDITION 35



All in a day's work

From factory fires to
wet weather

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Fire and Rescue Service firefighters worked around the clock to bring an industrial fire in Brisbane's east under control. Photo by Brendan Neinert.

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FOREWORDS



GREG LEACH
Commissioner

QUEENSLAND FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

Welcome to the first edition of *Response* for the year. I hope you were able to spend time with loved ones over the festive season and recharge after the disruptions of 2020. To those who worked over the break, thank you for your service.

This year got off to a good start at the Premier's Awards for Excellence where QFES was presented with the Premier's Special Commendation Award for our response to the 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19.

We were also a finalist for the Keep Communities Safe Award for the support SES members provided at the border.

This recognition is for every QFES member who did their part and kept Queenslanders safe through these events, which were on a scale we have never encountered before.

At the end of last year, we demonstrated the power of working together with our community and partners when we responded to the fire burning across K'gari (Fraser Island).

QFES worked with local communities including Happy Valley to build their resilience, as well as collaborating with partners such as the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and the Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation.

It was a fantastic team effort that could not have been achieved by one agency alone, and Queensland breathed a collective sigh of relief when the fire was contained in mid-December. See the full story on page 4.

This month we mark the 10th anniversary of the Christchurch earthquake that took such a terrible toll on our neighbours across the Tasman Sea. A QFES taskforce played a significant role in helping the city of Christchurch get back on its feet. Read more on page 6.

QFES members have also been honoured in the 2021 Australia Day Achievement Awards. I was delighted to attend the state award ceremony at Kedron Park, as well as the South Eastern Region ceremony.

Our staff and volunteers do fantastic work every day, so it's wonderful to take some time out to recognise their contributions to the community. Read more on page 13.

As cyclones and floods inundate parts of the state, I am proud of how well prepared we are. Alongside our community and partners, we stand strong in preparation for the challenges of 2021.

I look forward to working with all of you to keep building resilience across Queensland.



MARK ROCHE
Deputy Commissioner

READINESS AND RESPONSE SERVICES

Thank you to all the QFES members who have been working out in the community and behind the scenes to support Queenslanders through the severe weather season.

When Tropical Cyclones Kimi and Lucas brought heavy rainfall and flooding, we were prepared, and we will continue to monitor weather conditions for potential cyclone activity late in the season.

Before Queensland borders opened on 1 February, QFES staff and volunteers, particularly in South Eastern Region, put in a tremendous effort to support Queensland Health and Queensland Police Service (QPS) in border security activities.

QFES personnel and volunteers helped ensure people could enter Queensland as efficiently as possible while following all relevant processes. They carried out these duties to a high degree of professionalism that was much appreciated by QPS.

Congratulations to the 120 QFES members who were recognised in this year's Australia Day Achievement Awards. I would particularly like to acknowledge the winners of our highest honours: Corey Bock (AFSM), Cheryl-Lee Fitzgerald (ESM), Roni Bau (OAM) and Neil Musch (OAM).

On 13 February, five Type 2 Appliances were loaded onto HMAS Choules bound for Port Moresby, as part of a donation program in support of the capacity building Memorandum of Understanding between QFES and the Papua New Guinea Fire Service (PNGFS).

Valued at around \$3.5million, the appliances will be a highly valuable asset for the PNGFS, equipped with Road Crash Rescue equipment, Breathing Apparatus, and Personal Protective Clothing to assist with operational readiness.

In Queensland we have so far escaped the severe weather season, however, it has been devastating to see the destruction by the fires in Western Australia, as they burnt through thousands of hectares and destroyed homes. QFES is always ready to support our colleagues in other states, so we have been closely monitoring the fires and conducted preliminary planning in case they need our support.

QFES is hosting the 2021 Annual Public Safety Agencies' International Women's Day (IWD) event. This year's event is going virtual, giving everyone an opportunity to be involved.

A quick reminder about Blue Cards: the cut-off date is 31 March. Reminder letters have been posted to those yet to apply.

We don't know what 2021 will bring, but no matter what happens, our preparation, partnerships and the passion of our staff and volunteers mean we will rise to the challenge.



United for K'gari

As fire spread across the World Heritage listed K'gari (Fraser Island) at the end of last year, QFES worked with the community and partners to keep people safe and protect important cultural sites.

Heightened fire danger ratings and fire bans were in place across large parts of Queensland in November and December 2020, with around 45 bushfires burning around the state. The fire on K'gari burnt approximately 87 000 hectares – more than half the island.

QFES worked in partnership with the community, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) and the Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) to protect populated areas at The Oakes, Happy Valley, Yidney Rocks, Kingfisher Bay and Camp K'gari, as well as culturally significant sites. In total, around 90 personnel and 38 vehicles fought the fire on the island.

In partnership with the community

Chief Superintendent James Gill said QFES worked with the local community early on to help them build resilience.

The Happy Valley community started making their bushfire plan 12 months earlier after being told their town was undefendable from bushfire. They completed scheduled hazard reduction burns in winter.

“They put a bushfire plan together and QFES worked with them to enhance it and get prepared,” James said.

“The community can't do it alone and we can't do it for them, so we kept them informed and put the right resources on the island to support the firefighting operation and bolster the community's response.”

When the fire jumped containment lines one kilometre from the town, about 50 residents stayed to protect their properties while others evacuated to the beach.

Cultural sites protected

A representative from the BAC was present in the Incident Control Centre (ICC) every day of the fire, providing advice about the location of cultural sites so QFES could develop strategies to protect them.

“That representative also authorised the ICC to take water from lakes on the island and saltwater from the sea,” James said.

“Crews could only take up to two helicopter loads out of each lake at a time. They avoided some lakes because of their cultural significance.

“For every two loads of saltwater they dropped on the island, they dropped a load of freshwater to reduce the risk of damaging the vegetation.

The ICC worked remotely from Rainbow Beach before relocating to Howard, devising strategies based on information from the fire ground and aerial vision from helicopters.

Rural Fire Service (RFS) crews also constructed control lines by hand to manage fuel loads around cultural sites.

One of the sites QFES, BAC and QPWS were able to save was a large sand dune shaped like a footprint.

“When you look at a map of the island, you can see a big footprint with three or four toes in one of the sand dunes on the eastern beach,” James said.

“The BAC representative explained this site is significant to their culture because it relates to a story about a figure who walked across the island and left the footprint.

“If the fire burnt the undergrowth near that footprint, the wind and rain could create a sand drift that would change its shape. Everyone worked very hard to stop that from happening.

“In previous years, without a BAC representative in the ICC, there were delays getting approvals. This time the process was very fast and the representative proved to be a huge asset.”

Hard terrain

The landscape presented unique challenges for firefighters. K'gari is a sand island with many hills and valleys, the coastal heath is highly flammable and the sand retains heat for a long time.



“When the wind was blowing north or north-west, hot winds blew straight down the island, pushing the fire ahead of them,” James said.

“When the wind changed to south-east, it brought a cooler offshore sea breeze and the relative humidity rose overnight, which slowed the fire.”

There are no formed roads on the island, only sand tracks, some not wide enough for a fire truck.

“Ground crews couldn’t always reach the fire,” James said.

“We need ground crews to come in and carry out the final extinguishment because aircraft can’t totally extinguish a fire on their own.

“Since the ground crews couldn’t do that here, we used waterbombing aircraft to steer the fire around cultural sites and populated areas.”

Even then, the thick vegetation stopped some of the water from reaching the ground, which made the fire more intense. The hilly terrain also affected air pockets, generating turbulence.

Many different aircraft helped manage the fire – helicopters, a Large Air Tanker (LAT), small airplanes and a 737 from New South Wales. They dropped more than 10 million litres of water and suppressant.

Working together

“QFES members did an exceptional job and worked really well with QPWS and BAC,” James said.

“That’s really what showed at the end, with no loss of property – everyone worked together.

“Before command of the fire was handed over to QFES, we’d already pre-deployed our crews and equipment, so we had resources in place.

“We were happy we stopped the fire travelling any further south and we were confident we were handing back the island to QPWS in a safe condition.”

QFES representatives were also members of the Recovery Committee set up and managed by Fraser Coast Regional Council to assess and assist the economic, social, environmental and infrastructure impacts of the fire.

Timeline

14 Oct: The fire started at an Orchid Beach campsite at the northern end of the island

27 Nov: Control of the incident was transferred from QPWS to QFES. New campers and visitors were no longer able to access the island

30 Nov: Guests at Kingfisher Bay Resort were evacuated to Hervey Bay

7 Dec: QFES and QPWS conducted back burning operations around Happy Valley. A Large Air Tanker was deployed from New South Wales

8 Dec: The fire came within two kilometres of Kingfisher Bay Resort, but QFES and QPWS kept it at bay

9 Dec: The heightened fire danger across large parts of Queensland began to ease

13 Dec: The fire was contained with the help of heavy rainfall. QFES handed back control of the fire to QPWS



The paths of 17 aircraft working over K'gari on 4 December.



QFES worked in partnership with the community, BAC and QPWS. Photo by Colin Morrow.

Looking back on the Christchurch earthquake

Faced with a catastrophe that changed Christchurch forever, QFES members worked around the clock to support their New Zealand colleagues and bring closure to a devastated community.

In the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, a grey cloud of dust rose above the tallest buildings. Cars sank into roads turned as soft as wet sand by the earth's vibrations, and steeples lay on the footpath in front of churches.

The magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck on the afternoon of 22 February 2011. Centred on the township of Lyttleton, it damaged more than 10 000 structures, including about 70% of buildings in the Christchurch CBD. More than 165 people lost their lives.

Within hours, Queensland mobilised a heavy Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) taskforce, alongside one from New South Wales, to aid our neighbours.

International response

Other teams came from Singapore, USA, Japan, the United Kingdom, Taiwan and China.

Assistant Commissioner John Cawcutt was the Queensland USAR Taskforce Leader at the time.

"To get about 75 people and 15 tonnes of equipment aboard a RAAF plane in a matter of hours, including passports, visas and approvals, was a huge logistical effort, particularly since we'd already deployed a team to Samoa in the aftermath of a severe cyclone," Mr Cawcutt said.

"About 45 000 people had left Christchurch, so it felt like a ghost town. Our base of operations in Latimer Square housed more than 500 people."

In previous years, the team had mostly been deployed to developing nations such as Indonesia or the Pacific Islands, which did not necessarily have systems or emergency services in place.

"In this case, we deployed to a developed nation with its own fire and emergency systems and military support, which was quite an extraordinary experience," Mr Cawcutt said. "The New Zealand USAR Command set direction, strategies and tasking."

Search and rescue

The USAR taskforce went into areas too unstable for local firefighters or police and looked for people who were trapped.

They spent most of their time working around the clock at the five-storey Canterbury Television (CTV) building, which had collapsed into a six-metre high pile of rubble.

"The floors were so compressed, we could only tell which one we were working on by the colour of the carpet," Mr Cawcutt said.

"It was very dangerous and unstable. Concrete was hanging over it and fire was burning below. There were a lot of airborne contaminants and biohazards.

"Ultimately, the team retrieved 43 people from that building and also helped the Japanese team with another 28 people.

"The team didn't miss a beat. It was an extraordinary effort and we were massively proud of the whole team.



The USAR taskforce found 43 people in the CTV building.



Silt and ground water were pushed to the surface, and an average of 70 aftershocks shook the ground each day.



The taskforce comprised USAR technicians, communications staff, paramedics, doctors, structural engineers, canine handlers, a mechanic and management team members.

“I remember seeing a shift resting in a Holden dealership across the road at the end of a long day. On the window was written, *Exceeding the customer’s expectations*. I thought that was perfect.

“Even though we sadly didn’t find any survivors, the search was massively important because no community can move forward until the search is complete.”

Beyond the rubble

After the taskforce had done everything they could to locate missing people, they asked New Zealand authorities how else they could help.

“We took on a whole range of other, less tangible tasks,” Mr Cawcutt said.

“We removed pharmaceuticals from a chemist shop and provided them to a temporary pharmacy.

“We retrieved personal effects and provided medical support. Our engineers helped local engineers assess whether bridges were safe to open, which allowed more services to reach the city.

“The operation cemented a strong relationship between New Zealand and Australia, and 10 years down the track we still have a strong connection.

“It was akin to a member of the family being in trouble, and another member of the family coming through for them.

“I think everybody remembers the Christchurch earthquake and what it meant.”

Always learning

Mr Cawcutt said everything the USAR team learnt in Christchurch helped hone their systems of reporting, logistics, transport and integration with local emergency management arrangements.

Key achievements

- 11 days in the rescue phase
- 58 hours of continuous operations on the CTV building
- 113 primary searches with rescue dogs of major buildings
- 573 secondary searches, most requiring forced entry
- 120 windscreen surveys of structures in Lyttleton

“The systems we’ve put in place for the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART), as it’s now called, greatly enhance our response,” he said.

Over the past 10 years, the DART team has deployed many times both internationally and nationally, including to the Solomon Islands, East Timor and Papua New Guinea.

“The DART team is vital because Australia sits in the most active region on earth – the Ring of Fire. While we’re good neighbours and we need to be able to provide assistance to other countries, the main benefit has been to our local communities. We’ve responded to every disaster of national importance since the team’s inception.

“We have moved away from the heavy USAR team of 75. We can still do that, but now we have a more tailored, modular approach – we can arrange the team into a whole range of different support systems based on the situation at hand.

“We can create a full heavy response team for earthquakes or cyclones, a logistics support team, a swiftwater rescue team, or a hazardous material team, all using the same system.”

Looking out for one another

Mr Cawcutt said he was grateful to the Fire and Emergency Services Support Network (FESSN) for supporting the USAR taskforce during the operation, and for continuing to check on their welfare right through to the 10th anniversary.

The Christchurch operation was the first and only time QFES has deployed a psychologist and a Peer Support Officer (PSO) overseas.

Critical Incidents and Peer Support/ Operations Support Manager Barb Gonda said the earthquake was particularly difficult for QFES members because they didn’t find any survivors.

“The USAR team did magnificent work,” Barb said, “but they had to be mindful of how they evaluated what they did.

“It would be easy to say they didn’t achieve anything because they couldn’t find anybody alive. But they did achieve. They had to find a different way to make meaning from what they did.

“Reminiscing and yarn-telling is an important way to recognise and honour such experiences. Some may want to just get on and not reflect, that’s ok too. It is important to choose what works best for you.

“After any operation, it’s good to spend time with those who were there with you. This group often becomes a new family of people who know you. Acknowledge your participation in making a difference, in the skills and insights gained and the way in which you may have grown from the experience.

“And along the way, remember support is always available either through PSOs or the FESSN counselling network. QFES members can access free counselling by calling 1800 805 980.”



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Overnight rescue saves a life

QFES members sheltered overnight on the highest peak in south-east Queensland to help bring an injured hiker to safety.

When the State Emergency Service (SES) are called to a rescue, they don't expect to spend 24 hours on top of a mountain but, in this case, they had no choice.

Two brothers were hiking on Mount Superbus near Killarney in the Main Range National Park. They'd brought a lot of water, but Queensland was going through a heatwave and the mercury was rising above 38 degrees.

They checked their map and decided to follow the state line to their car. Around midday, the older brother lost his footing and fell 10 metres down a cliff.

The Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) worked with the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) to locate them.

SES South Western Area Controller Ian Phipps said the rough, almost inaccessible terrain meant it took four Warwick SES volunteers several hours to reach the brothers.

"They were only 1.7 kilometres away by line of sight but it was more than eight kilometres by foot," Ian said.

"In places the volunteers had to crawl on hands and knees along slopes at 60-degree angles. The bush was overgrown and the valley held the heat and magnified it."

Two of the volunteers stayed with the victim while the other two walked out and marked the track for other teams.

"He had broken bones and damaged vertebrae, so they couldn't move him," Ian said.

"It was traumatic for them to be there without being able to deliver pain relief – the best they could do was reassure him and dig an indent into the side of the mountain so he wouldn't slip further down."

Remote rescue firefighters and a QAS paramedic made their way in during the night, bringing extra water, food and camping equipment.



A LifeFlight helicopter lifted the brothers to safety.

"They reached the victim at midnight and the paramedic went straight to work managing his pain," Ian said.

"The volunteers spent the night distracting him from the discomfort by telling stories about the history of the area and the plants that grow around the ridges."

It was too difficult to carry him out on a stretcher so the RACQ LifeFlight rescue helicopter was called and arrived in the morning to winch him out.

"The helicopter winched down a battery-powered chainsaw to the SES and FRS members so they could clear the undergrowth and make room for the victim to be winched," Ian said.

"The helicopter first picked up the younger brother and returned him to the command post. A second helicopter then performed a very difficult winch to recover the injured man and flew him straight to Toowoomba Base Hospital."

Exhausted and relieved, the SES members, firefighters and paramedic walked back down from the mountain.

They were covered in ticks and leeches, and one SES member went to hospital as a precaution.

"Once we got all our people back to town, it was a great relief," Ian said.

"All the agencies worked extremely well together. We learnt a lot – there were many things we did very well, and some areas for improvement. More than anything, the rescue highlighted the professionalism of our volunteers."



Two SES volunteers stayed with the victim on the mountain overnight.

Pulled from the floodwaters

Cyclones and tropical lows have caused flooding in parts of Queensland, but QFES is always ready to respond.

On 3 January, Category 1 Cyclone Imogen crossed the Gulf of Carpentaria at Karumba, bringing floods to far north Queensland. Two weeks later, Cyclone Kimi approached the coast but was eventually downgraded to a tropical low.

As weather systems developed and transformed, QFES members were out in the community, sandbagging, removing fallen trees, tarping damaged roofs and rescuing drivers stranded on the roofs of their cars.

Town flooded twice

Northern Region was hit with intense rainfall that caused flooding, particularly in Ingham and surrounding towns.

Chief Superintendent Michael O’Neil said crews were immediately deployed to Charters Towers, Ayr, Ingham and Halifax.

“The swiftwater crews deployed to Halifax were cut off by floodwaters,” Michael said.

“The town’s fresh water supply was also cut off when the Halifax Pump Station’s electrical system faulted, affecting the water treatment system.”

A motorised swiftwater crew transported local engineers to the pump station to restore the water supply.

“This task was a group effort by QFES personnel. Francis De Bono led his State Emergency Service (SES) crew alongside Captain James Steven and the Halifax Auxiliary crew,” Michael said.

“This team not only provided valuable assistance and local knowledge, they also remained on station throughout the weather event.”

Within two days, the water receded and the crew headed home, but their downtime was shortlived.

“On 12 January, crews found their way back to Halifax for another major flood,” Michael said.

“The early morning callup meant crews arrived just in time, moments before roads closed.

“The crew quickly helped a reluctant member of the public who tried to traverse a flooding bridge.”

The flooding only lasted the day and the town survived the weather event thanks to QFES’ and the community’s preparation.

Storm lashes Sunshine Coast

In the aftermath of Cyclone Kimi, an intense storm hit suburbs to the south of the Sunshine Coast, including Little Mountain, Aroona and Caloundra.

Sally Bloomfield, SES Area Controller for the Sunshine Coast, Noosa, Gympie and South Burnett, said heavy rain and strong winds brought down many large trees onto homes. Hundreds of people were left without power.



A lightning strike captured by Dale Ford from Jericho SES Group.



Flooding in Northern Region.



SES crews sandbagging in Mareeba.



FRS swiftwater and SES crews supporting the community in Northern Region.

“The rain we’ve had over the holidays contributed to a lot of big gumtrees falling over because the soil was very wet and gumtrees have shallow roots,” Sally said.

“In total we had 84 requests for assistance and we completed 63 jobs.

“We also tarped several roofs because water was leaking into houses, but thankfully no one had to be evacuated.”

Sally said SES groups had been training all year round to make sure they had enough people qualified to carry out chainsaw and storm damage operations.

“Our teams are prepared and everyone knows who is available so we can get people on the ground as quickly as possible,” she said.

“Groups from surrounding areas came to help out, and it was great to see such teamwork. The community were really grateful.”

Back it up

Several drivers across the state were caught out when they tried to drive across flooded roads and their cars were swept away, a timely reminder that ‘If It’s Flooded Forget It’.

On 1 January, a man in Stoney Creek south of Townsville was driving on his property at 2am when he tried to cross a flooded causeway and his car was washed away.

Fire and Rescue Service Station Officer Warren Stubberfield led the crew who came to his rescue.

“When we got there the water was flowing in a torrent and the car was wedged against a tree,” Warren said.

“He’d climbed out with his dog. We went into the estuaries at the side of the torrent, where the water wasn’t flowing as quickly, and found him clinging to a tree near the bank.

“He was seconds away from drowning, no doubt about it. He was so exhausted. Unfortunately we didn’t find his dog.”

The crew took him across the causeway in a boat. Ambulance officers tended to him and then the police arrested him.

“He put our lives in danger, because we had to go into the water,” Warren said. “When you drive into floodwaters, it’s a concern for everybody.

“He’d driven across this causeway several times a day for many years, and it was on his own property, so he thought he knew it like the back of his hand.

“But the water was moving so fast, it was night-time, and he was under the influence of alcohol.

“He was very upset that he caused the loss of his dog.

“There are a few causeways in our area, and we have teams on standby to respond in case people make bad decisions.”



Congratulations to all QFES Australia Day Award recipients

Thank you for your continued
service to our communities.

Proudly supporting the QFES Australia Day Awards

QSuper



Beyond the call of duty

More than 120 QFES members from across Queensland were honoured in this year's Australia Day Achievement Awards for their service to the community.

Presented at ceremonies around the state, the Australia Day Achievement Awards acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of QFES members in their response to disasters and keeping Queenslanders safe.

QFES also presented Australia Day Appreciation Certificates to businesses and organisations who have provided outstanding support to QFES in a range of ways.

Four QFES members received some of the country's highest honours:

- Corey Bock – Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM)
- Cheryl-Lee Fitzgerald – Emergency Services Medal (ESM)
- Neil Musch – Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM)
- Roni Bau – Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM)

QFES would like to acknowledge and thank our sponsor, QSuper, for their continued support of QFES and the Australia Day Achievement Awards.

Leading by example

Corey Bock joined QFES in 1992 and has worked in many different areas, from frontline operations to strategic governance. He is a Rural Fire Service (RFS) staff member and volunteer, and was an auxiliary firefighter for many years.



Corey Bock was awarded the Australian Fire Service Medal for his contributions over 28 years of service with QFES.

"I became a firefighter because I wanted to help," Corey said. "I just fell in love with that ability to support my community."

At 24 he became one of the youngest auxiliary captains in the state, discovering a passion for leadership.

"Leadership is something you continually learn and grow. It all comes down to relationships," he said.

"We have some amazing people at QFES from all walks of life, and I try to take the time to listen and understand each person for who they are."

A formative experience for Corey was becoming an Inspector at Ipswich just a few weeks after the Grantham floods in 2011.

"I spent a lot of time helping people in Grantham and surrounding areas rebuild. The Grantham Rural Fire Brigade set up a temporary store, giving away donated items to the community while the town rebuilt. I spent a few years listening and helping people through the psychological damage."

Corey also transformed the culture in the region, encouraging greater respect and cooperation.

"I spent almost every night visiting brigades, working alongside them and encouraging them. I invested a lot of time into the people. I'm a people person."



Cheryl-Lee Fitzgerald received the Emergency Services Medal for her leadership in emergency management across Queensland.



Award recipients in South Western Region.

Another game changer for Corey was when he became the first RFS member to take on the role of QFES Ministerial Liaison Officer, representing QFES across all facets of government strategy and relations.

“I worked with three ministers and learnt a lot about our organisation and the government,” Corey said.

“QFES has a lot of moving parts, and I didn’t want to limit myself to one area. A mentor once told me if you want to grow within yourself, you should continually sit in an uncomfortable position. It forces you to think outside the box and connect with people.”

After learning about the operational side of QFES, Corey decided it was time to familiarise himself with corporate services. His current role is Executive Manager of Knowledge Hub, leading the direction of knowledge management and capability within QFES.

A testament to Corey’s leadership is that volunteers often invite him to attend and speak at funerals.

“I once wrote and delivered a eulogy at the funeral of a young volunteer who was very connected to a brigade,” he said.

“It was an honour to talk about how passionate they were about making a difference in this world.

“A brigade once asked me to deliver a clasp for 55 years of service to a dying man in ICU. I presented it to him surrounded by his family and brigade members. I’ll never forget that day. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house.”

Building people and community

As the Far Northern Region Executive Manager of Emergency Management, Cheryl-Lee Fitzgerald has been instrumental in designing and implementing QFES’ emergency management framework and strategy.

Cheryl-Lee has over 20 years’ public sector experience including local and state government appointments and military service. She has held lead roles during major disaster response and recovery operations throughout Australia.

Before joining QFES, she was the Disaster Management Coordinator for Cairns Regional Council, working across local government communities to help them prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies, including Severe Tropical Cyclones Larry and Yasi and the Grantham floods.

Since joining QFES in 2011, she has worked across 21 Local Government Areas, assisting with response and recovery activities

during floods, fires and cyclones.

“Every community is different, with different hazard exposures and vulnerabilities. What works in one community is very different for others,” she said.

“Remote far north communities, for example, can be cut off for a long time during a normal wet season and by disasters, so they are used to being isolated and are resilient in that way.”

She recently worked with 14 remote Indigenous communities while they were in lockdown to finalise sub-plans in response to the pandemic and ensure supply chain continuity.

“I have the opportunity to work with some great leaders across the disaster management groups, who have their community’s interest close at heart,” Cheryl-Lee said.

“Disaster management relies heavily on the teamwork, community engagement, coordination, collaboration and commitment of so many. Nobody has all the answers, nor can any one person or agency go it alone.

“To understand a problem and find solutions, we have to work with communities.”

Far Northern Region is one of the most risk-exposed and remote regions in Queensland, so Cheryl-Lee’s team has procedures in place to pre-deploy members into communities before disaster strikes.

“If we anticipate a remote location in our region may be affected by a severe disaster event, such as a cyclone, we have a team that can pre-deploy into these areas.

“Before Cyclones Nathan (2015), Nora (2018) and Trevor (2019), we pre-deployed to assist Local Disaster Management Groups (LDMGs) with coordination, response operations, community messaging and resupply.”

Cheryl-Lee said leadership is leading through uncertainty, remaining open to learning, and listening and valuing the input of others.

“It’s important to be able to recognise and trust in the ability of your people, while building and mentoring people so they are confident in their work.”

A good work ethic

Boolboonda Rural Fire Brigade First Officer Neil Musch said he was surprised when he got an email the day before Christmas saying he’d been awarded the OAM.



Neil is a retired ambulance officer and has been teaching first aid for 42 years.

He joined the RFS in 2010 after moving to Boolboonda near Gin-Gin. He found a piece of paper in his letterbox one day with a callout for people to join the local fire brigade.

“I went to see the First Officer and said I’d do any job he wanted me to,” Neil remembered.

Since then he’s taken on several roles including First Officer, Brigade Training Officer and Secretary, and he provides first aid classes for the Bundaberg area.

“I enjoy feeling useful,” Neil said. “It comes from my father – he had a good work ethic and instilled in us to always put the work in.

“These days it’s a bit harder for me to pull hoses up the steep hills, though. Even the mountain goats have heart attacks trying to climb the hills around here.”

Some of his strongest memories are from the five days he spent in Yeppoon in 2015, cleaning up after Cyclone Marcia.

“The devastation was shocking – trees without a single leaf, piles of branches on the side of the road, garage doors blown in.”

He said all the brigades in his area worked well together.

“When we’re at a fire, we all trust each other. We know everyone has the skills and will do their job well.

“When you join the RFS, you end up with a group of friends you would never have met otherwise.”

One hand washes the other

Rural firefighter Roni Bau has been part of the RFS for more than 50 years and has taken on many roles including First Officer, Chairman, Training Officer and Fire Warden.

He joined the RFS in 1970 when a large fire threatened the community.

“In those days, you were told you were needed and off you went,” Roni said. “If your neighbours were in trouble you packed up and helped them.

“In a little community like Stanthorpe, one hand washes the other. My great belief is if you protect your community your community looks after you.”

Roni said a lot of things had changed for the better over the years.

“When I first started, I had sandshoes, stubbies, a T-shirt, a terry-towelling hat, a rake hoe and a grey blanket. We had nothing like the equipment we have now.

“We were thrown onto the frontline and learnt on the frontline, but now you’re trained and you’re much more aware of things that can go wrong, which leads to better outcomes.

“It doesn’t matter what part of the emergency services you’re with, we’re all a big family. Every person knows their job.

“If you put your heart and soul into the RFS you’ll reap the rewards.”

Roni was nominated by fellow rural firefighter James Massey OAM, whom Roni nominated the year before. They met on the fire line in 1974 and James served under him as Deputy Group Officer and Group Secretary.

“The people who give up the most are our families who don’t know what’s happening until you get home. Families are the unsung heroes,” Roni said.



Roni Bau (left) received the OAM after being nominated by James Massey OAM (right).



Neil Musch was honoured with the OAM for his service to emergency response organisations.

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Community generosity bolsters RFS

Thanks to generous donations from the community in the wake of the Black Summer Bushfires, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) has bought a range of new equipment to help build resilience in the face of disasters.

The RFS received more than \$3.5 million in donations, which have been used to buy items including 800 bushfire mapping tablets to be fitted to appliances across the state.

The RFS has also used the donations to provide a range of smaller equipment, such as thermal imaging cameras, rattle guns, LED TVs, chainsaws, safety lights and mobile cellular signal amplifiers.

Purono Rural Fire Brigade First Officer Zac Holland said his brigade was grateful to receive one of the bushfire mapping tablets.

“We’ll use the tablet both for mitigating the risk of bushfires and fighting them,” Zac said.

“In our work with the community to prepare for bushfire season, we can use the tablet to inspect the area, identify hot spots and plan hazard reduction burns.

“When disaster strikes, be it a bushfire, cyclone or flood, we will use the tablet for mapping and completing rapid damage assessments.

“The tablet gives us a detailed view of the terrain and receives a direct feed from the helicopter of the line of fire. We can also map the fire by driving around it and tracing a line on the map.

“If I’m on the fireground and I see a candling tree, for example, I can mark it on the map and send a photo to the Incident Control Centre. We’re also planning to sign into large incidents using the tablet.”

Zac said his brigade is always looking for new ways to combat disasters.

“The donations have allowed us to move forward with technology so it’s great to see this support from the community. Everyone who is involved with our brigade is proud to be a volunteer.”

In addition to the equipment, the RFS has bought several vehicles, including two All-Terrain Vehicles for the Torres Strait Islands to assist with hazard mitigation activities, a command vehicle back pod for the Boonah Group, and an All-Terrain Vehicle for Scott Rural Fire Brigade.

The RFS also contributed towards new tankers commissioned by the Rural Fire Brigade Association Queensland (RFBAQ) for Birdsville and Burketown.

Mount Alford Rural Fire Brigade received a water tank to increase their water supply for firefighting while water restrictions are in place in south-east Queensland.

In 2019, ABC Radio held a state-wide appeal to support rural fire brigades in Queensland, raising around \$320 000 through a concert and online donations.

Rural fire brigades were invited to complete a nomination form to request items, and 171 brigades received water tanks, solar packages, water bores, security systems, phone extenders, station lockers, computer packages and sat sleeves.

The RFS thanked the community for their generosity. The fund will continue to be a remarkable help for rural fire brigades across the state, and further announcements about use of the funds will be made in the coming months.



Commissioner Greg Leach and Deputy Commissioner Mike Wassing with one of the new bushfire mapping tablets.



Answering the call

FireCom Officers work as a team to send help when every second counts. A complex situation during a fire in a unit block last year put their skills to the test.

In November 2020, FireCom Officer Vicki Hancox received a Triple Zero call from a panicked man in a unit block owned by the Department of Housing and Public Works (DHPW).

His unit was filling with smoke and the door was very hot from a fire on the other side.

“On a job like that, all our ears prick up,” Vicki said. “Everyone in FireCom listens to each other’s calls so we know what’s happening.

“I didn’t have to relay the information from the call because they all heard it and sent it straight to the crews. Everything flowed really well.

“We call it room awareness. When I take a call about a fire, someone else in the room will hear the address and the next thing they’ll have the hydrants up ready to go.”

Talking it through

Vicki reassured the man crews were on the way and he was safe.

“He had a learning disability, and I kept reassuring him he needed to stay where he was, get down low and place some blankets around the door to stop the smoke coming in,” she said.

“If he’d left his unit, it would have been hard for me to guide him through all the corridors and stairwells.

“He started coughing. I managed to find out his unit number and where he was in his unit so it would be easier for the crews to locate him when they arrived.”

Vicki was on the phone with him for 12 minutes, much longer than most Triple Zero calls.

“I stayed on the line and asked him to let me know when crews got there. Towards the end I could hear the crews’ radios in the background, but I kept listening until he said, ‘I’m okay now, thank you.’ It was a big relief.”

Vicki received an Assistant Commissioner’s Commendation for her work that day.

Controlling the call

When callers are stressed or panicked, taking control of the call is paramount.

“With every call, we start by getting their location and phone number, so we can send someone to help and call them back if they lose reception,” Vicki said.

“If they’re having trouble communicating, we keep bringing the conversation back to those vital details.

“We keep calm and reassure them. They want confirmation they’re doing the right thing.

“You have to visualise what they’re seeing, so you get a feel for what they’re going through. It helps you paint a picture for the crews.”

Vicki said it could be hard to talk to people in some of their worst moments.

“But I just like helping people,” she said.

Complicating factors

Shift Supervisor Tarni Fry said the fire at the unit block was complicated because there were so many people in the building and the area had low water flow.

“Fire Communications Officers have tools that tell us to consider extra resources in certain areas where Queensland Urban Utilities have advised there’s not a lot of water,” Tarni said.

“I work closely with the Duty Manager of Operations, who manages the resources and people for Brisbane Region. This ensures that there is still adequate coverage for incidents that are long and protracted.

“While Vicki was on that call, I instructed another FireCom Officer to have other radio traffic standby so we could transmit the priority message about the man trapped in his unit.

“Calls like that can be the longest minutes of your life. A Triple Zero call any longer than a minute is a long time. Vicki really went above and beyond.”

Challenges

FireCom works on a shift roster, with one supervisor and four FireCom Officers per shift. They work the same shifts as firefighters so they talk with the same crews every day and build a rapport.

“As incidents come in, I study them to gauge what resources are needed,” Tarni said. “The shift ensures that the right resources are allocated. The jobs are sorted by problem type. It depends on factors like, if a car’s on fire, is it a large fire, is there anyone inside, is the car near any buildings?



Vicki Hancox has honed her skills over 13 years as a FireCom Officer. She previously worked as a paramedic for 18 years.



FireCom C Shift. Front row (L-R): Tarni Fry, Jodie Krammer and Vicki Hancox. Back row: Analina Tone and Tanya Henderson. Not pictured: Janet Park.

“If we’re receiving multiple Triple Zero calls about a single incident, the shift ensures that the right resources are allocated. Our focus is to send the appropriate amount of resources to the incident and relay all information to responding crews.”

One of the main challenges is when people call from remote areas and don’t know where they are.

“With calls like these we can sometimes narrow it down by asking how long they’ve been travelling for and on what road. We ask them to read the coordinates on their phone if they can.

“Language barriers are another challenge. We have an interpreter service, which is great but it takes time.

“We had a call recently from a lady on Moreton Island who spoke Spanish and all she could tell us was ‘gas’. The interpreter found out she was camping by herself and had two gas bottles leaking in her caravan.”

Looking out for each other

Tarni said the team joins the firefighters for debriefs after major incidents.

“It helps the firefighters understand what it’s like for us, and it helps us understand what it’s like for the firefighters out there, dealing with a raging fire and trying to look after their crews,” Tarni said.

“Sometimes we get abused by callers, and we also hear about distressing events all day every day. You don’t become immune to it, because everyone has a limit, and that’s why we have our support network and each other.

“We don’t often get closure, because we don’t know the outcomes of events. Sometimes I read things in the newspaper and wonder if it was an incident I took a call about.”

The team gets uplifting calls as well.

“Another FireCom Officer on our shift once took a call from a lady who was trapped in a stairwell, and she passed out on the phone. The firefighters later told us she was going to be fine and that they got her out safe.

“I couldn’t ask for a better crew. We have complete trust in each other, and trust is the key to any successful team.”



FAR NORTHERN REGION



Regional office traditional smoking ceremony

In recognition of the tumultuous year that was 2020, QFES Far Northern Region was one of many departments that collaborated with the Department of Environment and Science and the Department of Resources to invite Henry Fourmile, proud Traditional Owner and Elder of the Gimuy Wallarbara Yidinji People, to perform a smoking ceremony.

Smoking ceremonies are a traditional custom in which native plants are burnt to produce smoke to acknowledge the ancestors and pay respect to land, water, sea and sky country. They are held in high regard for their healing and cleansing properties and promotion of wellbeing.

Active start to the year for SES

State Emergency Service (SES) members have conducted search and rescue activations across the region in the lead up to the monsoon period and during tropical cyclones Imogen and Kimi.

On Monday 4 January, four adults and a young child were ascending the Kirrama Range Road west of Tully when their car broke down and they got stuck.

They were able to reach higher ground and pitched a tent to bunker down for the night as the creeks around them flooded the road, blocking them in.

FRS swiftwater crews deployed

Far Northern Region deployed two Fire and Rescue Service swiftwater rescue teams to Innisfail and Tully to respond to emergencies in the lead up to Tropical Cyclone Kimi.

QFES members were well positioned to respond to incidents north of Innisfail and south to Cardwell, and even to support Northern Region swiftwater capabilities if needed.



With no mobile reception, they contacted a family member by using a drone to fly a mobile phone up high enough to send an SOS with their GPS coordinates.

At around 8am the next day, the message was received and authorities were alerted to the situation.

Cardwell Police, local Cardwell SES volunteers and Cassowary Coast Regional Council staff with a frontend loader set out to locate the group.

Fallen trees and landslides slowed their search, but around noon they found the group safe and well, exactly where their GPS coordinates had placed them.





NORTHERN REGION



New firefighting appliance for Burketown

Burketown and surrounding communities will be better protected from bushfires after the handover of a new firefighting appliance.

In December, the Rural Fire Brigade Association Queensland (RFBAQ) handed Burketown Rural Fire Brigade an Isuzu 4x4 heavy attack appliance at the Nijinda Durlga Hall.

Monies received through the RFBAQ's fundraising efforts during the 2019 bushfire season helped buy this essential equipment, which will assist volunteers to perform the many and varied functions required by their community.

The state-of-the-art appliance will give Burketown Rural Fire Brigade the ability to conduct bushfire mitigation activities, support neighbouring areas and continue to provide primary response to fires.

The brigade has 13 members and serves an area of more than 3000 square kilometres in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria.

Valued at more than \$500 000, the appliance was funded by the RFBAQ (\$293 000), Queensland Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade Donation Fund (\$150 000) and QFES (\$57 610). This includes road crash rescue, communications and firefighting equipment installed on the appliance.

Northern Regional Manager Tony Hazell played an integral role in securing the appliance and liaising with the RFBAQ on the development and implementation of this prototype equipment. QFES would like to acknowledge the generosity of the RFBAQ and community.

Photo by Jamie Firth.



Richmond LDMG breaks new ground

In December, the Richmond Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) ran Exercise Galvanise to test their Aerodrome Emergency Plan, Local Disaster Management Plan and stakeholder procedures.

The exercise, which included a test of the aerodrome firefighting systems and capacities, was a great opportunity to optimise processes and develop deeper working relationships.

It also included a debrief between stakeholders from QFES, Queensland Police Service (QPS), Queensland Health and Richmond Shire Council members.

In March last year, the LDMG approved the Local Disaster Management Sub Plan for Pandemic in response to COVID-19. The LDMG has also developed a more robust understanding of local risks in their Local Government Area, support agencies, processes and plans, and more than doubled their membership since 2018.

In response to new legislation, policy and doctrine, key positions on the LDMG now incorporate deputies, allowing the LDMG to be more flexible in its support of the community.

The LDMG also has great depth in disaster-related training for its members.



CENTRAL REGION

Introducing QFES to Yumba Bimbi clients

Emerald firefighter Cameron McMurtrie organised and led an interactive discussion with some very excited members of the Yumba Bimbi Support Services group. Yumba Bimbi provides disability support for members of the Emerald community.

Cameron also had the honour of teaching his own Uncle Bruce Purvis, a regular at Yumba Bimbi, how to use the fire hose.



60km swim for men's health

The Fire and Rescue Service Mackay Movember Team stepped up to help change the face of men's health in 2020.

The team grew some spectacular moustaches and completed personal challenges, with several team members doing more than 150 kilometres of exercise over the month. They also threw out a challenge to swim 60 kilometres in one morning, the distance representing the number of male suicides per hour every day globally.

Thirty-nine QFES members from Mackay took on the challenge alongside the Queensland Ambulance Service and Aviation Rescue Fire Fighting.

Joint organiser Tim Curtin said, "We might be doggy paddling in the end," but nothing could have been further from the case. The team smashed out the 60 kilometres in just three hours.

The event was supported by local sponsors and was a perfect opportunity to interact with the public, build relationships with fellow emergency responders and support a good cause. The event raised \$8000 for Movember programs.



Supporting people with disabilities to get prepared

QFES members from Mackay attended the Mackay Regional Council Person Centred Emergency Preparedness (PCEP) workshop last year to problem solve and share planning and preparedness strategies to help people prepare their all-hazards disaster management plan.

The workshop included multi-agency emergency managers and local organisations that care and support people with vulnerability and disabilities and those experiencing homelessness and domestic violence.

Local Disaster Management Group members delivered a panel conversation with Q&A. The workshop provided practical skills and a workbook for non-government organisations to assist in developing individual plans through conversations.

Further activities are planned for the council and its stakeholders to further advance this project in 2021. Preparations are underway for a similar workshop in Rockhampton in February.



Longreach backs it up

Longreach is famous for its wide-open spaces and abundance of self-drive tourists. In the lead up to this year's severe weather season, the Longreach team have been busy working with the area's hotels and clubs to spread the If It's Flooded, Forget It safety message.

Licensed venues are collaborating by choosing one day or night where there is high traffic flow to share the message. QFES supplied the venues with drink coasters, air fresheners and other educational information.

Thank you to our partners in this promotion:

- Longreach RSL,
- Birdcage Tavern,
- Wellshot Tavern,
- Jundah Hotel,
- Windorah Hotel,
- Muttaborra Exchange Hotel,
- Winton Bowling Club
- and Alpha Gold Club.





NORTH COAST REGION



A year on from the Cooroibah fire

The Cooroibah community came together with QFES members and Noosa Council staff and councillors last year to have a barbeque and reminisce on the first anniversary of the Cooroibah fire that swept through the area in November 2019.

QFES North Coast Region was represented by Tinbeerwah and District Rural Fire Brigade and Volunteer Community Educator Jackie Kirk, as well as State Emergency Service (SES) Local Controller Noosa Warren Kuskopf and Tewanin SES Group members. Unfortunately the Fire and Rescue Service crew were called out and could not attend.



Variety Bash

At the end of last year, the QFES Variety Bash team participated in their 15th Variety Bash, an annual event to raise funds for the Variety Children's Charity, which helps disadvantaged Queensland children.

The QFES team are operational firefighters who volunteer their time to raise funds to enter the Variety Bash in a decommissioned fire appliance donated by QFES to Variety Queensland.

The Variety Bash started from Norville State School in Bundaberg with the Bundaberg Fire and Rescue Station crew on hand, and finished in Noosa via Nindigully.

On the way the team visited schools, youth clubs and remote communities to carry out fire awareness and safety education. If called upon to help people in need, the Bash Fire Appliance is fully operational.

Over 15 years of Variety Bashes, the QFES team has raised more than \$200 000.

Launch of the Noosa Emergency Action Guide

In December, QFES members from all three services attended the media launch of the Noosa Emergency Action Guide and the Noosa Alert at Noosa Leisure Centre.

The Emergency Action Guide is an all hazards guide to raise awareness of local risk and provide information on hazards including bushfire, storm and flood, earthquake, cyclone, heatwave and pandemic.

QFES contributed to the content of the guide, which outlines the steps households and businesses can take to prepare.

Acting State Emergency Service Regional Manager Peter Harkin congratulated Noosa Council and spoke about the value of the guide and alert system for the community.



Kingaroy Postie Bike Run

Four Fire and Rescue Stations took part in this year's Postie Bike Run – Kingaroy, Wondai, Tannum Sands and Walkerston – with 10 bike riders and two support staff.

The riders travelled 1000 kilometres over four days, through the North and South Burnett and Western Downs.

This is their second year raising money for Movember. They surpassed all expectations, raising a whopping \$11 578 to support men's health.

Rob Horton, who helped organise the event, said, "Fellowship and a good time was had by all, while spreading the word. This has attracted more firefighters putting their hand up for next year. We hope to top this year's tally in the following year."



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BRISBANE REGION

Enhancing partnerships and skills

As part of the ongoing development of our State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers, Brisbane Region is enhancing volunteer capabilities in search and rescue.

Volunteers from across the region recently participated in a search and rescue course organised by the Region Training team and facilitated by Jim Whitehead and Cindel Shackleton, Search and Rescue Mission Coordinators (SARMCs) in the Queensland Police Service. Cindel is also a Deputy Group Leader in the Cleveland SES Group.

The SES members can now apply their knowledge and assist with the management and coordination of searches around the region.



Firefighters save historic building

On 1 January, more than 30 firefighters from Annerley, Kemp Place, Roma Street and Windsor Fire and Rescue Stations responded to a large fire in a church hall in Annerley.

When they arrived, the 130-year-old heritage-listed building was burning through the roof.

With the use of six pumpers, an aerial appliance and the fast actions of the crews on A Shift, the fire was contained before this important piece of Brisbane history was destroyed.



Getting behind a good cause

Every year, Brisbane Region supports the Zephyr Education lunchbox drive. Spearheaded at a regional level by our Executive Officer Regina O'Toole, the lunchbox drive collects donated lunchboxes for children living in domestic violence shelters.

C Shift crew at Ashgrove Fire and Rescue Station did their bit by purchasing lunchboxes and exercise books.

Newly trained rural firefighters

In late 2020, Rural Fire Service (RFS) Brisbane Region Headquarters Brigade members successfully completed their practical assessment for the Firefighter Minimum Skills Course, which gives them the required knowledge and skills to become volunteer firefighters.

With all participants passing the course with flying colours, the brigade is in prime position ahead of Operation Coolburn.

The brigade was established in 2020 to provide bushfire mitigation and community engagement support across the entire region. Although not a new concept in the RFS, the brigade is a first for Brisbane Region.

Acting Area Training and Support Officer Alan Britcliffe said, "The entire crew were very enthusiastic, professional and well drilled across all disciplines."

First Officer Robbie Christie shared the sentiment that they were "the best group of trainees I have assessed based on the quality of their written assessment, practical demonstrations and professionalism towards all tasks."





SOUTH EASTERN REGION



Assistant Commissioner's Commendation for bravery

Christian Cullen, a teenager from Tamborine Mountain, received an Assistant Commissioner's Commendation in December for alerting authorities when his friend fell down a ravine.

In March 2020, he was playing with his friend in bushland when his friend rolled off a cliff, ending up on a rock ledge 40 metres down a steep ravine.

Christian leaned over the edge and called out to his friend, but when there was no response he climbed down through bushland and found his friend facedown and entangled in a shrub.

Christian placed his friend in the recovery position, but he was still unconscious and bleeding profusely from a head wound, so Christian applied a pressure bandage and dressed the wound.

He then scaled back through the ravine and ran to the nearby Queensland Conference and Camping Centre to seek help.

A staff member called Triple Zero while another returned to the cliff with Christian, where they remained until emergency services arrived and Christian told crews where to find his friend.

Rescuers took three hours to get his friend to safe ground. The operation involved Tamborine Mountain and Nerang Fire and Rescue Stations, Scenic Rim SES Unit, Queensland Ambulance Service, Queensland Police Service and a LifeFlight rescue helicopter.

His friend made a full recovery from his injuries and Christian received the Assistant Commissioner's Commendation for his bravery.

QFES hosts ADF members

On 26 November, QFES hosted Australian Defence Force (ADF) members from Enoggera Barracks for training and a tour of Southport Fire and Rescue Station.

QFES members trained the ADF in the Queensland Disaster Management Arrangements before taking them to visit the station's FireCom, Community Safety and BA HazMat areas, as well as the command offices, training tower and smoke room.

QFES members also gave an overview of the Southport appliances' capabilities and communications equipment, and ran a test turnout to show what activities the operational crews perform.



Porters Plainland Hotel fire

At about 5am on 8 December 2020, Fire and Rescue Service crews from Laidley, Forest Hill, Marburg and Gatton responded to smoke and fire issuing from the roof of the Porters Plainland Hotel, a 115-year-old timber pub.

On arrival, crews found bystanders trying to extinguish a fire in the roof space and an air conditioner unit. Firefighters went into immediate action, wearing breathing apparatus and using multiple hose lines to contain the fire.

They extinguished the blaze within 40 minutes and limited the fire damage to the roof space and air conditioner. Their care and precision meant there was almost no water damage, and the hotel was up and running again by lunch the same day.



SOUTH WESTERN REGION

New appliances for Warwick and Crows Nest

The new year got off to a good start with the official handover of two new vehicles at Warwick and Crows Nest fire and rescue stations.

Warwick received a Type 3 Urban Pumper, while Crows Nest received a Type 2 Appliance.

The new vehicle at Crows Nest has the added advantage of being a four-wheel-drive. Its greater clearance height will allow crews to drive through the area's thick native scrub and forest, reaching bushfire-prone areas that were previously inaccessible.

The Crows Nest crew have already used the vehicle to protect a structure under threat of an encroaching grass fire. Captain John

Hislop said he was happy with their increased ability to provide a better service to the local community.

Warwick's new appliance, valued at \$800 000, has added safety features including side curtain, airbags and electronic stability control to improve crew safety.

The appliance uses the cleanest emission technology available and includes a rear-mounted pump capable of pumping over 4500 litres of water per minute.

The handover was attended by Commissioner Greg Leach, Deputy Commissioner Mark Roche, Assistant Commissioner Dave Hermann, Acting Chief Superintendent Bernie Nunn and Regional Manager Rural Fire Service Wayne Waltisbuhl, along with government representatives.



Warwick Fire and Rescue Station goes live

The new operational staffing configuration at Warwick Fire and Rescue Station had its first shift on 22 December 2020, and five new firefighter recruits attended their first house fire that same day.

While familiarising themselves with the area as part of their induction, they received a call.

The fire involved recalled solar panel isolators and was only 60 metres from the station. The house was smoke logged, so the recruits wore breathing apparatuses.

They successfully carried out an internal primary search and used a thermal imaging camera and high-pressure hose lines.



The hot zone

From chemical spills to gas leaks and pandemics, the BA HazMat Unit and the Research and Scientific Branch work hand in glove supporting firefighters to eliminate hazardous materials safely and efficiently.



When the unexpected happens, both teams spring into action. Last December, they were deployed to the Port of Brisbane for three days after two shipping containers were damaged, spilling sodium cyanide granules that can readily react and generate toxic hydrogen cyanide gas.

In extreme heat firefighters and supporting specialists donned chemical protective suits and journeyed from the port into the ship and down into the hull to clean up the granules. They conducted atmospheric monitoring to make sure the air was clear and repaired the container.

This is just one of many scenarios where their specialist skills and knowledge are called on. Both teams are based at the Special Operations Complex in Cannon Hill and support the response to small and large incidents across the state when requested by the Incident Controller (IC).

The BA HazMat Unit carries out hazardous materials operations and accredits and maintains QFES' BA HazMat equipment, while the Research and Scientific Branch provides operational support, conducts research on hazardous materials, looks after detectors and other HazMat resources and develops education and training.

Clean up

Douglas King, Manager of the BA Hazmat Unit, said the two teams work together seamlessly to support the IC.

"We have an immediate response radius of 400 kilometres, so the bells could drop now and we would respond anywhere from the NSW border up to Gympie," he said.

At every incident the teams establish a hot zone, warm zone and cold zone.

“The hot zone is where the hazardous material presents an immediate danger to life and health,” Doug said.

“The warm zone is where you’re exposed but it’s not an immediate risk, and the cold zone is a normal level of exposure that’s safe for the public.

“We set up barricades to mark the boundaries, and the Queensland Police Service use a cordon to keep the public in the cold zone.”

Once they’ve identified the chemical and contained the spill, the BA HazMat Unit coordinates decontamination, washing down first responders with chlorine, bleach or water.

“We sample their suits, test them and get them out. Chemical jobs are very long, drawn out and resource intensive. It’s all about supporting firefighters to do their job safely and go home clean.”

Hidden threats

Dr Michael Logan, Director of the Research and Scientific Branch, said QFES is well prepared for chemical threats specific to our state.

“Queensland is one of the biggest users of ammonium nitrate in the country – about 1.3 million tonnes per year,” Mike said.

“We have the second largest sodium cyanide manufacturing plant in the world, and we ship through pipelines about 28 billion litres of natural gas before it is liquefied and exported.”

But it’s not just chemicals the teams need to be ready for.

“If a cyclone or flood cuts the power to refrigeration systems, food rots and creates a biological threat,” Mike said.

“We also consider the chemicals in the refrigeration system – are they stable? There could be a freon leak, in which case firefighters need to protect their lungs and use a gas detector and thermal imaging camera to find the source.”

The right gear

The teams store a vast array of equipment in their warehouse and caches throughout the state to prepare for any contingency.

“We have about 3000 detectors, 34 tonnes of neutralising agents, 40 tonnes of foam and eight tonnes of absorbents,” Mike said.

To aid Queensland’s pandemic response, the warehouse stores tens of thousands of surgical masks and respirators, gloves, suits and disinfectant.

“We helped other agencies like Queensland Health interpret what personal protective equipment meets requirements,” Mike said.

“We’ve been preparing for a pandemic for a long time to make sure we have the right gear and systems in place.”

Doug said one of their most important pieces of equipment is overpacks – thick plastic drums that can safely contain hazardous materials.

“Whenever there’s a spillage – for example if a forklift pierces a drum – we place the hazardous material into the overpacks,” he said.

Transfer pumps allow them to safely remove petrol from tankers involved in road crashes. For example, in 2020 a large tanker rolled over on the Pacific Motorway and blocked the south lane.

“Not only was the truck an explosion hazard, but every hour the eight-lane Pacific Motorway is closed equals more than \$3million in lost productivity,” Doug said. “So the faster we can make the



A BA HazMat Officer undergoes decontamination.

incident safe and transfer the petrol, the faster the road can open and the public can get back to business.”

The teams also support the Rural Fire Service by managing the distribution of P3 masks.

The BA Hazmat Unit attends incidents in 850 Oscar, a Hazmat response vehicle that carries detection devices that can pick up anything from common gases such as formaldehyde – a by-product of bushfires – to explosives and chemical warfare agents.

Their team is also responsible for testing and maintaining equipment used around the state – everything from photoionisation detectors to gas suits and BA facemasks, cylinders and backplates.

“When it comes to firefighter safety, there’s no apology for over-testing, because every time a firefighter puts on equipment, they know they’re completely safe,” Doug said.

The science behind it

The Research and Scientific Branch conducts many research programs to find out how to detect and destroy materials and better protect QFES members.

Their research is supported by databases with information on about a million materials, as well as hazard prediction modelling programs.

“We also have our own internal library with around 30 000 documents on toxicology, chemistry, incidents and reviews,” Mike said.

Their scientific officers and firefighters are supported by 55 volunteer scientists, chemists and chemical engineers around the state.

“We teach QFES members to better recognise and manage HazMat,” Mike said. “We collectively strive to improve our HazMat incident response approaches, support, resources and training so we can always be ready to support our community, firefighters and other responders.”



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PSBA transition going smoothly

We welcome our PSBA colleagues who have started transitioning across to QFES.

The PSBA transition will help create efficiencies and deliver better outcomes for QFES, our partners and Queensland communities.

The transition team is doing everything they can to make sure both PSBA and QFES staff members feel supported. They are facilitating a range of activities for PSBA staff, including an induction forum and one-on-one sessions, to make them feel welcome.

As part of the transition, QFES will look at our current functions and how we need to operate in support of regional and state frontline service delivery.

Assistant Commissioner Stephen Smith said there was a lot of work going on behind the scenes to make sure the transition happened smoothly.

“Our focus is on making sure all staff transitioning into QFES, and our current staff, have a clear understanding of where we’re up to and the next steps in the process,” Mr Smith said.

“Any change on this level brings a degree of uncertainty, but we need to make sure we get things right.

“There has been a strong spirit of collaboration throughout the process, and this helps us overcome any issues or concerns along the way.”

The Human Resources and Fleet teams have already begun their transition to QFES.

Acting Director of Corporate Governance (Fleet and Capital Works), Barbara Zandona-Gehan, said about 60 Fleet staff members had moved across to the QFES operating model including mechanics at workshops around the state.

“The transition of fleet has been very well received,” Barbara said. “We’ve been talking with the seven workshops across the regions and visiting them to support with the transition.

“Many of the PSBA staff members who have moved across feel like they’re coming back home.

“Many of them were part of QFES originally and have always felt like they were part of QFES.

“We’re now working as one. When QFES members need to access a workshop to fix an issue with a vehicle, they can approach the workshop directly.”

Barbara is interviewing all the PSBA staff members to get their ideas and suggestions about the unit’s new business model moving forward, in line with the QFES change plan.

“We’ve been communicating with them regularly since moving to the QFES operating model on 30 November,” she said.

The transition team are still working through Finance, Property and Facilities Management, Procurement, Office of the Chief Operating Officer and Frontline and Digital Services.

Frontline and Digital Services is more complex than other functions and will take a little more time. However, QFES is still advocating for discrete function to transition to QFES.

Once the PSBA Act is repealed, those who have transitioned to the QFES operating model will officially become QFES employees.

Until then, incoming PSBA employees will be reporting to a QFES line manager for daily tasking and duties, outcomes and priorities.





Wishart and Kemp Place firefighters trained with a Combined Aerial Pump Appliance, which can pump up to 4000 litres a minute.



The Logan Emergency Services Santa Run brought festive cheer to the community on Christmas day.



QFES joined the Queensland Police Service (QPS), Queensland Ambulance Service and Department of Transport and Main Roads in December to launch the QPS Christmas road safety campaign, Operation Sierra Noella.



In December, Commissioner Greg Leach welcomed the newest Fire and Rescue Service recruit graduates to QFES.



At the Premier's Awards for Excellence in February, QFES received the Premier's Special Commendation Award for our response to the 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19. QFES was also a finalist for the Keep Communities Safe Award for the support SES members provided at the border.



Urangan Point Primary School students made thank you cards for the Rural Fire Service crews working hard at Happy Valley during the K'gari fire.



Fire and Rescue Service firefighters from around the state practised industrial climbing in the final vertical rescue refresher course for 2020.



QFES held a farewell for Assistant Commissioner Neil Gallant at Kedron in December, where Commissioner Greg Leach presented him with a Commissioner's Distinguished Service Medal.



State Emergency Service and Rural Fire Service volunteers, joined by Commissioner Greg Leach and Assistant Commissioner John Bolger, had a wonderful time at the 2020 Brisbane Pride March.



Ironwoman turned firefighter

Kirsty Holmes is a two-time Australian Ironwoman champion and one of the country's best all-round surf sports athletes. She's also been fighting fires for more than 17 years.

Kirsty was the first woman in Australia to win Ironwoman, surfboard and surf ski events at a state and national level.

Her family has long been involved with surf sports – her parents met at Northcliffe Surf Club on the Gold Coast in the 60s and her father and brother are Ironman champions.

“I basically grew up around the surf club after joining nippers when I was nine,” Kirsty said.

“I finished nippers at 13 and took a seven-year break until I saw my younger sister compete in the first Ironwoman Series back in 1992.”

For 10 years in a row, Kirsty competed in the Ironwoman Series, which tests the country's best surf sports athletes with gruelling rounds of swimming, boarding, skiing and running.

Among her many achievements are representing Australia five times internationally, including at the 2001 Goodwill Games, where she won Ironwoman Gold.

“In some of those teams I competed alongside my brother and sister, which was pretty special,” Kirsty said.

“I also won the Molokai to Oahu Channel Race a few times, both in a surf ski and in a six-person outrigger canoe.”

The channel, also known as the channel of bones, stretches 42 kilometres between the Hawaiian islands of Molokai and Oahu, reaching up to 700 metres deep.

Kirsty officially retired from Ironwoman competition in 2004 and pursued the less-demanding, single-discipline sport of ocean paddling and kayaking.



“I could not muster the mental strength to endure the heaving training loads required to stay at peak level (about 30 hours a week), so I started looking for a new path,” she said.

“I had a friend in surf lifesaving who was a firefighter and he sparked my interest. I joined QFES in 2003 and I've been at Maroochydore Fire and Rescue Station for several years.

“Helping people in their time of greatest need is rewarding and working with my crew makes it enjoyable.”

Kirsty said fighting fires and racing through the surf have a lot in common.

“I love competing in large surf because it's a dynamic environment where you work under great pressure and fatigue,” she said.

“To negotiate the waves, you make split-second decisions based on what you're faced with at any given moment. That's what separates people with experience and those without.

“Fighting a fire feels similar. All the knowledge you learn over the years helps you make the right decisions.”

The main difference between the two is that firefighting is a team effort.

“You work in a crew and you are a team. In individual sport, you're on your own, and the physical demands of a multi-discipline sport are much higher,” she said.

In 2012 she made a comeback and competed in the Ironwoman Series against women up to 22 years her junior.

She still competes in masters competitions – in 2018 she won eight gold medals in the Queensland Surf Life Saving Championships at Mooloolaba.





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