

Fire Brigade

Roger V. McNeice

The Fire Brigade was formed in the early 1950s by the late Marc Ashton who lived in Tarooona Crescent. He was concerned about the time it took the Hobart Fire Brigade to reach Tarooona from Hobart, and so he took the unusual step of forming a local fire brigade. Although at the time of its formation it had no legal standing, the members successfully fought several bush fires behind homes in the area.

With the formation of the Rural Fires Board in 1951 the Fire Brigade was registered and became known as the Tarooona Rural Fire Brigade. The brigade's equipment was very primitive, consisting of a few beaters made of canvas, several tin knapsacks and a couple of lengths of hose. Marc Ashton was appointed Captain and Chief Fire Warden. Marc soon gathered around him a number of local residents who formed the nucleus of the brigade.

The brigade's first real test came on the 30th January 1957 when heatwave conditions in Tasmania resulted in several large fires around Hobart. The worst affected area was Tarooona where one home was destroyed and several hundred acres of scrub burnt. He led a force of over 200 volunteers who battled for sixteen hours to check the fire which also threatened several other homes. The fire was fanned by strong north-westerly winds and at one stage the Hobart Fire Brigade sent two units from Hobart to assist volunteers.

Tarooona would have been excluded from the urban fire district if it had not been for the persistence of Marc Ashton and the Kingborough Municipal Council, both of whom argued that the number of homes in Tarooona required a proper fire service.

Over many years Marc Ashton tried to persuade the Hobart Fire Brigade to build a fire station at Tarooona and although the Hobart Fire Brigade inspected several sites, a decision to build a station was constantly deferred. Local brigade equipment was stored at Marc's home in Tarooona Crescent where it was easily obtained when needed.

Disaster Strikes

On the 7th February 1967 disaster struck. Fire

spread over Southern Tasmania in what is now known as Black Tuesday. It was the worst fire in Tasmania's history, resulting in heavy loss of life and property. The enormous damage suffered during the disaster occurred in a relatively short period. From the beginning of February 1967 the Rural Fires Board had been issuing warnings of acute fire danger and a declaration of a fire emergency was issued by the Rural Fires Board. On that fateful day 100 fires were burning in Southern Tasmania, including one large fire behind the built-up area at Tarooona. Tarooona Fire Brigade members had attended the fire several times before the 7th February, but had considered it "safe". On that day it "blew out" and entered the built-up area destroying several homes, the Doctor's surgery, the Old Public Hall on the Channel Highway and many outbuildings. High winds created fire storms and many Tarooona residents were forced to flee to the beaches for safety.

Reorganisation

Following the 1967 disaster the rural Fires Board was reorganised. The Tarooona Rural Fire Brigade was re-registered under the new Rural Fires Act on the 23rd December 1968. The brigade became part of the Kingborough Municipal Fires Group and part of the Hobart Special Fire Area Organisation.

Marc Ashton was re-appointed Captain, R.F. Elliott Deputy Captain, H.M. Murray Third Officer, M. Button Fourth Officer, D.J. Crouch Fifth Officer, S.L. Badcock Sixth Officer and G. Shelley Seventh Officer. Members were: R. Plymers, M. Elliot, M. Plymers, F.W. Moore, N. Jones, P. Willey, J.P. Dawson, J. Brownlie, G.C. Debnam, G. Henry, F.E. Lucas, H.K. Skeggs, E.K. Hook, F.G. Kuipers, H. Huising, R.V. McNeice and H. Vermey. Upon the death of Deputy Captain R.F. Elliott on the 18th January 1969 Harvey Skeggs was appointed Deputy Captain. Harvey kept this position until he left the district in 1971.

Under the Rural Fires Act the brigade became responsible for fire control of the bushland behind the built-up area in Tarooona and responsible for fire permits during fire danger periods. The urban area remained under the control of the Hobart Fire Brigade, but as it took some time for Hobart Brigade units to reach Tarooona the local brigade

answered calls and took control until the urban brigade arrived on the scene.

In September 1971 Marc Ashton resigned as Captain of the brigade and I was asked by him to become Brigade Captain. He remained the Patron of the brigade until his death in 1986. Following Marc's retirement the brigade underwent a further re-organisation. David Bond was appointed Deputy Captain, with Richard Dear as Third Officer. The brigade was reformed with new equipment, including a light four wheel drive tanker which had been lying idle in the Kingborough Council Store Yard. This gave the brigade more mobility. Many of the younger men in Taroona joined the brigade which soon gained a reputation for firefighting. During the next few years it was further equipped and was regarded as one of the best in Southern Tasmania.

It was called to many fires in the Hobart Special Fire Area which encompassed Hobart, Glenorchy and Kingborough. Some of the fires the brigade attended were at Mt. Hull (Glenorchy), Longley, Channel and Brighton. Members were also taken to fires on the West Coast and Midlands.

Bowls Club and Taroona Pre-School Fires

On the 29th August 1974 the Bowls Club was destroyed as a result of arson. The brigade received the call at 12.25 a.m. but the fire had a strong hold on the building and by the time units from the Hobart Fire Brigade arrived the building was a total loss. Hoses needed to be run out from hydrants several hundred metres away. This made firefighting difficult.

The Bowls Club fire was followed by a fire at the Taroona Pre-School on the 1st September 1974. The brigade was quickly on the scene after receiving the call, but it was soon found that its equipment for handling structural fires was inadequate. Shortly after the brigade began to fight the fire, units from the Hobart Fire Brigade arrived and both brigades took 30 minutes to bring the fire under control.

After the fire the Hobart Fire Brigade Board reported that it wanted further support in the area from the local brigade and the Rural Fires Board re-equipped the brigade with a new DC310 Tanker, new hoses and other equipment.

It was obvious that the small shed on the corner of Churchill Road and Channel Highway used to house brigade equipment would

not be adequate for the new vehicle and land on the Taroona Reserve was set aside by the Kingborough Council for construction of a new station. As no funds were available from the Government I lodged a plan under the Commonwealth R.E.D. employment scheme and the brigade received enough funds to build the station and fit it out. The Warden of Kingborough, Mr W.C. Hodgman M.L.C., officially opened it on the 10th May 1975. The new station also contained an operations and radio room. The lookout tower was obtained from the Main Roads Department and Mr Len Hutchinson of the Kingston Fire Brigade built the ladder and top platform.

As the station was nearing completion Ernie Bond, who lived in Kelvedon Avenue, joined the brigade. Ernie, a retired farmer whose property was destroyed in the 1967 bushfires became brigade station officer. He was well known for his interest in first aid and many first aid classes were held at the fire station. Ernie also managed the station on fire danger days, while brigade members were at work. Local residents could call at the fire station at any time during the day to find Ernie hard at work looking after the equipment and records.



Fire Station, 1986.

PHOTO ANDREW LORD.

Community Services

On Sunday morning on the 28th May 1978 the brigade was called to a serious house fire in Illawong Crescent. The house, owned by Dr. Rogers, was ablaze but the brigade had the fire under control in 15 minutes. The dwelling was seriously damaged.

The brigade's efficiency was recognised when it was called upon to give fire fighting demonstrations at the 1977, 1978 and 1979 Royal Hobart Shows. It also competed regularly at the Rural Fire Brigade's Annual Championships.

In January 1979 the Deputy Captain, David Bond resigned as he was leaving the district. Stan Roberts of Illawong Crescent was elected to fill the vacancy.

Rod Finlayson was elected Third Officer. The brigade members in 1979 were R. McNeice (Captain), S. Roberts (Deputy Captain), R. Finlayson (Third Officer), E. Bond (Station and First Aid Officer), D. Smith, C. Martindill, T. Beecroft, J. Beecroft, B. Sutton and C. Dalton. While being relatively small the brigade handled all the fire problems in Tarooona.

As a result of the hazard reduction measures undertaken by the brigade Tarooona faced very little threat from large bush fires until the 18th November 1982. On that day a fire, fanned by strong winds, spread from Proctors Road over Bonnet Hill towards the Channel Highway. Extensive back burning and fire attack by the Tarooona and Hobart Fire Brigades stopped the fire near the Shot Tower. Over 150 hectares were burnt.

New Role

The brigade's role changed substantially in December 1982 when it became the State's first volunteer dual purpose brigade, with both urban and bush fire fighting responsibilities. A new urban fire engine was allocated to the brigade and it was equipped for house fires. The handing over of the new unit formalised an unofficial agreement for the local brigade to fight house fires until units from the Hobart Fire Brigade arrived. A few months later, in May 1983, the brigade became officially part of the Hobart Fire Brigade.

Since then it has attended several fires in the area, the most serious being an explosion at the Tarooona State High School, when it was necessary to evacuate the school. The explosion resulted in 28 students being taken

to hospital but none was seriously hurt.

In 1983 a new training wing, costing \$30,000, was constructed behind the station, giving the brigade excellent training and recreation amenities.

The present Chief Officer is R. Talbot. Members are A.R. Stops (Second Officer), R. Finlayson (Third Officer), R. Reid, P. Johnston, M. Woolley, D. Lees, S. Denholm, T. Talbot, C. Brown, A. McGregor, C. Dalton and T. Johnson.

Long Serving Members

Marc Ashton (deceased), 25 years (Captain 1946-71)

National Medal for Fire Service.

Rural Fires Board 10,15 and 25 Year Long Service Badges.

Roger V. McNeice, 17 1/2 years (Captain 1971-83, Chief Officer 1983-85)

National Medal for Fire Service.

Rural Fires Board 10 Year Long Service Badge.

Tasmania Fire Service 15 Year Long Service Badge.

David Smith, 10 years.

Tasmania Fire Service 10 year Long Service Badge.

(David also served as Third Officer-Urban Brigade).

Rod Finlayson, 10 years.

Tasmania Fire Service 10 Year Long Service Badge.

References

McNeice, R.V., *Helmets and Hatchets, A History of the Hobart Fire Brigade*. State Fire Commission, 1983.

Scrap Book of the Tarooona Fire Brigade, 1946-86.

Mercury, Hobart, 3 Jun 46, 2 Sep 74, 19 Sep 74, 12 Sep 74, 28 Aug 74, 3 Oct 78, 16 Mar 78, 21 Mar 78, 22 Mar 78, 6 Apr 78, 18 Nov 82, 23 Dec 82.

