



UNCOMMON COURAGE

By Brad Cooper & Ben Lee

Australia, over recent months, has been engulfed in a fire disaster unlike anything seen before. In mid-January 2020, PANSW Organisers Ben Lee and Brad Cooper travelled to the south coast to visit members and returned with stories of destruction, survival, resilience, and strength.

The combined response from national and state agencies to the disaster has been significant. Despite the enormous loss, the resilience of communities and the first responders within those communities, has been demonstrated at an exceptional level. Police, along with other first responders, gallantly fought to protect their own homes, their mates' homes, and backed up for work once that job was done or resumed helping others. Some examples are outlined below.

We left Sydney on 13 January for Nowra where we met up with a member whose story was typical of many others. On New Year's Eve 2019, fires were on the doorstep of the family home but once that battle was won, they returned to work, continuing tirelessly to protect the community and was



Det S/Sgt Moon from FSG and Det Sgt Marks from South Coast PD were escorted by Army personnel on a NZ Air Force Helicopter to the southern fringes of the state to account for people living in remote areas.



now resting with family and cleaning up. The scars of the fire around this member's home and the surrounding area, including HMAS Albatross the Nowra Naval Air Station, showed how much effort had gone into protecting these structures, while also showing that the ferocity of the fire clearly had been beyond ordinary.

From there we continued to Batemans Bay where we met and spoke with several members at the station. We heard the tales and learned that many areas were without power, internet and mobile phone service as a result of damage to infrastructure. The effects of the fire highlighted the dependence on technology and how that dependence, can at times, be a limitation. As NSWPF phones are internet based, when the power went out, so did the phones.

UPS redundancy is effective for a small number of power points and only as long as batteries hold up, if there is no generator installed to boost power. Add to this the significant outage to mobile phone towers and land-based internet, everyone in these affected areas pretty quickly identified that they were isolated and pushed to manage as best as they could to get through the difficult days and weeks that followed.

We spoke with many members regarding their situation; many were still without power almost two weeks later. We made a number of applications under the PANSW Welfare Assistance Scheme to Acting President Kevin Morton who approved them without question. Members were granted financial assistance that mostly went toward providing small generators.

This enabled them to ensure there was power for cold food, lighting and washing machines etc. Many had young families or extended families that were coping as best they could. Being able to speak with them and arrange this assistance that PANSW provides its members was a great feeling of achievement and was well received and appreciated by them.

HEAVY RELIANCE ON POLICE

We continued through Moruya, witnessing the indiscriminate devastation, and on to Narooma where we stopped at the PCYC which had been transformed into an evacuation centre. We spoke to locals and visiting support staff who praised the local and visiting police highly, again sharing stories of how the local police had

taken control of the chaos that ensued when the fire and associated damage to infrastructure was unleashed on the area. Again, without power and communications, the town heavily relied on the local police to support them which clearly, they did. Further police and other agency support arrived days later which was a great relief to the town and emergency services, though the police continued to stand strong and support each other and the town.

WILLING WORKERS

We attended Narooma police station and spoke with a number of police who looked exhausted, but it was clear they had so much more to give. The idea of a rest day did not come into the conversation. Whilst they were tired, they indicated there was work to be done and they wanted to do it. Sergeant Brendan O'Mahony was identified by the locals and the police as being pivotal in the ongoing efforts to protect the town, the people, and his officers. When we met him, he had a big smile and was taking everything in his stride as if to say, "We've got this." Similarly with Sergeant Peter Vaughan. Both officers' main concern was their police, all police families and the community.

We met up with almost all of the local police and some visiting police for dinner that night. It was a great chance to say thanks and also a great opportunity for these officers and partners to unwind for a few hours. A few stories of the fires were shared, though mainly it was a time to gather thoughts and have a laugh as there is more work to do and, sure enough, it continued soon after.

Throughout the journey, the impulse to photograph the landscape and people to try and capture the moment, as well as showing the great work being done, was strong. Upon reflection, it didn't seem respectful to be photographing the destruction. Some people just didn't want to be photographed or be promoted as special. On reflection, it wasn't possible to do justice to what we saw. In some places the fires obliterated homes or businesses, either on properties, in bustling residential suburbs or in the middle of towns. These were people's homes and livelihoods, some were simply standing next to the ruins of what used to be. Silent reflection seemed the more appropriate response. It was good to see the social media tourist did not exist,



though neither did the actual paying tourist — an issue that will be felt in these communities.

Leaving Narooma, we travelled south through the little town of Tilba. Usually a very busy township of historical buildings and boutique shops, it was largely empty other than a few people stopping by like us.

A SURREAL SIGHT

From there we continued through amazing countryside to the town of Cobargo. Entering Cobargo from the north was surreal. Trees line the roadsides typically close so they can catch the drivers who fall asleep, and beyond the tree line are paddocks for several hundred metres, then more tree lines and hills. Another area that photos would not capture the story told by the landscape. There must have been such fierce fires that the tree line near the hills was burnt, the paddocks were burnt all the way to the roadway with some of the roadside trees burnt and others not. However, the most significant and odd sight was the amount of green foliage already growing in the paddock. There had only been a small amount of rain, yet it was already regrowing. This in the face of so many years of drought, we could only imagine the reaction of any landholder, laughter at the irony would be the only way to avoid going mad.

Further on and the devastation in Cobargo was clearly evident. The town was bustling despite the collapsed buildings and obvious firestorm residue. The locals were welcoming and showed

a strength that had to be admired.

One little café and coffee cart in the main street Via Luna Café, was giving free coffee to locals. We couldn't resist the chance to try the coffee while also paying forward to support the cause. A \$30 coffee tasted pretty good in this circumstance.

We then caught up with Senior Constable Paul Bond, the lock up keeper of Cobargo police station. By the time he arrived for work, there was a line-up of community members seeking advice. A number had brought in what was left of long arm rifles that had been burnt during fires. He certainly had his work cut out for him! After tending to community members, he gave us a tour of the station. A rich tapestry of history remains in this station. The building was built around 1910 and was originally the Court House though now is only a police station. We were pointed to a single cupboard in the middle of the station. Upon opening it we found a Pandora's box of police and PANSW history. A great reminder of the good old days in all the books and notices there.

Senior Constable Bond spoke of the incident that has been running since the massive firestorm, he has taken it in his stride and excelled at keeping the town informed, while supporting the emergency and recovery effort. He has been able to stay grounded by going for a short drive to the beach and clearing his mind in the surf, before returning to his town and community as the recovery effort continues. Military vehicles are a frequent sight in the town. Members of the community wave and beep horns



The Emergency Operations Centre in Nowra. In January supplies were delivered to the Milton Showground to support bushfire-affected towns on the South Coast.

at them, happy to see them, expressing a look of positivity and hope that is widespread in this area.

We moved on to Bega and met a number of members at Bega police station. The workload here also has been excessive, yet everyone continues to work and push forward to meet the demands of the job and the community. Bega and Merimbula have been significantly affected by the fires and the evacuation of tourists, yet managed to keep on top of events and keep the community informed.

At the local council chambers, we met A/Sgt Brad Ross of Bega HWP. He is the LEOCON and has been holding the respect and admiration of the town and the services since the fires commenced. We were introduced to the Mayor, Ms Kristy McBain who was coordinating a new command post to now focus on recovery efforts. She and A/Sgt Ross explained the fire movement and how resources had, and continue to be, deployed all the way to the Victorian border. This council is providing live updates on social media daily so people can be informed of what is happening. The superb collaboration between all services is playing a significant role in their response and recovery.

Since the major incident started, there have been a significant number of properties lost and at least 5 deaths in the Bega area, all requiring local police to manage and report. We spoke with Detective Sergeant Justin Marks at Bega about his team and their response to the fires. He advised that the workload was quite extensive and covered a significant

area of land. At the time he was waiting on a response from ADF regarding a helicopter flight to reach the areas where transient and off the grid people were known to live, though were not recorded anywhere so their safety could not be accounted for. Luckily, the approval to have the flight came through the following day and D/Sgt Marks and D/Sgt Moon from FSG were escorted by Army personnel on a Royal New Zealand Air Force Helicopter to the southern fringes of the state to survey the land.

COMMUNITY IS FOREVER GRATEFUL

D/Sgt Marks later provided us with this synopsis of what occurred during the emergency period:

On the 30th of December 2019, the South Coast Police District encountered catastrophic bush fires never seen in the history of the region. Nine fires commenced within the District with the loss of five lives and thousands of homes destroyed. This has personally affected all officers from the district as everyone knew of families who lost homes or loved ones. I know of officers who were protecting their own properties which were at threat of fire, only to leave home to attend work to help the community they serve. It was a difficult task, speaking to farmers who have lost their entire stock, witnessing farmers destroying their injured livelihood and watching our own community fall apart. We have seen our beloved towns all but wiped off the map. We are not only

local police officers but we are part of our communities and we are all devastated but still out there assisting the communities as much as we can. The assistance from all police outside of the South Coast District was a massive relief and we could see the devastation on their faces when they were briefed on what we all went through and had faced. Their support and friendship will never be forgotten. The assistance of the ADF and the Royal New Zealand Air Force in supporting us to do our jobs is something for which we are forever grateful.

We will rebuild and continue to support the communities we serve. The people in our communities are the salt of the earth and we will do everything we can to restore their faith and help them rebuild their lives and livelihood.

That night we met with local and visiting police for dinner, providing another chance for them to relax for a moment. It was clear how much respect the community had for first responders. They kept approaching police to thank them for their efforts and express appreciation for the work in keeping the community informed.

Throughout the week, resilience and strength shone above the devastation. This is the most significant fire emergency in Australia to date, and whilst it has continued for months, the effects will remain for years.

Strength and resilience are great assets to possess and to build upon. And, it is timely and important to remember that there will be times where the effects of exposure to trauma, the heightened level or response and general fatigue, will prevail. Please take a moment to check in on yourself and your colleagues, and be aware of the support services that exist for you (EAP 1300 667 197; Beyond Blue 1300 224 636; Lifeline 13 11 14). ■

Brad Cooper and Ben Lee are both organisers for the Non LAC Specialists team. They are serving NSW police officers seconded to the Police Association for a set period and deliver vital assistance to members.