

Personal Information

My name is Tim Fitzgerald. I joined CFA in February 1975 as a volunteer at Geelong City Fire Brigade. I later joined CFA as a career firefighter on February 1978 at Fiskville for a recruit course. I have worked as a firefighter at North Geelong, Geelong West and Geelong City Fire Brigades. I have worked as a station officer at Ballarat and Ballarat City Fire Brigades, and currently Bendigo Fire Brigade. I am qualified as a CFA Operations Officer and have worked at that rank at CFA Districts at Ballarat, Horsham, Bendigo, Swan Hill, Mildura and Kerang.

I do volunteer work with –

A historic fire engines group;

Committee member of the 39th Infantry Battalion Association representing World War One descendants;

Member and previous committee member of Golden City Collectors Association;

Member of Bendigo Branch of Western Front Association, a worldwide WW1 history group;

Researcher for Monument Australia, a volunteer group that locates missing war memorials and honour rolls.

HISTORY

Way back in 1974 or so the UFU and CFA together with MFB were at loggerheads so our current dispute is nothing new, perhaps even mild by today's events. I went to school at the time with a son of one the people involved, and I have worked with those involved.

But the dispute was not over an EBA. It was over union membership. The CFA had an organization called CFA Officers Association (CFAOA). This was comprised on CFA career station officers and regional officers, and senior ranks such as ACOs. The MFB had the Professional Fire Officers Association (PFOA) for its officers. Firefighters were all members of the UFU. If you were promoted to an officer you had to resign from the union and join one of the associations. For the strong union members it would be compared to being a member of the Labour Left and being forced to join the Nationals. The associations were highly conservative groups and mostly pro-boards. They rarely if ever voted against the boards. The UFU however had a large struggle almost all the time to get anything done or approved. But all was not right. There were many unhappy members in the associations and they agitated for change and were constantly rebuffed.

The crunch came around 1973/74. Formerly strong UFU members quit the CFAOA and rejoined the UFU. The same was happening across the MFB as PFOA members joined the UFU. The rush to exit CFAOA was initiated at Norlane Fire Station in the northern suburbs of Geelong. Station Officers such as Peter Lang joined the union, and the same was repeated at other CFA stations.

The CFA reacted quickly with threats against the new union members. They had to resign from the union and rejoin the CFAOA. As for what happened in the MFB I leave that up to others I am not entirely sure of the details. Of course the new UFU members refused to resign, so the CFA Chairman Brigadier Dick Eason sacked them. And so started a firestorm.

Back story – Eason was appointed Chairman in the mid-1960s to oversee a restructure of the CFA. It was highly dysfunctional (and what has changed you may well ask?). Eason was ultra-conservative, a former army officer who was very used to getting his own way. He was no slouch either and served as an army officer in during WW2 seeing action with the 2/2 Field Regiment at El Alamein and New Guinea. He was awarded one of the highest medals for gallantry; the Military Cross (probably 2nd to a Victoria Cross). He did not tolerate dissent at any level. He so despised the UFU that he refused to negotiate with anyone who wasn't a CFA employee. He was once interviewed by Bill Peach on This Day Tonight (now known as The 7.30 Report) for using CFA funds to promote his conservative agenda. He was unapologetic.

As soon as the officers were sacked almost every MFB station walked out. Some CFA stations went on work bans and would only respond to fire calls. Things now happened very quickly as there were a few fires in greater Melbourne that resulted in houses burning down. One MFB unit did respond to a house fire as there were children reported as trapped. This was not the case but the house was destroyed. The MFB/CFA boundary was considered a picket line by CFA union members and they would not cross it.

Within a day or so the Liberal Government headed by Premier Dick Hamer stepped in. Hamer, a reformist Liberal was considered the best premier Labour didn't have. CFA & MFB (Chief Officers, CFA Chairman and MFB President), UFU & CFAOA were summoned to the Premier's office. Also there I understand was Police Commissioner Reg Jackson and Chief Secretary (Police Minister) Arthur Rylah were there. Premier Hamer laid down the law that he was in charge and that all fire services would return to normal duties immediately. Brigadier Eason begged to differ and told the Premier that it was he, Eason, who ran the CFA. The premier reminded Eason that he served at 'the Governor's pleasure' who took advice from the Premier. Eason buckled. And shortly after CFA Chief Officer Arthur Pitfield resigned.

The end result was that all firefighters returned to duty. A further ruling was that any CFA firefighter or officer could join the industrial body of their choice – UFU or CFAOA. In the MFB there was a mass exodus from the PFOA to the UFU. Not quite the same in CFA. Some firefighters left the union and joined the CFAOA, and conversely station and regional officers of CFA crossed to the UFU. Across the state there were nearly fully CFAOA stations and fully UFU stations.

Eason tried to exploit this and made a film as he addressed a group of CFA officers. He stated the infamous saying that "CFA employees are only there to supplement the volunteers." This is now adapted to 'support' the volunteers. This has become a long standing policy even though it is unmentioned in the CFA Act & Regs. It is possibly unlawful under anti-discrimination law, but that would have to be tested in front of a judge. The film and Eason were derided immediately. It was Eason who started the great divide between CFA career and volunteers, and continually exploited by later CFA Chairs. Eason set about to deliberately and successfully to treat CFA career staff as second class members, and still exists today. That film of Eason would still exist if someone can track it down. It was at Fiskville for many years and shown to recruits and officer courses for a long time.

By 1979/80 the station based members of CFAOA were keen to establish strong ties on joint issues with the UFU. The regional based operational staff generally did not favour ties with UFU. A large station members meeting at Doveton Fire Station in 1980 (?) resolved by a huge majority of members to support UFU on a large number of issues. It was a heated meeting and many members spoke passionately about the issues and their feelings. The next day the executive of the CFAOA voted down all the resolutions, therefore going against the democratic vote of its members and siding with the CFA

board. There was speculation at the time that the CFA board had directed CFAOA executive to go against its own membership; never proven but highly likely. This was the beginning of the end for CFAOA. There was a mass exodus by station members to UFU.

About 1983 or so the John Cain Labour government introduced legislation to add an 'employee representative' to the CFA board. This started a verbal hornet's nest of vitriol from the right of politics. The LNP used their numbers in the upper house to defeat the bill. Much of the LNP opposition language is familiar with what we are seeing this year and last year. Some of the language centered on the 'abuse of volunteers', the 'insulting behaviour' of the UFU, and (my favourite) that 'all volunteers would be removed from all fire stations and they would be staffed by MFB firefighters'. As if the MFB had the staff and resources to crew 1200 fire stations, from major stations to remote tin sheds. It was sadly laughable.

The CFAOA lasted until mid-1988 or so when due to falling memberships it folded. Most members crossed to the UFU, but a few refused to join. And they remained so until they retired. Brigadier Eason was eased out of office in 1978 due to failing health. He died of a heart attack in November 1979.

CFA has since 1974 treated its career personnel as second to its volunteers. The organization will never formally acknowledge that. The last LNP government added the 'status' of CFA into the CFA Act as a 'volunteer and community organization,' therefore enshrining into legislation that volunteers have a higher priority to career personnel. This was not done by the LNP government to enhance a statutory authority. It was done to garner votes.

CFA will never move forward as an organisation while it treats its career staff so dismally.

CFA will never move forward while its staff do not have any representation on the Board.

The career staff need to be separate from volunteers; and not in the same organisation.

The volunteer association, VFVB, have campaigned long and hard for "Hands Off CFA" with a fear mongering public display. They don't want the UFU to run CFA, which the UFU could never do anyway. Yet now with a proposed split of CFA before the Victorian Parliament and the career staff leaving they are still unhappy.

The sooner the CFA career personnel leave CFA the better.

I strongly support the Fire Service Reforms before the Victorian Parliament.

Regards

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