

AUTUMN 2020

Community Matters

VICSES

EDITION 10



VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES



Task Force Alpha – Cann River deployment

The bushfires in photographs: Your photos from the field

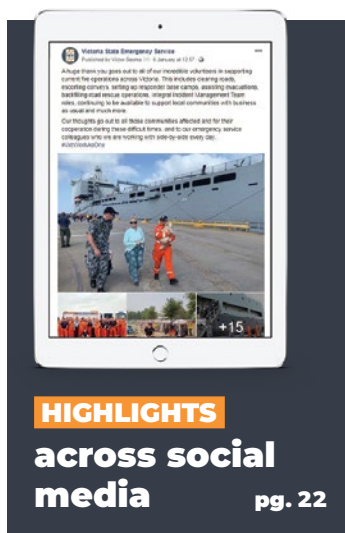
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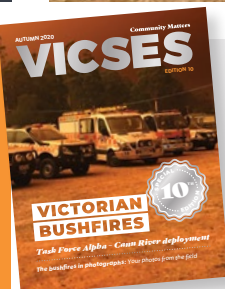
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Interested in contributing?

Submit your article here:
publications@ses.vic.gov.au



VICES would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout Victoria and acknowledge their ancestors and elders, both past and present.

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MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER FOR POLICE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

Welcome to the first edition of Community Matters for 2020.

This year has already been an incredibly busy one for all of our emergency services workers and volunteers, with bushfires burning across three different parts of Victoria.

So far, we've seen more than 1.53 million hectares burnt across the state this fire season, with more than 1,200 firefighters and 212 international and interstate personnel deployed.

Volunteers from 124 of 149 VICSES units, or 83% of units, have also assisted in fire operations, making an invaluable contribution in some of the most challenging of conditions.

Some volunteers have also lost property and houses this fire season, which highlights the enormous sacrifice VICSES crews often make to keep their communities safe.

Seymour Unit Controller Christine Welsh, for example, was joined by Deputy Controller Lisa James and member Morgan Duell in Corryong, where the three women provided road rescue capability, and put in many hours at the local relief centre, going above and beyond their duties (see page 14).



While Wonthaggi Unit member Mick Butera created a special 'honour board' out of molten scrap metal while deployed in Mallacoota, to thank volunteers who took time to help the coastal community (read more on page 15).

As people start to clean up after the fires and return to their communities, the work of VICSES volunteers will no doubt continue, and I thank you for your ongoing commitment to helping people get back into their homes and properties.

I'm incredibly proud of all of our volunteers who have worked tirelessly to respond to these incidents alongside their fellow emergency services workers.

As well as their amazing response to the bushfires, VICSES volunteers were also faced with storms in January and February, responding to 3,300 requests for assistance in just one week.

Members across Melbourne responded to thousands of calls for help for hail and wind damage, fallen trees and emergency short-term repairs.

The incredibly busy start to 2020 has no doubt challenged many of our members and units, but has also shown what a dedicated and capable network of volunteers we have across the state.

Thank you all again for your efforts.

Hon Lisa Neville MP
Minister for Police and
Emergency Services



Welcome

Hello everyone, and welcome to this special edition of Community Matters.

The past few months have been extremely busy and intense for many of our members. The fires across Victoria, especially in East Gippsland and in the North East, have had a huge impact on so many.

Throughout this time, VICSES volunteers and staff have contributed their extensive skills and experience to a huge multi-agency effort, providing assistance across a range of integral roles both on and off the ground, and stepping up to support one another with business-as-usual activities in areas where units and emergency services were at capacity.

What's more, when during this period of prolonged and escalated activity, parts of Victoria were hit with severe storms and flooding, our units continued to support their local communities to their usual high standards of service.

This issue of Community Matters is dedicated to the recent Victorian bushfires, and to celebrating the

incredible contributions of our members – some of whom lost homes and property of their own – during this time.

You can still catch up on our other news and events by flipping the issue over.

I'm extremely proud of the work that you do, and in your continued demonstration of the VICSES Values: Together we are VICSES, and we are part of our community.

It's important during times like this that we look out for each other. If you or someone you know needs support, remember you are not alone. You can find information on support services for volunteers and staff on page 21.

I hope you enjoy this edition, and thank you all once again for your dedication to VICSES and our communities.

Kind regards,

Stephen Griffin
CEO Victorian State
Emergency Service

Messages of thanks

Messages of thanks for the hard work of our volunteers poured in from across our communities and the sector.

THANK YOU

ANDREW CRISP

Emergency Management
Commissioner, Victoria



BERNIE CRONIN

Acting Board Chair, Victoria
State Emergency Service



The last few months have been challenging for our emergency services and the Victorian community.

We've had elevated fire conditions, extreme weather, significant wind events, while remaining focussed on the relief and recovery efforts in north east Victoria and East Gippsland.

Over the last few weeks I've taken the opportunity to get out and spend time with all of our people who have been working so hard. I've seen fantastic work occurring in the field and at all levels and I have witnessed the incredible support that VICSES volunteers provide to the broader emergency services.

Many community members have taken the opportunity to tell me how proud they are of their local

SES volunteers. I'll keep saying it – I think VICSES is the swiss army knife of the emergency services! It has been an outstanding job by the entire team, so please accept my heartfelt thanks.

We still have a long way to go this summer. Last year we saw significant fire and weather events in East Gippsland into March. While we have a slight reprieve in the weather, my message is – rest where you can and recharge. Spend time reconnecting with family and friends. We can only make good decisions if we are looking after ourselves.

Thank you for your support and continued commitment to keeping our community safe.

On behalf of the board, I'd like to express my admiration and thanks to all of our members who have provided support during Victoria's recent bushfires.

Our volunteers and staff are incredibly dedicated people, who always put the community first during their times of need. It has been inspiring to see our members support those affected by the fires across such a wide variety of roles, and working as one with our emergency services colleagues in such challenging conditions. It has also been fantastic to see our units step up to support the business as usual activities of those units who have been at capacity during this time. I have seen and received so many messages of praise and thanks for VICSES and your unwavering commitment, and feel

more proud than ever to be a part of this amazing organisation. You have all truly demonstrated our key Value 'Together, we are VICSES.'

The hard work doesn't stop here, and as we know there will be challenging events to come throughout this year and into the future. I hope that you all are able to get some well-deserved rest, and spend time with your loved ones. Thank you again, for your unwavering service.



I would like to acknowledge the amazing support the VICSES has provided to the Victorian firefighting efforts across Gippsland and the North East of Victoria this fire season.

The support from VICSES volunteers at base camps, incident control centres, and within incident management teams has been

invaluable. The feedback from the fire management across the state has been very positive and of great appreciation. I, myself, cannot

express how grateful I am for your absolute commitment and support.

Thank you to you all for your tireless efforts.



CHRIS HARDMAN

Chief Fire Officer, Executive
Director, Forest and Fire
Operations, Department of
Environment, Land, Water
and Planning



Message from Tim Wiebusch, Chief Officer Operations

I have been incredibly proud of our people over the last four months. On almost a daily basis I have received great feedback – from the Victorian Premier and the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, to other agency leaders and members – speaking so highly of the terrific work and professionalism of you all on the ground and in control centres, regularly going above and beyond.

These community focussed efforts have not only been here in Victoria, but also across New South Wales and Queensland during October and November, and more recently in the Australian Capital Territory. And it hasn't just been responding to bushfires – many of our members have stayed within their communities to respond to thousands of requests for assistance due to storm and flood damage, even picking up extra rotations to support those who have been deployed.

Be assured that your important, and sometimes behind the scenes work, has not gone unnoticed. This was reflected in a simple post on Twitter from our Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Lisa Neville, after a large storm in January, saying:

"Thanks to all of our VICSES volunteers who helped out so many yesterday on top of the support you're providing to bushfire areas. On Wednesday 5 February it was humbling to represent you during the sitting of Parliament, where members of Parliament from all parties spoke to the condolence and vote of thanks motions. Almost every speaker noted their thanks of VICSES, and the Chiefs (on behalf of you all) received a standing ovation on our departure from the house, signalling how strong their

thanks and recognition was for you all for a job well done."

In the last couple of weeks I've been able to take a break from the State Control Centre, where I've been performing roles such as the State Response Controller. It was terrific to spend some time with members from our units that have been surrounded and/or affected by the bushfires. I heard time and time again some amazing stories of resilience and commitment in supporting and providing care and assurance to your communities at their most difficult times.

It was also pleasing to hear of the wonderful support that 124 of our 149 units have provided. This includes tasks such as providing extra road crash rescue assistance for deployed units, logistics capability, staging area and base camp management, Incident Management Team roles at control centres, deploying Incident Air Monitoring Kits, and reloading aircraft, particularly throughout December and January.

I have also heard of the frustrations of some of our members, and there will always be room for us to learn from these major emergencies in terms of how we coordinate and communicate better. However, we should be overwhelmingly proud of how our organisational Value 'Together we are VICSES' has been seen so strongly



demonstrated, as well as being 'focussed and adaptable' throughout our response.

Our hearts go out to all those that have been affected in many ways by the fires and storms – in some cases losing loved ones and homes. We especially think of the families, friends and colleagues of the three Forest Fire Management Victoria staff that tragically lost their lives during active duty. These are the members of our community that we must not forget or neglect. They need our support, in what will be a long journey.

My sincere thanks to all of our members for an outstanding response over summer so far. And please extend our thanks to your family and employers that have enabled you to contribute to these emergencies.

Kind regards,

Tim Wiebusch
Chief Officer Operations
VICSES

Victorian bushfires, summer 2020

**As at 14 February 2020*



>1.5m

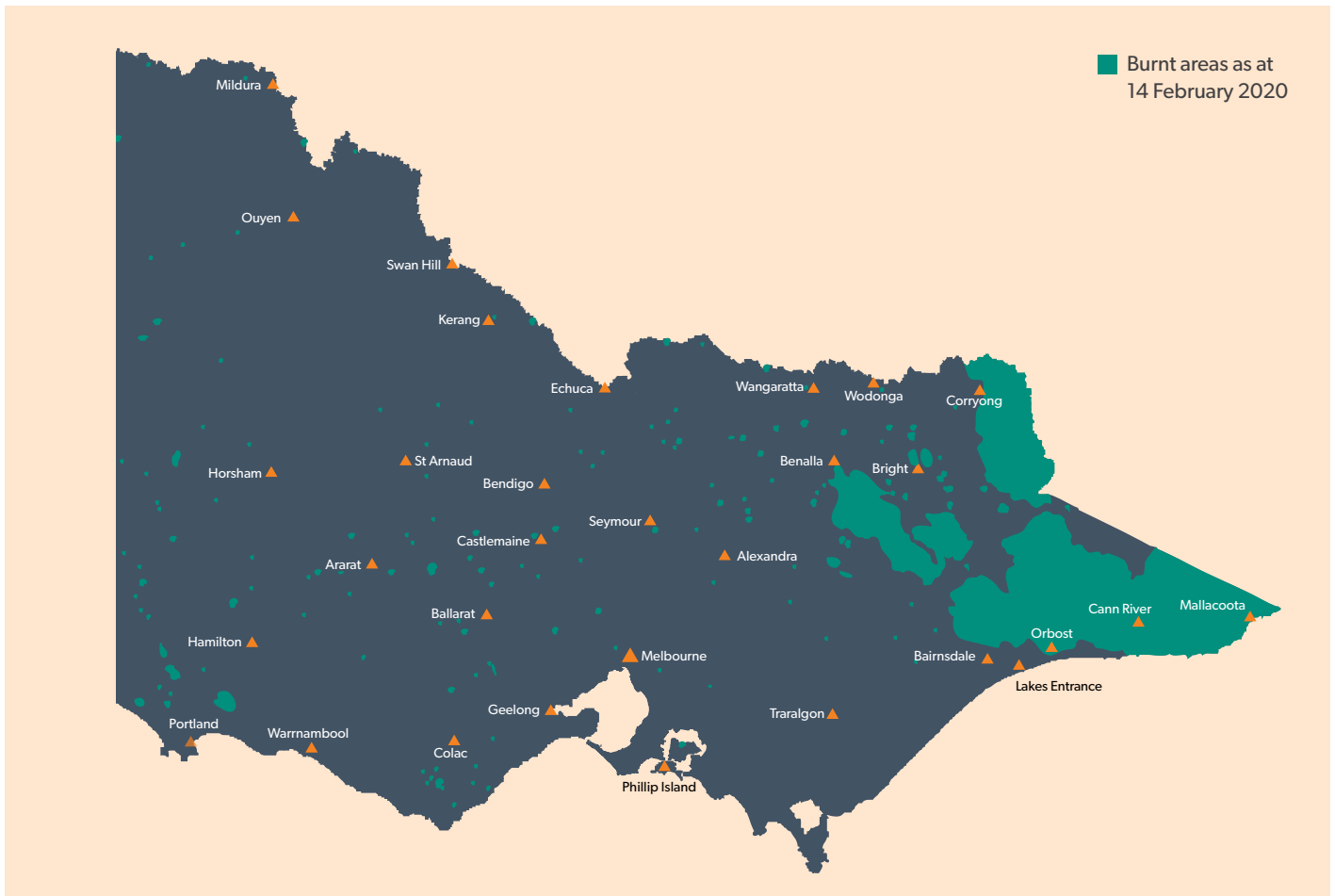
HECTARES BURNT

**throughout Victoria
this fire season**

SUPPORT PROVIDED FROM

124

VICSES units



Key VICSES support roles:



General Support



Logistic Support / Driver



Management Support Officer



Road Crash Rescue Crew / Support



Incident Agency Commander



Storm Taskforce



Base Camp Manager



Intel Officer

Road Crash Rescue Air



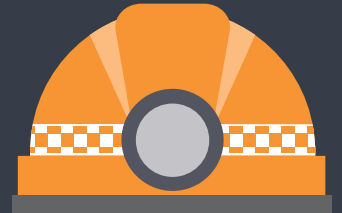
REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE

SO FAR THIS FIRE SEASON

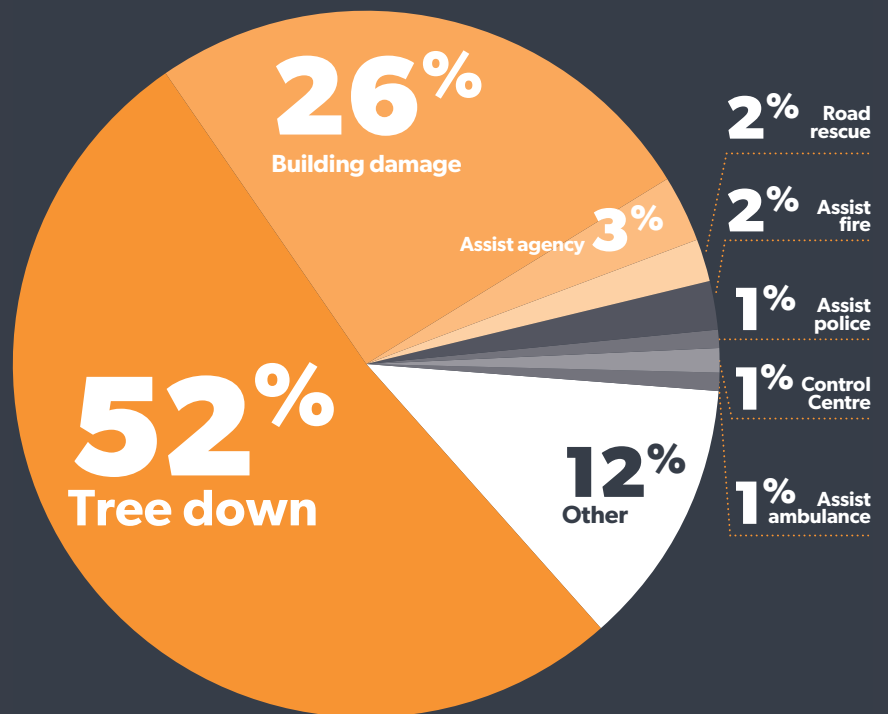
16 Dec 2019 - 16 Feb 2020

Total

11,072



Breakdown



FEATURE



Task Force Alpha – Cann River deployment

By George Katris, Deputy Unit Controller, Port Phillip Unit

It was a conference call on 28 December that was to change my life forever. Originally arriving in Sale to lead a coxswain's crew, I was then asked to lead Task Force Alpha, which would be deployed to Cann River to support the devastating fires. What was intended to be a three-day deployment, soon turned into an intensely challenging six-day effort.

After arriving at Cann River, we were notified that roads out of the town had been closed due to the approaching fires, meaning we were unable to leave. The next few days saw the power completely cut off, and all phone reception lost. The only mode of communication back to the Bairnsdale Incident Control Centre (ICC) was by travelling 5km out of town to pick up phone reception from the next tower. Our situation was getting direr by the minute.

As the fire loomed closer, Task Force Alpha sprang into action to protect the town. This included tasks such as setting up generators and lighting for the local school and emergency services, setting up make shift bedding for



the locals and their families, continuous door knocking to check on residents, running food packs out to convoys, charging and connecting firefighting bladders and hoses, and assisting evacuations to the school – otherwise called ‘The place of last resort’. With no blue sky to be seen, we couldn’t ascertain whether it was day or night. But we kept working.

It was 4:00am on day four when the threat of fire became scarily real. I woke the team up and told them to get to the school immediately: there was a fire front to the west of Cann River, which was approximately 2km away, one in the east approximately 100 metres away, and fire coming from the south east. Survival mode had well and truly kicked in.

Once at the school, we worked with Victoria Police to prepare as best we could. We were told if the school caught fire, we were to move from room to room, soaking the school in as much water as possible. We received a crash course in how to defend against the fire – in simple terms: aim the wet stuff on the hot stuff. If the fire took a hold of the school, we were to seek refuge behind a brick wall to protect us from the radiating heat. We had no idea what our fate would be.

Morning finally came, and it seemed we had been spared. Call it a force field or just pure luck, but the cold weather had slowed down the raging fire. Although our team might have had a chance at leaving, our decision was unanimous – the only way we were leaving, was together with Victoria Police and all the locals too.

The following day we received a call from the Orbest ICC with a plan to form a convoy to evacuate the town, leaving at 3:00pm sharp. In conjunction with Victoria Police, we doorknocked the entire town, and then mustered everyone together at the school to leave in a convoy consisting of personal vehicles, two 45-seater coaches, two fire trucks, and two 4WD strike teams.

Leaving Cann River felt bittersweet. Our team knew that we did the very best that we could for the community. We got to know the locals and formed many friendships. One of our members even knew the name of every dog in town! When we were finally out of danger, we stopped for a quick New Year drink, and headed to bed for some well-earned rest.

What Task Force Alpha experienced and accomplished during our six-day deployment was nothing short of incredible. Thanks to our amazing and hardworking team members, we were able to do so much for Cann River and its community. We should all be immensely proud of our achievements.

As our orange uniforms read, we are ‘SES RESCUE’. It’s about working as one and protecting communities, setting up infrastructure, connecting with people and families, and providing assurance that everything will be okay. We continuously put the community first, and that’s what it’s all about.

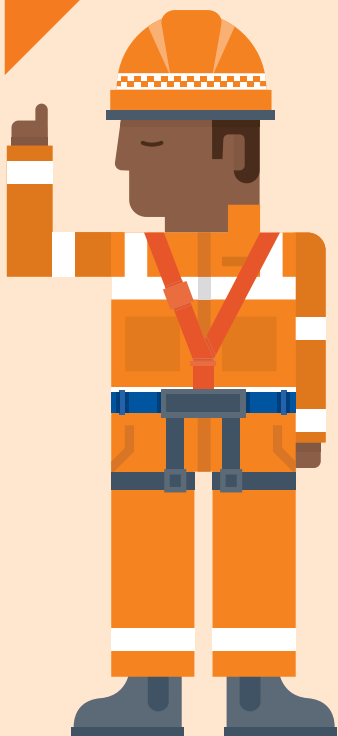
There will be teams that will continue to support Cann River, and we bid them the best of luck.

One thing I will take away from this experience is to never take anything or anyone for granted. Life is precious; make sure you embrace every moment like your last. ■



SUPPORTING THE FIRE RESPONSE

Stories from across our regions



Geelong Unit volunteer moved by thankful gesture

Article by James Taylor of the Surf Coast Times (reprinted with permission)

Marion Petersen from the Geelong Unit learned recently in East Gippsland that it's the smaller things in life that make a difference.

Part of a Staging Area Support Taskforce in Orbost during the bushfire crisis, Ms Petersen ferried supplies to the Orbost relief centre, transported people to Cann River, and assisted convoys and emergency distribution.

In uniform and coming home from deployment alongside Nathan Street and Trevor Clutterbuck from the South Barwon Unit, she decided to stop for breakfast in Warragul.

The trio ordered a meal at Frankies when a customer noticed their orange uniforms.

As they ate together, the stranger decided to undertake

a small but significant act of kindness and pay for their food and drinks.

Ms Petersen was moved by the gesture – one of many seen by volunteers from the south west during Victoria's bushfire crisis.

"I was a bit gobsmacked when our food was paid for in Warragul. It nearly brought me to tears that people would demonstrate such kindness," she said.

"It was the same thing when we stopped for fuel and passers-by would say nice things and ask if they could shout us a coffee or an icy pole. It was really heart-warming."

Alongside her praises for the public, Ms Petersen also shared her gratitude for fellow volunteers at the Orbost Unit, including Allan Smeaton, whose professionalism and dedication in the face of difficult conditions has helped the remaining locals in the area stay calm.

VICES continues to support emergency services in fire-affected communities in far East Gippsland and the state's north east, with volunteers from all over the state putting up their hands for multiple deployments. ■



Geelong and South Barwon Unit members with South West Regional Manager Cain Trist and VICES CEO Stephen Griffin.



An eerily orange Orbost, photographed by Sunbury Unit volunteer Nicole Dale.

Reflections from Gisborne Unit

By Rosie McMahon, Gisborne Unit, North West Region

Reflections from some of Gisborne Unit's deployed members on their time away assisting the bushfires...

Humour

The old lady who wanted the Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel to pack up and bring her prized furniture with them during an evacuation – which they did with good humour and respect.

Humility

Being thanked by people they didn't know, some of whom paid for their drinks and food. Community members were so grateful to have their support.

Calmness

Some people who had evacuated a number of times were very calm and organised, while others were the extreme opposite – a man reading the paper while his wife hysterically tried to get him to take the evacuation seriously.

Awe and respect

The great food provided by volunteers, and working alongside the Australian Defence Force – they have some amazing toys!

While deployments were of a serious nature, a number of members said they had lots of fun and learned a lot along the way. There were some long 12-hour shifts, moments of boredom interspersed with periods of relentless activity, and for one team never-ending dad jokes! Some

great new relationships were established, and bonds formed for life. The size and seriousness of the bushfires escaped no-one, with one single common reflection – human beings pulling together are awesome. ■



Thank you mug presented to Gisborne Unit from Myrtleford Unit.



Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews with Gisborne Unit Controller Mike Bagnall.

Air Rescue Support

By Luke Simionato, Nillumbik Unit, Central Region



The multi-agency team included members from VICSES, CFA and MFB.

As a qualified Road Crash Rescue (RCR) operator, I was recently deployed on a 1-3-1 rotation to the Bairnsdale Airbase as part of the newly formed Air Rescue Support capability.



Nillumbik Unit member Luke Simionato, Operations Officer – Technical Rescue Andrew Feagan, and South Barwon Unit member Charlie Stevenson alongside our MFB colleagues.



This inter-agency team across VICSES, Country Fire Authority and Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) was put in place to provide a supporting role to ground-based Road Air Industrial Rail (RAIR) and Technical Rescue crews in eastern Victoria, while roads, access and crewing was severely limited. The team consisted of two high angle rescue technicians (HARTs) and three Road Crash Rescue (RCR) operators, rotating between each agency.

My team consisted of three RCR operators from VICSES, and two HARTs from MFB. On arrival we were greeted by the outgoing crew, who carried out a handover and explained the current learnings, issues and ideas to address. The next day we started our 0800-2000 shift, getting familiar with the helicopter and pilot, our weight allowances, and the limited equipment cache we would carry. We quickly formed a truly integrated team, clearly aligned with our purpose and skillsets.

While our particular rotation did not get dispatched to any incidents, we spent our time refining the equipment caches, developing process flows and generally thinking 'outside the box' as to how we would approach different scenarios. It was a unique experience with many learnings, and a real pleasure working with Andrew and Charlie from VICSES, alongside our peers from MFB – a truly integrated cross agency team. ■

Mid West volunteers assist vehicle relocation

Jane Patton, Community Resilience Coordinator, Mid West Region

On 8 January 12 members from VICSES Ballarat and Bacchus Marsh Units joined together as a task force to relocate Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) firefighting vehicles.

The relocation of vehicles was in preparation for the arrival of international emergency service members who were deployed to Australia to assist with the bushfires.

On 24 January units from Mid West Region once again assisted with the movement of 4WD vehicles from Altona to the Victorian Emergency Management Institute (VEMI) in Macedon. This team included Hepburn Unit members Michael Sitton and Emily Pullen,

and Ballarat Unit members Ben Lynch, Stephen Blood and Graham Wood.

Fantastic work by all of our members involved in these deployments. ■



DELWP vehicles ready to be relocated with assistance from VICSES.

Fires in south west

By Bess Krause, Community Resilience Coordinator, South West Region

While fires burned in the east of Victoria, dry lightning strikes in late December caused further blazes to ignite in the far south west.

Fire crews worked to contain the Crawford River-Boulevard fire and the Budj Bim Complex fire, while an additional fire started at Wade Junction-Nine Mile Road on 3 January.

The Budj Bim Complex fire required additional consideration, as the area is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Here, several thousands of years ago, the Gunditjmara Aboriginal people modified wetlands and waterways to create a complex aquaculture system to trap eels. The terrain in the complex made it difficult to access for fire crews and traditional owners of the land were actively involved with trying to preserve the site.

An Incident Control Centre (ICC) was set up in Heywood where Country Fire Authority (CFA), Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Forest Fire Management, Parks Victoria, Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, and VICSES worked together to manage the incident.

VICSES members assisted in the role of Incident Agency Commander, tasked with organising and communicating capability of crews, providing situation reports, managing storm jobs in the footprint of the

ICC, supporting Victoria Police with road closures, organising catering, and refuelling of vehicles and machinery.

Additional VICSES volunteers joined CFA members to travel door-to-door to discuss fire plans with residents, and encourage early decision making.

Many VICSES volunteers from units across the area also made themselves available for 'one hour recall', in case further support was required. During this time, all units in the area maintained operational capability.

A 'Watch and Act' message was released on Friday 3 January for several areas in the vicinity of the Budj-Bim fire. However by 7 January, all three fires were able to be contained, with no significant loss of assets.

Following the Budj Bim fires that burned more than 7,000 hectares, traditional owners of the land have discovered what they believe to be additional sections of the site that had been previously concealed by vegetation. A new cultural heritage survey will be conducted to determine if the finding is in fact a newly discovered section of the aquaculture system. ■



Seymour Unit Controller Christine Welsh, Deputy Controller Lisa James and unit member Morgan Duell made up the all-female rescue team.

North East rescue crews support Corryong Unit

By Liz Frazer, Community Resilience Coordinator, North East Region

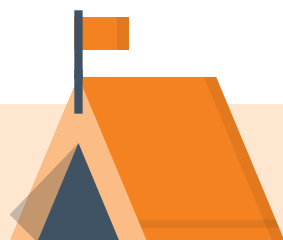
During January, North East Region rotated special rescue crews into the Corryong area to support Corryong Unit members who had evacuated or become isolated due to the threat from the devastating Upper Murray bushfires.

This special rescue resource gave Corryong Unit members a break from responding to VICSES requests for assistance, while many defended their own homes and properties. Much like the crews heading into Tambo Valley on similar rotations, it also took the pressure off local members and allowed them the chance to focus on their wellbeing and recovery.

Each rescue crew rotated roughly every four days. One of the teams worked side-by-side with Australian Defence Force Reserves, whilst another was an all-female rotation,

which included Seymour's Unit Controller Christine Welsh, Deputy Controller Lisa James and member Morgan Duell. Fortunately for the rescue crews there weren't any rescue operations to undertake during their rotations. Instead, crews spent time servicing and checking equipment and volunteering at the relief centre to put care packages together for those in need.

A big thanks to the members who volunteered their time as part of a rescue crew during the fires. ■



Tallangatta Base Camp

By Geoff Ashby, Unit Officer – Broadmeadows Unit, Central Region

It all started when I received a phone call from the Regional Duty Officer, asking if I was available to be deployed as a night camp manager for five days at Tallangatta Base Camp.

Ipacked my bags and said goodbye to my partner, and waited for a member from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning to drive me to Tallangatta.

Once I arrived I started immediately after the briefing, working through the night until 8am. I surveyed the layout of the camp, making sure it was prepared for the arrival of personnel including strike teams and the Australian Defense Force (ADF). There was great comradery and communication within the camp,

Michael leaves his mark in Mallacoota

By Kath Jessop, Media Officer, VHO



VICSES members from across the state have been supporting the East Gippsland fires in many unique ways, with one instance highlighted by Wonthaggi Unit volunteer Michael Butera.

Michael spent time in the coastal town of Mallacoota on deployment between 7 and 10 January, as well as in Omeo from 27 to 31 December.

In the latter deployment he travelled to Mallacoota by air, as all roads in and out of

the area at that time were closed. During that time, Michael supported the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Fisheries Officers and the Australian Defence Force alongside fellow volunteers – and decided to leave a mark on the community in his own way.

with any issue or problem resolved as soon as possible. A highlight for me was chatting with an ADF member about a minor issue he had, and eventually learning that he is the son of one of my Warrant Officers during my time in the force. It's a small world.

There were also a number of heartwarming moments that you don't forget. A thank-you card made by a brother and sister, as well as water and snacks for our volunteers purchased with

their own pocket money, and flowers and other thank-you notes from other children. Seeing the facial expressions of the personnel when they read the thank you notes was unforgettable – smiling and appreciative, despite their exhaustion.

Throughout my years at VICSES, this experience is something I'll never forget, especially from a community that was going through so much. ■

"We were sitting down, thinking of unique ways we could help folks in Mallacoota, and commemorate all the people, all the volunteers that came down to help them," said Michael.



I told my Controller that I wouldn't mind making up a kind of honour board or a plaque, something to remember us all by."

After finding a piece of scrap metal that was partly melted down by the fires, Michael decided to create a make-shift plaque dedicated to all the VICSES members that had travelled down to assist the fire-ravaged, but extremely tough, town. Michael was tasked by his Controller to make the rustic emblem, with the aluminium found among the cars that had been destroyed by fire.

The plaque now sits proudly in the Mallacoota Unit office, with many names yet to come. ■

Community Liaison Officers on the front line in East Gippsland



Wodonga Unit members Carina Newton and Bronwyn Chapman proudly display Carina's newsletter at Bright's Tourist Information Centre.

The Incident Management Team (IMT) Community Liaison Officer (CLO) role can be such an interesting and diverse deployment in an emergency. Wodonga Unit member Carina Newton and North East Region Headquarter Support Unit member Ian Sheldrick share a little about their deployment, and how they supported bushfire affected areas.

Carina's first CLO deployment into East region involved walking around Swifts Creek, seeing how the locals were coping, distributing the local newsletter, warnings and fire maps. In Tallangatta, she assisted with the sorting and packaging of essential donated food stuffs and products, for deliveries to affected individuals and families. Carina also spent time as CLO in Omeo, Ensay, the Ovens Valley and Corryong and the Staging Area at Tallangatta.

"It was such a great experience... my proudest moment was writing up my very first newsletter with Bronwyn and Chloe," said Carina.



I had to be a great conversationalist with many of the locals, who just wanted someone to talk to, even if most of it was unrelated to the fires. To have some normality during the situation seemed to help many."



NE Region Headquarter Support Unit member Ian Sheldrick comforts a furry friend.

Ian, (aka "Mr Have-a-chat"), was part of the meet-and-greet team at the Corryong Relief Centre, directing people to the registration table, and liaising with the Incident Control Centre and Towong council regarding the latest community messaging. This included attending community meetings and the distributing community newsletters and maps of the fire situation.

"IMT CLOs are really on the 'front line' with the community during an emergency incident," says Ian.

In addition to supporting the distribution of community information in an emergency, often in areas with no electricity or communication, we also conduct welfare checks on communities to feed information back to ICCs, such as the immediate needs and concerns of the locals. ■



Supporting Base Camp in Bairnsdale.

SUPPORTING

Gippsland, Wimmera and regional Victoria

By Jane Patton, Community Resilience Coordinator, Mid West Region

VICSES members from Ballarat, Horsham, and Bacchus Marsh Units, as well as Mid West Region staff were proud to support the bushfire response in both operational and non-operational roles, working with amazing efforts and integrity.



The team at the Bairnsdale ICC.

Deployment roles have varied, and have been a critical part of the overall function of operational and support roles in the Incident Control Centres (ICC), Staging Areas and Base Camps at Bairnsdale, Orbost and Swan Reach.

Ballarat Unit member Damien Slater undertook the role of Staging Area Manager, while unit members Gary Hickson and Ben Lynch provided ground support when deployed at Swan Reach in January.

Ararat Unit member Warren Pitt was also deployed in January to the

Horsham ICC as the Incident Agency Commander for spike days in the Wimmera, and was also on standby for the Ararat ICC.

Mid West regional staff Lauren Hawkins, Clare Mintern, Gavin Kelly, Kendra Clegg and Tony Grimme were deployed to Gippsland ICCs. Assistant Chief Officer Stephen Warren was deployed as Incident Controller (fire) to Tallangatta, Wodonga, Bairnsdale and Orbost ICCs. This was a fantastic opportunity to work with other members within the emergency service sector and respond to the needs of the community. ■



Night shift in Bairnsdale.

Tales from Bruthen

By Jamie Devenish, Manager Media and Communications, VHO



Bruthen Unit member Mike McStephen has thanked his local community and agency peer support programs for the overwhelming support after he lost his own home to bushfire while responding as a Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteer on the evening of 30 December 2019.

Mike recently received a Long Service Award following more than 10 years' service with VICSES and is keen to distance himself from the hero narrative, saying he was only doing his job as a volunteer.

"I wouldn't have stayed to defend my home anyway, so it's not like it was a choice between my house or responding as a volunteer. I have a clear plan not to be there on days like that, so I see them as quite separate," said Mike.

As a symbol of the dedication he shows to his community, Mike selflessly spoke at the Bruthen community meeting just days later, ahead of another spike fire day, imploring locals to make clear decisions on their emergency plans and stick to them. Mike says he's probably doing as well as can be, given the circumstances.



Being involved in emergency management for so long probably makes you as prepared as anyone can be for something like this, but it's certainly not easy.

The CFA brigade captain has helped me out with a rental property, and the support I've had locally has been fantastic – so I'm doing OK." ■



Intelligence analysis at the SCC

By Terry Kanellos, Deputy Controller, State Headquarters Unit

This fire period saw many State Headquarters Unit members utilised at the State Control Centre (SCC).

The State Headquarter Unit comes with a broad range of skills, allowing us to operate on the ground and in an office environment. In my case, I worked as an Intelligence Analyst in the SCC. I formed part of the Operation Genesis team, which was later renamed the Combined Agency Operations Group. As the name implies, the group included members from multiple agencies, including Victoria Police, the Australian Defence Force (ADF), Australian Red Cross and more.

Our initial aim was to identify the needs of communities isolated by fires and bring relief to them, as well as evacuations. As an Intelligence Analyst, you collect information you can analyse and draw conclusions from. My first job was to assist in the relief effort by monitoring and networking with other personnel, and providing reporting to those that needed it. It was critical to draw out the consequences, and not just look at the immediate need. For instance, providing fuel for mobile towers, so EFTPOS and ATM facilities would still work in isolated communities if the internet went down.

Our means of gathering information and communication ranged from in-house systems, to social media and locals within the community. Gaining access to ADF reports and information from other government departments was also helpful. Overall, this was a fantastic experience to hone our skills and see a fully functioning SCC, despite being a devastating emergency event. ■

Protecting the town of Omeo

By Kath Jessop, Media Officer, VHO

Tambo Valley Unit volunteer Shane Peach was the only member from his unit who was available when the fires in East Gippsland threatened his own home in the small town of Omeo.



Shane Peach (left) with fellow VICSES members in Omeo.

Many of Shane's fellow unit members work for Forest Fire Management (FFM) or council and were needed elsewhere, while other members chose to evacuate or were overseas.

Shane assisted at the Omeo recreation reserve, which acted as an informal meeting point. VICSES volunteers from Sorrento, Phillip Island, Moe and Sunbury Units came to assist, and working alongside Victoria Police and FFM, the team informally ran the site by supplying power, food and water to displaced locals. They also made sure to maintain critical generators and keep morale steady for those community members who had chosen to stay behind.

The experience for Shane was extremely tough, especially after evacuating his four step children and helping to keep his partner safe. But despite this, Shane is proud of his commitment

to the community as a VICSES volunteer. And thankfully, his house remains standing.

Shane was recently announced as the Controller of the Tambo Valley Unit, and is grateful to the many VICSES members who have come to assist on rotating deployments since late December.

"I am a proud man that has been brought up to serve my community; I don't do it for the accolades," says Shane.

"I can't thank my Duty Officers and the support from VICSES enough; I think we've made one hell of a difference." ■



Supporting the bushfires through state-wide OHS

By Terese Howlett, Manager Wellbeing Health & Safety, VHO

The State Occupational, Health and Safety (OHS) Executive Officer role provides OHS advice to the State Response Controller (SRC) and Emergency Management Commissioner on all agencies and activities state-wide.

This can also include OHS for those being deployed interstate and internationally, as well as agencies that have travelled to assist Victoria.

OHS at a state advisory level is something our state does really well. The role encompasses a lot of variety, and supports our crews and agencies by ensuring they come home safely at the end of the day. This is achieved through intelligence advice regarding safe systems of work, and where we see a gap forming that has the potential for harm. For instance, I provided advice on asbestos and site management for fire damaged homes in Mallacoota, to enable people to return to their own homes. Other tasks included the deployment of a crew to a remote location to rescue some rare birds before the fire, smoke exposure, debris

risk flows for pending storms, and more.

At times it can be very tough. I was working on the night that Forest Fire Management member Bill Slade passed away. It had already been a long day, and it was just one of those calls that you don't want to hear. I worked with the SRC and State Agency Commander in the initial support and response, even though we were hundreds of kilometres away.

It's great connecting with other VICSES members during a fire event, as it shows just how far we've come as an agency in undertaking leading roles in the response to fires. I am always in awe of everyone's commitment and dedication to serving the Victorian community, no matter what role they are in. ■

Self-care on deployment

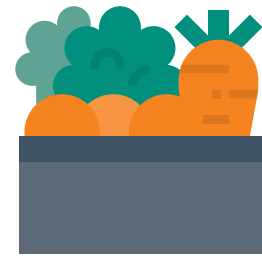
By Alison Wright, Health and Wellbeing Coordinator, VHO

What is self-care?

Self-care is looking after our physical and emotional health to reduce the risk of depression, burnout and illness. Nutrition, hydration, rest, sleep and managing stress each play an important role in maintaining our health.

Why is self-care so important?

Being in an unfamiliar environment during an emergency situation can frequently contribute to an increase in stress, which makes us more susceptible to illness, infection, accidents, poor decision-making and mistakes. During times like this, looking after ourselves is a priority so that we can be effective in looking after others.



What should I be eating?

Good nutrition can boost our immunity and mood, maintain our concentration, and help to keep fatigue at bay. While you may not have much control over your diet on deployment, try to eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables if available and pack some healthy snacks to take with you.

What types of snacks should I take?

While a sugar hit can be tempting for a quick energy boost, try to pack snacks that are high in protein and good fats, as these nutrients deliver a sustained release of energy. Examples include:

- Fruit free muesli bars and nut bars.
- Nut butter with an apple.
- Seed or bean based snacks.
- Tuna or salmon and bean meals.
- Trail mix with raw almonds, walnuts and sunflower seeds – make your own, or look for ones high in nuts and low in dried fruit (preferably raw nuts).



What should I be drinking?

Dehydration adversely affects our energy and concentration, so fluid intake is vital in staying safe and focussed. Remember, by the time you are thirsty, you are already dehydrated.

- Have a glass of water as soon as you wake up.
- Choose still over carbonated drinks. Avoid drinks high in sugar and caffeine as they can reduce the speed of fluid replacement and contribute to dehydration.
- Take a water bottle and drink water regularly throughout the day.
- Monitor the colour of your urine – it should be pale yellow.

What if I get dehydrated?

During extreme heat and/or strenuous activity, watch yourself and those around you for symptoms of dehydration. Dehydration can present as a headache, thirst, dizziness, nausea, cramps, yellow to dark coloured urine, lack of sweating, or dry skin. For dehydration:

- Begin consuming electrolyte replacement drinks at the detection of the first symptoms of dehydration and continue over the next hour.
- Consume electrolyte replacement drinks at the ratio of one bottle for every two bottles of water.
- Monitor symptoms and seek medical attention if feeling unwell.



How can I make sure I get enough rest?

Rest is vital for preventing fatigue and managing stress, so make sure to take regular breaks and rest up between shifts.

- Rest can be a 5 minute break or powernap in the truck, as well as making sure you get as much sleep as possible.
- Sleep might be hard to come by, and conditions for sleeping may not be optimal, so be sure to take an eye mask and earplugs.
- Know what impacts sleep (stress, caffeine, and environment) and avoid spicy foods, rich foods, sugary foods, alcohol and caffeine before bed.
- Try and relax before bed time. Take headphones and listen to your favourite music, read a book or play a game of cards – anything that allows your mind and body to take a break from work.



How do I switch off after a shift?

It's not always easy to quieten our mind and wind down. Different things work for each of us so it's important to find what works for you. Here are some ideas:

- Try finding a quiet environment and taking some deep breaths. Simply breathe in, hold for four seconds and breathe out, and repeat for five to ten minutes to reset.
- If you have a mindfulness or meditation practice you may find it helpful to increase this as a preventative strategy. If you've never tried mindfulness stuff before, deployment might be a chance to start – try the Headspace app for some ideas.
- Reliance on coffee, alcohol, sugar or other substances to get you through is never a good thing. ■



Wellbeing support:

There's a reason we deploy in teams – to share the load, and reduce the stress. It can be really helpful to reach out to other members of the crew. And remember, support is always available through VICSES.

Volunteers: Contact Peer Support on 1800 899 927

Staff: Contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) on 1300 687 327



Highlights across social media

A look at some of the fantastic stories and photos shared across our social media pages in January during the Victorian bushfires.

**JAN
1**

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE (VICTORIAN STATE PAGE)

VICSES supports Victorian communities affected by fires on the first day of 2020.



LIKES: 1,600 **COMMENTS:** 107 **SHARES:** 196

**JAN
5**

Seymour Unit

Seymour Unit proud to lead the convoy of essential services into the town of Corryong.



LIKES: 313 **COMMENTS:** 33 **SHARES:** 52

**JAN
6**

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE (VICTORIAN STATE PAGE)

Thanking all of our incredible volunteers in supporting current fire operations across Victoria.

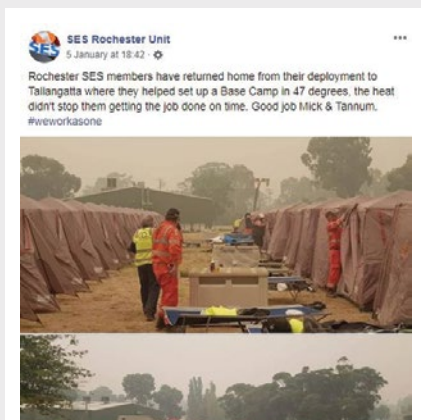


LIKES: 1,300 **COMMENTS:** 57 **SHARES:** 211

**JAN
5**

Rochester Unit

Rochester Unit members return from deployment in Tallangatta where they helped to set up base camp.

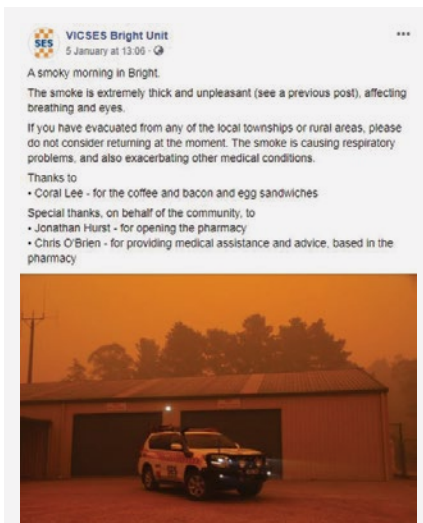


LIKES: 144 **COMMENTS:** 12 **SHARES:** 11

**JAN
5**

Bright Unit

Bright Unit warns the community of smoky conditions.



LIKES: 487 **COMMENTS:** 274 **SHARES:** 237

**JAN
7**

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE (VICTORIAN STATE PAGE)

VICSES thanks the community for their overwhelming requests to assist.



LIKES: 482 **COMMENTS:** 29 **SHARES:** 156

**JAN
7**

Tallangatta Unit

The Murray Valley Highway reopens from 7am - 8pm every day for residents.

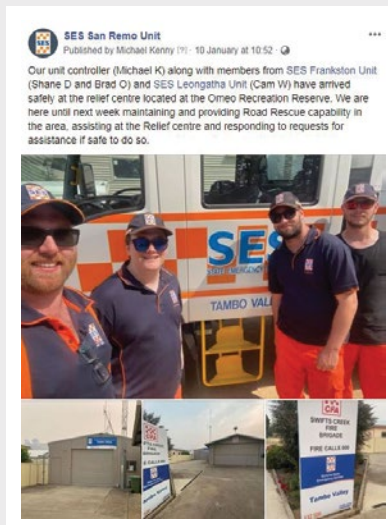


LIKES: 195 **COMMENTS:** 49 **SHARES:** 109

**JAN
10**

San Remo Unit

Volunteers arrive safely at the relief centre in Omeo to provide road rescue capability to the local community.



LIKES: 90 **COMMENTS:** 12 **SHARES:** 3

**JAN
13**

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE (VICTORIAN STATE PAGE)

Thanking all of our incredible volunteers for their support for fire operations across Victoria.



LIKES: 487 **COMMENTS:** 274 **SHARES:** 237

**JAN
8**

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE (VICTORIAN STATE PAGE)



VICSES CEO Stephen Griffin visiting units in East Gippsland to check in and say thanks for their incredible work.

LIKES: 268 **COMMENTS:** 13 **SHARES:** 10

Twitter

LIKES: 104 **COMMENTS:** 1 **SHARES:** 24

**JAN
14**

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE (VICTORIAN STATE PAGE)

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews thanking our hardworking volunteers who assisted the Corryong community.



LIKES: 326 **COMMENTS:** 30 **SHARES:** 14

**JAN
8**

Wodonga Unit

Wodonga Unit provides assistance in the community of Corryong.

LIKES: 115 **COMMENTS:** 19 **SHARES:** 16



YOUR PHOTOS FROM THE FIELD



VICSES members in Corryong.



VICSES members in Ovens.



Australian Defence Force and VICSES assist those evacuated from Mallacoota.



Myrtleford Unit members.



Base Camp in Tallangatta.



Supporting operations at the Orbost Incident Control Centre.



Swifts Creek Base Camp.



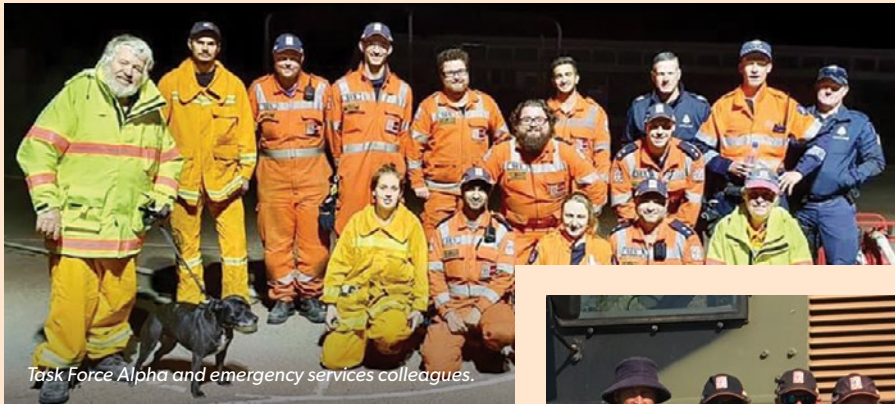
Australian Defence Force and VICSES assist those evacuated from Mallacoota.



Cann River.



VICSES relief crews evacuated from Omeo to Bairnsdale by the Australian Defence Force.



Task Force Alpha and emergency services colleagues.



Swifts Creek Base Camp.



Ovens Incident Control Centre team.



Setting up base camp in Tallangatta.



Swan Reach Base Camp team, including members from Frankston, Gisborne, Central East RSU and Sunbury Units.



Greater Dandenong Deputy Controller Benjamin Langan and Regional Officer Diana Ferguson with VICSES Task Force members.



Multi-agency taskforce in Omeo to assist Tambo Valley Unit with road crash rescue support.



Bright Unit.



VICSES members in Ovens.



Bairnsdale Air Rescue Support.



Myrtleford Unit presents Gisborne Unit with a thank you mug.



Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, former Police Commissioner Ken Lay, Country Fire Authority Chief Officer Steve Warrington and VICES members from Gisborne, Bendigo, Marong and Rochester Units.



Frankston Unit members on their way home from deployment to Orbest.



Task Force Bravo.



Rescue support crew members in Coryong.



Swifts Creek.



North West members in Tallangata.



Malvern Unit supporting Cann River Unit and the local community.



Bendigo Unit.