



CFS FOUNDATION

Supporting Volunteer Firefighters

Remembering Ash Wednesday

Robert Styling - FSM OAM JP FAHRI MBA., B.Ed., Dip T.



Rob Styling, is the Group Officer of the CFS Para Group in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. He has been a member of the CFS for over 50 years and a Life Member of the CFS and the Salisbury Brigade.

On 16 February 1983, he had been in the CFS for 11 years and held the rank of Lieutenant in the Salisbury CFS.

Salisbury had three CFS appliances, 2 rural and one urban. The rural appliances were 2-wheel drive International ACCO trucks with v8 petrol engines, two seats in front with room for about 10 or 12 firefighters on the back, which was the way back then. The appliances were purchased by Councils as opposed to the State Government, although things were in the process of changing with the introduction of the Country Fires Act 1976. Essentially if your Council had plenty of money, you had good appliances. If not, you often had rubbish, some were petrol driven and others were diesel and some dated back to World War II. There was no standard appliance type, and there were significant differences from Brigade to Brigade.

Protective equipment consisted of khaki overalls, rubber gumboots, and, if you were lucky, they had steel caps, leather gardening, gloves, and a helmet. Breathing protection, consisted of a triangular bandage often soaked in water to cool you down.

The CFS Group structures were in their infancy and the state was generally divided into Council areas and this was then part of a Regional network but not with the command structure we have now. There was no real State-wide radio network other than a couple of VHF state channels that were monitored at headquarters, other than that you were pretty much on your own.

On the 16th February 1983 by 0930, the temperature was approaching 40° and the dust was so thick you could hardly see 100 meters in front of you due to the wind. The call went out from Headquarters for all CFS stations to be manned.

A significant fire behind Tea Tree Gully in Anstey's Hill had started around lunch time, and things were starting to get out of hand. There was no SACAD, no clear response plan and on hearing Tea Tree Gully had lost a truck, our Group Captain at the time made the call to just go. We headed up the hill fighting fire as we found it. We then turned into Range Road South into what could only be described as chaos. Fire was roaring up the hill behind houses straight at us. Some houses just seemed to spontaneously combust.

The fire just went straight over the top of us. There was a little or no protection for the crew on our trucks, other than the steel sides and hoses. In the chaos we kicked the door of the nearest house in and sheltered in there until we could safely leave. We subsequently saved the house that had started burning at the rear. We left a note that said sorry about the carpet, which was white shagpile back then, but we saved your house, signed Salisbury CFS Oh and thanks for the Coke. Three days later, when we were driving down the street to discover that this was one of two houses, still standing, a man came running after us asking if we were in his house, to which we, we sheepishly replied yes and to our amazement, he gave us a \$500 donation on the spot and a slab of beer.

Communications had been that bad that day that we were unaware that there were trucks further down the road that had also been caught in the burn over, and a number of the crew were quite severely injured.

We continued to chase the fire for the next 48 hours with little rest. Back then there was no aerial support, no fatigue management policies and no mobile phones, so we were limited in being able to call families to let them know we were okay as they were seeing horrendous things on TV. The fire had raced through the Paracombe Golf Course and the thing that sticks in my mind is seeing the greens and fairways burnt black.

The next day we suffered our second burn over. I had backed up a driveway to try and stop the fire in the rear yard. The wind changed without warning and the fire came back right over the top of the truck melting all the plastic fittings on the right-hand side of the truck, including the lightbar on the roof. It still worked but it was an interesting shape.

We slept when and where ever we could and were fed by the untiring Ladies Auxiliaries. No Logistics Officers back then. We finally returned to our own station around 1200 on Saturday the 19th to waiting families and friends, with more than a few tears being shed. Whilst our equipment was worse for wear, we were okay, physically as that's all that mattered back then.

It was only then we really started to understand the enormity of the situation. There was no mental health support for us at all we just had to deal with it as best we could.

I was fortunate enough to have a father who had served in the Second World War, Korea and Vietnam in the RAAF and we spent many sessions over a quite one just sitting down talking about what I saw during that campaign. His view, and the view of a lot of other veterans at the time, was to just suck it up. However, it was actually quite helpful talking about it, and having someone understand somewhat of what we've gone through.

A number of people left the CFS because they weren't prepared to put themselves through that again, but there were others of us that stayed and worked hard at developing a resilience to help us in times of significant trauma.

The key for me has been close family support. Not only my own family, but the CFS family where we can talk through things and work things out.

Since Ash Wednesday our equipment and trucks have improved greatly. There are significant safety systems on our trucks and protective clothing is state of the art. We have aerial resources that can assist in understanding where the fires are going, what the fire behaviour is and we can be far more strategic in fighting fires as opposed to defend and chase as we did on Ash Wednesday.

Significant resources have also been put into mental health programs for our volunteers, but there is always more that we can do. Firefighting is inherently, dangerous and as volunteers, it's something that we choose to do to provide something back to the community. Therefore, developing resilience and support for our current and future firefighters as well as our communities is extremely important and something that we must continue to put resources towards. As much as we focus on the physical equipment, such as trucks etc. We must also never lose sight of the mental health and well-being of volunteers.