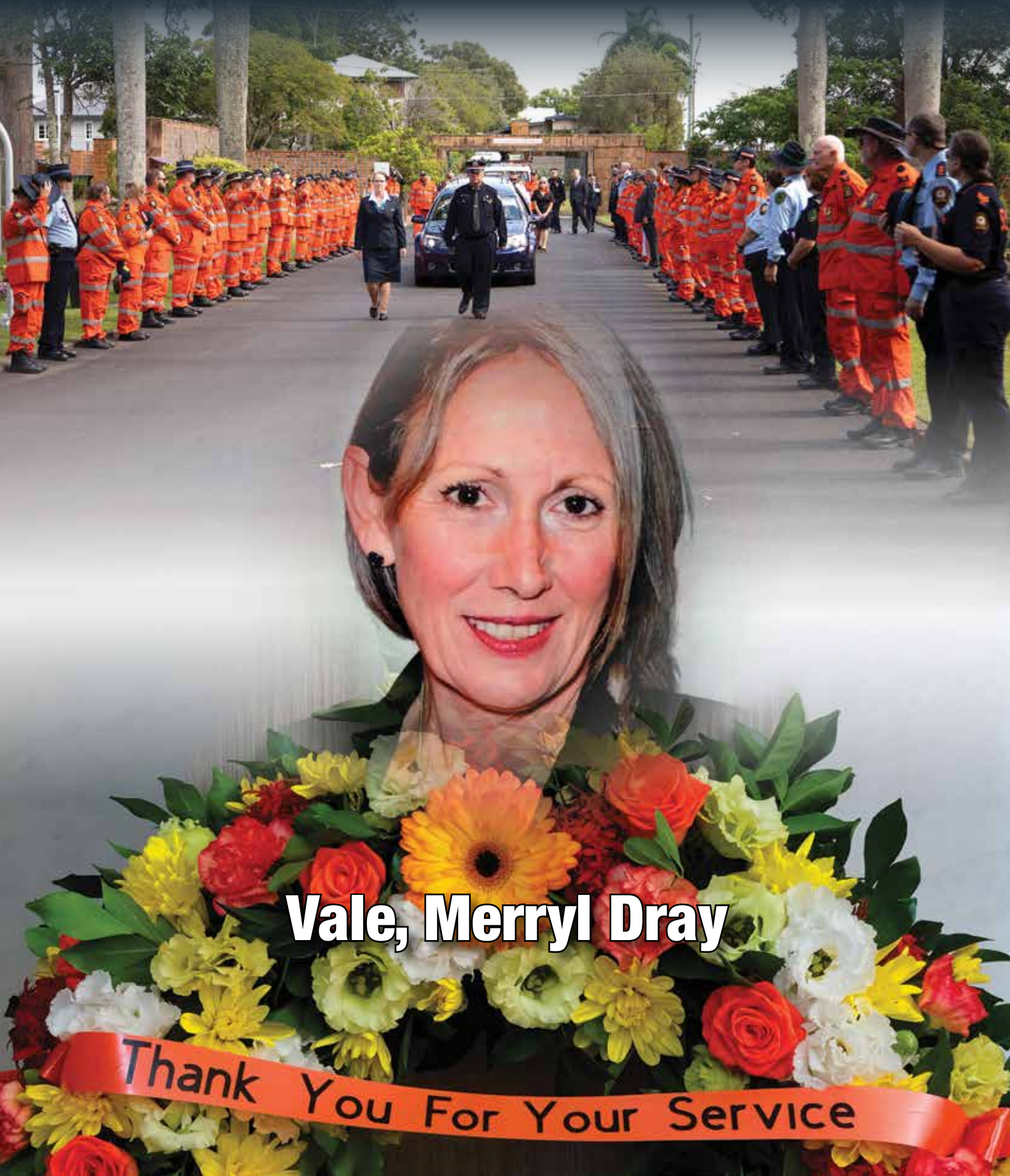


RESPONSE

RESILIENT AND READY FOR THE PEOPLE OF QUEENSLAND

QUEENSLAND'S OFFICIAL FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES MAGAZINE

APRIL 2022



Vale, Merryl Dray

Thank You For Your Service

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ON THE COVER

Celebrating the life of State Emergency Service volunteer Merryl Dray at her memorial service at Mt Thompson Memorial Gardens in Holland Park on 19 March.

RESPONSE is a bi-monthly magazine produced by Queensland Fire and Emergency Services. Contributions and feedback are welcome. The Editor reserves the right to edit submissions for brevity and clarity.

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QFES acknowledges and recognises Traditional Owners as custodians of the lands where we work together with the communities of Queensland. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestors of these lands, their spirits and their legacy.

FOREWORDS



GREG LEACH
Commissioner

QUEENSLAND FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

During the past few months we have experienced our fair share of tragedy and triumphs as we helped Queenslanders get through the floods.

I have nothing but admiration for the outstanding work all our volunteers and staff have done. No matter how you contributed to the response and recovery efforts, whether it was pulling people from floodwaters, sandbagging, tarping, cleaning up, taking calls, sending out emergency alerts or keeping everything running smoothly in the background, thank you.

On 19 March I paid tribute to State Emergency Service volunteer Merryl Dray, who made the ultimate sacrifice.

The floods response was a marathon effort for all involved as the waters kept rising and the rain kept coming down.

I had the opportunity to visit our people on the ground throughout the floods. While it was harrowing to see the destruction in some parts of the south-east, the commitment I saw from our crews and the resilience of the community were genuinely uplifting.

I'm glad we had the opportunity after all that hard work to acknowledge some of our wonderful QFES members with awards for their efforts in supporting our community throughout the past year.

Several high-achieving leaders were recognised in the recent International Women's Day Awards for their work promoting the rights of women in QFES.

During Peer Support Week in March, we celebrated the valuable work of our Peer Support Officers, who have played such a vital role supporting their colleagues through this difficult time, as they do throughout the year.

QFES members who have developed opportunities for First Nations peoples were also acknowledged in this year's Closing the Gap Awards. You can read more about all these awards in the following pages.

This month I started my regional tours and I'm thankful I have the chance to engage with you about your work with QFES and what matters most in your region. I look forward to talking with many of you over the months to come.

Thank you again for getting out there and doing what you do best. Our community has faced a tremendous challenge and, with your help, Queensland is on the road to recovery.



ADAM STEVENSON
Acting Deputy Commissioner

STRATEGY AND CORPORATE SERVICES

I want to say a big thank you to all our corporate staff who have provided support during the recent flood event.

I particularly want to acknowledge the Assets and Finance teams and the Fire and Emergency Services Support Network (FESSN) for their fantastic work supporting QFES members and the community.

Please remember to keep track of any expenses that are eligible to be claimed through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DFRA). If you're not sure what to do or what applies to your situation, ask your supervisor.

If you've been personally affected by the floods, please look after yourself and your family first. We work hard to support our community, but we can't do that if we aren't also caring for ourselves.

By now we are all familiar with the constraints on supply chains that recent events associated with COVID-19 and the floods have caused. We are living in a new world and it is more important than ever to plan upfront so we're prepared for the unexpected and we can procure services and supplies for our frontline. Please factor these constraints into your own everyday planning and talk to your manager if new issues become apparent.

I have enjoyed holding regular meetings with small groups of staff at all levels to have informal conversations about experiences during the pandemic, changes at work and other issues of importance to people. I look forward to continuing these and meeting with more staff from the Strategy and Corporate Services Division.

I am proud to say this financial year QFES has constructed five replacement fire and rescue stations. Another two are at the planning stage.

We are currently constructing three more stations in Mossman, Loganlea and Maryborough.

Loganlea and Maryborough are redevelopments of existing station sites and have presented diverse challenges. The Maryborough site has had to be vacated temporarily during construction, while the Loganlea station has remained operational alongside the build.

It's exciting to see these construction projects come to fruition and we will continue to develop QFES assets to support our people in serving the community.



Facing the floods: a community comes together

A year’s worth of rain in a week. Widespread flooding. Fourteen lives lost. Faced with one of Queensland’s worst disasters, QFES staff and volunteers from all services pitched in to do what needed to be done.

From 22 February to 7 March, intense rain led to flooding across south-east Queensland, the Sunshine Coast and New South Wales.

Calls for assistance kept coming in and more than 7000 QFES members responded, aided by 15 Fire Rescue Victoria personnel who flew up to help.

When the water finally receded, QFES members kept working to help Queenslanders with the staggering task of cleaning up.

Response talked with staff and volunteers from all services about their experiences during the floods. These are their stories.

The SES steps in

Glenn Alderton, State Emergency Service (SES) Director of the State Coordination

Branch, said SES volunteers in floodboats rescued hundreds of people from homes and businesses.

“An SES team from Cairns helped the Brisbane SES Unit rescue a woman and her baby from a flooded apartment building,” Glenn said.

“The volunteers drove their floodboat into the undercover carpark and up to the base of a flight of stairs.

“The woman had a fractured spine and couldn’t walk, so they put dining chairs in the water to make a path and carried her wheelchair across to the boat.

“The whole time their boat was bobbing up and down against the first floor of the building. And they did it all on their own time, without getting paid, away from their families.”

Glenn said every severe weather season was different.

“People have been comparing these Brisbane floods to those from 2011, but they’re completely different beasts,” Glenn said.

“In 2011 the Brisbane River played a big part, but this time its tributaries caused a lot of the damage in the suburbs. That’s why some areas flooded this time but not last time.”

“SES volunteers responded to more than 13,500 requests for assistance, including storm damage operations, chainsawing, sandbagging, temporary repairs and evacuations. After the water receded, the SES assisted the Rural Fire Service (RFS) with washouts.”



About 2340 RFS personnel supported the community during the floods.



An SES crew in Maryborough used their floodboat to evacuate people to the Brolga Theatre.

Glenn said the community generously donated to the SES during and after the floods.

“A lot of people from other states and territories have also been donating to us and sending thank you letters and cards,” he said.

“The SES continued to work really well with local governments. Many SES volunteers from other regions were more than happy to give up a week’s work and time with their family to deploy to affected areas. That’s a special trait that our volunteers display.”

Cut off on Bribie Island

Jan Dwyer, Group Leader of Bribie Island SES Group, was cut off from her own home by floodwaters.

“I live at Beachmere on the mainland and at 7am the roads were starting to go over,” she said.

“I drove across to Bribie to help out and a few hours later I found out I was stranded on the island.

“By lunchtime we had about 40 jobs. We were also getting evacuation calls from Beachmere, which was hard because we couldn’t send help.

“My house is about 30 metres from a lake and the water got near our back fence. My husband was sending me photos.”

By the end of the day, parts of the island itself were getting cut off.

“Our local public sandpit emptied quickly because a lot of people filled sandbags to help others. One group put up a marquee for shade, others filled utes and took sandbags all around the island.

“That night I stayed with another SES member. The next morning, the phone didn’t stop. We ended up with 188 jobs in total. We tried to talk to everyone on the phone so at least they wouldn’t feel alone.

“We got called to work with Volunteer Marine Rescue to bring water supplies to Whitepatch, a suburb connected to the rest of Bribie by a small bridge, which got washed away.”

Jan said the flood response was an absolute team effort.

“Everyone put in a mammoth amount of work. The community was amazing. They supplied us with food and supported us as best they could.”

The floods really hit home when one of their own members was flooded.

“He had to relocate his wife and son out of Bribie before the island got shut off, and he stayed and worked with us over the first three days. He literally only had the clothes he was wearing.

“He’s still dealing with insurance, which reminds us every day what people are going through. Our group is seeing those impacts more than we would otherwise because one of our team is experiencing it.”

Tarping roofs in the rain

Heather Davis, Deputy Group Leader of the Cleveland SES Unit, said the severe weather season’s main impact in the Redlands was leaking roofs.

“If there was one little crack in a roof tile, the water went straight into the roof and caved the ceiling in,” Heather said.

“We were working in the pouring rain. A lot of our jobs had to be done at night because of solar panels.

“As long as it wasn’t thundering, we were out on roofs. Just trying to dry our gear off for the next day was hard.”

Heather said the community generously offered the volunteers food and water.



“Local restaurant owners brought us food and a flower farm sent flowers,” she said.

“Late one afternoon rain was pelting down and we were working on a roof near the main road. I looked after the ropes while two other volunteers used silicone on the roof.

“Cars were coming past, and every single car honked, flashed their lights or wound their windows down to say well done. There wasn’t a car going past that didn’t do something. Everyone was so supportive.

“Our unit did more than 400 jobs during the floods – a year’s worth in nine days.”

Swiftwater rescue and damage assessment

Brad Commens, Director of the Specialist and Technical Rescue Branch, said the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) conducted more than 660 swiftwater rescues.

“Unfortunately, many of the people we rescued had driven into floodwaters,” Brad said. “Those rescues could have been prevented if the drivers had chosen to turn around.

“The devastation to many road surfaces is a stark reminder that the road under the water may not be the same as it was before the flooding.”

Over many days, FRS crews completed one rescue after another.

“The skills of our swiftwater rescue technicians, supported by our permanent and auxiliary FRS staff, saved many lives,” Brad said.

“We deployed all available swiftwater response vehicles and inflatable rescue rafts, including the full surge capacity of motorised rescue craft from the State Deployment Centre. Many additional firefighters were recalled to duty to ride extra trucks.”

Brad praised the efforts of two swiftwater rescue technicians – Jon Fullard and Paul Dunn – who used a motorised craft to rescue three people after their vehicle was washed off the road.

“This selfless act saved the lives of three people, and is testament to the skill and commitment of our rescue technicians.

“Jon and Paul’s actions delivered these three people from a very dangerous situation.”

As soon as the floods subsided, FRS staff changed roles and conducted Damage Assessments to help communities recover. Working with the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, they completed more than 18,000 Damage Assessments, sharing data with local authorities and the Australian Defence Force.

“The hundreds of rescues and hundreds of people saved is a true testament to our quality training and equipment, but more so to the professionalism and competency of our swiftwater rescue technicians,” Brad said.

Seconds from their last breath

Officer in Charge Adam Martin and three other swiftwater technicians from Roma Street Fire and Rescue Station pulled two

people from a submerged car at the last possible moment.

“We got a Triple Zero call saying a car had driven into floodwaters on a road in Nundah. That was all the information we had,” Adam said.

“When we arrived on scene at 9pm, there was water everywhere, like an ocean. We waded about 200 metres into it and yelled out, but we couldn’t see any sign of a car.

“We thought we could hear banging, but we assumed it was a transformer blowing up – we’d heard one earlier that day.

“After about 15 minutes we were considering moving on when someone from a nearby house shouted that they saw something about 50 metres from us. There was a light under the water.

“We swam over. The water was shoulder high and fast moving. The light was a phone in a submerged car. We smashed the passenger window with a spring-loaded tool.

“We pulled out a non-responsive woman and then her husband, who could still talk.

“They were seconds from their last breath. They’d moved to the back of the car because it was tilted nose down and there was a pocket of air above the backseat. They were saying their goodbyes over the phone.”

The crew later found out the couple were newlyweds and she’d just travelled to Australia from Nepal. She’d only been in the country for 24 hours.



Floodwater is one of the most dangerous environments QFES crews face.



A couple thanked the team of swiftwater technicians who pulled them from their submerged car in Nundah.



“We were 450 metres from the water’s edge,” Adam said. “Since the water was deep and we were wearing life jackets, we couldn’t get traction on the ground. We threw a line to the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and they hauled us out.

“It was surreal – a once-in-a-career event. It was great to use our years of training in a real-case scenario that saved lives.”

The crew were on a 16-hour shift that day and at 4pm had rescued three people from a tree after they’d tried to cross a flooded road.

“They were right in the thick of the floods and while we rescued them, big chunks of bitumen peeled up off the road and floated past our boat.”

Forewarned is forearmed

About 2340 RFS personnel helped communities recover by washing out inundated houses and businesses.

Craig Adams, RFS Area Director Maryborough, said the Fraser Coast Regional Council provided comprehensive mapping before the floods to show which areas would be flooded.

“That enabled us to warn the community and determine where we could send QFES resources from all three services,” Craig said.

“We doorknocked to give residents plenty of time to decide whether they’d stay or leave.

“After the floods, we went back to those properties to see how they fared and help get people back in their homes as soon as possible.

“I was very proud to have a group of committed volunteers who couldn’t do enough to support their community.

“The camaraderie between SES, RFS and FRS was fantastic. We all play a role in preparation, planning, response and recovery, and it was good to see it all come together. Each service understood their role and how it was important.”

In North Coast Region, the RFS washed out about 500 properties.

“I was amazed we finished most of the jobs in five days. The community are resilient because they’ve been through this before. They’ve learnt to live with it. I think that speeds up recovery.”

RFS and SES volunteers also assisted the NSW Rural Fire Service by driving 65 motorhomes down to Lismore to deliver temporary housing.



Commissioner Leach surveyed the impact of the floods in Brisbane and met with staff and volunteers.



Flooding at Tewantin on the Sunshine Coast.

Two tragedies

First Officer of Aldershot Rural Fire Brigade Craig Smith and his crew dealt with two major floods six weeks apart in Maryborough.

“The first was in early February,” Craig said. “We’d just recovered from that when the second flood came.

“The first flood was about seven metres high and it inundated the CBD and a lot of houses on the east side of Maryborough.”

The second flood went up to about 11 metres.

“All the houses we’d cleaned out the first time, we had to go back and clean them out again,” Craig said.

“There was an elderly woman who hadn’t recovered from the first flood and had just put everything back in her house when the devastation came a second time around.

“She couldn’t insure her house and she couldn’t afford repairs. She honestly had no idea what to do. That hit a lot of us hard.

“The look on her face – you never forget that. She was really depressed the first time, but grateful. The second time she was speechless.”

Volunteer Community Educators helped people connect with outside agencies to deal with the trauma of what had happened.

“We asked the elderly if they had any close relatives or children who could help them while we cleaned up, because it’s hard to see all your possessions being thrown out into the street,” Craig said.

“It’s not our decision to dispose of things, so it’s easier if a family member is there to help them make the decision.”



The brigade usually had to throw out 90 per cent of possessions in a flooded house. Often they could only salvage jewellery. Working conditions were tough.

“There’s two to three inches of mud and it stinks because the house has been locked up in high humidity. The smell inside fridges and freezers is unbelievable. We tape them up so they don’t open when we take them out.

“We can only work inside a house for 20 or 30 minutes before we have to rotate out due to dehydration.

“People don’t just see us as rural firefighters, but as part of the community. We’re not looking for pats on the back, we just go and do it because it has to be done.”

The only brigade in Gympie

Serge Leroyer, First Officer of Chatsworth Rural Fire Brigade, said his team worked with Gympie Regional Council throughout the floods.

“Before the flood, we had a good idea it was coming, but it went higher than expected by a few metres,” Serge said. “On the Friday night we were called to help with evacuating 600 or 700 houses.

“I’ve been in Gympie since 2006 and this is my sixth flood clean-up.”

Gympie regularly floods because it was built around a valley where gold was found, so there are many low-lying areas.

“Some of the flood-prone areas have been reclaimed by council and turned into parks, but the centre of town is still low-lying,” Serge said.

“The highway was closed. On the Saturday, we were the only brigade that could access Gympie because we’re higher up and we use a back road that follows ridges into Gympie’s highest point.

“The clean-up took about 10 days. We got stuck in as soon as the water started to go down because it’s easier to move wet sludge than dry mud.

“There were problems with the water supply so we used river water and our onboard pumpers instead of hydrants.

“Some buildings had sewerage backed up into the floodwaters so it was very smelly. Since the power was off, some back rooms were dark and we had to work with torches.”

Strike team goes above and beyond

A strike team of volunteers from Gowrie Little Plains, Broadwater Amiens, Wallangarra and Glen Aplin Rural Fire Brigades made an unexpected discovery in a flood-affected home at Indooroopilly.

When they arrived at the ‘blink and miss’ property they realised an elderly man had been stranded without power, adequate food or clean drinking water.

Public Information Officer Kylie Poulsen, who was on deployment from Northern Region, said the state of the house would be etched in her mind forever.



Sandbagging businesses in Dayboro.



“One of the members of the strike team had a word to me saying there was an elderly gentleman on the first floor who didn’t look too well,” she said.

“I waded through the water on the ground flood to a timber staircase and headed up to speak with the gentleman. I found him slumped back on the lounge with a face mask on.

“He said he was struggling to breathe due to the stagnant stench permeating up from the ground level and the moisture in the air.”

The man, 82, had been living on biscuits and distilled water since his home was first inundated by floodwater about a week prior.

RFS volunteer Hugh Strong said his team gave the man ration packs and clean drinking water, while helping him access further support.

Hugh, who works in the welfare sector, assisted the man with claiming the Australian Government Disaster Relief Payment while Kylie and other volunteers reached out to his family.

“Kylie really went above and beyond for him, getting him connected with the Department of Veterans’ Affairs and engaging the RSL and local community groups to further assist him with repairs, hot meals and community connections,” he said.

Kylie helped him access laundry services, kerbside collection, aged care services and additional hardships grants while the strike team worked for two days to clean out the house.

She also rallied the local community through a call-out on social media, resulting in a team of eight women helping him over the coming days with meals and cleaning.

“We left him that day after doing all that was in our capacity,” Kylie said. “A tear or two was shed, a photo or seven was taken, and memories and friendships were firmly embedded.

“I will forever be in awe of our volunteers who throw blood, sweat, tears and a hell of a lot of heart into these deployments.”

Kylie said the man now laughs with her over the phone, saying his life is “even better now than it was before, with a lot of new friends that live just around the corner”.

For the RFS volunteers, that is exactly the outcome they were hoping for.

“Helping him exemplifies why we do what we do,” Hugh said.

“We know we can’t help everyone but the ability to make such a huge difference to even one person gives us all the best reason to continue our service.”

Support is here

As we move into the recovery phase of flood operations, we also need to let ourselves recover.

The Fire and Emergency Services Support Network (FESSN) provides mental health support for all QFES members. As a QFES volunteer you have access to a range of support services, including Peer Support Officers, professional counsellors, COVID-19 check-in service, Flood Disaster Support check-in service and 24-hour telephone counselling service.

Counselling services are available to all volunteers and their immediate family members for work-related and non-work-related concerns. For more information visit qfes.qld.gov.au/supporting-our-people

The Bushfire Support Service, produced by the Black Dog Institute, also provides free mental health support for emergency services staff, volunteers and their loved ones.

While the name specifies bushfire, the program is currently open for any emergency event, including the recent floods. Free telephone or online counselling options are available for those in Queensland. The service has been extended until the end of the financial year and you can find further details at blackdoginstitute.org.au/bush-fire-support-service.



An RFS strike team helps clean up in Gympie.



A passion for helping others

It was in her own time of desperate need that Merryl Dray devoted herself to helping the community.

A nurse from the age of 16, a dedicated mum and grandmother, Merryl brought her selfless generosity and dedication to the State Emergency Service (SES) in 2017, following the sudden death of her son Daniel.

Joined in her volunteering pursuit by several of her family members, including daughter Nicole, Nicole's partner Bernard Bibby and Daniel's best friend Nathan Hurley, it was a decision none would look back from.

In the years to come, volunteering developed into a passion – to the extent that Merryl never went anywhere without her kit bag, ready to respond to an emergency call-out at the drop of a hat.

It was during one such call-out, during the height of the 2022 Queensland floods, that she would tragically lose her life.

Her death prompted tributes not only from across the Queensland emergency services community, but from all corners of the nation.

“The messages of support have been coming from everywhere, not just within Queensland but the whole of Australia,” daughter Nicole said.

“Merryl's younger brother is from WA, he has friends over there in the SES and they are all grieving,” Bernard said.

“It's obviously not just a Queensland family, it's an SES family Australia-wide and we didn't really think of it that way, until this happened.”

Merryl, a member of the Lowood SES, was travelling to a call for help with three other volunteers on February 26, when their vehicle became surrounded by fast-moving water at Coolana, north-west of Ipswich.

The 62-year-old was swept away. She was one of 14 who died in the Queensland flood disaster.

Having previously served the Kenilworth SES, Merryl had built a broad network of friends within the volunteering ranks.

The effect her loss had on the community was never more apparent than at her memorial service at Mt Thompson Memorial Gardens, Holland Park on 19 March.

A convoy of emergency vehicles lined the road leading into the ceremony.



There, a sea of bright orange and emergency services personnel in full formal attire was on hand to celebrate the life of a one-of-a-kind personality who touched so many lives.

“She was everyone’s best friend,” Nicole said. “It just goes to show how many people she did have an effect on.”

“Any activation she could go on, any callout, or any community event she was able to get to, she was there without question,” Bernard said.

“She met a lot of SES people from a lot of different units. There was one comment on the Kenilworth SES pages from a lady saying, ‘I didn’t know her, but I remember her,’ and that’s typical of a lot of people because she really was happy to chat to anyone.”

Family members remain particularly grateful for the support shown by Merryll’s Lowood SES colleagues and their local Kenilworth SES members, including group leader Greg Wilson, in the days following her death.

Merryll, Nicole, Bernard and Nathan signed up for the SES in 2017, as they looked to give something back to their community following the death of Merryll’s son Daniel.

Merryll was like a surrogate mum to Daniel’s best mate Nathan, who joined the Jimboomba SES.

“It was really like a second family, a distraction from everything that was happening that helped pull us through,” Nathan said.

“One thing we really want to get out to the public is that volunteers don’t just help the community, they also help other volunteers,” Bernard said.

“The SES has helped pull some of its volunteers out of some really dark places. I know with Nathan it really saved him, as it did for Merryll.”

Going out on jobs together would become a great new bonding experience for the family, which somehow juggled volunteering with work and parenting responsibilities.

The Dray household was something of a mini depot where the SES gear was always kept in a filing cabinet, ready to throw on quickly.

One of Nicole’s favourite memories of volunteering alongside mum was a road crash rescue they were called out to near Maleny a few years ago.

The SES helped Fire and Rescue Service technical rescue firefighters winch a badly injured woman up a muddy embankment.

It was a happy ending to what might have been a traumatic situation, but Merryll always taught her children to be resilient in the face of danger and adversity.

“With mum being in nursing she brought us up pretty openly,” Nicole said.

“She would explain to us how things happen – not so much the gruesome stuff, but the fact that you cannot emotionally involve yourself too much.”

During one point in her nursing career, Merryll worked in the burns unit at a children’s hospital.

After seeing so many awful injuries, she decided to disconnect the home stove and oven when her children were in their early years.

Peta recalled a time she and her mother passed a road crash and Merryll didn’t hesitate to pull over and help.

“There were people upside down in one of the cars that needed help. Mum ran over and was able to get other people to help. She basically led the situation until emergency services arrived,” Peta said.

As a mum, Merryll will also be remembered as having an almost child-like sense of humour.

“Mum liked to party, she liked to dress up and act like a complete fool,” Peta said.

She loved the singer Meat Loaf and the song “Bat out of Hell” was played at her funeral, because she listened to it every time she cleaned her house.

But when it comes to the Merryll Dray people will remember most, it will be the courageous and selfless volunteer, who put herself in harm’s way to help those in need.

“Mum will be remembered as someone who helped others. She was big on sustainability and making sure you leave a place in better condition than when you arrived,” Peta said.

Following the tragedy, Merryll’s younger brother David, who lives in WA, has also decided to join his local SES.





Thank you Merryl

Commissioner Greg Leach paid tribute to Merryl Dray at her memorial service, touching on the qualities that made her such a wonderful State Emergency Service (SES) volunteer.

“...It’s my privilege today to say a few words on behalf of all my colleagues. In my two years as Commissioner, I’ve had the opportunity to travel to many parts of Queensland and to meet many hundreds of SES volunteers. But over that journey I hadn’t had the opportunity to get to Lowood and meet Merryl, and that’s my loss.

Over the past three weeks I feel I’ve got to know Merryl through her family and through sharing stories with her SES colleagues. I’ve appreciated the opportunity to spend time with the Lowood team, to get to talk about Merryl, to share your grief, and to share some of the funny stories that you’ve had...

It’s clear to me Merryl is held in the highest regard by her friends and her colleagues at SES. Merryl embodies all the traits we admire and see in our SES team, and

that’s not surprising when you think about Merryl’s career as a nurse.

As we’ve heard, Merryl commenced her nursing career at the age of 16. She worked across several fields in nursing, but found a particular compassion in aged care. She led a life of caring and compassion for her fellow human beings, so it’s not surprising she found a home with the SES.

...Today our army of orange angels are pausing to pay their respects to one of their own who has paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to her community. Many of you have come here in person to pay your respects and I know that many more, wherever they are in Queensland, or in fact at SES units across the nation, are pausing to honour Merryl.

To Merryl’s family, you can be very proud of all that Merryl achieved and of her selfless

service at a time of one of Queensland’s most devastating emergencies. Merryl’s memory will live on in the emergency services.

I know Merryl will be honoured in the memorial garden at Lowood SES. Merryl’s name has also been added to the Honour Roll at the Kedron State Emergency Complex and in May, Merryl’s name will be added to the National Memorial Wall for fallen emergency services personnel in Canberra.

Could I also acknowledge our people who have been supporting the family and our SES colleagues at this time. To Peta, Nicole, Bernard, the grandchildren, the extended family, we say how sorry we are for your loss.

To Merryl we say, thank you for your service. Rest in peace.”



Embracing traditional practices in a modern world

The Tinaroo Rural Fire Brigade were recognised at QFES' Closing the Gap Awards for recruiting and retaining 17 Indigenous members.

While the town of Tinaroo in the Tablelands Region may be small and sleepy, members of the local Rural Fire Brigade have been busy creating opportunities for and working together with the traditional owners.

First Officer Les Green, a founding member of the Tinaroo Rural Fire Brigade, revealed how the brigade achieved their recruitment feat.

"There's currently 42 members in the brigade, with more on the way," Les said.

The 2014 fires in the area provided an opportunity for the traditional owners and the Rural Fire Service (RFS) to work alongside each other.

"We met with the traditional owners, got chatting, they shared what they wanted, and we began to work together."

Four years later when a recruitment day was held, 20 First Nations people showed up, and 15 had joined by the end of the day.

"Maria from our brigade was the first Indigenous Crew Leader and Fire Officer on

the Tablelands, so that was very exciting and it motivated others to do the training as well.

"Kylee, Zara and Arlene Clubb are involved in the Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation board, an Indigenous-led network using cultural burning for land management, and Kylee is a co-chairperson on the board."

Les said his motivation was to involve traditional owners in the RFS so both cultures can work together.

"We're blending together the modern and traditional cultures of burning," he said.

The Far North Queensland community has noticed the brigade's hard work.

"So far, we're the only brigade in the Cape that is doing what we're doing," Les said.

"It's been a good thing for the community. Tinaroo is basically a retirement town, and when we first started in 1998, we only had eight people. Now we have people travel from Malanda, Atherton and Tolga to be involved.

"It's also important to encourage the younger ones to join at 16. By the time they're 18 and 19 they've learnt life skills from the brigade and are ready to go off and become apprentices or start other ventures.

"Every time we have a fire, we all learn something. We have a debrief and a barbeque and go around and say what we learnt. It's one big happy family.

"That's why I didn't want a sole person to be nominated – it really was a whole brigade effort and we worked together.

"People want to join, and it puts a smile on their faces."

Far Northern Region's Acting Executive Officer Virginia King, won the Individual category for her work in raising the awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures by recognising traditional place names on plaques at QFES sites.



Les Green (right) with Kylee Clubb (centre) and Emerald Clubb (left).



Members of the Tinaroo Rural Fire Brigade after a hazard reduction burn at the Atherton Golf Club.



Taking action against inequality

While COVID-19 may have postponed wider celebrations, QFES recognised the remarkable achievements of women on International Women's Day.

International Women's Day is celebrated globally on 8 March. For QFES, an important part of the celebration is the Women in Fire and Emergency Services Awards, which are presented to staff and volunteers for their contributions to embracing gender equality and promoting the rights and wellbeing of women in QFES.

Response caught up with a few of this year's winners.

Sheree Merryfull – Outstanding Female Leader, FRS

Nine years into her firefighting career, Senior Firefighter Sheree took on the challenge of becoming a Station Officer and was successful. However, after some serious thinking, she made a tough decision.

"I had my own challenges, mainly self-doubt. I wanted to be prepared and ready to be a Station Officer, and make sure I did the job right. But it wasn't for me, so I went back to being a Senior Firefighter," Sheree said.

"I worked with the Fire and Emergency Services Support Network to overcome the challenges I put on myself. It was imposter syndrome almost."

Sheree, now a Station Officer at Helensvale Station, is involved with the Station Officer recruitment process and the development of a program to provide Senior Firefighters with ongoing recruitment training.

"I'm pushing to develop our own guide and support network for Senior Firefighters becoming Station Officers. Some Senior Firefighters might not have the skills, knowledge and experience to write a resume that will be competitive against other candidates.

"They need to focus on leadership skills and how they've developed, and a lot haven't thought about that.

"I want to encourage Senior Firefighters to take interest in other avenues in QFES that they can be exposed to in the future. I want to help make them into the leaders QFES needs."

Sheree is working on the program for South Eastern Region for now but has big plans to take it state-wide.

"Older firefighters and senior management had to grind it out and did it tough. We need to create a culture where we support

our next generation, and show mentoring and support is beneficial to succeeding. That old culture doesn't need to keep continuing.

"Having someone you can look up to for guidance and support, who can bring out your best side is true leadership. I experienced that from leaders I've been around, and now I'm trying to pay it forward."

Sharna Pogan – Outstanding Female Leader, SES

After the 2010-11 floods in Grantham and the Western Downs, Sharna became an SES volunteer to help make a difference to people in need. Inspiring mentors took her under their wing, motivating Sharna to learn, upskill and model their behaviour.

In October 2021, she joined the staff stream of SES as the Area Controller for South Western Region where she empowers, leads and inspires volunteers and promotes and increases the profile of the SES through projects such as Women in Orange, community engagement and development workshops.

"The Empowering Women campaign encourages women to take on a role in a traditionally male-dominant area and to have a go at something they may not have thought about doing, like chainsaw and floodboat operations," Sharna said.

"We started with little hairbows to get the message out there, and some of our men wear them too – they put them in their beards or on their collars, so they support the women in our organisation as well.

"We've had about a 50 per cent increase in women becoming SES members in the Western Downs area in the last 18 months, so it's working for us. There are a lot of capable women out there who are extremely talented and can bring as many skills to the table as men do."

Sharna can see the gender bias within QFES has slowly been removed through cultural change and organisational growth, as women who join are encouraged, supported and receive equal opportunity and treatment.

"My message about leadership is always really clear: you lead with integrity and honesty, and you're transparent. If you're not prepared to do something, you can't expect anybody else to do it.





“I was talking to some children in the community, and I said, ‘I’m Sharna, I get out of bed every day to make a difference’ and they started laughing. But it’s so important to have that positive outlook no matter what’s going on and to assist where you can.”

Kate Eggar – Outstanding Female Leader, Corporate Support/ Administration

Kate joined QFES five years ago in her current position as Relationship Officer in the Partnerships and Sponsorships Unit, and has become a consistent and strong supporter of women in QFES through her engagement with volunteers.



“My husband is an SES volunteer, so I’ve been hanging around with the SES for a lot longer than five years. A lot of my friends are women I met through volunteering. This job has enabled me to meet more volunteers, both male and female, in the SES and RFS, and advocate for them with our industry stakeholders,” Kate said.

“Volunteers are just such amazing people. There’s a certain culture in volunteers that attracts me. The kind of people who volunteer are my kind of people.”

Kate finds her role very emotionally rewarding, and witnesses firsthand the value she brings to volunteers.

“We were approached by Girl Guides back in the 2019 bushfires. Girl Guides were keen to have an association with the SES, whose role in the community fits with their culture of enabling people to be resilient and mates helping mates.

“The new partnership between Girl Guides and the SES will teach really important skills to young girls who will be the backbone of the community in the future.

“I’m passionate about leadership. I do a lot of leadership outside of QFES like the Taekwondo school that I run.

“I’m a big believer in collaborative leadership. You’re only leading if there’s a team behind you. And I have a great team both inside and outside QFES.

“I’m very excited by this award, and it comes at an important time when we’re managing the donations coming in due to the recent floods.

“The award is more about what I do, not who I am. It’s about all the things I get done.”

Winners of the International Women’s Day Awards

Janice Pittaway – Outstanding Female Leader, RFS

Joanne Greenfield, Assistant Commissioner Emergency Management and Community Capability – Outstanding Female Leader, Disaster Management

Julie Carmody, Horseshoe Bay Rural Fire Brigade – Mentor of the Year

Quinn Cramer – Champion of Change

Liz Radajewski – Champion of Change, Highly Commended



Each region held their own celebration for International Women’s Day.

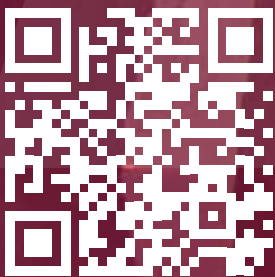


Left to right: Sheree Merryfull, Kate Eggar, Commissioner Leach, Liz Radajewski and Joanne Greenfield.

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Crunching the data

In our latest collaboration with the tech industry, QFES has worked with Google to add a bushfire layer to Google Maps.

The new feature uses QFES data to show real-time bushfire information that helps people plan their travel and make decisions.

You can turn on the layer by tapping the layers symbol and then the bushfires icon. If you tap on a particular bushfire you can see more detail such as level of severity and recommended actions.

Google has been working with fire and emergency services in each state and territory for more than a decade to help deliver information about emergencies via Google apps and devices.

Lidia Dudina, Team Lead of the GIS Unit, said QFES had a strong working relationship with Google.

“It’s important for QFES to work with our data users, who are often tech companies, to ensure they can access timely data in the right format,” Lidia said.

“Being a community service, QFES can’t stay isolated and keep the data to ourselves. Giving data feeds to third-party

app makers allows us to share information more widely without making the apps ourselves, which is outside our area of expertise.”

Lidia said the project would have many benefits for the community during the next bushfire season.

“A warning will show up when you choose a route or search for your destination in Google Maps,” she said.

“Google will display QFES’ current incidents to more people in the community, warning them of smoke, hazards or road closures.”

QFES produces an open data feed for bushfires by converting OCS Warnings into the CAP-AU file format, which is used nation-wide. Many other stakeholders, such as the NSW Rural Fire Service, Department of Transport and Main Roads and ABC, also use the data feed in their dashboards or maps.

Local councils use QFES data for other disasters such as floods, including flood levels, levies and damage assessments.

“Providing data in the correct format is important so external companies can process it smoothly and without errors,” Lidia said.

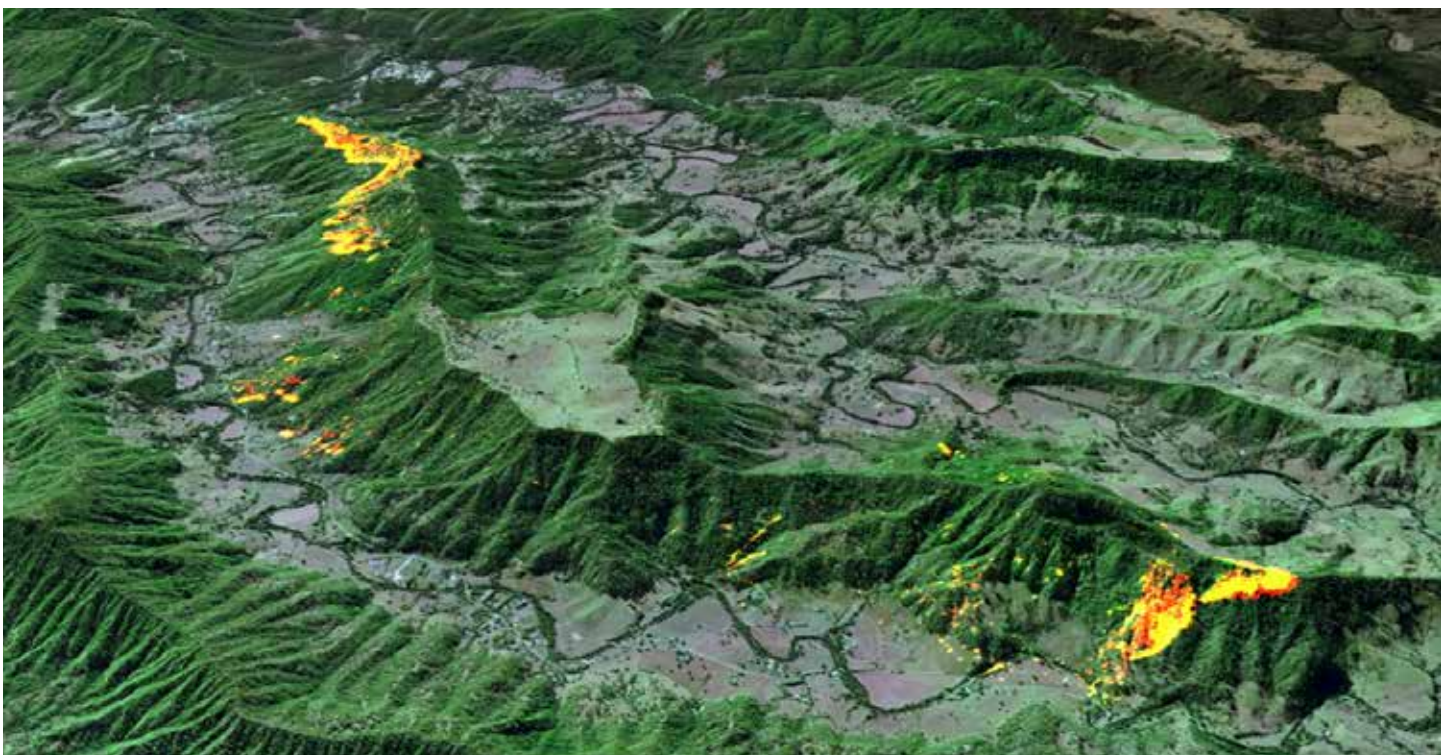
During the recent floods, QFES worked with another tech company, FloodMapp, to access their real-time flood modelling.

“We work with the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) in the same way. For many years now QFES has displayed BOM’s weather forecasts in our maps and dashboards like TOM and SAP.

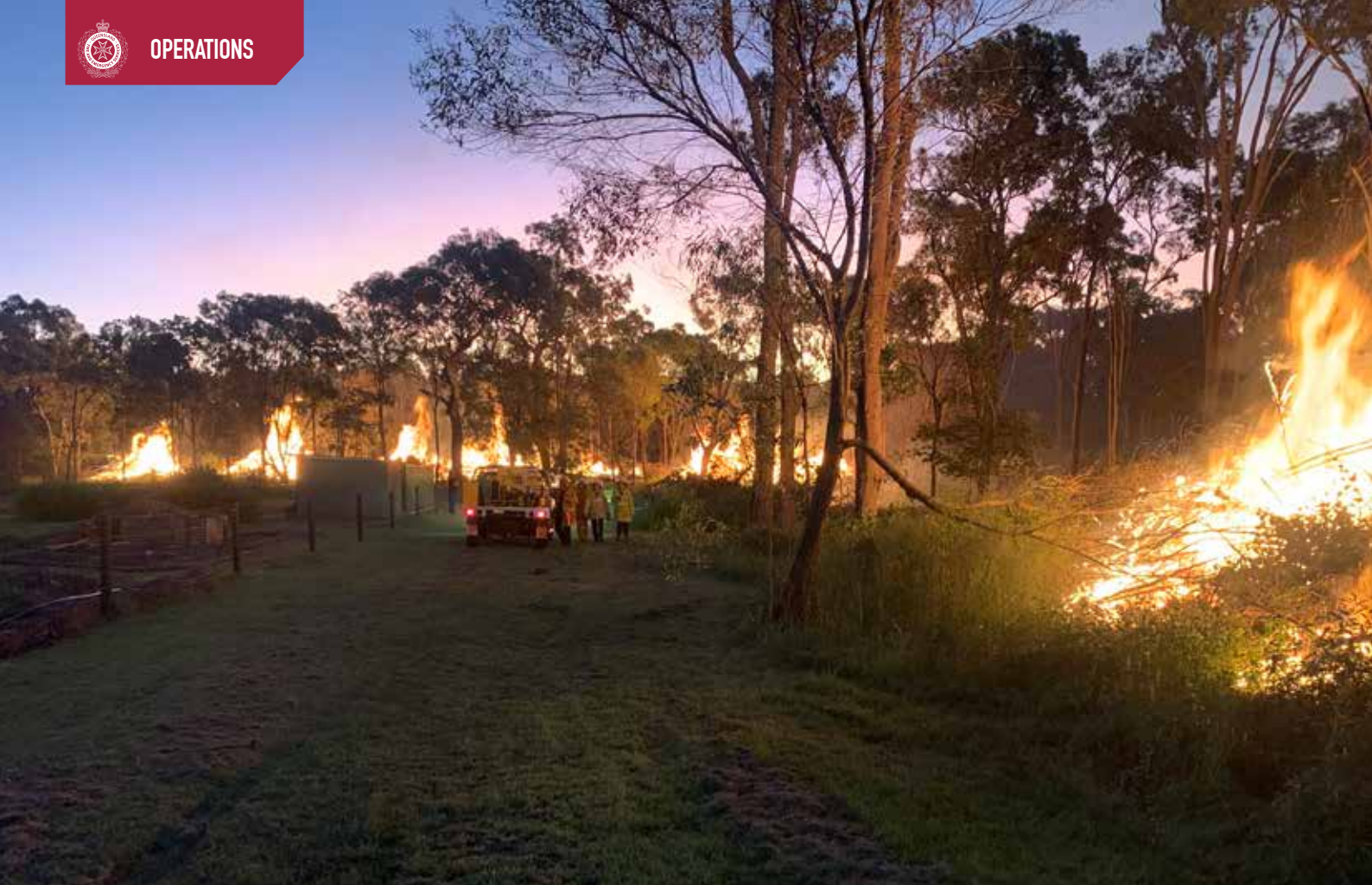
“It’s not just temperature, it’s river gauges, river observations, storm tracking, severe weather, fire weather, lightning and much more.”

In addition to working on these innovations, Lidia’s team have been using data to support the recent flood operations.

“We’re helping process data from damage assessments, creating new data feeds of the current flood extent and answering questions related to statistics.”



3D imagery of the Sarabah fires in 2019.



Rural Fire Service volunteers from Nikenbah and East Booral train Hervey Bay Emergency Services Cadets to conduct a hazard mitigation burn.

The future of bushfire mitigation

QFES is taking a bold new approach to bushfire mitigation with Program Grass Tree, which strikes a delicate balance between promoting biodiversity and keeping communities safe.

Wayne Ford, Manager Bushfire Safety, said Program Grass Tree was a three-year bushfire mitigation program that would sustain a safe living environment for Queensland communities while maintaining our diverse landscape.

“We will achieve this through informed decision-making, engagement and collaboration with stakeholders state-wide,” Wayne said.

“We’re applying the lessons we’ve learnt over time and using both modern and traditional methodologies.”

A balanced approach

Program Grass Tree empowers QFES to carry out bushfire mitigation in a more informed, planned, coordinated and consistent way.

“The issue isn’t just whether bushfires occur or not, but how often they come back and how severe they are,” Wayne said.

Frequent or severe fires can damage bioregions and vegetation. On the other hand, a lack of fire can lead to a drop in the diversity of vegetation.

Somewhere between these two extremes is an optimal environment, where just the right amount of burning promotes healthy biodiversity.

“Program Grass Tree is about long-term management of bushfire risk,” Wayne said. “It incorporates long-term mitigation and land management plans to reduce vegetation fuel loads and support biodiversity in the landscape.”

Behind the name

The program takes its name from native grass trees, which symbolise a well-managed landscape.

“A healthy grass tree represents a healthy country,” Wayne said.



Grass trees are very slow growing and some species in Queensland can live up to 500 years old. Their iconic stem can take up to 20 years to develop. Over time they accumulate a skirt of dead leaf bases around their trunk that insulates them against the heat of bushfires, charring to form an almost indestructible shield.

When some species of grass tree burn, they form a dark ring of leaf. Some tend to flower after a fire, resulting in a kink in the trunk.

All these signs provide a history of burning over hundreds of years.

Operation Sesbania

The operational component of Program Grass Tree is called Operation Sesbania.

While Program Grass Tree encompasses a wide range of activities over three years, Operation Sesbania is an annual cycle of mitigation and planning that replaces Operation Cool Burn.

“Operation Cool Burn focused on completing mitigation activities within the defined time period of April to August,” Wayne said.

“It didn’t allow for location, environmental outcomes or seasonal influences. Bushfire seasons are very much dependent on the weather and accumulated vegetation.”

Operation Sesbania focuses on planning mitigation activities in high-risk locations and managing any residual risk as required.

“Operation Sesbania doesn’t have specific timeframes so we can align our mitigation programs with location, vegetation and bioregion management, as well as changes in weather patterns across the state.

“For example, we can conduct mitigation burns in the south of the state while it’s raining in the tropics.

“We’re taking a new direction by conducting mitigation activities year-round to help create safer communities.”

Sesbania’s history

The operation takes its name from Sesbania Rural Fire Brigade near Hughenden, which is no longer active.

“In 1954 the brigade responded to a bushfire and a father, son and cousin perished fighting it,” Wayne said. “At that time, equipment, technologies and resources were scarce or non-existent.

“We were looking for a name that represented the work QFES and other agencies undertake, the challenges of dealing with bushfires and the progress we have made over the years in firefighting technologies and training.

“Sesbania represents and respects the changes to bushfire management and the individuals who have paid the ultimate price in protecting their communities.”

Other projects

In addition to Operation Sesbania, Program Grass Tree features 10 separate but interlinked projects to support its objectives.

These include mapping Queensland bioregions to each Local Government Area and Area Fire Management Group.

“We categorise vegetation mapping into bioregions with different vegetation and soil types,” Wayne said.

“This allows us to adjust our mitigation activities to the unique circumstances of the vegetation type. For example, some species require a cooler burn after rain while others need a hotter fire to germinate their seeds.”

QFES will provide leadership and enhanced bushfire management through the State Bushfire Committee.

Program Grass Tree will also integrate First Nations knowledge to better understand country and cultural burning techniques.

“The integration of First Nations knowledge into managing country is the key to a healthy ecosystem,” Wayne said. “The program will also provide the opportunity to share that knowledge through land managers and communities.”

Technology is another vital component of Program Grass Tree.

“Operation Sesbania uses a dashboard for computers and mobile devices,” Wayne said. “Some of the tools integrated into the dashboard will include mitigation mapping for planned and completed activities.

“The dashboard also includes the Community Engagement App and Burnt Area App. These can produce a PDF report showing planned and completed activities.

“We’re investigating the idea of annual conferences or workshops to encourage out-of-the-box thinking and review our progress so we can ensure the program continues to benefit the community.”

Other projects include capability and capacity mapping across geographical regions, greater community engagement, and bushfire mitigation planning to match fuel load validations.

Wayne said he didn’t expect a forest fire season in south-east Queensland this year.

“However, a grass fire season could be on the cards,” he said.

Whatever the bushfire season brings, Program Grass Tree has many powerful tools to help communities prepare.





FAR NORTHERN REGION

Acknowledging Kurrabana

Far Northern Region Acting Assistant Commissioner Neil Francis and Regional Community Engagement Officer Chris Wegger presented Yirrganydji Rangers Gavin Singleton and Brian Singleton with a Commissioner's Certificate of Appreciation to Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation.

The certificate acknowledges that Kurrabana, the name for QFES' response to the severe weather season, is an Indigenous term from the Yirrganydji language.

The Yirrganydji traditional lands and waters extend along the coastal plains from Cairns to Port Douglas in far north Queensland.

The Yirrganydji seasonal calendar shows two major seasons, with one being the Kurrabana (wet season) spanning November to May.



SES deploy to the south-east

More than 60 Far Northern Region State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers have travelled to south-east Queensland to help the local SES and their community respond and recover from the floods.

Our teams are proud to assist in any way, working big days and conducting rescues in floodboats.

They've also completed chainsaw operations, emergency roof repairs, storm damage prevention and home clean-ups. Some volunteers have undertaken roles in incident management teams, coordinating and supporting teams in the field.

New appliance for Kuranda/Myola

Area Director Neil Parker handed over a new light attack appliance to Kuranda/Myola Rural Fire Brigade's First Officer Barry Child.

Trustees of the Queensland Volunteer Rural Fire Donation Fund built seven such appliances based on the Ford Ranger platform.

The appliances were fully funded by generous donations from across Australia following the devastating 2018 and 2019 bushfires. The Trust received 56 applications from rural fire brigades in Queensland.

The Kuranda/Myola Rural Fire Brigade, established in 1956, has 23 members and covers 44 square kilometres, as well as responding to 63 square kilometres of the Flaggy Creek Fire Warden District. Their current medium attack appliance can't access several structures in these areas.

The brigade is proactive and collaborates closely with the community, Indigenous ranger groups, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and HQPlantations.

They conduct mitigation burns over 7000 hectares of country. The light attack appliance will make this work easier by helping them traverse the difficult landscape.





NORTHERN REGION

Life Skills Queensland emergency preparedness workshops

Townsville State Emergency Service recently supported Life Skills Queensland, a local service provider, to conduct free community disaster preparedness workshops.

The workshops were designed to increase community resilience and minimise dependence on government assistance, while progressing self-reliance and community connectedness.

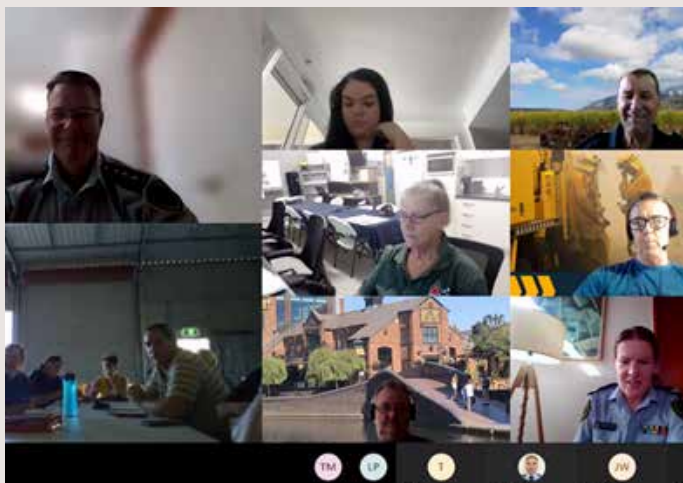
The workshops consisted of five practical stands designed to build capacity and resilience in the community, by empowering participants with activities on how to be better prepared.

The stands included water ingress education, how to sandbag your home, storm water diversion techniques, basic knot tying and ratchet straps, and how to prepare an emergency kit.

Townsville SES Volunteer Community Educator Peter Rice said, "It was one of the best engagement opportunities I have ever had. The participants were still here 45 minutes after the workshop finished, talking and engaging with our people."

The workshops had support from QFES, Townsville City Council, James Cook University Cyclone Testing Station, the Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction project, and Oasis Townsville.

The workshops were funded under the commonwealth/state disaster recovery funding arrangements 2018.



Virtual workshop for VCEs

Northern Region conducted a virtual Volunteer Community Educator (VCE) workshop in February with 19 VCEs from across the region.

The workshop facilitator Sarah McCarron, Acting Bushfire Safety Officer, said the Teams meeting allowed them to engage effectively with parts of the region they rarely got to engage with due to the tyranny of distance.

Workshop participants received updates on Operation Sesbania and Program Grass Tree, and the opportunities for VCEs to support community education.

Other topics included how to support communities to better understand bushfire risk, as well as engagement opportunities in schools and the bushfire education program.

Jeff Hurlle, VCE for Bluewater Rural Fire Brigade, said, "Engagement with Northern Region VCEs is heading for exciting times this year with how we are communicating, providing the critical link with communities and changing the way our communities understand their bushfire risk. I am already looking forward to the next workshop."

An act of bravery

Senior Firefighter Luke Giudicatti from Ingham Fire and Rescue Station was recently awarded the Queensland Police Commissioner's Certificate for bravery.

Luke was recognised for saving a woman from jumping off a seventh-floor hotel balcony in Cairns in 2019.

Luke was staying at the hotel, off-duty, on the floor below. He heard shouts and looked up to see the woman standing on the outside of her balcony. After calling Triple Zero, he called to her to go back inside.

Another guest also tried to help, but the woman swung out and dropped onto a sixth-floor balcony, falling heavily onto the railing and floor.

Luke climbed across two balconies to reach her and, with the other guest, pulled her to safety.





CENTRAL REGION

VMR Whitsunday wins global award for AIS installation

Volunteer Marine Rescue (VMR) Whitsunday were announced international winners of an award for the most innovative installation of an Automatic Identification System (AIS).

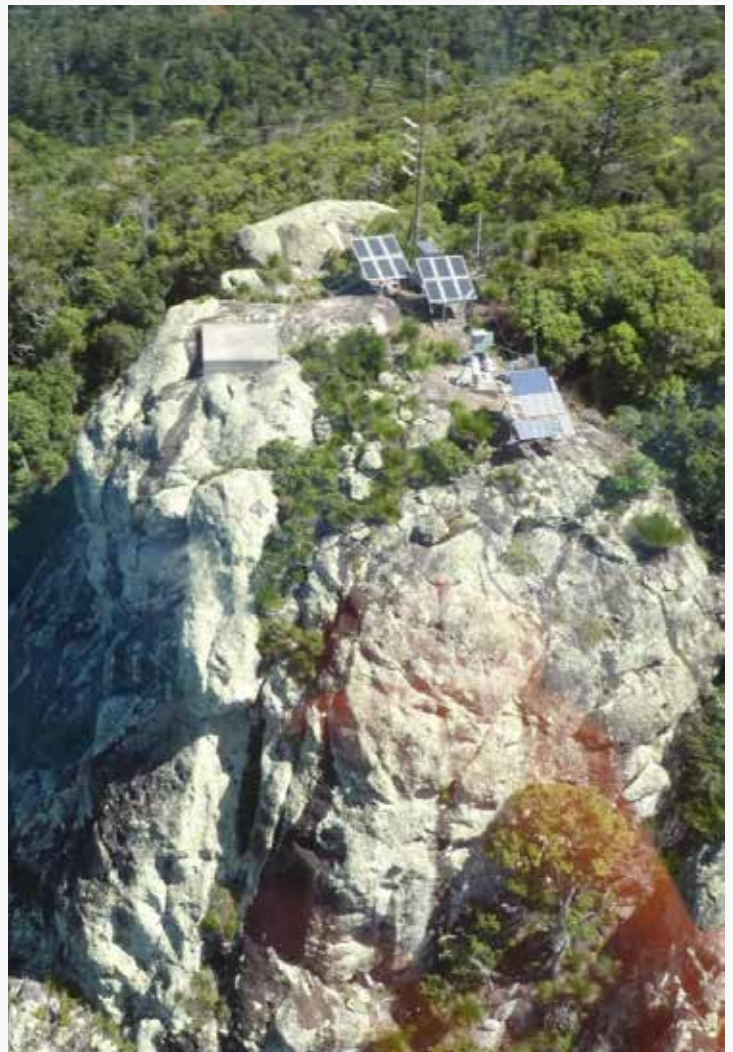
VMR Whitsunday President Mal Priday said, “This project was funded by grants and donations and was critical in reducing the amount of black spots in the Whitsundays.”

The installation on Mount Robinson is at an altitude of 400 metres and is only accessible by helicopter.

The site provides tracking and communication services across 2400 to 3500 square kilometres, and shares power with solar and wind generation.

The site provides almost 100% of coverage to AIS-equipped vessels in the Whitsundays and outer reef, in addition to Hayman Island and Shute Harbour, greatly enhancing public safety.

You can track vessels near you via marinetraffic.com.



Quinn Cramer – this year’s Champion of Change

Congratulations to Station Officer Quinn Cramer who was awarded the Women in Fire and Emergency Services Award – Champion of Change during the International Women’s Day celebrations in March.

Quinn received the award for creating an inclusive workplace, acknowledging gender diversity in QFES and promoting change, particularly in her role as immediate past president of the national board of Women in Firefighting Australasia (WAFA).

Quinn was also a founding leader in the QFES Frontline Women’s Network and a member of the QFES Gender Equity Advisory Group.





NORTH COAST REGION



Strike team moves in

Far Northern Region recently deployed a Rural Fire Service (RFS) strike team of 12 firefighters (better known as the FNR Dirty

Dozen) who flew from Cairns to Brisbane and then travelled by bus to flood-ravaged Gympie. They assisted crews with clean up and assisted in the Divisional Control Centre including logistics. Their tireless efforts are appreciated.



Precious cargo

No one plans a motocross accident or flood, but Ethan found himself dealing with both at once.

He broke his tibia and collarbone in a motocross accident on Friday 25 February, just before he, his partner and baby were stranded by rising waters at his parents' house in Granville.

On Sunday, Ethan got a call advising him to get surgery the next morning, but the floodwaters were reaching major flood levels and it seemed impossible to get to the hospital.

State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers were travelling back and forth in their boat, dropping off supplies to stranded suburbs, and Ethan's father asked if they could assist.

The SES and Ethan's family loaded him into the boat with his partner and baby and transported them back across the floodwaters for his surgery.

Ethan's surgery went well and we wish him a smooth and speedy recovery.

Here we go again

Bidwill Rural Fire Brigade, supported by 20 volunteers and located on the outskirts of Maryborough, has already experienced floods twice in 2022.

January's flood was unprecedented and came quickly, with the crew evacuating most equipment from the station and relocating their truck to the First Officer's house with only hours to spare.

The electrical, painting and plastering work was finally completed on Thursday 24 February and the brigade were about to move back in when the threat of another flood meant they had to evacuate again.

Flood levels peaked on Monday 28 February at 10.3 metres, about half a metre more than January.

The floodwaters cut off the road into the nearby suburb of Little Tinana, isolating the local community.

First Officer Noel Fischer coordinated with the community and Fraser Coast Regional Council to helicopter in food, medication and other supplies. Crews worked non-stop throughout the floods to ensure all residents were safe.

The brigade returned to their station on Saturday 5 March to start cleaning up again and they hope to be back on their feet soon. The devotion and resilience of our volunteers is remarkable and has enabled the brigade to stay operationally ready before, during and after the flood.

The brigade would like to give special mention to everyone in the area office, especially their Brigade Training and Support Officer Shannon Smith for all the work he does to assist the brigade and help them get back on their feet.





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BRISBANE REGION

Changing lives through the spirit of Kokoda

Three firefighters have signed up for a tough physical challenge to raise funds for local young people through the Kokoda Youth Foundation.

Kody, Ryan and Chris are taking part in the Kokoda Challenge by trekking through D'Aguilar National Park.

The Kokoda Youth Foundation is an Australian charity whose mission is to change the lives of local teens by providing experiential programs that inspire them to reach their full potential.

The Kokoda values of courage, endurance, mateship and sacrifice are similar to QFES's values, so all three firefighters relate to them.

Kody previously completed the challenge while he was in year 11 and 12, while the others are looking forward to a new experience.



Rural firefighters study bushfire fuel

Brisbane Region Rural Fire Service (RFS) has undertaken four overall fuel hazard training workshops at the Mount Nebo Rural Fire Brigade and Clear Mountain Rural Fire Brigade.

The workshops helped more than 50 local volunteers change how they perceive bushfire fuel in the landscape and discuss what treatments work best for reducing its impact.

The volunteers also learnt information about preparedness they could pass on to the community.

These workshops are an important long-term component of Brisbane Region's mitigation strategy. They provide our people with the tools and knowledge to understand not only their local risk, but how to treat that risk before a fire starts. This is crucial prior to carrying out broad-acre strategic burning.

A visit to remember

Our region received two special visits during the floods. Her Excellency The Honourable Dr Jeannette Young PSM visited the State Emergency Service (SES) Moreton Unit at Murrumba Downs to thank the local SES volunteers for their efforts.



The volunteers shared their stories of determination to serve their local community despite personal loss.

His Excellency, General The Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) and Her Excellency Mrs Linda Hurley visited the SES Brisbane Unit at Newmarket to thank local volunteers and a taskforce deployed from Far Northern Region.





SOUTH EASTERN REGION

A coordinated response

More than 1000 QFES staff and volunteers were involved in the South Eastern Region response during the recent severe weather event.

Fire and Rescue Service swiftwater crews carried out 86 rescues, many in extremely dangerous conditions. Some of the crews were isolated in locations for days at a time. Crews at Karana Downs did extended shifts after being transported in and out by helicopter.

The State Emergency Service (SES) received more than 2300 requests for assistance and performed 25 floodboat rescues. Volunteers completed a range of other critical jobs including relocating people and transferring logistic supplies for cut-off communities.

Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers have been assisting their local communities with recovery, completing more than 400 washouts.

Fire Communications staff were extremely busy with BAU as well as communicating critical jobs to the Regional Operations Centre (ROC) for tasking aircraft or specialist activities during the response phase.

Emergency Management Coordinators and disaster management group core members provided extensive support to councils during this event and continue to do so through the recovery phase.

QFES State Air Operations Unit supported the region by using helicopters to conduct reconnaissance flights and transport personnel to hospitals and cut-off areas. Also, 36 drone flights provided situation awareness to the ROC.

Assistant Commissioner Kevin Walsh said, “It was an extraordinary response to an extraordinary event and my thanks go out to everyone involved.”



Zephyr Lunchbox Drive

South Eastern Region donated 107 lunchboxes to Zephyr, smashing our total from last year.

Thank you to everyone who donated to the drive, especially RFS South Coast and Canungra Fire and Rescue Station, who donated a significant amount.

Zephyr thanked everyone for their contributions to this important charity event that supports so many kids.



Fire Ed in Auslan

Senior Firefighter James Reece from Ripley Fire and Rescue Station delivered the Fire Ed program to students in sign language for the first time recently.

James started learning Auslan 18 years ago from his wife, who is deaf.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students from Ipswich Central State School and Ipswich State High School learnt all about fire safety and the equipment on a fire truck.

“The kids were excited that a firefighter could communicate to them in their language,” James said.





SOUTH WESTERN REGION



RFS deployment

Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers from the Darling Downs and Western Rivers Area deployed to Durack to assist the community as they recovered from the floods.

In total, 28 volunteers from 12 brigades, along with two staff members, used high-pressure hose lines to help clean up. Many of them had previously helped during the 2011 floods.



SES lend a helping hand

During the rain event in February, the Warwick State Emergency Service (SES) and the Gowrie Mountain and Cabarlah Rural Fire Service supported the Toowoomba SES Unit to work with the community. Together, they responded to 370 requests in Toowoomba and surrounding areas.

Emergency Service Cadets also helped with sandbagging at the Toowoomba SES Headquarters. The teams went through copious amounts of sandbags, black plastic and tarps.

When your roof's leaking, water is flowing through your doors, or you're stranded and need assistance, it's not always possible for the SES to attend immediately. The SES would like to thank the community for their patience during this trying time.

New St George Rural Fire Brigade

Over the past year, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) has been building a partnership with the Queensland Murray Darling Catchment Aboriginal Rangers (QMDC) to better understand fire management and fire on Country.

A review of QFES' service delivery in the St George area identified a need for better bushfire management, mitigation and response.

In collaboration with the Balonne Shire Council and QMDC, the Fire and Rescue Service and RFS decided to form a Rural Fire Brigade that will complement the current auxiliary brigade in the town. This will greatly enhance the council's mitigation strategies and QMDC's cultural burning programs.

On 9 March 2022, St George Rural Fire Brigade held their inaugural meeting. The brigade has nine members and will be located at the new QMDC complex in St George. The brigade district covers the existing St George Fire Warden's district, which is about 400 square kilometres on the northern side of the township.

RFS Inspector Neale Ray will assume the role of Chair for the first 12 months and provide guidance to the new members. Training started on 27 March 2022.





State Duty Officer Janelle Parkin responding to a request for information from Scenic Rim Regional Council.

A day in the life of the Watch Desk

QFES' "eyes and ears" is the Watch Desk – a 24/7 emergency management hub that monitors and reports on disasters, ensuring QFES is ready to respond to any situation at the drop of a hat.

In the State Disaster Coordination Centre (SDCC) at Kedron's Emergency Services Complex, sits a dedicated team of 17 personnel whose ordinary day involves maintaining active oversight of the state by researching and analysing everything from severe weather to animal diseases.

Response sat down with two Watch Desk Officers, Melyssa Dow and Ashley Pringle, to understand the ins-and-outs of this behind-the-scenes team.

Mel has been with QFES for more than eight years and joined the Watch Desk in May 2021.

"There aren't really any roles in QFES that are like this. Even if you compared it to the State Operations Centre, that's very QFES hazard specific, whereas the SDCC is whole-of-government focused. It's very much the big picture and a lot of information," Mel said.

A juggling act

The SDCC was activated, known as 'Stand Up', on 2 February 2020, to support

Queensland's COVID-19 response, and has been operating continuously since.

"We've been dealing with rolling events, from COVID-19 (which we assist with reporting) to short-term severe weather events," Mel said.

"COVID-19 adds another layer of complexity, but we're all used to it now. We need to have active oversight and stress that it's important to be aware of risks COVID-19 could pose."

The prolonged floods in February and March added another ball to the mix. During SDCC activations, the Watch Desk concurrently works within the Operations Capability while continuing existing Watch Desk activities.

"We were extremely busy during the floods. It required a lot of liaising with internal and external stakeholders, particularly around maintaining situational awareness and advice to the community about threats," Mel said.

"We do 12-hour shifts, either day or night. Our standard staffing operations is two State Duty Officers and a Supervisor, but during the floods we had additional State Duty Officers. It was definitely all hands-on deck.

"It's very busy, but at the end of the day we all work together well as a team and support each other."

Ashley Pringle, who is also a long-standing State Emergency Service (SES) volunteer, said no emergency event is ever the same.

"We could be issuing emergency alerts for impacted communities, supporting local governments with resupply, providing situational reports to stakeholders or simply reaching out to local agencies to offer support. We do this while continuing to have active oversight for the rest of the state," Ash said.

"We could be 1000 kilometres from the disaster area, but we still feel as part of the response as the local community. There is usually a coordinated, high-tempo workload.



“We ensure the SDCC is always ready to ‘Stand Up’ in response to a sudden or emerging incident.”

The Watch Desk also conducts SES job tasking, either requests for assistance from the public or agency support requests, to ensure they are effectively coordinated.

Preparing the community

Another Watch Desk function is to issue Emergency Alerts.

An Emergency Alert can be a life-saving tool to alert people in a specific location of an imminent threat. During the recent 12-day floods, QFES issued 183 emergency alerts across Brisbane, South Western, South Eastern and North Coast regions.

The team continuously works with local government and key stakeholders

to receive up-to-date information in preparation for a possible Emergency Alert to put into the system, so the Alert is ready to go at any moment.

“While Emergency Alerts are important to communicate with the community, they complement other communication methods such as social and mainstream media, door knocking and bushfire warnings,” Ash said.

No ordinary life

The role may be complex and busy, the height peaking during disaster events, but this doesn’t faze Mel and Ash.

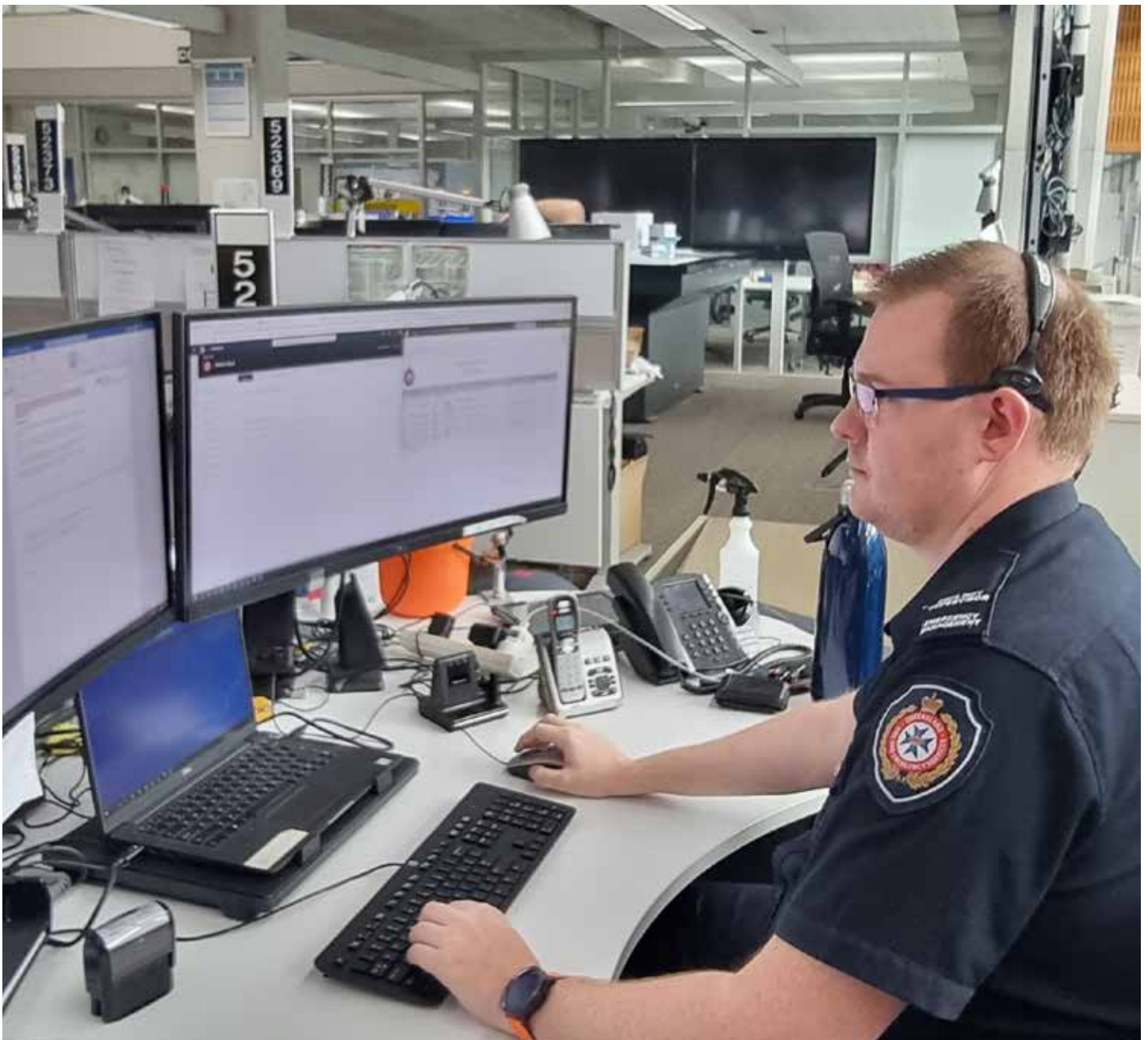
“Everyone is forever learning. I don’t know how you could not be learning on the Desk. The needs of the community and stakeholders are forever evolving, so we need to stay up to date with that,” Mel said.

“As long as you’re eager to learn, it’s a great opportunity to broaden your horizons and learn a lot about QFES and how QFES and all government agencies are working together.”

Ash added, “You need to be adaptable and have the desire to be constantly learning and preparing while continuously building relationships with key stakeholders.

“Diversity on the Watch Desk is one of our key strengths, as we have team members from corporate and operational backgrounds as well as non-emergency service experience.

“We share our key strengths with each other to further broaden knowledge and perspective, that in turn supports a modern approach to disaster management with a broad lens.”



Acting State Duty Supervisor Ashley Pringle conducting a threat assessment after the BOM issued a Severe Weather Warning.

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Supporting people with a disability in emergencies

QFES in Mackay is leading the way in supporting people with a disability to plan for emergencies.

Gary Matthews, a Mackay resident who uses a wheelchair, woke up one day in 2008, swung his legs out of bed and heard a splash.

His flat had flooded overnight. Emergency services came to Gary's house and took him to the base hospital in an ambulance, but they couldn't take his wheelchair with them.

He was given another wheelchair and waited in a hospital room for several hours with no information about what was happening.

Gary was then taken to an evacuation centre down the road, but his wheelchair couldn't fit through many of the doors, so he couldn't access the toilets or bathrooms.

It wasn't until the local MP stepped in that he was taken to a local nursing home with proper facilities.

Mackay City Area Commander Sven Diga said he was inspired by Gary's story to do more to support vulnerable people during emergencies.

"Listening to Gary Matthews' story I just couldn't believe what he had to go through, and so I was inspired to see what we could do as emergency services to make it better," Sven said.

Sven and Emergency Management Coordinator Carla Duck have worked closely with Mackay Regional Council to implement the Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness program (P-CEP) in their region.

Mackay is one of the first areas to widely distribute the P-CEP workbook, handing out more than 4,000, along with training 100 service providers to use it in their community engagement.

The project was a joint winner in the Local Government category for the 2021 Get Ready Queensland Resilient Australia Awards.

Carla said Mackay Regional Council took up P-CEP, which was developed by Sydney

University, after catastrophic bushfires tore through the region in 2018.

The rapid evacuations during the fires were traumatising and afterwards, seniors and people with a disability raised concerns about the emergency response process.

"With P-CEP, you have a conversation with someone and work with them to create a tailored emergency plan, which includes whether they need transport, medications, assistive devices and so on, or if they have friends and family who can collect them.

"With emergency management, we don't often plan for the minority, we only make decisions for the majority.

"But people with disabilities are more adversely affected by disasters. Our goal is to include them in plans rather than making plans for them. It's a two-way conversation and I get so much out of it.

"We've enhanced our relationships with NDIS providers and the Queensland

disability network in town to better understand their needs.

"It's been a real eye-opener and I've learnt a lot. There was one client with a spinal injury who needed power to get out of bed, because without power their bed wouldn't operate. If a disaster took out power in Mackay, we'd need to factor that in, which is something we might not normally think about."

Sven said crews from all QFES services could use P-CEP to help vulnerable people.

"If we need to assist in evacuations, for example, we can take extra time to listen to what someone really needs," he said.

"We're very proactive with community engagement in Mackay, working with disability networks and other stakeholders to make sure we get the best response for our community."



Gary Matthews from Queenslanders with Disability Network, Bob Khalsa from Mackay Regional Council and Carla Duck from QFES planning PCEP workshops across Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday council areas. Photo provided by Mackay Regional Council.



The Townsville FireCom team took part in the Pink Run for International Women’s Day. Photo by Arlene Arends.



The Queensland Fire and Rescue AFL team took on local 2021 premiers Sherwood AFC. They held a minute of silence before the game and wore orange arm bands in honour of fallen SES volunteer Merryl Dray. Photo by Gracie A Sport & Event.



Four Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) crews responded to a ferocious fire in a Brisbane unit. They protected nearby homes and brought the massive blaze under control within 20 minutes.



Sammy found himself in a spot of bother after falling into a sinkhole. Firefighters from Brassall Fire and Rescue Station worked alongside Greenbank Rural Fire Brigade members to use a sling to safely remove the horse from the mud.



The QFES Executive Leadership team took part in Domestic and Family Violence training in February.



QFES crews and Queensland Rail attended a train derailment in Traverston in February. Train lines were closed in all directions but fortunately no one was trapped.



Celebrating International Women's Day at FireCom North Coast.



Fire and Rescue Service firefighters and State Emergency Service volunteers worked alongside the Queensland Police Service, paramedics and QGAir to help a patient who fell from a cliff at Mount Greville near Boonah.



Richmond Local Disaster Management Group held Exercise IMPART to function test the Local Disaster Management Plan and communication strategy for agencies and stakeholders before, during and after a disaster.



After a tsunami caused widespread devastation in Tonga this January, QFES joined forces with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to deliver portable pumps to Tonga on the HMAS Adelaide III. The pumps will be used to wash out homes and businesses.



Commissioner Greg Leach presented Belinda Morier with her award at a ceremony in Kedron.

Support is a phone call away

For Fire Communications Officer Belinda Morier, becoming a Peer Support Officer (PSO) was about helping to change the stigma around mental health and encouraging people to ask for help.

Belinda has been awarded this year's PSO of the Year Award for her extraordinary work supporting QFES staff and volunteers, as well as the PSO team.

"I heard a friend once say, 'Don't ever complain about anything if you aren't willing to do something to try and change it'," she said.

"That has always stuck with me. So, by becoming a PSO and now the coordinator, I'd like to think I'm helping people feel comfortable to talk and reach out if they need to."

Belinda's previous experience as a Peer Support Officer in the Queensland Police Service inspired her to join the Fire and Emergency Services Support Network (FESSN).

"I saw the fantastic potential of peer support and other related services and I wanted to be a part of it," she said.

The Peer Support Program consists of about 175 active PSOs from a range of

ranks and roles across the state who volunteer to assist their colleagues with work or personal challenges. PSOs can also help guide colleagues to further support, such as counsellors.

Belinda said FESSN was a vital service because it prioritised mental health and wellbeing among staff and volunteers.

"In my 14 years with QFES it's been really great to see attitudes change," she said.

"It's become more acceptable to talk and admit if you're not OK. Sometimes it's good to have someone to listen, who you don't have to see every day, don't work directly with, or know outside of the job.

"Nine times out of 10 when I ring, people are content with the incident and how it went. But at the end of the day, they just want to know someone cared enough to make contact and ask if they were OK."

Belinda said she wanted to acknowledge the outstanding work of every FESSN PSO.

"There are so many worthy nominees and peer supporters within the state that do such a great job," she said.

"No one who puts their hand up to be a PSO does it for any reward other than wanting to just let people know there is someone there."

You can find a PSO in your region by visiting qfes.qld.gov.au/fessn/peersupport or access FESSN counselling by calling 1800 805 890.

Other award winners

Rosi (Rosemary) Trencher
– Assistant Commissioner's
Certificate of Appreciation

Andrew Vaughan – Peer Support
Officer Award

Sharon Davis – Peer Support
Officer Award

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