

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Echuca – Thursday 24 August 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESS

Darrell Phillips, Echuca Village Country Fire Authority.

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, a bipartisan committee of the Parliament, looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to please be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce myself, and then committee members will also introduce themselves to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and I am also a Member for the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

John BERGER: My name is John Berger. I am a Member for Southern Metropolitan.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Gaelle BROAD: I am Gaelle Broad, Northern Victoria Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Good afternoon. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: Thank you. With that, we welcome your opening remarks. If you can limit your remarks to about 10 minutes in time, and just before you commence your remarks, could you please state your name and the organisation that you are representing or where you are from. So about 10 minutes, and I will give you a 2-minute warning as we get in.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Darrell Phillips. I am a member of the Echuca Village community. I live out there on a 300-acre Angus farm with my wife, and I have got two adult children. I have lived out there for approximately 20 years, and I am a local builder in town. We have two adult children, which I have already said, sorry; I am starting to go backwards already. For the positive side of today, if you want to look on YouTube the Shire of Campaspe did a YouTube video, and that has all the positive side of everything the Echuca Village community did and what I am so proud of. I have got to squeeze probably the toughest two weeks of my life into the next 12 minutes. Hopefully she might give me 15. There are a lot of ups and downs in that roller-coaster ride. There are some proud times, there are some mentally draining times, there are some fatigued times and there are some rewarding times. I think everybody in this area has those same roller-coaster emotions. I have sort of segregated mine, so I will start off with the SES.

We did not have a great deal to do with the SES out at Echuca Village – they did not come out there and see us at all, I do not believe. But on the first night of the floods when the Campaspe was coming up and Rochester

was under flood, on the Thursday evening, we were part of a strike team that assembled in Strathallan Road – which is probably about 7 k's that way – and in the first 10 minutes of that I realised we were in a bit of trouble because we had not followed the CFA protocol and training we do by having a SMEACS briefing. We had no idea what we were going to do out there and we had not been tasked with what we were actually going to do or achieve. As most CFA members will agree, we had these SMEACS cards –

The CHAIR: Can you just explain what SMEACS means?

Darrell PHILLIPS: It is a briefing you get given about the situation, the mission, execution, administration and logistics, command and communication and safety. Before we go into any bushfire we get given one of these SMEACS, and it tells us what time the weather is going to change, who is the leading agency, what radio channel we will be using, what time we will be having lunch and what sorts of things to watch out for. You do not go anywhere without it. We can go all the way to Brisbane in a fire truck, and we will still have this SMEACS system implemented. The Brisbane fire chief up there might tell us what we are going to do and task us with a briefing, and our CFA commanders or strike team leaders will then come and brief us on what we do. It is a standard thing. I have been in the CFA for 20 years, seven years as a captain, and I carry it in my book, as you see here.

In the first 10 minutes we did not get a SMEACS briefing, but we were told to go to houses and tell them that maybe they should evacuate and the water level was going to be higher than in 2011. It was very hard, in our big truck, to go down someone's 400-metre driveway that had had so much rain on it over a period of time; we started chewing the driveways up. At the first house I came to when we went down I knocked on the door and the bloke said, 'Stand back'. He opened the door and he had COVID. I said, 'You've got to evacuate, mate, because the water is going to come up higher than in 2011.' He said to me, 'Having COVID, where do I go?' This is what comes down to the SMEACS. We were not briefed on where to send people or tell them where to go, especially the COVID one – I got the best one from the start. I advised through the radio system – I think it was being run by the SES out of Echuca div com – but we did not have a great lot of detail. I advised them that it was no good this big truck going in people's driveways, we were going to get bogged and just cause damage and upset the residents.

Then we got tasked to go around houses. Our strike team normally has to stay together, but it got broken up. We were getting tasked to go to houses out near Bamawm, in Echuca and back to Rochester during the night – we were out there until about 2 or 3 in the morning. It was very hard for us. Normally when we go to a house there is no-one there because they have left due to a fire, but we were walking into houses that had old ladies in there and the water was coming up. We do not have pumps on our trucks. We have the main pump, but we do not have pumps to help them to get the water away from their houses. We do not have sandbags. And like I say, we have not been trained in floods. This is not our job. It is normally the SES's job. We had poor old ladies there, and some people abused us. To one particular lady I said, 'Listen, we can't do anything for you,' and she said, 'No worries. Thanks. That's fine. Thanks for coming out anyway.' We got in the truck and the members seemed a bit distressed about that. We were all sitting there going, 'What can we do? We can't do nothing.' So we went back and I wrote on her fridge with a texta my phone number and my name and I said, 'Listen, if it gets bad, give us a bell and we'll come back.' She was quite good. That was a bit traumatic for a lot of us members. We did that for the first day.

On the Friday our truck went into Kerferd Street where they were making the sandbags and my members sort of stood there all day, bored out of their brains, counting how many sandbags people put on their trailers, which was a wasted resource. The event was starting to build up in Echuca Village, and I said to the div com that I wanted my truck and my crew back in Echuca Village.

We are still on the SES here. On the Saturday I thought that we would go in there with our 12-pallet tray truck and get a truckload of sandbags – because we had been helping the SES with their sandbagging and making sandbags – so it was organised that we could go in there and pick up our sandbags. When we went in there nobody knew anything about us picking up the sandbags for Echuca Village. I even threw in the 'I'm the Echuca Village captain and we need them for our community.' I was then told to get in my truck and eff off, when I was nearly begging the man to get the sandbags. The member with me knows of my temper and he grabbed me and put me in the truck and we left. As we left we saw a Northern Construction truck coming out with sandbags. We went around to their factory and they were making sandbags there too. So we just wheeled in there and I said, 'I need some sandbags, mate, Echuca Village', and they just laid 12 pallets on us

straightaway. So proud as punch we go back to Echuca Village, thinking that was all we needed in the sandbags. We unloaded them out the front of our station, our 12 pallets, thinking how good we were. That night, they all got taken and stolen.

The CHAIR: Oh, no.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Which the community – I do not blame them, if they needed them, they did – so the next day we went back out and got more sandbags, and this time we put them in the station, because we believed that this event was not going to be that bad and we were just going to follow the fire truck with a few sandbags, and we had prepared pretty well. We did think that maybe we could get a truckload of sand, just if people wanted to make their own sandbags. That truckload of sand turned in to a semitrailer every hour for five days – seven concrete trucks there, seven forklifts and 100 people making sandbags. People came up from Melbourne to give their kids the community experience of making sandbags. You know, I went out there sometimes and said, 'We've run out of empty sandbags, mate, you're probably going to have to go home', and he goes, 'I have come from Melbourne to teach my kid what community's about, can I finish filling these 20 you've got here?' What people probably do not understand is not one empty sandbag came from Echuca. They were sourced by us from Pyramid Hill, Melbourne, Bunnings in Bendigo, Rochester fire station – we could not get given any here, even though they were coming in and landing by helicopters, I believe. That is basically our SES involvement. They did run the div com in there because they were the leading agency.

If I just go onto the div com now – I will have a glass of water first. I normally stand up; this is a bit funny sitting down doing this. As far as the div com in Echuca; when we went out on that Thursday night we thought we were part of the team, but as the event got bigger, we sort of did not get any instruction other than what had happened and where we had sort of lost our way. It turned out that the ICC in Echuca became div com run by the ICC in Bendigo, we believed. We did not have any interaction, we got no SMEACS briefing. We did not have a plan. There was not a levee built between Echuca and Echuca Village, but I believe we were pretty much cut off for probably the first four or five days.

The resources that came into Echuca were unbelievable. The knowledge and the information that came in to Echuca was probably second to none, but nothing got passed out to the troops on the ground out in Echuca Village. It was not until a commander came into our station and I told him that the Murray was our fourth problem in getting flooded. We were getting flooded from the Rochester water coming down through the Beattie Depression – I have got a map here if anyone wants to have a look at it – and the Goulburn was rising as well and the channels were backing up from the Murray. The Murray was not going to be our worry. But no-one seemed to want to listen or believe us until a commander took me in there. I said to him at the div com on the map, 'What do you think that is?' And they said, 'That's a channel.' I said, 'That channel is 400 metres wide, 4.5 kilometres long and probably 3 metres deep.' And then their eyes sort of opened up and we started to get a little bit more respect than in the Echuca Village area.

The structure, like I said early on, with the SMEACS briefings and the communications – in the first couple of days the comms plan I got from the div com in Echuca was this. If anyone can read that or work out what we are supposed to do with that, please let me know. But thank Christ we were going to a flood and not to a bushfire, because I would not have left the station with a div com plan like that. Most CFA people that are seeing that are probably thinking 'Jesus.' That is the sort of thing we got, and that was the sort of thing we were up against with it.

I am sorry if I get a bit emotional, but I do carry 10 months of the floods. The floods have been over for 10 months, but some of us are probably going to have to live with things for 10 years. There are times when we said to people they could not have fuel or they could not have sandbags, or 'Come and settle your wife down, she's starting to panic and everybody else is starting to panic.' People are not going to remember the floods; they are going to remember the calls that I and some of the members of my brigade made. We are the ones that are going to have to live with that, and I do not know how to get around that. We hope by being here today it goes forward, and that is sort of going to be our legacy for the Echuca Village community. We do not want any praise or anything, but we want it to be remembered and to learn from our mistakes.

Just getting back to another one, Goulburn–Murray Water: a lot of our properties there have irrigation channels, and Goulburn water – when the floodwaters came up and they were running down that floodway which is on that map there, the doors that shut the water from coming out of the floodway were missing. So we had teams

24 hours a day sandbagging those outlets, even to the point when the Murray rose up so high it started coming back up the irrigation channels and impacting houses. So some of our ingenious community members went down and wound the door down, but we still had trouble with the water coming up from the Murray. We found that there were 8 inches missing off the door that had not been there because the door had rusted off. So all the assets of Goulburn–Murray were failing. We rang their emergency phone line, and we could not get them. We finally got on to them, and they were going to supply us with fuel to run our pumps because it was pretty hard to get into town because there was only one road left open in Echuca Village and the guys were sick of carting fuel in. So with Goulburn–Murray we came up with a deal that they would supply us with the fuel. After 48 hours we had no fuel, and I was told that they had not found their jerry cans yet. I did tell them that they still sell the things at Bunnings, and maybe he could go there and get a couple, which they did, and they supplied us with 40 litres of fuel most days.

The shire – we did not really have a big problem with the shire. Three weeks before the floods the shire and the SES rang me jointly, saying, ‘If we were to make sandbags out at Echuca Village, where would you recommend we do it?’ I said the Echuca Village tennis centre. We never got any follow-up. We were left to our own devices there. The shire was good in that I knew some people in there and I got on to them about getting some skips and signage out there for us, and going not through the right channels but direct to some people worked very well. We got some resources that way. We had a lot of trouble getting resources out of div com. As I say, in there they had all the resources and all the knowledge but did not seem to want to share. I think Echuca Village was pretty much cut off out there, and we were left to our own devices. The Echuca Village community did an unbelievable job, and I think, like I say, we just hope we do not have to go through that again.

The CHAIR: You have got 30 seconds.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Thirty seconds? Okay.

The CHAIR: There will be lots of questions, do not worry.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Well, that is probably the main thing. If someone came up with a closure of what the Echuca Village people want – I am speaking on behalf of them but there are probably a lot of people out there: now is the time to shine, I think, for the council and people to get out there and really have a talk to them and try and do something for them to alleviate the mental side, the stress side. And all our farms are struggling. We might not have got water in our house, but there is a lot of damage out there. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Darrell. All right, we will throw over to questions now. Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Well done, Darrell. You did a very good job. Thank you, Darrell, for being here and for sharing your story and your account and all the work that you did in response to supporting the community through this disastrous event. I just want to acknowledge what a difficult time it has been, and we appreciate you presenting through the challenge in recounting what happened. Just in terms of the coordination and communication, it sounds like a breakdown essentially in terms of some of the examples you presented. Why do you think that happened? Do you think there was no plan and therefore people did not know what to follow or there was a plan and people did not follow that plan? From your perspective and your vantage point, what do you think went wrong, and how can we fix it, essentially, in the future?

Darrell PHILLIPS: Well, as CFA we are trained for the planning. Planning, preparation and execution was one of our key things we set out in the village between our members. The better planning, the better preparation, it will make it better for the execution. But I believe the lead agency and maybe some of the people got a bit caught up in the event and where they were looking after their own area, or they did not become static. At any bushfire we go to, the main thing is to become static and not be running over to the trees or going over telling crews what to do. You have to be static to be able to forward information. Quite a few times we tried to get on to the div com to find out things, and the people were not there. The SMEACS system is used in every emergency organisation, including AIIMS, and we just had to stick to those fundamental things, and I think that is what would have got us through. We can go to the fires in Brisbane, Sydney and Lakes Entrance, and we do not have any problems like that because we stick to our structure, what we are taught. If I was going to a bushfire with the comms and the briefings I had got during the flood period, the wheels of the truck would not have moved. We would not go into places. I am from Gisborne, originally Mount Macedon. We would not go

into there without having the plan and the SMEACS and being told when the wind is going to change, when the front is going to come through and where we can get to. Yes, basically, not sticking to the structure, I believe – some people maybe got caught up in the event. I am not 100 per cent sure, but yes. I was not in there that much.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you. I am happy to come back later.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you for your appearance today, and I am just flabbergasted at some of the things that you have just outlined.

Darrell PHILLIPS: I can do a few more hours if you want.

John BERGER: I am happy to do that at some stage. I think we have heard a bit yesterday and again this morning about role clarity and, you know, the warning systems and who is in charge. Well, who is in charge of this situation? What were your thoughts? Who is supposed to be in charge?

Darrell PHILLIPS: I believe that the SES were in charge, and I do not think there are a lot of SES people between Elmore and Swan Hill, so they were probably pretty light on the ground. To me, like I said before, I do not really care who was in charge. If we are the assisting agency, we still follow our own training and our own protocols whether it is Donald Trump telling us what to do. My strike team leader will brief us as CFA like we have always been briefed for every fire we go to. We have structure and chain of command in place, so it does not matter who is telling us, as long as we brief each agency individually. I suppose the police have a system too, so if the SES told them to go here, I am sure the main policeman comes down and tells his police people how to do it. That is what we have to stick to: our own structure, you know. That is going to be the most important thing for this up and coming fire season. It is going to be bad – and probably not this year because we have still got wet feet – but the next year it is going to get worse. But we have to stick to our structure. And all our young members that come through the CFA are trained, you know: ‘Did you get a briefing?’ ‘Don’t you go anywhere.’ ‘If you don’t feel comfortable going in there, don’t go in there.’

And we had to go and ask people did they want to evacuate. We did not know where we were evacuating them to. We did not know how to get the water out of their houses. We are not trained in floods, but all emergency organisations should still use that same SMEACS program. And we all use probably the same peer support program afterward, you know. After a fatality car accident we all know to go and get debriefed and have peer support there. It is a normal thing. The after-action review has not happened for us. We have had little ones here, but I think it was that the government or something did not want to have a proper after-action review. I think if they got some of the leaders of some of these brigades and communities in, it would be quite surprising, some of the things they would probably hear.

John BERGER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Do you think that floods are not seen in the same way as perhaps a fire is? Do you think that the two events are seen quite differently, and should they be seen in the same way if they are not?

Darrell PHILLIPS: I think we should manage them, like I say, with our structure once again. Sorry to harp on it, but yes, we should manage anything, whether it be helicopter crash, a bus rollover or a flood. Floods are a shit of a thing because they take a while to get here and they take a while to go away, whereas when there is a fire, normally when we get there the people are not there. I went in 2019 to Wodonga. We did some fantastic work. Unfortunately, I kicked the back door of a house in to make sure no-one was there – I could have opened the sliding door – but there was no-one there. But then people are grateful that we come. You know, we told people, ‘Listen, we can save your house, but we’re going to lose your shed,’ and they take it on the chin. But with floods, people have got a lot of time there to get upset and come up with plans and conspiracy theories, and it just takes a long time to come and a long time to go. Unfortunately, in Rochester’s case it is pretty quick; they do not get much warning, and it comes and goes. I think that is probably better than what we had in Echuca Village, because if it had have got to the height they were saying it was going to get to, it would have been in Echuca.

The CHAIR: But your point is that the same approach – it should be the same, consistent all the way, no matter what the event is.

Darrell PHILLIPS: The same – it does not matter what we are going to; if it is a nuclear bomb, we will still follow the SMEACS program and the CFA training that we did.

The CHAIR: That process, yes. Okay.

Darrell PHILLIPS: You can throw any challenge at any emergency organisation – but you have got to stick to that structure. And I say this to my members all the time: floods are not our core product, fire is, but we still approach them in the same way.

Darrell PHILLIPS: I have had nearly every incident in my time in the CFA, except a train crash. I have had helicopters fall to the ground. And we still go with the same –

The CHAIR: Approach.

Darrell PHILLIPS: On the way from the fire station we are sitting in the truck – and now we have got these new dual-cab trucks – and we are going through the incident on our way there. Sometimes if it is close to the station we have got 2 minutes – ‘Okay, where’s the defibrillator? You guys are on the hose.’ We have that same structure, and that should be used in the floods. It does not matter who is providing the information to us, but you have got to follow that same system we train for, and I think that probably let us down.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks, Darrell. Thank you for your presentation and thank you for everything you did for this community during that event and since then. There is no doubt that the CFA are the best by far at logistics. They are used to managing big campaign fires, and I understand your frustration at what went on on the day. Why do you think that there was no briefing given to you? What do you think about the chain of command? Was it too remote having the ICC in Bendigo? We heard different variations on that yesterday in Rochester. People were saying it should have been in the municipality. This morning we have heard Bendigo was the right place to have it because you would not have an ICC in a fire zone either. But do you think that it was too remote to actually manage the situation, or was there some breakdown in communication between there and here?

Darrell PHILLIPS: I am only talking about what I believe, because I actually did not get to spend much time in there at all. I think where it was set up was a good spot for it, but you have to remember that there are communities everywhere else. It was not just about Echuca. I know it has got the largest number – of population and houses and all of that. Go out to Echuca Village or Torrumbarry and tell those people that. They pay the same rates. We as a community went out there on the Thursday and Friday as part of a team, and then after we came back we were not part of that team. The resources were all here. We did end up getting the strike team – because some politician bloke came to our station, and I was probably a bit emotional. I grabbed him and shook his hand with both hands, and I said, ‘Mate, we need help.’ And for some reason we got a phone call saying there was a strike team coming to help us. This was after the water had peaked. We did not really need them, and I said, ‘Where’s it coming from, Echuca?’ and they said, ‘No, it’s coming from Rochester.’ I did not want a strike team to come from Rochester; they needed as much as they had down there.

What you are saying is about the chain of command. George Calleja got in there, and he made us a sector out there in Echuca Village, and the world changed for us. We became a dot on the map then, and they started to help us. He did a mighty job. I did not think he was going to do it, but, yes, he did a great job. He said, ‘I’m going to come in there and I’m going to support Echuca Village,’ and he did. And on your chain of command, at one stage 10 members of the brigade were going to probably give up on the CFA and walk away. We were going to get trail units and become little vigilantes – ‘If you have a fire at your house, we’ll come with our trailers.’ I organised a meeting with them. The members all came in, and I said, ‘I understand your frustrations. We’re not getting much support or help, but this brigade was started in 1946 by people that wanted to help their community, and why should it be any different in 2022?’

Wendy LOVELL: Absolutely. And the after-action review, would it be too late to do an after-action review now?

Darrell PHILLIPS: I do not know. Bring it on and try – as long as it is done on, probably, a proper scale like this, not just putting a whiteboard up and someone standing there going, ‘What did we do wrong, and what

did we do right, and what can we change?’ I think somehow that connection between the SES and the CFA needs to be part of it. I will go to my grave saying that we are trained in the CFA with all our policies, our SMEACS and our standard operating procedures. That is what we instil into those kids that become new members, because one day it will save their life. Hopefully it does not come to that, but that is what we instil.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Not at the moment. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Not at the moment. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I am gobsmacked, I think is the word. I cannot believe that in 2022 last year we had Emergency Management Victoria, EMV, with 200 people down in the CBD of Melbourne or surrounds. I just looked up their website, and it talks about operational coordination. I am reading a couple of dot points: emergency management operating procedures and standards, state emergency response planning and emergency management coordination and operations. And yet you are saying basically that you were given none of that chain of command. You had to make it up yourself from your own community.

Darrell PHILLIPS: That is what I got from the div com.

Melina BATH: I just think there is a sense of frustration. I feel your frustration.

The CHAIR: When you say ‘div com’ – just so we all know what you are talking about, what is div com?

Darrell PHILLIPS: The ICC was named ‘div com’ – divisional command. But that name did get changed nearly every day or every half a day. The radio channel that we were on would get changed. One day there we were using a radio channel, and someone said, ‘We haven’t used that one for 5 hours.’ Okay, so we changed it.

Melina BATH: It is important to change your name, because that is going to affect somebody. Anyway, can you also describe to me, and I will rephrase it, who exactly told you to go away? You came into town, and you asked for help or you asked to see where there was a chain of command where you could get instructions. Who told you to go away? Do not name a person, but what was the –

Darrell PHILLIPS: In the div com or in the SES?

Melina BATH: Was it div com?

Darrell PHILLIPS: No-one ever came out from div com to see what we were up against. I did ask some people, ‘Maybe you need to drive out here, have a look and see what’s going on.’ When our actual paid commanders came out to see us, we got a different one every day, which was fair enough. Our actual paid commanders that we work with all year round and build up a relationship with had nothing to do with the flood event. They were the ones that were staying home looking after the children, the houses and the cattle – you know what I mean? They were told, I believe – they might be able to tell you more – they were looking after our bread-and-butter stuff, so if we had had a structure fire, they would have helped us with that. They were not part of the flood, and I think if they had been part of the flood, we would have had that little bond with them and that friendly face. If I have been at a fire, I am asking for more trucks and someone from the SES is saying no – but if someone I know gets on there and says, ‘Darrell, there ain’t no more trucks,’ I go, ‘Okay, there ain’t no more trucks.’

Sometimes I was cheeky. At Echuca Village every night at 11:30 or 10 o’clock I would get on the radio and tell div com that Echuca Village fire station was closing down, and every morning at 2:30 or 3 I would tell them that Echuca Village station was manned and open, just so they did not forget about us. I went in there one time at 2:30 in the morning. They have got a big TV screen. A girl is wrapped up in a blanket watching a movie. The other bloke is asleep in a chair. I said, ‘Where’s the whiteboard with all the stuff we want in Echuca Village?’ They looked at me stupidly. I rubbed something off the board, and I wrote what we needed out in Echuca Village – fuel, pumps, toilet paper, water, milk, food – on the board. I rubbed whatever was on there off. The other thing is that – if I say stuff here, I cannot be accused of it – there were like 14 Honda pumps leaning up against the fence in there. I took two of them. I, and my dog, every morning used go in there and load up with

food, milk and maybe some hoses or pumps for Echuca Village community, and I think that was justified. They did have trackers in those pumps, which I found out later on. But we would give them to some residents, and they were pumping their houses' water out with those pumps. They had trackers in them, and the div com in there sent people out to take their pumps off them and leave them with nothing.

Melina BATH: So there was a systematic lack of coordination?

Darrell PHILLIPS: Not out in Echuca Village.

Melina BATH: No, I am talking about earlier up the food chain.

Darrell PHILLIPS: I think they probably need to look at the structure, yes. Maybe people got caught up in the event. I have been to fires where some people can get caught up in the event and start going off and trying to do stuff instead of delegating, and we have to pull back. Many times at fires we will have a bloke stand at a fence post with two radios, and he needs to be static. He cannot be bouncing around in a fire truck trying to run the fire. Maybe that is what happened in the floods. I do not really know, because I did not get to go in there too often until George Calleja took over.

Melina BATH: And I guess in terms of the debrief –

Darrell PHILLIPS: Zero.

Melina BATH: Zero. After every big event – this was mammoth – structurally in the CFA you would have a proper debriefing system. Is that correct, Darrell?

Darrell PHILLIPS: We do. If it is a helicopter crash we will go back to our own station and have a debrief, and if it is required, we will bring the peer support people in. I think a lot of people from the floods probably need peer support. The debrief came late. They did have one. The group organised one.

Melina BATH: Who is the group?

Darrell PHILLIPS: It is the combined – all the brigades in this area.

Melina BATH: The CFA.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Yes, the CFA group. They organised one. I was not 100 per cent happy with the format. I maybe read it wrong, but I thought it was going to be that a lot of people could just come along and have their say. I think for the debrief you probably only need two or three of the key players of the brigade there. It is not a spectator sport.

Melina BATH: But, Darrell, in terms of Emergency Management Victoria or the commissioner or head office or SES, there has been none.

Darrell PHILLIPS: That broke our heart. A lot of captains – when we were told that the government would not be doing a proper inquiry into the floods there, that hurt a lot of people.

The CHAIR: Mrs Broad, a question.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much, Darrell. I just want to acknowledge that there is a huge amount of volunteer work that goes on in this space. You certainly have demonstrated that and I guess as well with the SES. That is something I was keen for you to expand on, because just talking to people around the region, SES is the lead agency in this, but in a lot of areas there are no SES active members. So then it would revert to CFA. As far as the response goes, you were handing out sandbags or counting sandbags. Could there have been more support from elsewhere – from other states, from the army? Talk about the volunteer aspect and what support you would like to see in future.

Darrell PHILLIPS: The SES, yes, are low on numbers. They are the jaffles – we like to call them that sometimes – or the sandwich-eating specialists. We have a bit of a joke. In the car accidents and what they do, that is their field. That is what they do. We do fires and car accidents, but we always work with and support the SES where we can in car accidents and here with the emergency rescue and all that. Yes, that is their problem.

Or whether it is a problem – that is them. Obviously volunteering is on the decline in everything at the moment. CFA numbers are down. People just are not volunteering. I do not know what it is. It is because of COVID. I do not know. Can I answer that one later on? That is a bit –

Gaelle BROAD: Yes.

Darrell PHILLIPS: I cannot really speak for them. We sort of became our own individual brigade out there, and it became our priority. We struggle to get members too. We are ageing. We will get two new ones and we will lose two. We had 15 core members out there, and last year we turned out to 106 incidents. Half of them were probably here supporting Echuca. We come in and support Echuca. For 15 members to turn out to 106 incidents for the year – plus the floods went for probably three or four weeks really – and everything else we have had on, we do a pretty great effort, I think.

Gaelle BROAD: Well, it is incredible. I was watching your YouTube too and how people kind of came to help you while you were helping other people. I mean, that is quite incredible. You mentioned CFA had to carry a huge load across 63 local government areas impacted by these floods, so it is huge pressure on the CFA. But the training for floods – you said you do not feel like you have done any training in that space.

Darrell PHILLIPS: No, I normally put the water on the ground. Just on that, a lot of resources came here, and we are buggers. We are like kids. If we have got nothing to do, we will get in trouble. So if you send a strike team of four trucks and a car somewhere, if they are not doing something, they will get the shits: ‘We went all the way to Echuca, and it was a waste of time.’ They want to do stuff, and they want to get out there and help the community and do something. That is where you create great mateships, when you do some great work. You know, I have been to West Wodonga. We were actually passing through going to Cudgewa, and a fire took off there. We were first on it, and we had no idea. But we did some great work, and we achieved something. With these strike teams that come up here, if they do not get tasks, they are like kids, and it is contagious: ‘This is bullshit. This is a waste of time. What are we doing here?’ So you need to make sure that they are tasked. We would have taken as many of those trucks as we could have. I did see them all parked out the back of the bowling club out there ready to man the pumps in Echuca, and I do not think some of those guys really knew what they were doing when they got tasked to go and do stuff. It was unfortunate the strike team that we got was from some politician that I spoke to who spoke to someone in Melbourne, who then took the one from Rochy and brought it to us. It was very hard for me to say ‘Rochester’. I could not say ‘Rochester’ for two weeks, because I was a bit emotional. We have a great relationship with the Rochester fire brigade, and to take the strike team from there, like I said before, was a little bit of a kick in the guts. There were plenty here that we could have got.

Gaelle BROAD: So that support coming from other parts, not other areas under demand, would be better in the future. I guess that is what you are –

Darrell PHILLIPS: As long as they are tasked and have got something to do. I have been recently to Bunyip. I have been to Sydney a couple of times. But you have got to send them there and give them something to do, otherwise they are like kids. They will stand around bitching and whingeing, and it is contagious. Then the morale drops, and everybody is like, ‘This is a waste of time.’ But at the village out there, they are working their arses off, and here we are having coffee and standing around a pump.

Gaelle BROAD: So give them something to do. I guess we have seen that this is still very real for you. It is 10 months on – we are coming up to one year. I mean, I have spoken to others that have had trauma; I guess they are experiencing trauma. But are you supported? We talk about mental health a lot. What has it been like? Have you and your team been offered assistance? Where is that?

Darrell PHILLIPS: We did not get as much mental health support as we wanted. That is a bit of an interesting one. The CFA is fantastic. There is always somebody. They are like little Jack Russells chasing you around, you know. Sometimes I speak at something, and I think that the bus is going to come to my place with the two blokes in the white suits and they are going to throw me in the back. But being a captain, I have got some fantastic mates in the CFA. They are like my watchdogs, and I am the same for them. They will tip me off, or they will tip somebody else off if I need it. I have got a great mate who is our first lieutenant. I have got a mother that has got dementia, and it was giving me a bit of problem in the head with all the CFA stuff. He went away around Australia a few months ago. On the Monday I got a phone call from a lady from the CFA, and she

started chatting to me: ‘How are you going, Darrell? What’s going on?’ And I was like, ‘Who have you been talking to?’ She said, ‘So-and-so gave me a ring and said maybe to give you a call.’ That is how the CFA family look after each other. That is part of the problem with the floods. Why wasn’t all that CFA family looking after each other? We all wear the same yellow overalls. You know, you can give someone half your sandwich in bloody Bega or wherever you are. We need to have that solidarity. We are all the same – one CFA – so if we can help anyone in any way, we should.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Any more? Come on.

The CHAIR: We have got about 2 more minutes, and I know Mrs Tyrrell did not have a question before, so I will go to Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: You mentioned a rusted door before that was eroded away by about 8 inches. Do you know if that has been repaired?

Darrell PHILLIPS: No. I am here representing the community and the CFA, but there are two factions in Echuca Village. There is one that wants to take Goulburn–Murray Water to task. You know, they want to go in there with shotguns and they want to – you know, duty of care and all of this. I said, ‘Let’s just do it nicely.’ It would be good if they just came out and acknowledged that the assets are not there and they failed. Do not just drive past us at 60 kilometres an hour with the window up and toot, like, ‘Good job, boys.’ You know, we have asked and asked for someone from Goulburn water to come out and have a look at those assets that failed. Two months ago we thought we were going to be back where we were and nothing would have been done. Now the boys are pulling sandbags out of those holes to drain their properties into that floodway. We are also now getting the snakes that are in there with them. We have created a natural disaster in Echuca Village with sandbags. Nobody has been out and picked them up for us. They are picked up from every house there in Echuca, but we have still got them in the bush and in the streets, especially those white ones. Nobody has come and picked up sandbags for us, and that is why we still do not feel like we are part of it.

The CHAIR: We are running out of time. Have you got any more? I was just going to say, you can put it on notice if you like.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. I was just wondering if we could request evidence of said door.

The CHAIR: Yes, you can have that question on notice. If you could provide that to us?

Darrell PHILLIPS: Do you want to go down and take the photo?

The CHAIR: Yes. Take some photos for us.

Darrell PHILLIPS: There are a lot of sandbags to be put in there.

The CHAIR: Yes, and just to conclude, Ms Bath has one question on notice for you.

Melina BATH: I have one question on notice, because I forgot to ask it before. Thank you. In relation to the CFA and the SES, and you have outlined some of the challenges, should the CFA become the lead agency in these sorts of major flood events, not the SES?

The CHAIR: You can take that on notice and provide a response if you like.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Jeez. It would open up – are you talking for major flood events, or a tree falling on somebody’s house?

Melina BATH: No, for a major flood event. I guess you have identified the fact that in numbers there are far more CFA on the ground by comparison. I am just interested in your feedback.

Darrell PHILLIPS: I am probably going to cop a couple of whacks to the head from maybe some people behind me. It would be a lot for the CFA to take on, and I think CFA would do a great job of it, but can we train so that we can work together? Work together with the police – we can work no worries with the police, just

bring the standard of training up so we are all on par and work together. Surely we should be able to work out some way rather than, 'Oh, it's your job. It's going to be my job.' Some CFA diehards will probably hate to hear that, and some SES people would not. It would maybe work together – I do not know. I think you are going to create too big a workload if the CFA started, but that is not in mine. I look after Echuca Village. I am not going to go any further in my career, so I am done.

Melina BATH: Thank you. It was not a leading question; it was just an open-ended question.

Darrell PHILLIPS: Work together, I think, is probably better.

The CHAIR: Darrell, feel free if you would like to provide more information to the committee on notice, you can send us those photos and provide more information, because we have now run out of time. I just want to thank you very much for your contribution today. We really appreciate you coming here and giving evidence to us, so thank you.

Witness withdrew.