

## **INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE**

**Organisation:** Warrumbungle Fire Action Group

**Date received:** 30/01/2014

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## General Purpose Standing Committee Enquiry No 5

I am a landowner in the Warrumbungle region and as such was involved with some of the RFS landowner fire fighters. My husband and son fought in two different Brigades in the fire. It was evident in the early stages that there were many concerns relevant to the management of the fire.

Although I was not actively involved in fighting the Wambelong Fire, I realized what a huge community concern it had become and decided to document the events for two reasons:

- 1 To use my Psychotherapy training to support and hopefully unburden some of the Captains of Brigades and their wives, by helping them to talk about their experiences and thereby have a true and honest account of their situations and
- 2 To make known to those in authority the many problems encountered during the fires.

In some ways I became a medium for the issues of the seven Captains I approached. They were exhausted, traumatized and incapable of putting together a movement for change. As other like- minded people came on board, we gradually created a small group and have been able, through the assistance of the Shooters and Fishers Party, to achieve an Enquiry into this catastrophic event.

To follow, under the headings of Management, Prevention, Chain of Command, Local Response and Communication, I have collated evidence that will, I hope, define and clarify our brief which is to aim for change in procedure and best practice in fire management.

The following seven transcripts, for which I have permission from each individual to send as submissions, are attached, together with the submission that I have coordinated and written on behalf of our Warrumbungle Fire Action Group.

I am happy to appear before the Enquiry.

Carolyn Lyons OAM  
"Parmedman"  
GULARGAMBONE NSW 2828

19<sup>th</sup> February:

Carolyn: We are going to have a talk about his experience in the fires and his opinions.

So. how long have you lived in this neck of the woods?

Male: All my life

Carolyn: You obvious had previous experience with fires.

Male: Just a little bit. The memories of my parents, what happened in the Brigade years and years ago. I find when it comes summer we are on red alert because of our parents. We are all set up. I worked it out the other day; there is one hundred thousand acres: eight people own the hundred thousand acres and we all have fifteen units of their own.

Carolyn: That's very good stats to have. How did you feel with the Warrumbungle fires?

Male: It didn't really affect us. We were very anxious to fight it on the front particularly when it got into the Valley on Sunday evening. If it got one more property a little bit further - the good cropping area, it nearly could have got to Coonamble.

Carolyn: Yes and that has been said before too. Another question I would like to ask you. Do you believe that collating evidence and first hand experiences as we are doing, would be beneficial towards changing some of the problems.

Male: Yeah I do Carolyn; certainly you could get contributions from all the fire captains. I guess it's my belief that where ever the fire is fought, if it is in a different fire captains' brigade, I think he should be in complete control of that rather than someone else. They know their area.

Carolyn: Have you come across any mates, friends or family whom you're a bit worried about as the result of the fires.

Male: I guess the one I was worried about was \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ We got a call from them at one stage. We actually sent a couple of people out there from our brigade to assist them.

Carolyn: They needed every... They needed manpower.

Carolyn: A couple of comments: one fellow up behind you does not have any mobile access, so how's your mobile access when you go up into the mountains?

Male: Right up the top there they ran out when we were up on Warrawong we did not have any mobile service.

Carolyn: So you had UHF?

Male: Yes

Carolyn: Was that operational?

Male: Yes Yes

Carolyn: Did you have a PMR?

Male: That's the VHS yes

Carolyn: All the fire trucks equipped with that.?

Male: Yes, but we took members of our brigade up there with other units and they were not fitted with those.

Carolyn: Somebody advised me that you had to buy your own. They give you the truck and you have to buy your own PMR

Male: This was equipped with the lot

Carolyn: **What, to your knowledge, is the National Parks fire plan? Do you believe they have maintained the property to a level of complete safety?**

Male: **No I don't.** I was alerted by the one of the fire captains when the fire first started as they approached the National Parks. I asked if they need any help and they said no, we have got it under control. It was not until that Sunday afternoon that all of a sudden the wind came up and it was such a hot day it got going and all of a sudden they had a fire and it just went.

Carolyn: Did they have fire breaks on the perimeter of the Park?

Male: I don't know, I didn't see them. I didn't get up that far.

Carolyn: With regard to the chain of command you mentioned earlier, **you weren't notified of the fire and yet you are captain of the brigade.**

Male: **Yes, we weren't notified** if we were needed so we rang the captain of the \_\_\_\_\_ brigade and asked him if he could use our help and he said **I am here by myself I would love your help** so we took three units up from our brigade and **when we got there we were nearly too late for a lot of it.**

Carolyn: When you did get to a situation where you were being referred or when you were being told what to do by the RFS, were you comfortable with the commands were they clear and practical commands?

Male: That particular event that Sunday evening it was just the brigade captain and it was fine. We just carted water to assist. It was not until the next day that we were requested to go in on this side to Gumin Gumin that other people became involved.

Carolyn: It's been said by several people involved in the fire that **Gumin Gumin should have had a fire control centre there.**

Male: **I think that is right, I do.**

Carolyn: It's also been said by others that the Coonamble RFS mobile crew were ready to go and were advised by Coonabarabran 'that this is our fire you stay out of it'. Quote unquote.

Male: I did not hear that.

Carolyn: And it is interesting, a few of them said there should have been three fronts with command centres as it turned out there was Toorweenah, Gumin Gumin and the Warkton Valley.

Male: .Yes and the \_\_\_\_\_. What they were trying to do to protect the \_Warkton Valley and our Valley which was very good, they made a break: they spent two or three days trying to make a good break all the way across. We went up to back-burn. We were requested by the \_\_\_\_\_? fire captain to meet at the summit at four O'clock in the afternoon. Our brigade took five groups up to them; thirteen men to do this back-burn. And then we had the RFS there, there were lots of other people and when we went to back-burn we still could not make a decision. They discovered it wasn't safe. By the time they made a decision to do the back-burn, it was eleven o'clock at night. I was not too happy with that: starting something that late when it had not been fully explored. Two people went to explore it and they discovered that \_\_\_\_\_ was right; that is wasn't safe it wasn't fully covered. There were things like that. **It sort of got a bit gung hoe I thought. I prefer to make sure things are right before we go.**

Carolyn: So do you feel that there was **a possible danger to lives?**

Male: I was certainly uncomfortable about putting thirteen of my people into that area that late at night. I know the wind was right at that time but you don't know what might happen. If it had come back this way it would have burnt into Warrawong and it would have endangered all those crews that I had there - what we had there.

Carolyn: So did that come **from command centre?**

Male: **They approved it**

Carolyn: Because they had someone on the ground?

Male: Yeah with the \_\_\_\_\_ fire captain and then they asked our opinions at the end of it and \_\_\_\_\_ said 'no'. I said 'no' Then they decided to go ahead with it anyway, and it wasn't until they went and had a **decent look at that break and found it was not right to go.** We were back there after that the next day too. I spent the afternoon up there following the grader around trying to get the rest of the break done. That's when....We were going

to have another crack that night but it was called off by someone else that night.

Carolyn: Well that's interesting, as we meet someone coming back from that group that you organised and they told us they had been sent back because **they were not allowed to back burn and when we asked why, they said, and I will quote again 'because there is a total fire ban' that's what they were told.**

Male: I didn't know that.

Carolyn: That's happened on two occasions this one and another one over the other side. I went and spoke to the **SES** and asked them about that and they said **you are not allowed to use certain machinery when there is a total fire ban.** So we let the fire go, no doubt?

Male: **The track wasn't bulldozed right out - it was not clean. It was too hard to get into it. They ran out of time and daylight for safety for the guys on the dozer and the grader and they could not get it clean. People were getting flat tyres so we were going into an area that was very risky.**

Carolyn: Very risky

Carolyn: Was there any difficulty communicating with the RFS at the higher level?

Male: Well I didn't actually come across them really. **They were there making decisions: they were there one minute and gone the next.** I think ultimately the brigade members were making the decisions

Carolyn: And subsequent to the fires, have you heard anything to do with the fact that a lot of decisions were made at the command centre and the people were not coming out to have a look on site.

Male: It could have been happening. I didn't know what was happening on the other side of the hill.

Carolyn: But you do agree that one command centre was in charge but three would have done a better job on this fire?

Male: I think so yeah. I don't know about fires up in those hills. **It shouldn't have got to where it did but they were extraordinary conditions** I must say the wind and the heat was extraordinary. Boy! when we looked at that fire coming towards us, I feared for the worst. I went up there two days ago Carolyn, remember when I spoke to you and you said some one wanted to see them. I rang them first \_\_\_\_\_.

Carolyn: How do you see the chain of command in a fire like this? Can you explain your experience and how you think it should be run?

Male: I think it should be run in conjunction if the RFS are involved. I think the RFS should listen to the fire captains, brigade captains because they know their area and they know access from previous experiences. I think the chain of command should probably be very happy to have them there. I would like to think if they were in our brigade I was still in charge of the fire.

Carolyn: This is a hard one. Would you say the RFS should have command over the national parks? Or what?

Male: Maybe and certainly land holders that run to the edge of the park should have a big say in what goes on. From what I can hear, there does not appear to be much back-burning done in the park and consequently the land owners out side of the park are the ones that suffer. I thought of all the animals kangaroos in fences that sort of thing - that's terrible

Carolyn: Yes devastation, because the Greenies came in. In the 50's apparently there were lots of sheep, there was no problem. It was eaten down and every thing was under control. Then the Greenies came in and you got you've your woody weed and you've got your pine and now, nothing can be done.

Male: No

Carolyn: And therefore we are going to have an extraordinary fire. So you had a few people come in from far away to help with this fire.

Male: They were from Cobar and others from long distances. They came to fight the fire probably. While I was there they didn't do anything: we probably didn't need them.

Carolyn: Well a lot of them had been sent around to Coonabarabran via Mendooran and Binnaway to register.

Male: Yes

Carolyn: When they got there they were given a cup of tea and a sandwich and told to rest and they were sent home next day. So there is going to be a lot of people out there who rushed to our support who will not be sending a crew next time. The command centre couldn't operate properly. If there had been a command centre at Gumin Gumin and Tooraweenah they could have been passed around; they could been on breaks doing what ever immediately after travelling so far. But they have been saying we are not going back because we can't get around the RFS and their procedures.

Male: It is just what I noticed in the other fires we have had. We had one Christmas day: we had the fire out before the RFS got hold of it. I was called to two fires last week one at \_\_\_\_\_ and another one at \_\_\_\_\_ and it was run virtually by all the land owners. In my opinion it was fought on three different fronts and run very well: they knew where to be and we got the

fire out. Certainly we did not have the heat and the wind that they had in the park. I thought it was run very well.

Carolyn: Run as it usually was, by the landowners who were keeping control of their own land.

Male: Yes it was

Carolyn: You were saying.

Male: I went to Coonabarabran one day while the fire was on. I was just amazed they had a street blocked off and there were people every where. There were RFS uniforms every where, there was. I believe there were sandwiches being made. We took our own food because we did not know how long we were going to be there. We found it was being passed around every where. I know the day we had to take the truck into Coonamble there were eleven vehicles in the RFS place in Coonamble. I was amazed they were all new even!

Carolyn: Just sitting there?

Male: All sitting there - one for every person I think.

Carolyn: So in the old days, how were you taught? You have lived here all your life, how did you face a fire? What were the criteria if there was a fire?

Male: We all had our own gear one person would let all the neighbours know then we went to the fire and looked after it on the fronts we would be directed by the fire captain.

Carolyn: and you got them out.

Male: Yes.

Carolyn: There seems to be evidence of a lack of chain of command which has caused untold strife, worry and upset through these mountains. At this stage we are also bringing into play the Pilliga fires and the Canberra fires and others that have already gone thru and people have the same problem. Chain of command, lack of ability to allow the land owner to run the show on his property, lack of hazard control and prevention So what do you hope we can do to change these problems?

Male: I hope we can all learn something, I hope we can all sit around a table and come to some common solution -a very practical solution.

Carolyn: Do you see that being a change of procedure by the RFS?

Male: Possibly I don't know Carolyn. I don't know the answer to that.



Carolyn: With regards to National Parks, its been said many times apparently and I know one of ours was told when they were up there fighting the fire to 'Get out' - you weren't invited." They were then told, "Well, you take over. We will be leaving at seven o'clock." The question was "Well what happens to the fire when you leave?" and the answer was- a *shrug*!!

Male: Actually, I did hear something like that on the truck radio the other night. This fellow said, "You have got to knock off now because I am taking you back to Coonabarabran your shift has changed." The fellow said, "I have only got a little bit to put out before we go." They said, "No, you gotta go."

Carolyn: Well I am calling it the 'nine to five mentality' and this happened on a daily basis morning and night; and you will hear from \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ that once the shift had gone they only did their certain time regardless of the situation of the fire. They were not replaced for over two hours. At any time there could have been four hours. The shortest time to replace the shift was two hours and of course, as has been said on other recordings, that fire got away. The twenty two hours - that was done by the local land holders and it never changed.

Male: We had a call from \_\_\_\_\_ one morning saying 'there are only two of us on the ground' and we sent two from our brigade and the message got to everyone and they were fine after that. There was a time that they were worried

Carolyn: She also got into strife because she was so terrified she rang 000

Male: Ooh really

Carolyn: And she was taken to task about that by the powers that were handling it.

Male: What was she supposed to do?

Carolyn: She had it on three fronts and she couldn't get support and when she asked one fire truck that had come from the north coast to get up there and take some water up, she was told they 'weren't there to fight a fire - they were there to look'. So, there are a lot of incidents that have occurred that have really caused extreme fear and unhappiness and upset to a lot of the people in the Mountains. We must support them to rally and say we are not going to put up with this again.

Male: Certainly from our side of the hill that did not happen.

Carolyn: Which is wonderful, which is fantastic, which speaks highly of your brigade and anyone else that came here. But you were running your own show, you weren't interfered with as much as they were on the other side.

Male: No, no.

Carolyn: and you survived and you achieved

Male: All the brigades - we all knew each other – it worked pretty well under the circumstances

Carolyn: I think we will end it there, unless you have any ideas to add.

Pause:

Carolyn: So \_\_\_\_\_ you were talking about some after-thoughts you had about things that could possibly change.

Male: What they need to do with something like that fire, they need to get the fire captains concerned in that area into that chopper; to go and look because it's their area, their field,. They know their neighbours, they know where to be, they know how to fight the fire but they need to get up there to see because you can't see from the ground a lot of what's happening. If the fire captains were able to get up in the air then I think we might have had a better result.

Carolyn: Well, it was requested and refused.  
What about the fire up there near Gumin Gumin?

Male: I thought there were two or three heroic people there racing around on bikes shifting stock, directing people; it was on their property.

Carolyn: A women and her son?

Male: Yes a women and her son on two bikes. Balaclavas and glasses; they were there because the smoke was so bad - they were very heroic.

Male: It's not rocket science Carolyn, how to achieve the best results. You have got to get the people in the air to have a look at how to fight the fire and on which front; it's too hard on the ground, particularly up in the mountains, up there, the area that we don't know. I need to be directed up there. I guess if you put me in a helicopter I could tell you how to do it.