

FIRE SERVICES BILL SELECT COMMITTEE SUBMISSION 2017

PERSONAL DETAILS

Scott Edmonds-Wilson

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FIRE SERVICE HISTORY

Current Position: Station Officer
 Corio Fire Station – Country Fire Authority
 20-32 Birdwood Avenue
 Norlane
 Vic 3214

Previous work history:

I joined the Country Fire Authority (CFA) as a career firefighter in September 2003 and graduated from the Fiskville Training College as a Level 1 Firefighter on January 9, 2004. In the almost fourteen years since this time I have worked as a Firefighter, Leading Firefighter and Station Officer at over 20 of the CFA's 35 Integrated Fire Stations. These stations have been as far afield as Mildura and Warrnambool in regional Victoria to Hoppers Crossing and Frankston in suburban Melbourne.

Over my career I have spent the majority of my time as a full time firefighter in the Geelong region. Since 2008 I have held a continual substantive position at the Corio Fire Station, firstly as a Firefighter, then Leading Firefighter and since April 2016 as a Station Officer. The only exception to this was in 2014 when I worked as an Instructor on Recruit Course 3/2014 for a period of 6 months and from September 2015 until April 2016 when I acted up as a Station Officer at Hoppers Crossing Fire Brigade in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

Corio is deemed as one of the CFA's major stations and as such we operate a number of specialist appliances from this location including a Heavy Hazmat appliance, a Breathing Apparatus support

vehicle and a Teleboom Aerial appliance, all three of which are State-Based appliances that can be called upon anywhere in the State of Victoria. These vehicles are in addition to our Type 4 Heavy Pumper, Type 3.4C Tanker and Brigade FCV (Forward Command Vehicle).

As such I am a qualified operator and supervisor on the Heavy Hazmat, BA support and Teleboom Aerial vehicles as well as an endorsed Pumper and Tanker operator and supervisor. In addition to this I have my Certificate IV in Training and Assessing so am able to assess others in my workplace.

The Corio Fire Brigade has one of the highest rates of structure fires of anywhere in Victoria, metropolitan Melbourne included. We attend on average approximately 1300-1400 calls per year and unlike many brigades the vast majority of these calls (approximately 1000) are primary calls, meaning we are the first arriving appliance at these calls.

According to our FIRS (Fire Incident Report Services) records I have attended over 2500 emergency incidents in my career to date in the CFA. In addition to my everyday service at a station level I have also been involved with the following major incidents:

- 2006 North East Campaign Fires in Alpine Victoria
- 2006 and 2007 Brisbane Ranges Fires
- 2009 Black Saturday Fires
- 2014 Grampians Fires
- 2014 Hazlewood Mine Fire as a specialist Teleboom operator
- Numerous strike teams to many areas of Country Victoria during almost every summer season

SOME PERSONAL THOUGHTS

In my personal opinion I believe that Fire Service Reform is long overdue. The Fire Services in Victoria operate on a model that is antiquated and has not kept pace with the rapid increase in urban development in Victoria, especially in the last decade or so.

As outlined above I have proudly worked as a career Firefighter for nearly fourteen years of my life. Even over this relatively short period of time I have been amazed at the increase in population and growth of the urban environment in Victoria. This is no more evident than in the western suburbs of Melbourne and suburbs of outer Geelong where I have spent a substantial period of time working as a Station Officer both at Hoppers Crossing and Corio Fire Brigades.

Up until quite recently (only the last couple of months) Hoppers Crossing operated with only three (3!) full time professional staff members. That number is now four. It is a well published and well-known fact that the optimum number of firefighters to have on the fireground to enable unrestricted operations is seven. Hoppers Crossing Fire Brigade would respond to well over 1700 calls a year. In addition to responding to the Hoppers Crossing brigade area we would also support and respond into the volunteer-only areas of Werribee, Truganina (including Tarneit) and Wyndham Vale. As such and taking into account that as a staff station we are always out the door and on the road in 90 seconds or less we would often not only be the first arriving appliance in the Hoppers Crossing brigade area but also into neighbouring volunteer brigade areas as well. Can you imagine turning up to a fully involved house fire, with persons reported missing with one truck and 3 people. If you think this is far-fetched It's

not –it has been and still is our reality. In effect the urban area of Wyndham Vale, Tarneit, Werribee and Truganina (the fastest growing area not only in the state but in Australia) is currently being serviced by 4 (and until only recently 3! Full time staff firefighters). The public has a right to know that in an area of probably 300,000 people they are being serviced by 4 full time firefighters!

In my time as a Firefighter I have actually had to begin fighting a fully involved house fire with only 2 people on more than one occasion. In fact, it is only since my time in the CFA that we no longer have 2-up stations (stations manned by 2 people). This only occurred in 2006 and it is only in the very recent history that all staff stations in the CFA must have a minimum staffing level of 4 people.

Up until only a couple of years ago we operated my home station of Corio with 4 staff. We have 6 operational vehicles in our brigade, 3 of which are state-based resources that can be responded anywhere to the South Australian border. That's right – 4 staff for 6 vehicles! We now have increased our staffing levels to 7 – yes an improvement but still a long way off what I believe the public deserve.

Yes, Corio is an integrated brigade and we have a number of volunteers on our books, most of whom have been a part of the brigade for a number of years and whom I have worked alongside of happily during this time. However, when it comes to operational ability we probably only have a core group of 6 or 7 volunteers that have the skill set to attend an operational incident in a meaningful way (i.e BA qualified, minimum skills etc.). We have zero volunteers with a pumper increment (our main operational appliance) and only a handful (2-3 people) that are crew leader qualified and are able to respond our Tanker. We have zero volunteers qualified to operate the Heavy Hazmat or Teleboom appliances and have 3-4 qualified operators of the BA support vehicle. As such the public in the area of Corio and Norlane cannot expect a rapid response to an incident without staff at the station.

In my almost fourteen years in the job I have attended many incidents into a neighbouring volunteer brigade area where we are the first appliance to arrive. It is a well-known fact that if a fire service vehicle does not arrive within 7-8 minutes then a fire that has started in a bedroom of a house for instance will escalate rapidly then into fully consuming the structure. As a staff member in an increasingly urbanised environment it is obvious to me that the more staff fire stations we have the better as the more professional and rapid the response will be.

I personally live in Jan Juc, near Torquay in country Victoria. My home town is serviced by the Torquay Fire Brigade which is a volunteer only brigade. I know for a fact that, despite their best efforts the quickest response to a fire at my home from the Torquay pumper is likely to be 12 or 13 minutes. The Belmont staff truck will probably be here from Geelong in 13-15 minutes. This is too late for my property. I have instructed my wife that, God-forbid there was to be a fire at our house, the best course of action will be to get herself and the kids out of the house and not worry about the house because it will have too much pre-burn time for much to be saved. We just make sure our property is well-insured.

Rapidly expanding locations such as Torquay in country Victoria are everywhere in Victoria. It is a by-product of Victoria being a State where people want to move and live. In my mind the only way forward for Victoria to have an effective fire service is for Fire Service Reform to occur.

WHY I SUPPORT FIRE SERVICE REFORM

In summary I am all for fire service reform. I hope that this will occur in the not too distant future. The main reasons I say this are:

- Many of us now live in a rapidly growing and highly urbanised urban environments. The outdated CFA integrated model must change to keep up with this growth
- There are many increased risks in many areas of Victoria which deserve a more modern approach (for example, in my home location of Corio we now have 5 major hazard facilities on to top of large industrial risks, nursing homes, shopping centres, schools etc.)
- As a staff member I am totally sick and tired of the political in-fighting and muck-throwing that has been occurring of the last few years. My main goal is to serve my community in the best possible fashion and in my mind that is going to happen with fire service reform. We need to move on and we need to do it now! I firmly believe that this is what the majority of Victorians also want.
- I believe that the proposed reform will be good for not only the newly formed FRV but will mean that the CFA will continue to provide first class service to the rural areas of Victoria. In fact I can only see upside for the CFA
- Fire service reform is needed to provide best practice and safety standards for all staff firefighters. This is vitally important to me to be able to perform the best I can at my profession in the safest possible manner in what is an inherently dynamic and risky environment.
- The establishment of presumptive legislation is also long overdue and gives me peace of mind that my service to the community over many years is actually appreciated and that my wife and family will be appropriately looked after if I was to suffer from any of the 11 listed cancers in the legislation framework
- This ongoing dispute has definitely had a negative impact upon my work colleagues over the last couple of years. Many have bemoaned the fact that our standing in the community as firefighters has been affected due to the prolonged and unprecedented attacks upon us in the Victorian media. This negative attention must end for the benefit of all Victorians

I would like to finish my submission by thanking you for taking the time to read it and I trust that the passage of Fire Service Reform through the Upper House will occur without delay. **At the end of the day these changes are about maximising safety; safety for our community and for me as a firefighter to be able to do my job.** I firmly believe this will be of benefit to all Victorians and will ensure that Victoria has the best fire service it can possibly have moving forward.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I would like to state here that I am happy for my submission to not be treated as confidential and can be published as the committee deems fit.