

# RESPONSE

RESILIENT AND READY FOR THE PEOPLE OF QUEENSLAND

QUEENSLAND'S OFFICIAL FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES MAGAZINE

APRIL 2024



**Through the wind and rain  
Here for Queensland**

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### ON THE COVER

Strike Team Alpha deployed from Brisbane in January to assist with storm cleanup. From left to right: Terry Morgan from Brisbane SES Unit, Justin Kirkby from Redland City SES Unit, Scott Barnes from Redland City SES Unit and Chris Sherrin from Brisbane SES Unit. Photo by Justin Kirkby.

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# FOREWORDS



**STEVE SMITH AFSM**  
**Acting Commissioner**

## QUEENSLAND FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

It's exciting to see the new Queensland Fire Department (QFD) taking shape. We've made significant progress recently, developing our new branding and simplified governance structure and preparing for our move to QFD headquarters in Albion.

Last month, Hon Nikki Boyd MP introduced the *Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024* into the Queensland Parliament.

The Bill will establish 'Queensland Fire and Rescue (QFR)' and 'Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ)' as separate fire services to provide the foundation for departmental arrangements.

The Bill was referred to the bipartisan Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee for consideration, and I'd like to thank everyone who made a submission or presented to the committee during the recent public hearings.

Operationally, the busy tempo from the start of the year did not let up as rain continued to drench large parts of Queensland into February. Tropical Cyclone Kirrily and Tropical Cyclone Lincoln threw up multiple challenges but as always QFES members used their experience and ingenuity to provide support and comfort to affected communities. Read more on page 4.

In among the hard work there has been much to celebrate. QFES members were again recognised in this year's Australia Day Honours. Congratulations to David Heck AFSM, Simon Ball AFSM, Gary McCormack AFSM, Paul Mardon AFSM, Mark Dole ESM, Colin (Curl) Santacaterina AFSM and William (Bill) Humble OAM. You can read more about each of the recipients on page 12.

In March, as part of International Women's Day, we celebrated the inspiring women of QFES in the Women in QFES Awards. Congratulations to this year's winners: Vanessa Madge, Rachel Curnuck, Anne-Marie Bennett, Jarna Vilayrack, Kath Ryan, Bridget Kerans and Sharnte Butler. You can read more about their achievements on page 18.

March also saw our annual celebration and recognition of QFES' Peer Support Officers (PSOs). Across our organisation, 170 PSOs make themselves available to their colleagues, offering support and a listening ear. The 2024 Peer Support Officer of the Year, Tim Willis, tells us a little about his PSO journey on page 35.



**BEN MILLINGTON**  
**Acting Chief Officer**

## RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Since I joined QFES in February, it's been my privilege to visit many local Rural Fire Service (RFS) brigades on weekends to meet with volunteers.

I have enjoyed hearing stories about their hard work and dedication to their communities, as well as their experiences with all facets of QFES.

Of course, I've also talked with many RFS staff members about their roles and their thoughts about the transition to the new Queensland Fire Department (QFD). Some discussions have been robust, and I welcome that.

My job is to listen to these views and experiences so we can learn and implement them as we restructure the RFS as a separate entity within the QFD. It's through having open and honest conversations where concerns and ideas are aired that we will create the best RFS for the service and for Queenslanders.

I've also had the pleasure of meeting many staff and volunteers in the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS). Under the umbrella of the QFD, our two services will continue working closely together and I look forward to many more fruitful discussions with FRS moving forward.

It's exciting to be a part of this organisation at such a pivotal point in its history and, although change can be challenging at times, I am confident in our people and their ability to work through these changes. I will continue to consult with our members throughout the reform process.

As part of the RFSQ uplift, we've received a significant increase in resources. Setting a clear direction for our future will allow us to put those resources to the best possible use for the people of Queensland.

I've developed five priorities for the RFSQ moving forward: recognising our staff and volunteers, progressing our reform work, prioritising key projects, enhancing relationships with stakeholders and preparing for fire season.

You can read more about these priorities, along with my experience with change management and previous bushfire seasons, on page 28.



QFES staff and volunteers responded to calls for assistance across the south-east.

# In the drenching rain

Since the start of the year, staff and volunteers have been out on the ground working with communities to respond to and recover from cyclones and storms.

QFES had a busy start to the year with major recovery operations underway in Northern, Far Northern and South Eastern regions.

The state’s north hadn’t yet recovered from the drenching Tropical Cyclone Jasper dumped in late December when Tropical Cyclone Kiriilly crossed the coast north of Townsville on 25 January, bringing more than a metre of rain.

About 100 QFES staff and volunteers, along with interstate personnel, were deployed into north and central Queensland to assist communities.

On the night of 29 January more than 300 millimetres of rain soaked south-eastern Queensland. State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers responded to nearly 100 calls for assistance and Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) swiftwater crews rescued several people from flooded homes.

In mid-February, Tropical Cyclone Lincoln soaked already saturated areas around the Gulf and added to flooding in the far north and west of the state.

## Incredible resilience

Faye Child, a Leading Field Operations Member from Petrie SES Group, was deployed to Cairns in December to assist with the response to Tropical Cyclone Jasper.

“I’ve never seen so much rain – relentless, drenching rain,” Faye said. “Drains were turning into dangerous creeks and the Barron River was rising and rising and getting angrier and angrier. Water was swallowing everything in its path in all directions.

“We travelled to Wonga Beach and I’ll never forget the moment a resident came out of her home and was so glad to see us, she was almost in tears and needed to sit down. She thought they’d been forgotten about. They needed fresh drinking water and, until we arrived, they didn’t know where or how they were going to get it.

“She was so relieved to see our bright orange uniform and learn the rest of the country was okay. Wonga Beach had been cut off by floodwaters and they had no news, TV, radio, internet, nothing. Even the SES radios wouldn’t work.

“It had been nearly two weeks and they didn’t know if anyone was even coming to check on them. Help had arrived and she was just overwhelmed and relieved.

“The residents had already gotten chainsaws out and removed trees and they were helping each other clean up around the streets and houses.

“What an amazing community – they were offering us help in the end, asking if we were hungry or needed to cool down. Absolutely incredible resilient people.



“All the SES volunteers should hold their heads high as they worked relentlessly, getting drenched as soon as we left base and being drenched for the entire day, working long hours trying to get to as many tasks as we could and not complaining but relishing in the thought we helped so many.”

### A moving target

Regional Technical Rescue Coordinator Kris Maguire said Northern Region was lashed with rainfall and high winds during Tropical Cyclone Kirrily.

“It was lucky the system moved to the west quickly and that’s probably where the most rain was had,” Kris said. “In Townsville we were lucky there was minimal structural damage.

“I liaised between the Regional Operations Centre (ROC) and Incident Command Centre (ICC) and our troops on the ground, and briefed and tasked crews. It was the first time our region has run an incident out of our new emergency services complex.”

Kris said the most difficult part was tracking the cyclone.

“We pre-positioned crews in strategic locations that could be cut off by floodwater, but we had to move some of them because the cyclone took a different path. It was very unpredictable.

“The day after the cyclone passed, we started doing damage assessments from Bowen through to Ingham and out to Charters Towers. We completed more than 600.”

### Evacuating Warra

When Tropical Cyclone Kirrily brought flooding to the town of Warra, swiftwater teams swooped in to evacuate 27 residents.

Inspector of Dalby Command Stewart Lange said the nearby town of Jandowae flooded in the morning before the water flowed into the Condamine River and inundated Warra.

“It wasn’t until 4.30pm that water broke the creek banks in Warra,” Stewart said. “An elderly couple got stranded in their 4WD and the waters were rising so fast people were still in their houses.

“We received a request to rescue someone from their home and immediately initiated a greater response with additional swiftwater rescues and an appliance from Dalby Fire and Rescue Station, along with Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) and Queensland Police Service (QPS).

“When we arrived in Warra, the sun had set and the water was right through the town. There’s been flooding in Warra before, but not that severe.”

QFES personnel went door-to-door checking on residents and searching the township as conditions deteriorated and waters continued to rise.

“We went to every house to ensure people either wanted to be rescued or had a plan in place to stay. The service station had about 150 millimetres of water through it. We were concerned about fuel leaking into the floodwater, but we managed it with direction from the scientific team.”

Two swiftwater crews, one from Warwick and one from Toowoomba, used inflatable rescue craft to transport families to a control point, where a bus waited to transport them to Dalby. The Local Disaster Management Group had organised accommodation.

“The biggest challenge was doing everything by torchlight,” Stewart said. “We stayed until about 9.15pm when the water started dropping.

“I want to thank the community for heeding our advice on when to evacuate. It makes the job so much easier when people understand the reason why we’re doing it.



Thirty-one Disaster Assistance Response Team members travelled to Townsville to assist.



Swiftwater crews rescued 14 people stranded by floodwater in Charters Towers.



“Two days later we received a lovely thank you letter from a woman who was evacuated with her elderly mother and children.”

### Out-of-the-box thinking

Ian Bacon, Leading Field Operator for Redland SES Unit, deployed to Cairns for six days to assist during Tropical Cyclone Kirrily. The team he worked with consisted of Kiara Muraca from Cleveland Group, Karla Hellmuth and Jennifer Tam from Brisbane Unit, and Tyler Vikionkorpi and Patricia Blake from Gordonvale Group.

“As a 20-year SES veteran, I used my past experience to help my fellow team members complete a number of tasks from chain-sawing and clearing trees off roofs, to height safety jobs, storm damage jobs and sandbagging,” Ian said.

One of their more memorable tasks was saving a house from being flooded by a collapsing retaining wall.

“Water coming down the hill was causing a static pressure buildup behind the wall, which had a big bow in it. We dug a 50-metre trench along the side of the property with picks and shovels, diverting the water away from the retaining wall and home.”

When a broken whirlybird caused major issues for a local family, Ian and the team, along with some local members, came to the rescue.

“Water was pouring through the whirlybird into a bedroom,” Ian said. “On that side of the roof there were solar panels all the way up to the whirlybird so we couldn’t go up there.

“We discussed the idea of pulling a rubbish bin up the roof and flipping it over so it covered the remaining parts of the whirlybird. Years ago, when Cyclone Larry went through Innisfail, we’d done a similar thing with witches hats.

“The whirlybird was in between the TV aerial on one side and some clips holding the solar panels on the other, so we had about one-and-a-half metres on either side to throw a throwline through. With the added challenge of a bit of wind and rain, it took a couple of attempts but eventually we had two throwlines in place across the full width of the roof.

“We punched four holes in the top of the bin and tied the two ropes to one side and two more ropes to the other. We taped a fifth rope to the bottom of the bin to keep it straight.

“We used the two ropes going over the roof to pull the bin up so it was against the whirlybird then held the two ropes on our side firm. Pulling the two ropes over the roof again, we flipped the bin so it landed upside-down over the whirlybird. The team was ecstatic at our success and the occupants were very grateful.”



SES volunteers cleared a road in Upper Coomera. Photo by Justin Kirkby.



Rural Fire Service volunteers worked hard on washouts in the Moreton Bay region.



Swiftwater firefighters travelled north to pre-position themselves alongside local crews.



SES volunteers assisted with fallen trees and structural damage.

# Man rescued from grain silo

**When firefighters from Emerald Fire and Rescue Station got a call to rescue a man trapped in a grain silo, the situation wasn't what they expected.**

Acting Station Officer Kenton Robertson said the silo was on a farm in Gindie, 40 minutes south of Emerald.

"Enroute we were told he was trapped in a silo so we thought we'd have to come through the top and put a rope down," Kenton said.

"We don't have any level two vertical rescue technicians in Emerald so we were going to fly some in from Rockhampton on a helicopter. But it turned out the bottom had fallen out of the silo and pinned his legs to the ground."

The man had been working under the silo when its sheet-metal base gave way, releasing 50 tonnes of grain.

"Thankfully there were people nearby when the silo collapsed," Kenton said. "When we arrived, farmers were shovelling grain off the man and digging trenches with a front-

end loader. Someone had given him a hose so he wouldn't drown in the grain.

"The man was conscious and ambulance officers put tourniquets around his legs so he wouldn't get crush syndrome.

"The silo's legs and roof were buckled. I was worried about the roof coming down and injuring more people, so I got everyone out who didn't have to be there.

"Working in all the grain was like walking through quicksand and we had limited working space between the silos."

The firefighters waited until the ambulance officers gave them the all-clear to move the man.

"In the meantime we used battery-operated cutters and spreaders to make small cuts in the metal so when we lifted it, it wouldn't crumple back down on him," Kenton said.

"We put pneumatic rescue airbags under the metal on either side of him and lifted both at the same time until his feet were free and we could drag him out.

"We put him on a stretcher. His right foot was almost cut in half longways. The gash was full of grain and we got the hose reel off the truck to wash it out so they could bandage it. He was lucky not to have more injuries above his ankle. An RACQ Capricorn Rescue helicopter flew him to Rockhampton Base Hospital.

"The rescue took two-and-a-half hours. It was a relief just to be out of the silo because the structural integrity was playing on my mind the whole time.

"Everyone worked well together. At any car accident or cut-out, we work on the ambulance officers' advice. They rang me after and said it was really good working with us."



*The silo's roof was on the verge of collapse during the rescue.*



*The man was dragged out from under this piece of metal.*



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# The great sugar fire of 1963

When a bulk sugar terminal burnt down in Townsville, it was the first time in Queensland history that fire brigades were called in from other regions as reinforcements, but it soon revealed inconsistencies in how the brigades operated.

In Queensland's worst structural fire at the time, the concrete-and-steel shed at Townsville Harbour burnt for five days, starting on Thursday 9 May.

The alarm was raised by a nightwatchman, who later told the ABC, "You could see an uneven bobbing up and down of light, like if you've got a lightbulb and swung it."<sup>1</sup>

"I hopped on the motorbike and rode across town at great speed and pulled up in front of the fire brigade and they looked at me and I said, 'Listen, the bulk sugar terminal's on fire.' And with that I didn't wait around – I hopped on my bike and nearly cut a cop's car in half going back I was going that bloody fast and the coppers followed me back to see what was going on."

## Rivers of melted sugar

Thought to have started by internal combustion, the fire burnt 77,000 tons of raw sugar that was meant to be shipped to Japan.

Townsville only had 48 firefighters so they had to work four hours on and four hours off.

Part of the shed roof collapsed the next day, so the firefighters could no longer spray water on top of the sugar.

"They had to use the hoses to dissolve sugar and bring the stacks down to a level where water could reach the flames," the Canberra Times wrote. "Lava-like rivers of melted sugar, meanwhile, were streaming across the shed area."<sup>2</sup>

Brisbane's Fire Chief, George Healy, flew to Townsville to direct the firefighters.

"The melted sugar was as treacherous as quicksand," he said. "You had to keep moving once you were in it. If you stopped, even for a moment, you were caught."<sup>2</sup>

An engineer got trapped in the sugar and firefighters had to pull him out, but his gumboots were stuck fast.

Firefighter Alex Bull told the Townsville Bulletin, "It's hell in there. The heat near the sugar stack is tremendous."<sup>3</sup>

Firefighter Alfie Need was on day shifts, recovering from a broken leg, when he was reinstated to work alongside his colleagues.

"Nobody believed the sugar would burn," he told the ABC in 2010. "We were ploughing through what looked like a moving mass of quicksand."<sup>1</sup>

"The building was starting to distort at this stage and the fire was very difficult to fight because there was no water supply... we had to run pumps from the water which was about 700 feet away."

On top of that, the water pressure was dismally low.

"Not having any BA it was very difficult for the firemen [sic] to fight the fire and they had to go out to the open air as often as they could to rehabilitate, cough your guts up and go back in," Alfie said.



Firefighters were exhausted by the suffocating conditions in the shed. Photo from CityLibraries.



“The smell was shocking. It was a cross between when your mother’s cooking in the kitchen and you’ve got all those sweet sickly smells, plus the fact that it was in dense smoke that made it almost impossible to look, to see.”

Miraculously, no firefighters were injured.

### The wrong couplings

The local firefighters were supported by Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and Australian Army firefighters.

The USS Somers, a visiting US destroyer, provided 15 crew and three pumps. A tug owned by the Harbour Board pumped about 5600 litres of seawater per minute onto the fire and a circulating pump from the Townsville Regional Electricity Board pumped another 62,000 litres per minute.<sup>4</sup>

The Townsville Bulletin reported that tenders were brought in from Ayr, Brandon and Ingham, and volunteer firefighters from the Inkerman, Kalamia and Pioneer sugar mills.<sup>3</sup>

However, according to the Townsville Bulletin report, there were major setbacks when fire crews from Cairns, Innisfail and Proserpine found their firefighting equipment was not compatible with Townsville equipment, leading to crews spending wasted time refitting their connectors.

Alfie Need recalled that, since Queensland still operated under the fire boards system at the time, no two brigades used the same couplings to join their hoses together.

“We put aside an officer from Townsville and his job was to make up... coupling parts – hose with pieces of one size coupling and one on the other so we could more or less amalgamate the hoses and the units.”<sup>1</sup>

The brigades also used different commands.

“We used to work on whistle signals, and in Townsville one blast of the whistle meant you turn the water on, and one blast of the whistle say for instance in Ingham meant ‘All out, danger’.”

As a result, commanding officers could only work with their own firefighters.

After the fire, the state’s fire authorities began to standardise all fire equipment and procedures in Queensland. Two years later, in 1965, the Queensland Government established the State Fire Services Council, whose responsibilities included inspection, training and coordination of the state’s Fire Brigade Boards.

### Explosive consequences

According to the Townsville Bulletin, “A sticky, molasses-like mixture that was three inches deep poured out of the shed and into the harbour. The centre of town is now covered by foul smelling smoke and fumes, and the rivers are discoloured and full of dead fish.”<sup>3</sup>

Local photographer Ray told the ABC: “It was like a hydrogen sulphide gas the smell... the paint was peeling in Flinders Street. Any shops that had anything made of silver, all tarnished and went black. It really was very miserable.”<sup>1</sup>



About 30,000 tons of sugar was estimated to have washed into the bay. Photo from Queensland State Archives.



A week after the fire, crews cleaning up the rail sidings next to the building felt small explosions under their feet. Two days later, a switch room blew up after a circuit breaker dropped out.

Engineers at the shed decided there must be a buildup of gas, so the Inspector of Coal Mines, Charles McPherson, came from Rockhampton with equipment to detect the gas. He found hydrogen in explosive concentrations under the shed and the nearby roadway and railway.

Charles wrote in a report that, "A soil bacteria Clostridium can be dormant in soil as a spore for up to 50 years and become active with a solution of water and sugar. The bacteria multiplies rapidly under favourable conditions and produces hydrogen and CO<sub>2</sub> in equal percentages."<sup>5</sup>

Water and sugar from the fire had "saturated the whole area of reclaimed swamp land which acted like a huge

sponge holding the mixture in which the bacteria multiplied profusely."

The access hole covers and drain openings were sealed shut by molasses, which workers cleared to allow the gas to escape. They also dug a deep trench along the side of the shed to let gas out from under the concrete floor.

### Aftermath

George Healy told the Townsville Bulletin the fire was the consequence of poor planning.

"The fundamental reason why the fire burnt for so long and at such cost was the thought among sugar people that the sugar would not burn," he said.

"There was not one single fire precaution in the whole of the terminal... They spent an enormous amount of money proofing that terminal against cyclones, and did not spend a penny protecting it against fire."<sup>3</sup>

The fire resulted in the biggest insurance payout in Australia at the time – £6 million (about \$170 million in today's prices).<sup>6</sup>

In 2003, the firefighters who battled the blaze came together for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fire and Assistant Commissioner Ron Twomey told the ABC, "I don't think that unless you were actually there you could ever get an appreciation of the adversity and the dangerous situation they faced.

"It's really challenging working with equipment that's not as good as it is these days, working with limited water supplies, working with different breathing apparatus. We won't underestimate the wear and tear on those individuals or the bravery they exhibited in dealing with that."<sup>7</sup>



The mountain of sugar was 150 metres long, 45 metres wide and 27 metres high. Photo from Queensland State Archives.



The sugar terminal was rebuilt after the fire. Photo from Queensland State Archives.

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Built just four years earlier, the terminal was 300 metres long and could hold 10 per cent of Australia's annual sugar production. Photo from Queensland State Archives.



In addition to the Australia Day Honours recipients, QFES also celebrated high-achievers at an Australia Day Achievement Awards ceremony in Kedron.

# Australia Day Honours for QFES members

Six QFES personnel were awarded top honours – the Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM) and the Emergency Services Medal (ESM) – in the 2024 Australia Day Honours List.

## David Heck AFSM

First Officer, Chambers Flat Rural Fire Brigade

David joined the Rural Fire Service (RFS) after the local brigade saved his house from a bushfire 30 years ago.

“I went to give the brigade some money for fuel,” David said. “And they said keep your money, join the brigade – we have no members.”

David has since led many deployments and mentored other officers on how to manage complex incidents.

“We’ve had some close calls over the years. On a deployment to Sussex Inlet during Christmas 2001, we were in someone’s front yard while a fire approached from the bush across the road. We had to hose down our truck and ourselves because the smoke and flames came so close.

“We should have been two or three rows of houses down, but we lacked experience, particularly with that landscape and that type



of fire. That little township lost about 14 houses that afternoon. It was pretty scary but we saved quite a few houses and we learnt a lot.”

In 2019, David applied the knowledge he’d gained from previous operations when he helped manage the large fires at Sarabah and Boonah, taking on the role of Divisional Commander for several weeks.

“It was probably the busiest season I’ve ever struck,” he said. “I saw a fire roar up through Cunninghams Gap one day, crowning through the trees and burning in rainforest, which is very rare.”

David was an initial member of the South Eastern Training Team and committed his weekends over many years to train new members.

“People move away and you lose a lot of experience,” David said. “I realised we have to pass our knowledge on to others.”

Looking back, David recalled a special memory from the fire at Sussex Inlet.

“We searched a partially destroyed home that belonged to a woman with dementia and we found a small display case of medals. We carried it with us for five hours until we found a local police officer who could pass it on to the family.



“At Sydney Airport on our way home, I bought a local newspaper and came across an interview with the woman’s daughter. She said the medals were her dad’s from World War II. He was a prisoner of war and he’d passed away. The medals were all they had left to remind them of him.

“She thanked the firefighters who’d cared for his medals. We weren’t being heroes or anything, but we’d kept something of value safe. We did some good.”

### **Simon Ball AFSM**

**Acting Chief  
Superintendent**

Simon started out as a firefighter in 1982 in the Hampshire Fire Brigade.

“I was only 20 years old when I joined,” Simon said. “The training was incredibly tough – a

basic three months and then two weeks at Royal Navy ship firefighting school at Portsmouth. The instructors were ex Royal Marines and they ran the place like a boot camp.

“We were once called to a roof fire in a huge stately home. I was in a BA team crawling through this incredible roof space, trying to push the fire back while we passed suits of armour standing upright amid the smoke.

“My station covered the western part of Southampton including the port so we had many calls at the docks. I was part of a team providing round-the-clock fire cover while they loaded the fleet for the Falklands War. Being there on the ships and the dockside, talking with the troops embarking and seeing all the munitions and equipment loaded made that war more personal.”

After six years in Hampshire, Simon moved to Caboolture and joined QFES as an auxiliary firefighter. One of his proudest achievements was in November 2021, when he was appointed as the team leader to repatriate a large group of refugees from Afghanistan at Brisbane Airport.

“When the US withdrew from Afghanistan, it left all these people trying to leave the country for their safety,” he said.

“I’d just started as Director of Regional Operations and was given the task on Monday to make plans to receive 300 men, women and children arriving on Friday. This was during Covid, so everything had that layer to it.

“Coordinating with overseas military staff, Queensland Health, federal and state police, border security, customs, Queensland Ambulance Service, the airport, quarantine hotels and transport companies was challenging. We needed interpreters and special caterers to feed everyone in line with their religious beliefs.

“How did we overcome it? A great team of Brisbane Region staff. We all pretty much lived in the Regional Operations Centre for that week.



“The refugees arrived around 6pm and we had all 300 persons triaged, fed and in quarantine hotels by 2am. I’m proud of what we achieved in assisting many desperate people.”

One of his proudest memories is coordinating the annual Brisbane Region Remembrance Day service for fallen firefighters.

“It’s an absolute privilege to speak with the families of the fallen and all the retired firefighters. This day is for them, and I always want it to be perfect.”

### **Gary McCormack AFSM**

**Assistant Commissioner,  
North Coast Region**

Gary started his career with QFES as a firefighter in 1995, followed by various roles in the RFS, before becoming North Coast Region’s Assistant Commissioner in 2019.



“Awards such as this are only achievable with the guidance, support and fellowship of many people over a long time,” Gary said.

He was the Commander of North Coast Regional Operations during the 2019 Peregian bushfire, which involved widespread evacuations. Under Gary’s leadership, the huge response to the fire managed to save all but two structures, and no lives were lost.

“The Peregian fire was a high-tempo, high-risk bushfire with incredibly impressive outcomes that can be attributed to an amazing regional team effort,” Gary said.

“My role was providing strategic command and leadership from the Regional Operations Centre. I engaged with Fire Behaviour Analysts in the State Operations Centre to develop intelligence that informed public information and warnings decisions including evacuations.”

Gary also worked at the K’gari fire in late 2020, which burnt about 80,000 hectares over eight weeks. Gary was supportive of the Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation’s role throughout.

“The K’gari fire was a protracted event that required a high level of planning and resourcing,” he said. “The involvement of the Butchulla People, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) and Happy Valley Rural Fire Brigade ensured all vested interests were considered.”

*“I view leadership as providing direction, setting standards and empowering others to achieve through opportunity.”*

– Gary McCormack AFSM



Gary said he was a people-focused leader.

“I view leadership as providing direction, setting standards and empowering others to achieve through opportunity.

“I’ve been blessed to work alongside so many skilled and dedicated people. I want to thank my beautiful wife Karyna for her enduring love, support and patience.

“Receiving the award has prompted me to reflect on my career and what we collectively do as a department for the people of Queensland. I also am reminded of the importance to always treat others with respect, find time to laugh and genuinely enjoy the workplace experience.”

**Paul Mardon AFSM**

**Auxiliary Captain**

For almost 18 years, Auxiliary Captain Paul Mardon has served the communities of Pomona and Cooran.



“I never considered I would be a recipient of this prestigious award and I feel very humbled my colleagues nominated me,” Paul said.

“The people I’ve had the privilege to work alongside at Fire and Rescue Pomona are an amazing group, dedicated to their community and very proud of what we represent.”

Paul has been instrumental in the tactical leadership of several large incidents.

“We responded to both the Peregrin and Cooroibah fires in 2019 and were among the first crews to arrive. The speed at which the fire fronts moved was extraordinary and very confronting to all the emergency services on the ground.”

Since being appointed as the region’s auxiliary instructor in 2007, Paul has trained, supported and mentored more than 1000 auxiliary firefighters.

“I loved my training role and I’ve always enjoyed sharing my knowledge with new people. To see them develop and grow to become valued members of their stations has been great.”

In February 2022, Paul provided community engagement and support to the Black Mountain community after a major landslide.

*“I loved my training role and I’ve always enjoyed sharing my knowledge with new people. To see them develop and grow to become valued members of their stations has been great.”*

– Paul Mardon AFSM

“The Sunshine Coast experienced devastating floods and many of the residents of Black Mountain were faced with unprecedented issues including isolation due to roads being cut.

“We were on scene as parts of the road slipped away and it was amazing to see the forces of nature at work. We coordinated meetings and open days and acknowledged the residents’ concerns and fears.

“I always had the support of my wife and family, so this award is also recognition for them. The amount of time I spent away from home operationally and instructing on courses was considerable.”

**Mark Dole ESM**

**SES Regional Director,  
Brisbane Region**

Mark started his emergency service career in 1999 with the Tasmania State Emergency Service (SES). He was involved with the Queensland SES for 17 years before recently retiring.



Mark was responsible for training in the largest SES unit in Queensland. During the 2011 flood and cyclone events, Mark oversaw SES operations, including the deployment of about 2500 volunteers.

As part of a national team coordinated by Emergency Management Australia, Mark helped develop and deliver a disaster management instructional skills package to 60 Indonesian emergency management officers in Jakarta, Indonesia.

In 2014 Mark participated in the Pacific Technical Assistance Mechanism Australian Volunteers International program in Palau.

**Colin (Curl)  
Santacaterina  
AFSM**

**Volunteer, Childers  
Rural Fire Brigade**

Curl is well known in the Childers and Bundaberg community for his distinguished service as an Auxiliary Captain and RFS volunteer.



On 23 June 2000, he was one of the first firefighters to respond to the Palace Backpackers Hostel fire, where he helped rescue 76 people.

He and another firefighter attempted to enter the building but the intensity of the fire forced them back. Molten metal from lead-headed nails in the roof was falling like raindrops.



After retiring as an Auxiliary Captain in 2016, Curl continues to serve his community as a volunteer.

Always the first to lend a helping hand, Curl is highly respected by local brigades as an outstanding leader who gives countless hours to attend brigade activities.

### **William (Bill) Humble OAM**

#### **Volunteer, Sugarloaf Rural Fire Brigade**

Bill received the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), along with former voluntary chemical expert Gary Golding.

Bill has been involved with many community groups in Stanthorpe and was awarded Stanthorpe's Citizen of the Year in 2012 and the QFES Diligent and Ethical Service Medal in 2016.

"I came out here from Pommyland in '64," Bill said. "I helped organise the Apple and Grape Harvest Festival and I became the town crier for many years, an old British ritual.

"I put my hand up to be President of the Stanthorpe Business Association and I chaired the local branch of the Queensland Arts Council. In the '80s I was a stud cattle steward. I also did commentary and masseuse work for the rugby league and I was a boxing judge and referee. And I just thoroughly enjoyed it all."

Bill joined the RFS in 2002 when there was a big fire near Ballandean.

"It was a monster – you couldn't do anything with it because it was inaccessible, up in the mountains. Brigades from all over the place came down and we controlled the fire around the edges until it died down.



"When I retired in 2020 I threw myself into the RFS even more. There's nothing like being on a fire ground, holding the hose while your mate's on the pump and you can't see each other for the smoke but you know your mate's going to look after you.

"I love the comradeship and I really and truly miss it now that I'm coming up on 87 years and I can't drive the truck anymore."

Bill remembered helping a local couple whose house was badly damaged in a fire.

"They were a lovely middle-aged couple and after the fire they were staying in a ten-by-ten concrete shed, like a cold storage cellar you'd keep fruit in. They slept on the floor with a few blankets.

"I went to see them and was taken aback. I noticed a caravan for sale outside a garage, so I bought it and towed it over for them to stay in. And I reached out to some people who organised food and supplies for them. I'd like to think someone would do the same for me. Helping people, that's what life's about."

*"I love the comradeship and I really and truly miss it now that I'm coming up on 87 years and I can't drive the truck anymore."*

*– William (Bill) Humble OAM*

## **Do you own one of these torches?**

QFES has issued a product safety recall notice for these portable dynamo torches, which were distributed to the public between 2014 and 2023.

Product testing instigated by QFES found the torch does not comply with new safety requirements for products containing button/coin batteries. The battery compartment is not adequately secured, and the button batteries may be accessible.

There is a risk of choking, severe internal burn injuries or death to young children if they gain access to the button batteries and swallow or insert them.

If you have one of these torches, dispose of it immediately or get in touch with QFES by emailing [QFES.CommunityEd@qfes.qld.gov.au](mailto:QFES.CommunityEd@qfes.qld.gov.au).



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# Putting people first

An early milestone in QFES' transition to the Queensland Fire Department (QFD) was the marked with the recruitment of our new Chief Human Resource Officer Katrina McGill.

Katrina has a distinguished two-decade career with the Queensland Government and her experience will help QFES continue to build capability and our ideal culture.

"I've worked in hospitality, the arts, as a union organiser, industrial officer and campaign strategist and in human resources in the public, private and NGO sectors," Katrina said. "I've also studied in the arts, business and public sector management.

"What my experience has taught me is that people are endlessly fascinating and the extraordinary things they are capable of amaze me. Sometimes I think the people doing the amazing things are amazed by what they can do, too.

"Lots of things excite me about my new role but if I had to pick one it would be being part of the new QFD, which will have an exclusive focus on exemplary firefighting services for the people of Queensland. Being able to contribute to that is very exciting."

Katrina's directorate has changed its name from People to People and Culture to reflect QFES' and the future QFD's commitment to the workforce.

"Without our people being able to do their job, the people of Queensland will not receive the services they deserve," Katrina said.

"But one person doing an excellent job can only achieve so much. It's when the team and the organisation maximise what they can do that the real magic happens. That's where culture comes into the picture.

"If a workplace isn't positive or inclusive, people will often censor who they are and that limits the unique contribution they can make. We want our people to be excited when they come to work and to feel a sense of belonging."

QFES has made a commitment to prioritise its people at the core of its activities.

"People don't check their lives at the door when they arrive at work. Even though we come to work to do a good job we still have families, children, friends, hobbies and interests that form different parts of our lives.

"If our people are to be excited and have that sense of belonging we need to support them to be seen for who they are. We also want to send them home safely to their families at the end of the day.

"Often organisations focus solely on process or activities and while that is necessary it's not sufficient. Having skilled and capable people to ensure the work is done and acknowledging their contribution is important.

"It's also important to engage with our people as they have fabulous ideas that can assist in some of the problems all organisations face."

Katrina said her focus was to ensure the People and Culture Directorate supported QFES to transition staff and volunteers to the new QFD in a seamless manner.

"I've started engaging with regional areas and the state teams to understand the work they do, what can enable that work and what are some of the challenges.

"I will then look at the People and Culture function to improve our responses to those challenges and that work will feed into a People and Culture Strategy.

"I've been so impressed by the people I've had the pleasure of meeting since I started with QFES. They are engaged and passionate about the work they do, and I find that inspiring."





# Women leading the way

This International Women’s Day, we celebrated all the women of QFES and acknowledged those who are paving the way forward and inspiring others.

The theme this year was ‘Count Her In: Invest in Women. Accelerate Progress’, highlighting the role women play in shaping a better future.

At the Leading Women International Women’s Day event, Acting Commissioner Steve Smith presented the Women in QFES Awards. *Response* spoke with some of the winners about their outstanding efforts.

**Rachel Curnuck**  
Outstanding Female Leader (RFS)  
First Officer, Avondale Rural Fire Brigade

Rachel has been a volunteer for almost 10 years and her brigade’s First Officer for three.

“Since I was a little girl I’ve always had the passion and desire to help others,” Rachel said. “The Rural Fire Service (RFS) offered a way to connect with and give back to my community while building skills and experience.”

Over the years Rachel’s commitment to the service has evolved, not only as a firefighter but as a paramedic.



“The 2013 floods were pivotal for me. This event directed me to my current career as a paramedic but also inspired me to serve locally while I studied toward that goal. My twin and a few friends completed Firefighter Minimum Skills with me and I’ve enjoyed serving with them and other great people since.”

She said her favourite part of the job was making a difference.

“I love rolling up on a scenario that is less than ideal and operating with my team efficiently to solve the problem and protect people and property. I have inherited and propagated a legacy of excellence in what we do in the brigade and we have a reputation of being reliable.

“We’ve faced bushfires head on to keep structures safe, we’ve gotten out just in time as a fire in a state forest crowned and rushed through the tops of the trees.

“I’ve also had the joy of getting showered on by water bombers and eating fresh honey from a fallen tree that had been burning.

“But I reckon, my biggest highlights would be working with my brigade members and serving the community during the good and not so good times.

“It’s an absolute honour to have been nominated for the award and I hope I can continue to be a good mentor, leader and team player.”



**Anne-Marie Bennett**  
**Outstanding Female Leader (SES)**  
**Senior Field Operator,**  
**Redland SES Unit**

When Anne-Marie joined the State Emergency Service (SES) 26 years ago she was her unit's first female member. It was a struggle at first, but she encouraged other women to step up and today almost half of their members are female.

"In 1998 we had 12 male volunteers and no females in the ranks," Anne-Marie said. "In 2024 we have 160 volunteers across six islands and the mainland, with 42 per cent of those being female volunteers."

She was first inspired to volunteer by a teacher at her school.

"I had a geography teacher in grade nine who would come to school every Tuesday morning telling us what exciting skills she'd learnt at SES training the night before. I now gain 50 new orange friends every year."

Anne-Marie's passion is first aid and she created a Facebook page where she shares training tips and information with almost 700 members.

"I'm passionate about first aid because it's a lifesaving skill everyone should feel confident with," she said. "I love it when people ring and tell me about their real-life experiences administering first aid and they're so proud of the difference they made, irrespective of the outcome."

"Redland has been through several large medical emergencies that have required our team to pull together, including the Christmas by Starlight explosion in 2012."

The 2011 Brisbane floods were one of the most intense operations Anne-Marie has been a part of.

"The operational tempo was like nothing else, especially when they tasked 400 floodboat jobs out of our small operations centre. One of those jobs was rescuing a family with a four-day-old baby from a balcony."

"It isn't until the adrenaline stops that you think about the enormous efforts required to respond to an event of that scale."

"While there have been many challenges, I am who I am today because of all the fantastic people who have taught me what true leadership and selflessness means."

*"My biggest highlights would be working with my brigade members and serving the community during the good and not so good times."*

– Rachel Curnuck



**Jarna Vilayrack**  
**Outstanding Female Leader (Corporate Support)**  
**Principal Program Manager, Workforce Development**

Jarna developed the new Connecting Women course as part of the leadership programs within QFES. When she and her team ran a pilot workshop in November 2023, they were overwhelmed with nominations from staff and volunteers.

"I'm mostly a quiet achiever, so it was heartwarming that my commitment to continuous leadership learning and development opportunities for staff and volunteers was recognised," Jarna said.

"Last year was challenging for me, so being acknowledged for all the hard work is a special moment."

"Connecting Women was a culmination of my observations during the Leadership Foundations program across the state as well as my experience with the Balance program in New South Wales."

"The course is about creating a psychologically safe space to connect women across the department to develop their leadership and management capabilities."

"We aspire to create a high level of safety and trust within the cohort to build resilience, develop skills to have necessary conversations and build leadership abilities."

"The pilot's success was due to the support of coaches, the Executive Leadership Team, the Fire and Emergency Services Support Network and the Senior Advisor Workplace Standards network."

"I work with an amazing bunch of humans. I'm keen to create more bespoke development opportunities for our staff and volunteers."



**Congratulations to all this year's winners**

**Outstanding Female Leader (FRS)**

Vanessa Madge, Inspector, North Coast Region

**Outstanding Female Leader (RFS)**

Rachel Curnuck, Rural Firefighter, Avondale Rural Fire Brigade

**Outstanding Female Leader (SES)**

Anne-Marie Bennett, Volunteer, Redland SES Unit

**Outstanding Female Leader (Corporate Support)**

Jarna Vilayrack, Principal Program Manager, Workforce Development

**Outstanding Female Leader (Disaster Management)**

Kath Ryan, Executive Manager, Public Information and Warnings

**Mentor of the Year**

Bridget Kerans, Volunteer, Magnetic Island SES Unit

**Champion of Change**

Sharnte Butler, Senior Firefighter, North Coast Region



# CENTRAL REGION

## Rural Fire Service milestones

The Caves Rural Fire Brigade held a celebration to mark the official handover of their new The Caves 71 Tanker. Minister for Fire and Disaster Recovery Nikki Boyd MP, Acting Chief Officer Ben Millington and Acting Assistant Commissioner Steve Smith conducted the handover.

Brigade members, area staff and other dignitaries attended the event, which was followed by a barbeque breakfast at the station.

A few days later, Alton Downs Rural Fire Brigade celebrated the official opening of their new station. Attendees included Acting Assistant Commissioner Steve Smith, Assistant Commissioner Matthew Inwood, Area Director Matthew Eckhardt, brigade members and families, area staff and other dignitaries.

Following the official opening, First Officer Owen Buckle and long-serving member Sidney Hoare cut the cake to mark this important milestone.



## Australian Warning System pilot workshops

Central Region, along with the Public Information and Warnings Unit (PIWU) hosted two Australian Warning System workshops in March to identify how we can work with our community to ensure information and warnings reach everyone.

The pilots worked with 28 participants, including people with disabilities and the Central Queensland Multicultural Association's (CQMA) Disaster Community Connectors. Participants delved into how the communities currently find information about warnings and workshopped ideas to better assist their communities to understand warnings and make it easier to access information.

The workshops were co-designed with Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) and the CQMA to ensure the format met the participants' needs. Educational presentations were also delivered by the PIWU, State Emergency Service and Rockhampton Regional Council.

The next phase of the project is to bring together the ideas formed at the workshops and produce the identified resources.



## Webinars on workplace standards updates

Over the past year or so, feedback from the workforce within Central Region has identified the need for more accessible training concerning various workplace matters, with both volunteers and paid staff showing an 'appetite' for more frequent training that covers a range of important workplace topics such as acceptable workplace conduct, conflicts of interest, how to address low level conflict, and where to go for help and support.



In response, Senior Advisor, Workplace Standards (SAWS) Shantal Wallace has launched a webinar series on a range of important workplace topics, including building leadership capability in basic conflict resolution strategies, effective communication and coaching.

In Central Region, we have found that running online training sessions (both day and night sessions) that cover all shift arrangements allows flexibility to join a suitable session time, and recording the session provides a playback option for future reference.

The benefit of providing more regular and accessible training to all workforce members has been evident in the feedback received to date.

We see this as a fantastic opportunity to ensure our workforce is well-informed, up-to-date on the latest workplace policies and procedures, and better positioned to make informed decisions on handling workplace matters in productive ways.



# NORTH COAST REGION



## End of an era

In March, the final North Coast Region Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meeting took place in Maryborough. It marks the last time senior leaders across the State Emergency Service (SES), Rural Fire Service and Fire and Rescue Service will come together before we transition into Central and Greater Brisbane regions within the Queensland Fire Department.

The theme for the meeting was good governance and good process, with the SLT treated to presentations from a range of teams including Finance, Human Resources, Safety and Wellbeing, Workplace Standards, Mental Health Services and ICT.

A tradition of the SLT meetings was for a senior leader in the team to share their leadership philosophy. To round off North Coast Region's SLT, SES Regional Director Angela Everist shared her philosophy that, "You can't be what you can't see" but also "You can work and improve in yourself while supporting your team to do the same."

The meeting was held over two days, and was a great opportunity to come together, learn and celebrate what we have achieved as North Coast Region.



## Strategic Content visit North Coast Region

In March, the QFES Strategic Content Services team were out and about in North Coast Region with two projects.

The first was helping to create localised auxiliary recruitment content including interviews and photos with auxiliary firefighters from Imbil, Rainbow Beach, Maryborough and Hervey Bay. The images and videos will help us promote auxiliary recruitment across the region.

The second project was a campfire safety video for the Rural Fire Service, filmed at Inskip Point featuring members of the Eurong Rural Fire Brigade and our friends from the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service.



## Colin Hjortshoj Flood Boat Competency Maintenance Weekend

The first annual North Coast Region Col Hjortshoj Flood Boat Competency Maintenance Weekend was held in February at the Bjelke-Petersen Dam near Murgon. It was Col's idea seven years ago to do this and to make a weekend of it with camping.

The weekend led to 40 Flood Boat Renewal Records, a new record. Thank you to the trainers who travelled there to guide and support participants through the flood boat process.

The event also set a record for the number of people who camped, with about 30 members and their friends and families staying in caravans, camper trailers, vans, swags and tents.

Thank you all for making the weekend a huge success. It's a great way to remember Col and let future members know about who he was.



## Australian Warning System awareness for seniors

A series of grassroots community engagement sessions are underway for seniors to help them understand the Australian Warning System and how to be prepared.

QFES held an initial workshop in partnership with the Hervey Bay Halcro Community Centre to talk about warnings and capture their ideas about further spreading the word.

At the end of the workshop, the North Coast Region Community Engagement team walked away with pages of ideas and resources that will help us better communicate with this cohort. The team had many productive conversations and looks forward to expanding these sessions throughout the region in the coming months.



# BRISBANE REGION

## Hanging up his helmet

After an illustrious 38-year career as a firefighter, Station Officer and Area Commander, John Bastin-Byrne has embarked on his well-deserved pre-retirement leave.

His unwavering commitment has left an indelible mark on QFES. We wish John a fulfilling and rewarding next chapter as he takes a step back from the front lines.



## 41 years of service

We recently celebrated Lieutenant Ashley Newson's last training night at Caboolture. After 41 years Ashley is hanging up the helmet and taking off the boots.

He will be missed not only as a solid firefighter but as a mentor to many. Ashley started his career in Wondai in 1983 and has tirelessly served the communities he's lived in. We wish him the very best in his retirement.

## Winch training

Kilo and Lima crews are completing their training in tactical vehicle-mounted winch relocation and familiarisation.

Fortunately the appliance 514E Iveco is fitted with a suitable winch for delivering the training package when the Lima or Kilo appliances are unavailable due to servicing or repairs.

Many thanks must be given to the Brisbane Region Duty Managers, Operations for supporting and accommodating the training as it is an important advancement in road crash rescue capability for regional operations.



## New station opening

Moreton Bay Fire and Rescue Station was officially opened by The Honourable Nikki Boyd MP on 20 February.

The new station provides state-of-the-art facilities with an improved capability to service the growing population of the northern suburbs as well as the large industrial area.

This station contains full-time urban firefighters and auxiliary firefighters from the relocated Deception Bay Fire and Rescue Station.



# SOUTH EASTERN REGION



## Drive Night

The 2024 Learner Drive Night program was launched on 15 February, with 80 learner drivers and their families attending the interactive session.

The program is designed to equip learner drivers with the skills and confidence to respond to emergency lights and sirens through on-road simulations.

It also provides valuable insights into what to expect when interacting with emergency services personnel.

Ipswich Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) crews continue to support this road safety initiative. The program is led by Queensland Police Service and is a collaborative effort involving the FRS, Queensland Ambulance Service, Department of Transport and Main Roads, Queensland Raceway and Driver Safety Australia.

This collective commitment highlights the importance of road safety and the role each organisation plays in keeping drivers safe.



## Peer Support Week

South Eastern Region kicked off Peer Support Week with a morning tea and trophy presentation at Pimpama Fire and Rescue Station to celebrate the role played by our Peer Support Officers (PSOs) in supporting the wellbeing of QFES staff and volunteers.

Congratulations to PSO Award Nominees Station Officer Adam Andrewartha and Senior Firefighter Lochlan Patterson. Their unwavering support and dedication exemplify the spirit of peer support.

We also congratulate Fire Communications Officer and Regional Peer Support Coordinator Belinda Morier, who was presented with a Commissioner's Certificate of Appreciation for her outstanding support of Fire and Rescue Service crews responding to the Sea World helicopter incident at the Gold Coast Broadwater in January 2023.



# Superstar volunteers recognised for impact on local communities



From floods to bushfires, daring rescues to demanding land searches—at the heart of not-so-everyday events are a group of Queenslanders who've made it their mission to lead and support local communities through emergencies.

QFES staff and volunteers are once again being celebrated as 'everyday heroes' in the annual QFES Australia Day Achievement Awards, proudly supported by QSuper, part of Australian Retirement Trust.

In our 16th year supporting the awards, we are proud to unearth some of the stories of those who dedicate themselves to the wellbeing of others.

Among the 88 remarkable Queenslanders recognised were husband-wife duo, Arthur and Robyn Burrell, who have volunteered with the Bowen Rural Fire Brigade for two decades.



Arthur and Robyn Burrell

Living in the remote Bowen region for the better part of their 40-plus year union, the Burrells have become a fixture in their local fire brigade after an impromptu community meeting saw the pair signing up to volunteer.

"Arthur has lived here all his life, and we figured it was high time to get involved and help out where we could," Robyn said.

**"To this day we might be the only couple who have been silly enough to do this together."**

"Our connection actually started back when Arthur worked as a panel beater and did up the brigade's first ever fire truck."

Repurposing a retired Army Blitz truck for the fire brigade as a passion project, Arthur hadn't anticipated riding the truck or 'taking up the hose' to protect his community. Now 74, Arthur jokes that this is a great retirement plan.

From their first call-out at an overnight blaze at Euri Creek to supporting the brigade as Treasurer and Secretary,

the Burrells recognition in 2024 goes to show that every helping hand makes a difference in our communities.

After a fall at a previous call-out took Arthur out of the action, he travelled hours with Robyn to 'take up the tongs' and feed over 40 QFES personnel who were fighting a blaze that lasted five days.

"We were stationed at a homestead preparing food over an old camp barbecue around the clock for crews who were rotating through the blaze," Robyn said.

**"I don't think we have done anything special to deserve these recognitions. There are other people out there who do way more than we do."**

The pair's humility is an attribute shared by the others who also received recognition alongside the Burrells in ceremonies that took place across the state this year.

Rachael Loveland, 1st Officer and Treasurer Gregory River Rural Fire Brigade, is among the recipients recognised during critical incidents in the 2023 fire season.

"My husband and I moved around a lot due to his work. I initially joined the Marburg Rural Fire Brigade back in 2002 as a way to make friends and give back to the community I was now a part of," she said.

"What has kept me engaged in my work with QFES is the sense of community service and the friendships I have been able to form."

For over 100 years, we've supported our Queensland government frontline and support services save for retirement. And as the super partner of many other Queenslanders, we value the role QFES staff and volunteers play in their communities.

"These individuals are not only talented, but upstanding members of their diverse communities," Australian Retirement Trust Head of Government and Stakeholder Relationships Erick Cordero said.

"Many of our members live rurally and remotely where QFES operates. Through our support we not only honour those on the frontline, but the networks of people who ensure the ongoing safety and support of Queenslanders in times of crisis or emergency."

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# SOUTH WESTERN REGION

## Training across the region

State Emergency Service (SES) members from Charleville, Roma, Yowah, Wyandra, Eulo and Quilpie undertook a course where they gained knowledge and accreditation to operate ATVs thanks to Austrail Training Services' expertise. All participants passed the course, which strengthens our local community's capabilities.

Our region also held our first road crash rescue course for 2024. Firefighters from Goondiwindi, Warwick, Oakey, St George, Pittsworth and Miles completed their RCRCo50 course over two weekends at the Charlton training facility. The course also doubled as a refresher for one of the Goondiwindi lieutenants and a recertification for a local SES Area Controller.



## Disaster preparedness workshops

After several flooding events affected the Balonne Shire Council area, QFES held workshops to help residents better prepare for natural disasters.

Representatives from the Rural Fire Service, State Emergency Service and Queensland Police Service, along with an Emergency Management Coordinator, discussed disaster management in Queensland, the Australian Warning System, bushfire safety, evacuation kits and the role of the Local Disaster Management Group.

The workshops also gave staff insights into where the gaps in disaster knowledge were so we can get appropriate information out across the region.

All attendees were grateful for the information and acknowledged that, particularly in smaller regional communities, having the tools to prepare themselves in the event of disaster will keep everyone safer.



## Rural fire brigade donation

In March the team from Western Rivers helped deliver two slip-on units to the Woleebee and Sundown Rural Fire Brigades.

These units were kindly donated by Senex Energy and will allow the brigades to continue to keep their communities safe.

The Woleebee brigade covers 371 square kilometres of grazing and farming land and now has seven units in total. The Sundown brigade covers 274 square kilometres and now has five units.

The brigades were grateful to receive this assistance as there has been a lot of grass growth across the area. A big thank you to Senex Energy for their community focus.



# FAR NORTHERN REGION

## Enhancing safety equipment

Our region is introducing the Scott FX DUO Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) and the TFX5 Distress Signalling Unit (DSU) to enhance the safety of firefighters.

The SCBA is a hard-frame, three-way adjustable waistbelt as opposed to the older ACS SCBA. The DSU is louder and has more lights and various tones before and during the alarm, along with internal temperature sensing.

Last year the Far Northern Region Safety Equipment Office also purchased and installed a new Decontamination Washer for cleaning SCBA. Staff have used it several times to clean sets worn during structure and vehicle fires, and after a couple of hours in the drying room the sets are ready for use again.

This is good news for the BA Technicians because the sets can now be cleaned before the technicians service them.

Far Northern Region has also acquired a Raman analyser for chemical identification. This portable device allows responders to identify explosives, narcotics, toxic industrial chemicals, chemical warfare agents and other materials, even through sealed, opaque containers.

The Raman analyser adds to the suite of chemical detection equipment used by Far Northern Region, enhancing safety and preparedness. By continually improving safety measures, we can better serve and support communities.



## Yungaburra Knitters and Hookers

A group of dedicated women, known as the Yungaburra Knitters and Hookers, have been knitting blankets and teddies for aged care nursing homes and those in need.

They've also provided knitted teddies to QFES, Queensland Ambulance Service, cyclone shelters and people affected by natural disasters.

Since May 2023, they have knitted and donated 220 trauma teddies, with the most recent batch being delivered to Wujal Wujal during Tropical Cyclone Jasper. Once their current projects are completed, they will have donated about 280 items.

Among the members of the Yungaburra Knitters and Hookers are Babinda Auxiliary Firefighter Lotus James and her aunt, Ruth Seamark.



# NORTHERN REGION

## Celebrating International Women's Day

The inaugural International Women's Day North Queensland Emergency Services and Defence Breakfast was held in Townsville on 8 March.

The event was attended by personnel from QFES, Queensland Police Service, Queensland Ambulance Service, Aviation Rescue and Fire Fighting, Australian Army, Royal Australian Air Force, Townsville City Council and Queensland Health.

QFES' Public Information and Warnings Unit (PIWU) were very supportive of this event. International Women's Day is a great opportunity to share knowledge and strengthen the interoperability of the services within QFES.

Attendees took the opportunity to engage with colleagues from partner agencies over breakfast and heard from four amazing speakers:

- Renee Meier, PIWU, QFES
- Sam Pascoe, Townsville Fire General Manager, WNBL
- LTCOL Kylie Hasse, 4th Health Battalion Commanding Officer
- Suzy Wilson, General Manager, Townsville Bulletin.

The speakers shared thought-provoking stories related to women in emergencies. Renee Meier, for example, discussed the Australian Warning System and the importance of teaching women about warnings as women and girls are disproportionately affected by disasters.

Worldwide research shows they are more likely to lose their livelihood, less likely to evacuate and 14 times more likely to die. This is due to several factors including societal roles, gender and cultural norms, carer responsibilities, pregnancy and even their clothing.

"We also know that women are often the organisers, the communicators and the primary caregivers within their families and communities," Renee said. "What all this highlights is the need to do more to empower women to be informed and be prepared to take action when they are faced with situations where they need to keep themselves and their families safe."



## Batkovic Winter Cup

Before the Townsville Fire WNBL game on 18 February, QFES firefighters faced the Australian Army team in the annual Batkovic Winter Cup curtain raiser.

It was a fast 20 minutes on the court and while we had the lead at one stage, the army took out the win 38-26 and retain the trophy for another year.



## Defence Welcome Expo

QFES attended the Defence Member and Family Support (DMFS) Welcome Expo at the Townsville Stadium in February.

DMFS hosts this annual event to give families new to Townsville an opportunity to talk with local state government departments, businesses and sporting groups. More than 1000 attendees engaged with 120 exhibitors, including QFES.

## Chainsaw training

Rural Fire Service trainers conducted a chainsaw level one course in March at the Northern Region Emergency Services Complex. Trainees learnt the theory of using chainsaws and pole-saws to clear away fallen trees.

As their practical assessment, trainees travelled to Nome Districts Rural Fire Brigade and helped a property owner clear a large fallen tree that had come down during Tropical Cyclone Kirrily.





# Shaping the future RFS

**Response sat down with Ben Millington, the new Acting Chief Officer of the Rural Fire Service (RFS), to talk about the experience he brings to the role and his plans for the next 12 months.**

In February 2024 Mr Millington moved to Queensland from New South Wales, where he was the Assistant Commissioner of State Operations with the NSW RFS.

He has significant operational and change management experience and has played a key role in emergency and fire management at a state, national and international level.

“I was excited to take on this opportunity because of the significant investment being made into RFSQ,” Mr Millington said. “I also wanted to be part of restructuring RFSQ as a separate entity into the new Queensland Fire Department (QFD).”

For the first 12 years of his career, Ben served in the NSW Police Force.

“I worked in Sydney then Enngonia near Cunnamulla, out in the far west of NSW at a one-person station,” he said. “I set up the police emergency management unit and started working with the NSW RFS as the Police Liaison Officer during major bushfires.

“An opportunity at the RFS as the Manager Emergency Management came up so it was a logical step to move across to the RFS.”

Ben was with the NSW RFS for about 14 years and oversaw major projects such as the Large Air Tanker program and Computer Aided Dispatch arrangement. As the State Operations Controller he coordinated the response to the 2019/20 bushfire season that devastated large parts of NSW.

“We did a lot of preparation in the leadup but no one imagined the season would go the way it did. We saw our first lot of fire activity in July and it continued until February. It was non-stop.

“Our dedicated and hardworking volunteers, both from NSW and interstate, worked so hard to protect communities in the most difficult and horrendous circumstances.

“We lost 2400 homes, but the volunteers saved more than 15,000. We can never lose sight of what they gave up and what they achieved.”

Mr Millington was also seconded to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2016/17 as the Pacific Disaster Management Specialist to help strengthen the region’s disaster preparedness.

“I was based in Fiji and travelled to other countries including Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and the Marshall Islands, to assist during tropical cyclones and support them to develop their capabilities.

“It’s one of the most disaster-prone areas in the world so helping them prepare for disasters was a priority of the Australian Government and it was such a rewarding experience to be part of that.”

In 2013, Mr Millington also travelled to New Zealand, Japan, the US and Canada under a Churchill Fellowship to study mass evacuations and supporting arrangements after significant disasters.

Since joining QFES, Mr Millington has visited many brigades to speak with volunteers. Based on those conversations, he has developed five priorities for the RFS during the transition to the QFD.

“First and foremost is engaging and recognising our volunteers and staff for what they do,” he said. “We recently held our first volunteer townhall and we’re looking for other ways to engage with volunteers.

“The second is progressing our reform work as we move toward QFD and RFSQ as a separate entity. Thirdly, we have many key projects underway which we need to prioritise.

“Our fourth priority is to enhance and foster relationships with stakeholders such as the Queensland Farmers’ Federation and work more closely with them.

“Last but not least is preparing for the next fire season. We have lots on our plate with the reform and other projects, but at the end of the day we have to be ready for the season ahead.

“It’s important to be clear where the RFSQ is heading, and we’re doing that by talking to people and listening to their feedback.

“There’s been a massive body of work to consider and action the reform recommendations. Now we need to implement what’s been agreed to, which I think will be a good foundation from which RFSQ will grow.

“I’m really excited about the creation of the QFD and it’s really important both RFSQ and Queensland Fire and Rescue remain interoperable and work closely together as we move forward.”





# New RFS induction lays the foundations

As QFES evolves into the Queensland Fire Department, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) has launched an RFS-specific induction program to give staff a renewed focus and in-depth information about the RFS.

As part of the RFS uplift program, more staff members will soon be coming on board, so the new induction program is designed to familiarise them with important topics such as diversity, inclusion, domestic and family violence, mental health and leadership. The first induction was recently held over two weeks in Brisbane.

The program introduces participants from all over the state to subject matter experts from different parts of QFES. It allows them to understand the functions that support their roles and who they can talk to when they need more information.

Participant Robert Haigh said there were sessions on governance, policy, HR basics, privacy and security as well as workplace health and safety.

“These were all linked together with sessions on values and human rights as they relate to QFES, making them so much more than a simple lecture on policy,” Robert said.

“Mental health was a major focus, both in terms of identifying and mitigating stress

factors in ourselves and our team, as well as promoting positive mental health opportunities.”

The induction also included professional development activities such as Mental Health Leadership and Cultural Awareness Training, an up-to-date Australasian Inter-Agency Incident Management System (AIIMS) qualification and the Leadership Foundations Program: Leading Self.

“It was an amazing fortnight of personal growth and professional development that I believe truly sets a solid foundation for growth of the new RFS,” Robert said.

The RFS will look to facilitate additional induction sessions over coming months with the next session scheduled for April.

## Testimonials

*“I learnt a lot about leadership, which allowed me to reflect on myself and realise my potential for growth. I also learnt a lot from peer conversation – I really appreciated the level of contribution and open-mindedness from our group.”*

*“There are so many things of value that I struggle to identify one more than any other. The Cultural Awareness Training was both emotionally the most difficult and the most rewarding for me.”*

*“I really enjoyed the program overall and found it very beneficial! There was something to gain out of every session.”*

*“Best course I have attended for many years.”*

# Plan to survive

Interconnected smoke alarms and an escape plan save lives.

Scan for more information



[qld.gov.au/HomeFireSafety](https://qld.gov.au/HomeFireSafety)



Queensland  
Government



# Have you planned to survive a house fire?

**QFES' new home fire safety campaign urges Queenslanders to get their household together and plan to survive a house fire.**

Around 1000 Queenslanders are impacted by accidental home fires each year, from largely preventable reasons.

The new public safety campaign, *'Plan to survive,'* encourages Queenslanders to create a home fire escape plan and install interconnected photoelectric smoke alarms for the best chance of surviving a fire.

Queensland law requires all homeowners to have interconnected photoelectric smoke alarms on each storey, in each bedroom and in hallways that connect bedrooms by 2027.

However, research shows owner-occupiers have a lower sense of urgency, with some putting off upgrading their smoke alarms until closer to the deadline.

If a fire starts while you're asleep, your body may not alert you as your sense of smell also sleeps. A smoke alarm in the bedroom will alert you to a fire in the kitchen as interconnected smoke alarms 'talk' to each other, so when one goes off, they all go off.

Acting Communications Supervisor Shannon McBride said the campaign aimed to change this attitude through emotive storytelling.

"The main story shares the experience of a family who escapes a home fire thanks to their interconnected smoke alarms and well-practised escape plan," Shannon said.

"By tapping into these everyday moments, this video-led campaign aims to drive impact and memory attention to clearly demonstrate that interconnected smoke alarms and fire escape plans are crucial.

"The key to survival is a chain reaction, and if you break the chain, you run the risk of not being able to escape a home fire.

"People don't think clearly during an intense situation like a house fire, so it's important the whole household practises their escape plan together."

Acting Deputy Commissioner Kevin Walsh said traditionally, firefighters attend more house fires during the winter months, but having working smoke alarms and a well-practised plan is essential, regardless of the time of year.

"Firefighters will always be there for those on their hardest days," Acting Deputy Commissioner Walsh said.

"When people have interconnected alarms that alert them quickly, and know how to make their escape, we can do our work faster and more safely.

"QFES has a multi-faceted approach to developing community safety and resilience, and this messaging is another piece of the jigsaw to create more prepared and resilient communities."

The crew from Camp Hill Fire and Rescue Station performed as supporting actors in the television commercial and the Community Infrastructure Branch provided expertise on smoke alarm requirements.

With the help of QFES Online, a new online home fire escape plan was also developed. The online plan steps users through the key decisions to make in advance because people often don't think clearly when there is smoke, heat and fear to contend with.

Every second counts in a house fire, so plan with your household to survive.



The Communications team recruited the Camp Hill crew as background actors.

## Always be ready with your home fire escape plan.

1. *Escape plan – plan how you'll get out and have keys close by*
2. *Meeting place – pick a meeting place away from the home*
3. *Responsibilities – plan for anyone who might need help*
4. *Practise – plan to practise with your family every six months*
5. *Get interconnected, photoelectric smoke alarms*



QFES members promoted the Run Army event with our colleagues from the Queensland Ambulance Service and Queensland Police Service.



Fire and Rescue Service mountain rescue technicians, along with the SES and Queensland Ambulance Service, rescued two hikers from Mount Beerwah.



Fire and Rescue Service personnel from across Queensland suited up for advanced hazmat training.



QFES recently celebrated our long-standing partnership with Surf Lifesaving Australia.





Rural Fire Service brigades from South Western and South Eastern regions travelled south of the border for a weekend of friendly competition at the Region North Exercise at Glen Innes.



Recruit Course 148 celebrated their graduation after 16 weeks of hard work.



The latest round of Fire and Rescue Service firefighters recently completed the 12-month Officer Development Program.



Auxiliary firefighters from Proserpine, Airlie Beach and Moranbah spent four days sharpening their skills in road crash rescue.



# Remembering Herbert and Noel

This year, QFES commemorated the 30th anniversary of the tragic Southport Honda fire where two firefighters lost their lives.

On the morning of 11 February 1994, when Gold Coast crews responded to the fire, Sub-Station Officer Herbert Fennell and Firefighter Noel Watson paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Every five years, staff on the Gold Coast take a moment to acknowledge and honour the loss of these two brave men.

This year, Gold Coast Zone coordinated a memorial service at Cascade Gardens, next to the Surfers Paradise Fire and Rescue Station. A memorial stone stands in the gardens and plaques are installed at Southport Fire and Rescue Station and on two of its trucks as a tribute to Herbert and Noel's sacrifice.

Superintendent Greg Tomlinson and Acting Inspector Scott Morgan helped coordinate the service.

"This is a very important part of our calendar," Scott said. "About 80 people attended this year, including family, friends, retired firefighters, on-duty crews, the senior officer group from South Eastern Region and our Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and Acting Assistant Commissioner.

"The families were really happy with the turnout. It means a lot to them that, 30

years later, we're still remembering their husbands, dads and brothers."

The service has a different theme each five years.

"On the 25th anniversary we concentrated on remembering Noel and Herbert, as well as all the firefighters who were at that job," Scott said. "About 30 firefighters who were working at that time are still at QFES.

"This year we're looking toward the future. We have a lot of new firefighters in our region and we want to make sure they understand the importance of this day."

A coronial inquest was held after the fire, leading to several changes to operational procedures.

"The fire changed people's view of the job, no doubt," Scott said. "It really drove home how dangerous the job could be. It could have happened to any of us."

Greg said the Gold Coast wasn't the first area to lose firefighters, but the Southport Honda fire was the first time any Gold Coast firefighters were seriously injured or killed at a job.

"A lot of people travelled and gave up their time to attend the service, which holds to how important it is for us," he said. "That

date is something that we cherish and hold onto.

"For those of us who had the privilege of knowing and working with Noel and Herbie, they were exceptional individuals.

"Herbie was a firefighter for 20 years. He was on his way up through the ranks and who knows where he could have been. Noel had joined four years previously. They were both very skilled firefighters, both had families and unfortunately paid the ultimate sacrifice in doing their job for the community.

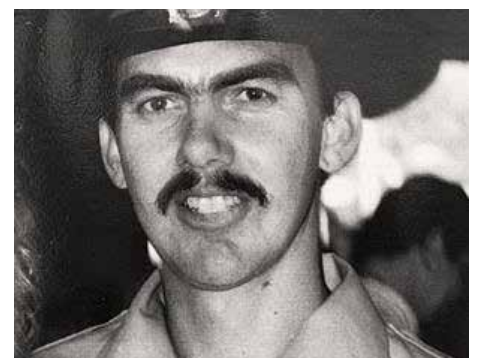
"As the number of staff who knew and worked with Herbie and Noel dwindles, we want to ensure their sacrifice and memories are not lost over time."



Memorial service held at Cascade Gardens on 11 February 2024.



Sub-Station Officer Herbert 'Herbie' Fennell.



Firefighter Noel Watson.



# A heart for people

**Tim Willis, the 2024 Peer Support Officer (PSO) of the Year, has seven years' experience in the role and relishes the opportunity to help his mates.**

Behind closed doors and away from the high-pressure environment of emergency response, QFES personnel often fight very personal battles. It could be related to a traumatic incident on the job, an injury to a colleague, or personal or family issues.

As one of 170 active PSOs across Queensland, Tim plays a vital role in supporting his colleagues through the challenges they encounter every day.

Tim joined the State Emergency Service (SES) in 2014 and is currently a Team Leader in the Redland Bay Group, a PSO for the Redland Unit and PSO Coordinator for Brisbane Region.

"I've always had a heart for people," Tim said. "I'm a bit of an introvert but I like to get to know people and have a yarn.

"I enjoy helping men because when I was growing up men always kept things to themselves. They couldn't talk to each other or let their emotions go.

"A firefighter told me recently how, before PSOs, if something traumatic happened at an incident, firefighters just got on with it. Now we follow up with everyone and make sure they get help if they need it."

Tim was acknowledged for his role in supporting SES members from Brisbane Region and interstate during the floods in South Eastern Region.

"I worked with the Victoria Task Force Deployment at the Gold Coast," he said. "I was available for members who wanted to chat when they came back at night.

"As people get experienced they become pretty resilient, but I always put my hand up after an event and ask if everyone is all right. I never judge people. I just take them the way they are."

Tim also enjoys mentoring probationary PSOs.

"I love encouraging people, especially new PSOs who have a lot of questions. Most important is for them to fit in and feel like an important part of the team.

"We have meetings every two months where we get together as a team and support each other. You can't take too much on yourself – we always talk about it."

Tim said being a PSO was about making people feel comfortable.

"I've learnt a lot about myself since I became a PSO – the good and the bad and things I have to work on. Listening skills are the main thing you need. When I first became a PSO I was surprised how much I used to butt in on people.

"Everyone's different, with different ideas and different ways they talk. You just have to be open and listen, build them up and say, 'Let's do this together, you're not alone'.

"I love it. It can be demanding sometimes, but it's satisfying to see people get back to

where they were. Sometimes people go up and down in a bit of a wave, but it's always encouraging to see them talking and being part of the crew again."

Tim received the award during Peer Support Week, which recognises PSOs' contribution to the wellbeing of our people. PSOs Adam Andrewartha, Lochlan Patterson, Jodie Reid, Neshia Saunders, Pat Maloney, Rob Coghlan, Darren Nelson and Bill Walker were also nominated.

Confidential counselling services are available to all volunteers, staff and immediate family members. If you feel you could benefit from support, go to [qfes.qld.gov.au/supporting-our-people](http://qfes.qld.gov.au/supporting-our-people) to locate your preferred counsellor or contact the 24/7 on-call counsellor on 1800 805 980 (calls returned within two hours).





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