

The Australian

# FIREFIGHTER

MICK FARRELL: A GENEROUS LIFE | UFU VICTORIA PICNIC | MICK GATTO

## Tasmanian bushfires

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**VOL 50 ISSUE 1 2013**



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**Cover:** Photo taken by Tasmanian firefighter Warren Frey.



MICK GATTO **20**

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**National President**  
Greg Northcott



**National Secretary**  
Peter Marshall

## From the National Secretary

**The UFUA is once again at the forefront of the international campaign for recognition of occupational cancer affecting firefighters.**

The UFUA co-hosted a global forum on occupational cancer and other OH & S matters affecting firefighters in March 2013. The UFUA, the United Fire Fighters of Winnipeg (“the UFFW”) and the Edmonton Firefighters Union (“the EFFU”) co-facilitated the Global Forum which was held in Melbourne on the 14th and 15th March 2013.

We are honoured to have leading international and national experts attend and present at the forum.

The high calibre of presenters has created significant international and national interest in the forum.

Keynote speaker Dr Tee Guidotti is a highly respected leading epidemiologist whose work on the incidence of cancer in firefighters is widely regarded and referred to. Dr Guidotti has authored a number of significant studies into cancer and firefighting. His research was key research in the evidence considered by the Australian Government Senate Committee inquiry which ultimately lead to the enactment of the Fair Protection for Firefighters presumptive legislation. His research was also accepted and highly regarded by Canadian and USA legislators that have enacted presumptive legislation.

As members will be aware, in 2011 the UFUA campaign successfully resulted in Australia being the third nation to protect firefighters through presumptive legislation. The “Fair Protection for Firefighters” legislation ensures federal firefighters can access their entitlements including medical assistance, work cover and compensation for occupational cancer by presuming specific cancers are occupational diseases. Firefighters generally cannot access their entitlements because they are unable to reach the required thresholds of proof of the actual fire or fires where they were exposed to the carcinogens and the specific carcinogens they were exposed to.

The “Fair Protection for Firefighters” Bill included a robust and now acclaimed Senate Inquiry which recognised the wealth of scientific evidence linking the nature of firefighting and the occurrence of specific cancers.

The successful UFUA campaign included extensive lobbying throughout Australia and across all political divides. It resulted in widespread understanding that firefighting increases the risk of contraction of specific cancers due to the absorption of carcinogens through the skin.

The Senate report confirmed acceptance of the evidence that because firefighter Personal Protective Clothing has to breathe to prevent metabolic heat build-up, smoke containing toxins and carcinogens are absorbed through the skin and it is this repeated exposure at every-day fires that increases the risk of cancer for firefighters.

Australia had followed Canada’s lead and the USA in its bid to recognise specified cancers as occupational diseases for firefighters.

It is therefore fitting that it Australia’s first global forum on occupational cancer in firefighting is being held in conjunction with our global counterparts the UFFW and the EFFU. We would not have achieved this legislation without the support and input from our IAFF and global partners.



National Secretary Peter Marshall.

UFFW President Alex Forrest has been devoted to this issue for many years and has been instrumental in achieving presumptive legislation in Canada and the USA. He is working with various other firefighter unions around the world to achieve similar protections. Alex, who is a firefighter and a lawyer, greatly assisted the UFUA

in its campaign for presumptive legislation from assistance with drafting the legislation through to the promotion of the need for such protections. He appeared before the Senate Inquiry Committee twice, met with politicians and government department officials and assisted with an extensive media campaign during a series of trips to Australia in 2011.

Edmonton Fire Chief Ken Block was also very generous in his time and support for the UFUA campaign and his evidence was paramount in dispelling myths about the perceived costs and impact presumptive legislation has on work cover schemes. He too appeared before the Senate Committee and willingly promoted the success of the Edmonton legislation and the impact it has had on the early detection of health issues for firefighters.

Both Alex Forrest and Fire Chief Ken Block have been back to Australia to promote presumptive legislation to states governments.

There was considerable interest both internationally and nationally in the global forum.

Firefighters, representatives from firefighter unions, and fire services from North America, Europe, New Zealand and around Australia attended.

In addition Australian state and federal members of parliaments were in attendance.

Presenters included leading epidemiologist Dr Tee Guidotti whose studies were relied upon in the Australian Senate Inquiry.

This global forum firmly puts occupational cancer and other firefighter health issues on the international stage. The work the North American firefighters unions and the UFUA have done in this field has been recognised by the calibre of speakers and the interest the global forum has created.

Other occupational health and safety issues were also explored.

This was an extraordinary opportunity for firefighters, OH & S delegates and anyone interested in firefighter health issues to hear from the international experts.

The Global Forum was held in the same week as the UFUA National Committee of Management. The timing of the two events together assisted UFUA Branches to maximise their attendance at both events.

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GREAT WORK THEY DO IN THE COMMUNITY.**

## From the National President

**Firstly I wish to pay my personal tribute to retiring National President Mick Farrell.** Your years of dedication, hard work and solidarity leave a firm impression and legacy on our great Union. I share with other Branch Secretaries our best wishes to you and Chris in retirement.

Mick, you can retire knowing that Chris and you are welcome at anytime to share our homes in your travels.

With the resignation of our Branch Secretary I was appointed as the interim South Australian Secretary in November 2006. The following week I found myself representing the South Australian Branch at my first National Committee of Management meeting. It was there in New Zealand as Mick chaired his first meeting as National President that he showed his strength in allowing the most junior voice to be heard equally in discussions. I thank you for the guidance and encouragement you gave me that week.

It is a proud moment for me to be occupying the position of National President of our Union and I take this opportunity to thank my South Australian Branch for their support.

I believe that with our Secretary Peter Marshall, Industrial Officer Joanne "Wattie" Watson, office staff and National Executive we are well resourced to continue our role in representing firefighters nationally.

Our first priority must be to complete the rollout of Presumptive Legislation so that all firefighters are supported in the event they contract an occupational illness. Following on from this we need to ensure that our appliance and station design clearly allows for clean/dirty areas to be segregated so they can be transitioned safely.

Each State has specific existing work practices that go to protecting our members from these toxins. As a national union we must work collectively to achieve the highest possible national standards.



National President Greg Northcott.

Transition to retirement is another area that needs to be addressed for firefighters. For too long it has been accepted that firefighters are no different to any other occupations. In fact firefighters feel the wear and tear of a life of work more aggressively than most others. We are only too aware of the physical and psychological impact firefighting has on our lives and family.

With nationally recognised qualifications, the lowering of the retirement age for firefighters and the introduction of favourable transition to retirement benefits, firefighters would be able to retire with dignity and with a healthy active lifestyle.

We also move into a Federal election year, faced with the possibility of a conservative Liberal Government. Workchoices is not far from our collective memories and distinct choice we face between an Abbott lead conservative Government and a Labor lead Government is real and obvious.

The attacks on firefighters from state Liberal governments are now taking shape. Our brothers and sisters in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales are being deliberately targeted as a way of weakening the UFU. We must do all we can to stop this happening, and to stop the next edition of Workchoices.

It is with confidence that I look forward to the next three working together to achieve better outcomes, conditions and quality of life for Firefighters.

**GREG NORTHCOTT ■**

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The health and wellbeing of all of our members is paramount. The UFUA identified the issue of firefighters being unable to access their entitlements for occupational cancer some years ago. It was then one of five campaigns listed for the UFUA legislative agenda.

In May 2011 the first UFUA Legislative Conference was held in Canberra where National Executive and Branch representatives walked the corridors of Federal Parliament meeting with more than 39 Ministers and Members of Parliament introducing the UFUA and the 5 issues on the legislative agenda. We did not expect such a positive response which resulted in the "Fair Protection for Firefighters" Bill being tabled 8 weeks later and the presumptive legislation being enacted after an incredibly successful six-month campaign.

We are now well on the way to our goal of having every Australian firefighter protected by similar legislation. Late last

year Western Australia and South Australian Governments pledged their commitment to introducing protections to ensure the firefighters in those states can access their entitlements for occupational cancer. Tasmania is following hot on the heels with Government voicing its support. There is also progress in Victoria.

This experience and these successes demonstrate the effectiveness of a unified union and the incredible achievements that can result.

We are facing tough times on a number of fronts as budget cuts bite and Governments attempt to undermine the role, profession and integrity of firefighters. But as a united union we can and do punch above our weight.

The UFUA has gone from strength to strength and already in 2013 we are seeing the benefits of a unified union that works closely with its global partners.

**PETER MARSHALL ■**

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## Senate Inquiry into preparedness for extreme weather events

### **Australian's preparedness for extreme weather events is the focus of a current Australian Senate Inquiry.**

The Inquiry "Recent Trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events" was announced late last year.

For the UFUA this was a significant opportunity to have the Australian Senate and therefore ultimately Parliament consider the capacity and capability of fire services to respond and protect the community during extreme weather events.

Recent budget cuts, attacks on the professionalism of firefighting through the attempt of some fire services to employ non-career firefighters into senior roles and the attempts to undermine minimum staffing requirements have been evident in a number of states and territories around the country.

This inquiry was a golden opportunity to put those issues before the federal Senate to demonstrate the serious gaps in Australian's preparedness.

Climate change experts predict an increase in magnitude and occurrence of severe weather events. Weather events like all natural disasters do not recognise fire service boundaries and often require a combined effort from across fire services and states and territories.

Currently there are significant differences between fire services in minimum crew numbers, resources, equipment, personal

protective clothing, training and qualifications and incident management. These differences are barriers to the interoperability of firefighters and therefore impact significantly on the ability to respond to severe weather events, protect the community and place firefighters at greater risk.

The UFUA commissioned three consultancy reports to highlight the key issues for preparedness for extreme weather events and the impacts and implications of such weather events on firefighters, fire services and the community.

The first was a case study projecting the increase in the number of firefighters Victoria would need between 2012 and 2026 taking climate change into account. This study was an update of a 2009 study that the Victorian Branch had commissioned to look at that very issue. The update by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) predicts an increase of at least 28% but as high as 40% career firefighter numbers would be needed to adequately protect the community and cope with bushfire events by 2026, depending on the severity of the impact of climate change.

That equates to 660 to 950 additional firefighters for Victoria alone, and if the trend of the decline in volunteerism is taken into account a further 240 additional staff is predicted to be needed.

This was an interim report and NIEIR is currently undertaking a comprehensive report to forecast numbers for all of Australia as well as consider other issues such as interoperability, capacity and capability and economic loss.

In other two consultancy reports commissioned and provided to the Senate Inquiry is a report looking into the merits of a national registration board, and a report on the economic cost of fire.

Establishing a National Registration Board for firefighters is part of the UFUA legislative agenda. Firefighting is a highly skilled profession requiring robust qualifications and experience. The training and experience is a matter of life and death. The differences between fire services highlights the need to have national coordination of key issues such as training, qualifications and experience requirements. The standardisation of resources, equipment, standards and operating procedures is necessary if genuine interoperability between fire services and states and territories is to be achieved. In order to do that there needs to be a body that sets the standards and monitors adherence. This should be done through a national firefighters registration board.

In determining what resources are needed for adequate fire services and funding of the provision of those services, the economic loss resulting from fire and other events needs to be identified.

Economist Ruth Kershaw provided a report into the Economic Cost of Fire which was also submitted as part of the UFUA submission to the Senate Inquiry. The costs to the community and business, direct and indirect, are significant and far more wide-reaching than the building or home that was destroyed.

The Senate Committee is due to report back to the Senate in mid March 2013.



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## 2012 Queensland Branch news

**2012 was a major year for the Queensland Branch where considerable new challenges were presented to us and will continue into 2013.**

### Election of the Newman Government

March 2012 saw the election of an LNP government with a massive majority in parliament.

### Legislative changes

The new government introduced a range of new laws, including key changes to industrial and labour laws. The Queensland Branch participated in parliamentary committees and made submissions about some of the legislative changes, although many changes were pushed through with no consultation and little debate.

Some of the legislative changes are:

- Changes to the bargaining laws to make it harder for unions to organise industrial action;
- IR minister can veto industrial action and force arbitration after 21 days conciliation;
- Fines and penalties for taking industrial action;
- Government can bypass the union and put substandard agreements out to ballot;
- Requirements for the industrial commission to take account of the government's 'fiscal strategy';
- The treasury to brief the industrial commission;
- Lawyers to appear more regularly in the industrial commission;
- Employment Security and job protection clauses and awards and agreements invalidated;
- Termination, Change and Redundancy (TCR) provisions watered down;
- Appointment of new industrial commissioners;
- Industrial commissioners to swear an oath of loyalty to the Queen;
- Labour Day public holiday changed to October (and the recent changes to the Queen's birthday holiday reversed).

### Workers compensation review

The state government has commenced a review of workers compensation laws.

UFUQ, amongst other Queensland unions is apprehensive of attacks on injured workers rights and a diminution of protection for their families.

### Job Cutting

The new government threatened to slash 20,000 public sector jobs and by the year's end had sacked over 6,000 people. Thousands more positions are left unfilled, temporary contracts haven't been renewed and services and jobs have been put out to tender. Job losses are predicted to exceed 14,000 during 2013.

### Public Sector Enterprise Bargaining

The government forced a hard line bargaining position across all public sector agencies. The common claims were low wage rises, abolition of consultation and employee refusal provisions, introduction of so-called "managerial prerogative" and a green light for agency and department management to pursue claims against their workforce.

### QFRS Bargaining

QFRS tabled a raft of sweeping bargaining demands consistent with the new government's policy and an agenda of QFRS senior management being unleashed to attack professional front line firefighters.

QFRS demands included:

- No more than "up to 2.7%" wage adjustment based upon conditions trade-offs;
- Aggregate wage buying out public holiday penalties, travel and meal payments, 5 overtime shifts per year paid at time and a half. The aggregated rate not paid on sick leave or superannuation;
- Introduction of a casual segment of the workforce;
- Removal of consultation and 20 agreement clauses;
- Our union branches adopted resolutions across the state vowing not to accept any agreement unless it was endorsed by SCM.

### Industrial action

Brisbane roster officers led the charge and took a 24 hour unpaid stoppage.

Firefighters, station officers and communication centres were then balloted under the cumbersome and complicated new state IR system, and a record 99% vote in favour of taking protected industrial action was returned.

2 hour "fire calls only" bans commenced in October and after initial threats to withhold pay, QFRS paid officers for their entire shift.

Further industrial action occurred in November in the form of 3 hour periods of "fire calls" only bans. QFRS did not deduct payment for these periods.

The industrial action garnered a lot of media attention.

### QIRC enterprise bargaining conciliation

QFRS and the state government sought the assistance of the QIRC in enterprise bargaining. After a few report back conferences the government asked QIRC to refer the matters to arbitration. The government maintained a fairly fixed negotiating position throughout and persisted with submissions for the matters to be arbitrated. The Queensland Branch opposed the matters being referred to arbitration. The conciliation process took many months and QIRC ultimately referred matters to arbitration.

QIRC noted that the industrial relations environment prevailing when previous agreements were negotiated "no longer exists". The tribunal noted that "the employer is much more proactive in advancing its agenda rather than was the case in the past" and this change "has occurred in light of fiscal imperatives being pursued by the government".

The matters will now be arbitrated during 2013.

### United Voice- UFUQ campaign

This year UFUQ and United Voice-Queensland joined forces in an unprecedented alliance to defend our common interests in the new environment of service cuts and attacks on our employment conditions. On August 24th firefighters, ambos and their supporters staged a joint march and rally where an impressive turn out of some 5,000 people was widely reported in the news.

We launched a joint TV advertisement, the 'standingwithus.com' website, delivered joint flyers and postcards and have united in joint rallies and media events.

Ambulance and firefighter delegates also paired up to visit their local MP's and arranged a number of regional demonstrations.

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Firefighters and ambos joined with all other Queensland unions in a massive day of action which featured rallies across the state including a massive protest at parliament house on September 12<sup>th</sup>.

### Auxiliaries' agreement and award

Despite the Queensland branch persistence, QFRS and the government refused to agree with our proposal for a certified agreement for auxiliary firefighters. The government stated that they would only flow on whatever pay increase arose from the QFRS agreement via the QFRS internal policy of a "standing order".

UFUQ took the matter to the QIRC and after facing more government stonewalling, in September we lodged an application for a first award to cover auxiliary firefighters.

Although the application may take some time to progress through the QIRC it provides a process to secure some minimum entitlements for auxiliaries.

QFRS and the government haven't advised as yet as to whether they will oppose the making of an award.

### Labour Day

The previous state government, held a public review of public holidays, and legislated to move the Queen's birthday holiday from June to October.

The LNP government reversed that decision, moved the Queen's birthday public holiday back to June and shifted Labour Day to October.

Labour Day has been celebrated by Queenslanders in May for over a century. Many people refer to it as "Mayday".

The Queensland labour movement resolved to continue to celebrate our achievements in May.

### Keelty review

In November the government announced a ministerial review into the police, corrective and emergency services. The review will be headed by former federal police commissioner, Mick Keelty.

The review will be wide ranging and will include consideration of cross agency co-ordination, current policies and legislation, efficiencies and national and international benchmarks.

## Summary.

2012 was an eventful year which foreshadows a challenging year ahead. There are a number of forces gathering under various guises to attack Queensland firefighters' rights.

I look forward to the year ahead as a proud UFUQ member.

**JOHN OLIVER**  
UFUQ SECRETARY

### UFUA QUEENSLAND BRANCH

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## SA BRANCH

**The UFU and SAMFS are about to embark on our first full design and build of a fire station with best practice, and highest safety standards for firefighters.**

In January the State ALP Government announced funding for the relocation of Salisbury Fire Station to better service the expanding northern developments of Adelaide. This new Salisbury Station will become a Command Station. This station will join eight other new stations built in the last 10 years by the current State Government. Of these new stations a number have been as a result of optimal relocation. There have also been three new regional stations built.

Our focus with the new stations will be on clean engine bays and sanitary areas

that will allow a clean transition from dirty to clean.

This will ensure that our living areas are free from the carcinogens contributing to our occupational cancer. These new stations will be with full co-operation between UFU and SAMFS. Final design approval for living areas and clean/dirty spaces will be from the UFU.

The UFU has also achieved considerable staffing increases for our Communications Centre. This statewide Call Receipt and Dispatch for SAMFS, CFS and SES has been strengthened with the addition of four extra staff. New rostering and minimum staffing for these new staff were arrived at through an extensive consultation process run by the UFU.

These new staff will allow for ongoing training and skills maintenance as well as facilitating appropriate breaks and daily work routine for Communication Centre personnel.

It is not very often that we find ourselves complimenting management and government for their decisions, but we believe these are two clear examples that show genuine engagement and consultation works.

### UFUA SA BRANCH

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## Tasmania Bushfires Devastate Communities.

**January 2013 will be remembered as a time when bushfires ravaged Tasmania in conditions reminiscent of the 1967 bushfires.**

Significant fires started in Lake Repulse (Southern Highlands), Forcett (South East), Middle Tea Tree Road (Southern Midlands) and Giblin Road (Southwest World Heritage)

During this time since January 2 the TFS responded to 451 incidents including 197 vegetation fires.

The TFS received more 135,000 calls and deployed more than 3000 people during the six-day period.

Ground cover incident response was significant and 24 helicopters and affixed wing air tractor were also deployed.

The general community played a significant role by being prepared.

While there was no loss of life in the general community a firefighter from Victoria died attending to containment lines.

The response demonstrated the effectiveness of Tasmania emergency service's interoperability capacity with the Tasmania Fire Service career and volunteer firefighters being well supported by Forestry Tasmania and Parks and Wildlife firefighters, State Emergency Service workers, Tasmania Ambulance and Tasmanian Police.

The fires took their toll in a number of ways:

- Forcett: 190 homes, 170 sheds, 73 vehicles, 22 caravans/cabins, 5 shipping containers 7 commercial business, including 1 school, a police station and over 22,500 hectares of land burnt.
- Lake Repulse: 2 outbuildings, a caravan and 11,000 hectares burnt.
- Bicheno: 11 Homes, 4 outbuildings, 9 vehicles, 5 caravans and 5,000 hectares burnt.



Cricket supporters at the Big Bash League game at Bellerive Oval also showed their support for firefighters.

- Montumana: 2 Homes and 3100 hectares burnt.
- Giblin Road: 50,000 hectares world heritage area burnt of button grass plain and significant food source for native species.
- A significant interruption to vital infrastructure including hydro poles and wires, telecommunications both fixed and mobile and water supply was also experienced during this time.
- Rural losses
  - Farm infrastructure for fencing damage alone estimated at \$10 million
  - Stock losses are estimated at 10,000 head of stock
  - Crop losses significant with one cherry and poppy farmer having 90% of crop destroyed valued at \$1 million

The TFS has urged the community to continue to be vigilant with the fire danger being far from over and several extended periods of hot weather and high fire danger still to come.

## Enterprise Bargaining

**The Tasmania Branch has commenced the bargaining process for the 2013 Enterprise Agreement.**

All members were invited to participate in an electronic survey to assist the Branch in developing a log of claims. The response by members to the survey was very healthy and the data is being prioritised.

A Union Workplace Reps Conference is scheduled for March 22nd. On this day reps will meet and develop the log of claims. The claim will then be circulated to all members for endorsement at a round of General meetings. Once endorsed by the membership the claim will be submitted to the Tasmania Fire Service for discussion and negotiation.

The UFUA has invited two guest speakers to attend the conference. They are Rebecca White, Government Whip, Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier, Small Business and Cost of Living and David O'Byrne Minister for Police and Emergency Services.

The Branch Committee of Management has endorsed the process and has nominated regional representatives to participate with the TFS on the bargaining negotiations.

The UFUA is hopeful that the negotiation process will be finalised by July 2013.

### UFUA TASMANIA BRANCH

Branch President: Darren Gye  
Branch Secretary: Vincent Males  
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email: ufutas@ufutas.com

**The urgent need for new appliances and modifications to existing equipment highlighted by the Black Saturday Royal Commission has demonstrated the value of having a highly skilled and experienced workforce within the CFA that's able to perform this vital work.**

Despite the limited additional staff made available to the CFA's mechanical maintenance workshops, the CFA's District Mechanical Officers have shown resourcefulness and ingenuity in adjusting to their increased workload. Over the past three years more than 70 new appliances have been added to the CFA fleet. DMOs have worked hard to seamlessly absorb this extra workload with limited resources.

DMOs have also been responsible for fitting the crew protection sprayer – which is used to spray water over a fire truck in the event it is overwhelmed by fire. DMOs have fitted the system – which is critical to firefighter safety – on a significant number of trucks with the addition of only one extra permanent staff member.

District Mechanical Officers also perform a crucial role in CFA operations. DMOs are available to be called out at any time to attend fires and perform running repairs and salvage fire trucks. If a mechanical fault occurs on a fire truck in an at-risk area, it's up to them to fix it.

When weather changes and fire conditions ease, the work of DMOs can be just as difficult as trucks become bogged and salvage is required.

DMOs describe their role in maintaining the safety the community – and the firefighters who depend on the appliances they repair, modify and maintain – as being their primary motivation when performing their difficult and important work.

The enterprise agreement covering DMOs and Tower Overseers expired on 28 December 2012. Negotiations have begun for a new agreement however the CFA are yet to obtain government approval for their bargaining position.

**JEREMY MURPHY  
INDUSTRIAL OFFICER**

## MFB Corporate and Technical Staff Negotiations

**In April 2011 the UFU wrote to MFB CEO including a comprehensive log of claims seeking to renew the Enterprise Agreement which covers MFB Corporate and Technical Staff (non uniform staff).**

Corporate and Technical Staff work in areas including fire prevention, research and education, supporting front-line firefighters and minimising the community's human, property and financial losses.

This marked the commencement of formal negotiations which are only now coming to a close.

Over the next several weeks, the UFU sought to commence meetings with the MFB who simply refused to respond. The UFU brought the matter to Fair Work Australia in June and the matter was subject to FWA conferences. The MFB dragged their heels until August before they would meet.

Concurrently the UFU was pursuing at FWA a classification restructure under the current EBA which was reserved during the life of the agreement. This matter was resolved in July 2011 and was to deliver a significant outcome to staff and potentially take a lot of heat out of the commencing negotiations. Unfortunately days after the matter was agreed at FWA the MFB and Government reneged on the agreement and subsequently utilised numerous lawyers unravelling what had been agreed at FWA.

Negotiations then commenced and the MFB engaged an external consultant and a regressive strategy to hold back the conditions of Corporate and Technical Staff. These staff have been in the bottom 25 per cent of wage earners doing similar work, according to research conducted for the MFB by Mercer. Many of these staff have been in the MFB for many years and have been loyal and dedicated to the MFB. The MFB reneging on the classification matter and their regressive attitude to bargaining was therefore taken as a slap in the face for these employees who were simply seeking fair and equitable conditions.

Further, the MFB were demanding extra performance to justify catch up pay rises rather than the MFB valuing the work that members already do.

Negotiations made slow progress seeing out 2011 and into 2012. The negotiations were the subject of numerous FWA conferences. Due to the significant pushback from the employer, MFB Corporate and Technical Staff decided to take matters directly into their own hands and early in 2012, commenced preparations for the commencement of Protected Industrial Action.

In May 2012 the staff commenced industrial action, including filtering phone calls with voice mail, not processing mail, not attending meetings and using their computers with the CAPS lock on. The complete list of authorised industrial action ran to 33 individual matters, which were progressively introduced over the next months.

As part of the campaign, members also attended a number of stoppages and protests at the MFB HQ. These included marches to Victorian Government Offices and Parliament house, member meetings coinciding with the MFB Board meetings, and other actions.

Eventually the message and the effect started getting through to senior management. The level and length of industrial action for MFB Corporate and Technical Staff was unprecedented. Due to this and members' solidarity, slowly management's attitude started to sway and the negotiations started to make progress. After eight months of intensifying industrial action the new EBA was agreed in principle.

Early in 2013 the industrial action has now been lifted, and the documentation is passing through the final stages before the formal voting process commences. The agreement will provide significant change for Corporate and Technical Staff including numerous improved wages and conditions.

**CASEY LEE  
INDUSTRIAL OFFICER, VIC**

### UFU VIC BRANCH

Branch President: Dave Hamilton  
Branch Secretary: Peter Marshall  
Website: [ufuvic.asn.au](http://ufuvic.asn.au)  
email: [reception@ufuvic.asn.au](mailto:reception@ufuvic.asn.au)

## **Around the nation we are witnessing Government attacks on the wages and conditions of Firefighters.**

This is unacceptable – and short sighted. The work that Firefighters do to protect our communities across Australia should not be subject to penny pinching or the latest administrative management fad – generic management. Officers in our Rank Structure are relied upon by Firefighters as having specific Fire and Rescue and Bushfire competencies – lateral entry so called “emergency” service people from civilian volunteer backgrounds like the SES do not cut the mustard operationally and are a risk to our personnel who are trained and experienced across a range of specific competencies.

Communities across Australia elect representatives in the hope that they guarantee the basic delivery of services to all Australians. In a state as big as WA that means that population growth and risk must be a part of the formulae that underpins planning for service delivery in Fire and Rescue Services – in addition to distance and the spread of our communities – particularly in regional country WA.

WA has four professional Fire and Rescue Stations – and the Station that is furthest north is in Geraldton. That is unsatisfactory – our volunteer brigades are secondary resources that are valued but they are struggling with the impact of “Fly In Fly Out” on their numbers and they are aging. WA’s share of the tax dollar and in particular the GST does not reflect the distances covered to provide basic infrastructure and this needs to change along with the way the Emergency Services Levy funds are spent and distributed. Volunteerism is not the

solution to problems that come from the chronic under resourcing of our professional Fire and Rescue and Bushfire services.

The Union has submitted to the State Parliamentary Committee investigating the State’s preparedness for the fire season that we need a significant increase in Firefighter and Officer positions – and those personnel need to be trained, equipped and housed. Minimum State Wage policy does not provide a realistic framework for the payment of our Firefighters or any capacity to improve their conditions. The mantra from politicians that fiscal responsibility is delivered by cuts to the Public Service is nonsense – those cuts impact on the provision of adequate infrastructure, training and research and development. Our members see more waste from the contracting out of building services and maintenance than from Firefighting – but it seems that there is an ideological bent from governments around Australia to contract out fundamental services that support Firefighting – like building, maintenance, workshops and some parts of training. We will soon struggle to attract and retain Firefighters if these practical issues are not addressed and funds are not released to establish the best services for our communities.

Election promises are being made in WA to professional and volunteer firefighters about crew and cab protection. Late last year there was a catastrophic fire including a burn over at Two People’s Bay, east of Albany, where two DEC workers were badly burnt and one subsequently died. The Union submitted to the Post Incident Analysis review that there needs to be the strongest and safest equipment and procedures and these

need to be standardised across agencies including professional firefighters, volunteers and DEC workers. It is not satisfactory that in 2013 there are so few protections available for our crews and appliances. SOPs need to be reviewed so that if they failed those DEC workers they are changed and SOPs need to be standardised so that on multi-agency incident grounds there is reliable consistency – and our Union as the representatives of professional Firefighters is best placed to provide advice and recommendations about these matters.

## **STOP PRESS:**

**Having secured the support of all major political parties and independents seeking re-election, the WA Branch looks forward to working with the newly elected State Government to implement the changes to the WA Workers Compensation Act to give effect to our presumptive legislation, identifying the occupational cancers that Firefighters commonly develop as a result of their exposure to toxins through their work and training.**

### **UFUA WA BRANCH**

WA Branch President: Kevin Jolly  
WA Branch Secretary: Graeme Geer  
Website: [ufuofwa.net.au](http://ufuofwa.net.au)  
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## MICK FARRELL

# A generous life

After 33 years service to the UFU, Mick Farrell is taking time off to travel with his wife of 40 years, Chris, enjoy his three adult children, their partners and three grandchildren, and do a few chores around the house. But he's keeping the door open for opportunities in 2014.

**M**ick recently stepped down as National President of the UFU, and last year as Secretary of the Aviation Branch. These roles are but two highlights from more than three decades of service to his colleagues in firefighting.

Yet he wasn't meant to be a firefighter – until a friend talked him into it.

By that stage Mick had begun three separate apprenticeships, completed a trade in the building industry, and had even driven heavy vehicles for a while.

He finally settled down in 1975 when he became a firefighter at Melbourne's Essendon airport – he's also served at Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine.

"I thought I would give this new vocation a trial run," Mick recalls.

"If I didn't like it, I thought I could return to one of my previous jobs.

"But 38 years down the track I still cannot decide what I would like to do when I grow up!"

Over those years the role of Aviation firefighters and firefighters generally has changed significantly.

Technology plays a huge part with the introduction of computers into fire stations, while fire vehicles carry equipment such as thermal imaging cameras.

And while the ARFF service has responded to medical emergencies around airports for more than 20 years, this has increased at major airports such as Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Sydney so that a third of all emergency responses are now medical.

For example, at Melbourne airport, over the past 12 months 600 of the 1600 odd emergency call outs were medical responses.



Mick with his grandson, Magnus.

Another imperative was the introduction of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority's regulation 139H, which provides legislative parameters for the establishment and operating practices of the ARFF in Australia.

"For many reasons it was and still is essential to the union that ARFF standards and operational excellence are maintained in a legislated document," says Mick.

"As a branch we played an integral role in the development of this very important regulation whereas prior to that there was none in place."

"One would think that the employer would aspire to the highest standards of operational

excellence, vehicles, and fire stations, when they have a legislated document to use as a reference.

"To not only achieve those goals but also to explain to the Government of the day why this is so.

"Yet disappointingly with the ARFF their record in this area is abysmal.

"The union spends much of its time, efforts and resources trying – as Don Chipp was wont to say – to 'keep the bastards honest'.

"For reasons known only to the ARFF hierarchy, but I suspect most probably as a cost saving measure, on many occasions they seek to find any avenue to not comply with

that legislated standard, whether that be by a weasel words explanation or applying an obviously incorrect interpretation to the regulation.

“It is also unfortunate that there is an unhealthy nexus between the regulator CASA and the ARFF which allows this situation to continue.

“Unfortunately, until there is a major aircraft accident in this country, I believe that nexus will remain.”

As the industry has changed, so too has the role of the union – dramatically.

“In the early years of my tenure almost anything the union achieved was through confrontation with the employer or Government of the day,” says Mick.

“That is that work bans would be introduced, strikes threatened, go slows etc, to attain the goal.

“Today it is mostly the art of negotiation and lobbying that unions need to employ in their day-to-day dealings.

“Much of that naturally is due to the industrial legislation and this now puts an extra impost on union representatives.

“The days of bluffing are gone. Union representatives need to have an intimate knowledge of industrial legislation, the workings and legislative parameters imposed on the employer and, of course, the applicable Fire Service regulations.

“If a representative does not possess this knowledge they are soon found out, which undermines their credibility and credibility to me is an imperative.”

Mick Farrell looks back today on many highlights and achievements by the union, but there was a personal lowlight too.

“In the 1980s I was advised by ARFF management that I had to choose between a union role or completing my training as a Station Officer,” he recalls.

“It did not however take long for me to select which path I would follow.

Another dark moment was the complete lack of management assistance when the UFU fought attempts to privatise the ARFF.

And there is one campaign that still troubles him.

“I still have my doubts that we as a union did as much as we could to prevent the removal of the ARFF at secondary airports around Australia.

- A member of the FFU-UFUA for 38 years
- An elected official of the union for 33 of those years
- Aviation Branch Secretary for more than 10 years
- National President for seven years
- Life member of the Aviation Branch of the UFUA

#### 1980

Elected State President of the Victorian Branch of the Federal Firefighters Union (FFU)

One term as Branch President of the FFU Vic following those years

Two terms as Branch Secretary of the FFU Vic

Two terms as National Trustee of the FFU

National President of the FFU, completing Wayne Berry’s term of office

#### 1990-2001

BCOM representative of Victorian Branch, following federal registration of the UFUA

#### 2001-12

Branch Secretary of the Aviation Branch of the UFUA.

#### 2006-13

National President of the UFUA



Mick at 2010 opening of the new UFU WA building opening with then WA President Kevin Jolly and Secretary Graeme Geer.



Peter Marshall, Mick Farrell, MP Adam Bandt, and UFU organiser Jake Wishart.

“That cost many jobs and has left the travelling public at those airports exposed.

“However, on a more positive note, thanks to the privatisation of the ARFF being blocked, they continue to expand and by all projections it appears that firefighter numbers will soon return to the days of pre-secondary airport closures.”

On the plus-side, the victories are too numerous to mention but include:

- the 38 hour week
- the two block leave system
- developing aviation regulations CASR 139H and CASR Manual Of Standards 139H that cement standards and practice for Aviation firefighters

- successfully blocking attacks on 10/14 rosters in Melbourne in the 1980s and later in the Darwin and Avalon roster disputes
- being on the selection committee for the new Aviation MK8 Panther Ultra Large Fire vehicles (ULFV)
- and subsequently travelling to Austria to complete that project
- the 2002 CA achieving an increase in the employer’s contribution to the accumulation section of the superannuation fund from the legislated 9% to 12.5%.

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Mick Farrell pins a UFUA badge on Jerry Lewis.



The helmet was presented to Mick Farrell in recognition of his 37 years dedication to the United Firefighters Union, Aviation Branch, and his outstanding efforts in protecting and preserving the rights and conditions of firefighters.



Mick Farrell and former AFL player David Schwarz at NCOM 2011.



Mick as honorary Victoria Branch secretary at the 1989 NCOM meeting.



Mick's first fire station was Essendon airport, 1975.

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“Nationally, if I had to choose one highlight it would be the adoption of presumptive legislation in Australia for those firefighters covered by the Safety Rehabilitation & Compensation Act,” says Mick.

“I am lucky and extremely proud to have been in a position to have played a part alongside Peter Marshall, our National Secretary, in the success of this campaign.

“I am very thankful to Peter for his unstinting and dedicated work on this legislation as should all firefighters in Australia, not just ACT and Aviation, because I believe it will be just a matter of time before similar legislation is enacted in every State in one form or another.”

The hard work of being Aviation Branch Secretary and National President has had its rewards too.

“Personally I have gained a fair amount of weight and high blood pressure,” Mick begins.

“Seriously, the satisfaction that is gained from assisting an individual member or having a good agreement certified is fantastic and a feeling that I have not felt replicated in any other forum.

“That, and the friends I have made, will stay with me forever I think.”

A few characters stand out.

Joe Stenhouse, Aviation Branch President for most of Mick’s time as Secretary: “In Joe I not only had a great team member but full support and dedication to the task. I am very sure that without Joe’s knowledge, application and expertise that many of our achievements would have gone by the wayside.”

John (Horrie) Hancox: “The Horrie is short for horizontal because he can sleep anywhere at anytime. With John Hancox what you see is what you get. His forthrightness is legendary, particularly when addressing management on any issue. Horrie played a major role during my years

as Secretary – dedicated, unstinting and unbelievably supportive.”

Finally, Peter Marshall: “I have never worked with anybody more committed. Peter’s work ethic and caring nature are one to behold. It has been an absolute pleasure – if at times somewhat frustrating! – working with Pete and it is a time I will always treasure.”

But now the priorities are shifting ...

“My immediate future is to travel with my long suffering wife Chris.

“Her support over the years has been unwavering and it is past time to concentrate perhaps a little selfishly on us for a while.

There will be family time too, and those outstanding chores around the house, but the door remains ajar.

“I intend to reassess that position perhaps next year sometime,” Mick says.

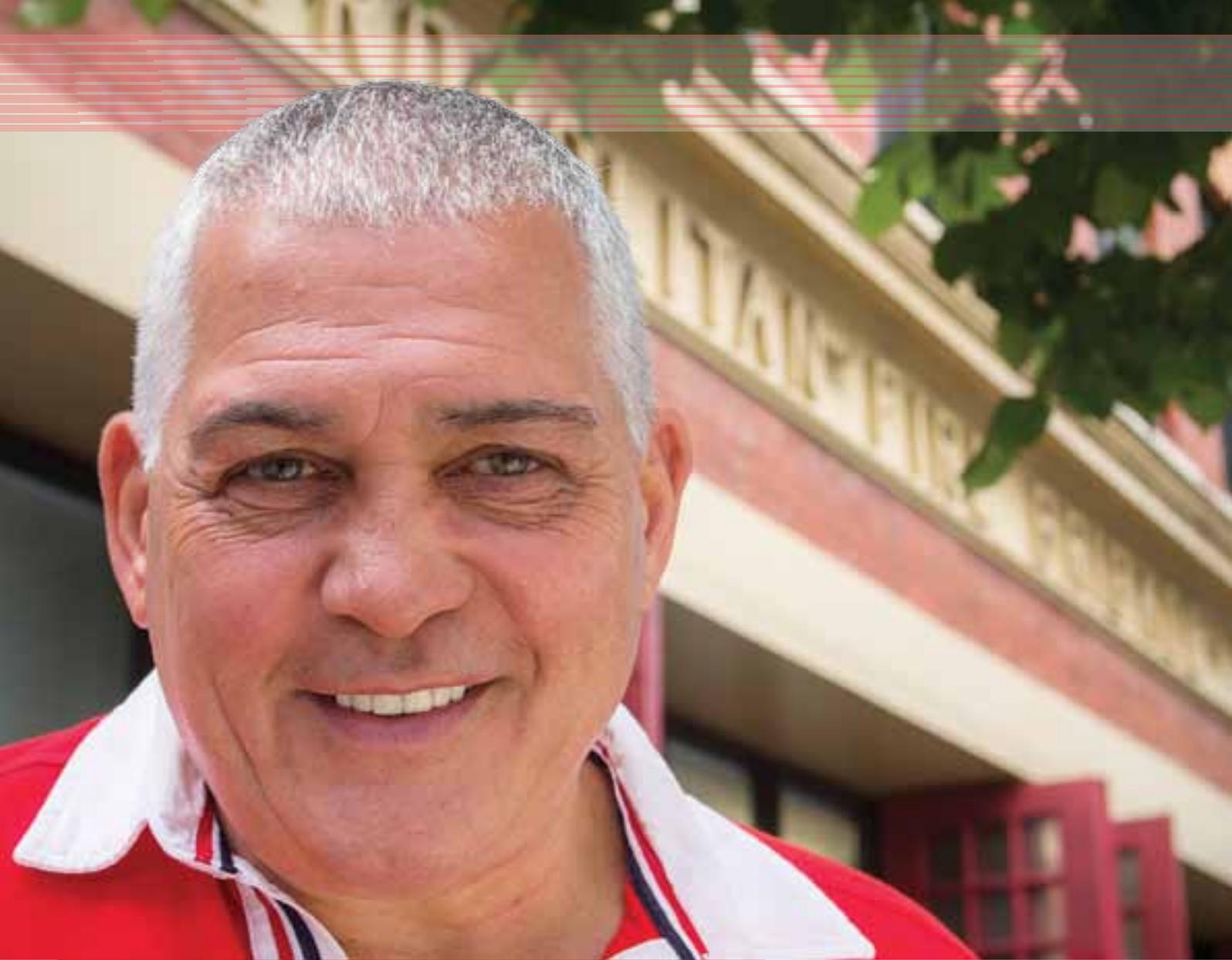
“That is, if there is something an old fire could do that would in some way assist UFUA members.” ■

# Tasmanian bushfires

Photos by Tasmanian firefighter Warren Frey.







# Mick Gatto

BY PETER MORRIS

A wide eyed boy stands by as the fire station next door comes to life... another emergency call and he watches intently as the crew race to their jackets and boots, then to the truck which spills a red flash of colour as its lights start whirring.

At just 6 years old, he dreams about doing the same thing one day but his strict Italian father insists it's far too dangerous, and such fanciful ideas should be forgotten ...

**T**hat the young boy and his three siblings were all too often responsible for setting off false alarms doesn't worry him ... he maintains the utmost respect for the fireys and so begins a lifelong admiration for their work ...

"We lived right next door and I was in there every day. I used to love it. We would run amok and set off fire alarms and then watch them take off."

Dominic 'Mick' Gatto is talking about his childhood, growing up in Cecil Street, South Melbourne, just a hop, skip and, occasionally, a cheeky rooftop jump to the South Melbourne fire station.

Closed for over two decades, the station had live-in members, a large mess hall and plenty of room for a bored local kid and his two sisters and brother to make mischief.

Mick's father, Antonio, ran a strict household. As a fruiterer at the South Melbourne markets, Tony was a workaholic, grateful to be in a country that allowed him



This page photos: Greg Noakes

to raise his children with his much younger wife, Filomena.

“My father used to get up at 4am in the morning and wouldn’t get home until 7 or 8 at night. He never spent much time with us at all and on the weekends he’d be working too.”

With all those fatherless hours up his sleeve, Mick and older sister Rose, plus younger siblings John and Cathy, spent time with the South Melbourne firemen.

“I used to play billiards with them. I was boxing and they used to glove up and I’d stand against the fire truck and they’d punch me as hard as they could in the stomach.” (Mick was an extremely promising heavyweight who could have gone on to great success.)

“I was a bit of a villain to be honest ...” says Mick, with a smile in his eye.

Today he is well known figure – the public recognise the gold jewellery, V12 Rolls Royce Ghost, smart clothes and megawatt smile

– but that’s not the Mick that his tight knit friends and family know.

He blames the release of the Underbelly TV series in 2008 for catapulting him into a household name.

“People who know me know what sort of person I am. That’s all that matters,” he says with a meaningful stare. “People who don’t know me form their own conclusions. I’m not out to win points.”

It’s this intense, unwavering loyalty and ‘not being able to say no’ which has, on one hand, seen him raise millions of dollars for charities such as the Black Saturday fundraiser, and on the other, has also landed Mick in some serious, life changing trouble.

After the death of Andrew ‘Benji’ Veniamin – underworld figure Carl Williams’ hired gun – in a Carlton restaurant, Mick Gatto was charged with murder and spent 14 months on remand.

He was adamant he acted in self-defence when Benji pulled a gun.

Mick Gatto was acquitted and emerged from court declaring ‘thank God for juries’ to begin the next phase of his life, buoyed by a new desire to help those in need.

“I get asked by friends to help out and how can you say no when there’s been a catastrophe?”

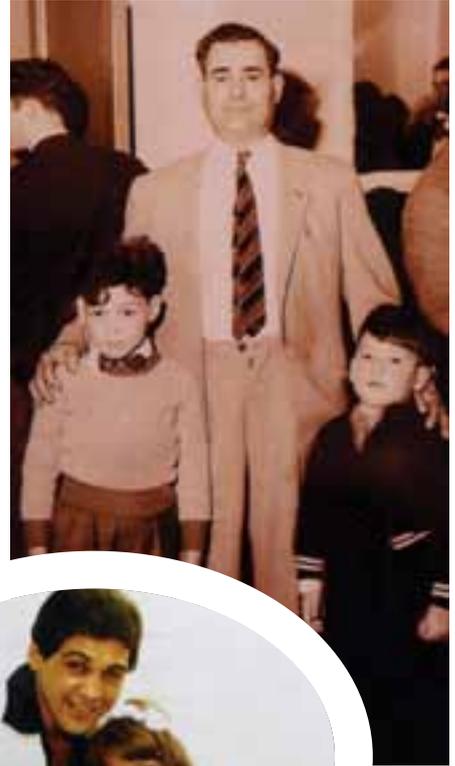
The biggest catastrophe occurred on February 7 2009, when Victoria was confronted by the worst bush fires since Ash Wednesday, three decades earlier. 173 people lost their lives. Hundreds more were left homeless and completely shell shocked.

After a local’s call for help, one of Mick’s ‘mates’ took him to the fire-ravaged region of Marysville. They arrived in spectacular fashion, landing a helicopter in the heart of town.

Mick offered to build a warehouse facility so the locals could get access to whatever

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# MICK GATTO



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possessions they had left, instead of driving 10 kms out of town to an old shed.

The plan was that, through his construction connections, all the goods would be donated and once the storage element was no longer required, the modern hall would be used as the town's basketball court.

But while Mick was getting organised, word came through that the Victorian Bushfire and Rescue and Recovery Authority had rejected the offer. It came as no surprise to Mick that the head of the Authority, former Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, hit the idea on the head.

"We were going to build right in the heart of town", says Mick. "It was going to go ahead and then we were told, no, we don't want your help."

The images of the Black Saturday aftermath were burned in to his brain.

"It was catastrophic," he says. "It was unbelievable, just everything burned beyond recognition."

In late 2009 he organised a Black Saturday dinner. The cost was \$1,000-a-head, with the eventual \$900,000 raised going to the CFA.

Little publicity was given to the event, but UFU National Secretary Peter Marshall says that money was desperately needed and frankly, not coming from anywhere else.

"That money was enough to buy 4-5 new tankers", says Peter. "Mick gave the cheque to the CFA, but there was nothing made of it. I don't care what he does for a living, he has been extremely loyal to the firefighting community."

"I feel like I'm blown' me own trumpet", Mick says. "That's why I was reluctant to do this. But what I am proud of is that most charities gobble up to 80% of the monies. We always give 110%, because I have also put my hand in my own pocket."

A typical example was the \$10,000 he donated personally to the family of ACT firefighter David Balfour who was killed by a falling branch in February 2009, in the aftermath of Victoria's Black Saturday fires.

Despite Mick's own financial issues now that the ATO has frozen his funds, he admits he just can't say no when friends ask for help.

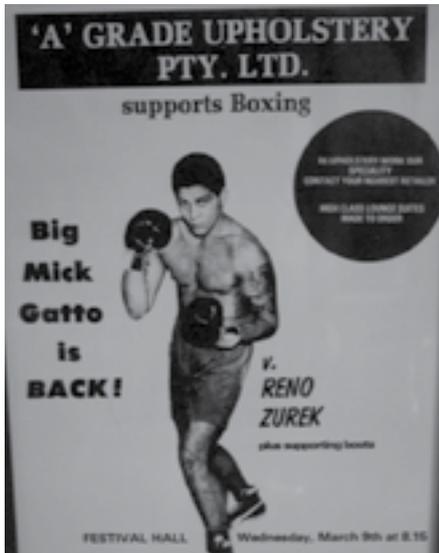
He considers himself very lucky to count veteran US comedian Jerry Lewis among his mates.

"He asked me to help raise money for muscular dystrophy – how can you knock him back?" he says.

In June 2011 Mick got a call from a mutual friend, saying Lewis was in Sydney, had heard about his charitable nature and wanted to have a meeting.

"He was a real character and he said, I'd like you to help me with muscular dystrophy, and the rest is history. I got an email from Jerry the other day, he's amazing at 87, just amazing."

The unlikely pair teamed up to host two \$1,000-a-seat charity balls with all money – around \$700,000 – going towards the Muscular Dystrophy Association. As an ambassador, Jerry Lewis has played a vital part in publicising the condition in the States, using firemen on street corners to rattle tins.



Mick even introduced Jerry to some Australian firefighters while he was in town.

“Jerry has a great affinity with firefighters in LA and Vegas and as supporters of his charity, they’ve raised millions of dollars.”

Then early last year, Mick got another phone call and another call to action ... (all of Mick’s dealings seem to be done over the phone, which rang at least half a dozen times during our interview).

This time, it was someone he had never met, a man whose mother was suffering from brain cancer and had been given months to live.

Doing what he does best - organising meetings – Mick jumped on the phone and within days had highly respected Sydney brain cancer surgeon Dr Charlie Teo meet with the family.

The man’s mother now lives to tell the tale.

Dr Teo and Mick formed a friendship of sorts, and in November 2012, Mick hosted a charity evening, “Up Close and Personal with Dr Teo: Finding a cure for brain cancer.”

Close to one million dollars was raised. Of this, \$38,000 was given to help

former CFA chief Brian Potter who has been battling a range of cancers associated with his service at Fiskville, and who had been abandoned by the State Government, the CFA and their insurer.

But all of this good work, according to Mick, flies under the media’s radar because it’s simply not controversial enough.

“Look,” says Mick with a hard stare, “whatever I do that’s good doesn’t get publicised. We raised a million bucks for Dr Teo’s foundation and there wasn’t one line in the papers. I even said to Charlie I was surprised.”

It’s hard to argue with Mick. But then, he’s had a fair bit of controversy surround him.

“I’ve been called everything”, he says. “You know, as long as they don’t call me late for lunch, I couldn’t care less. Or a drug dealer. I take great offence to being called a drug dealer”.

He may also think of himself as a bit of a comedian. He will always make sure he puts in a death notice when another opponent falls

– it became a ritual amongst crime reporters to go straight to the classifieds the day after an underworld execution to see what words of condolence Mick had sent to the *Herald Sun*.

After just an hour at Mick’s stunning suburban home, he takes great pleasure in introducing me to his wife Cheryle, a bubbly blonde woman gearing up for a night out with her husband to celebrate their 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

“I’ve got no regrets really,” Mick says. “I’ve had an interesting life. I have been pretty lucky too I guess, things have sort of fallen in to place for me.”

Back in South Melbourne for a photo shoot, outside his childhood home – now offices – Mick looks as though he agrees with his father when he said firefighting was too dangerous.

“I did want to be a firefighter but Dad talked me out of it. A firemen went through a roof in South Melbourne and was killed and it spooked him and he said no, it’s too dangerous ... ■

# UFU



# Victoria Picnic



Thank you to the UFU team for a wonderful day. It was our first as I've only been a firey for nine weeks and my little family had a blast. We look forward to the next one. I have attached a pic of my girl with her face painted. She loved it. Thanks again, Paul Reid



# Health Study

Firefighters have one of the most dangerous jobs in the world – and suffer high levels of physical and psychological injury, according to a new Australian university study.

Researchers from The Centre of Full Employment and Equity (a research unit of the University of Newcastle) were commissioned by the UFU's Victorian Branch to examine international and Australian health studies and interview local firefighters.

Their report — Occupational health effects for firefighters: The extent and implications of physical and psychological injuries — found that the changing role of firefighting is having a big impact on the health of career firefighters and volunteers.

Fires are not the only issue. Firefighters are also concerned at the stress of dealing with emergency medical response (EMR), suicides, drug incidents, traumatic events involving children such as SIDS, increased violence, and the threat of terrorism. Firefighters are found to have increased levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other illnesses.

Firefighting differs from other emergency services – they get the heavy jobs, the 'dirty' and dangerous jobs, and are often first on scene.

These risks cannot be mitigated. It is the nature of the job. Firefighters go into danger, as others flee.

"Firefighters are exposed to greater stresses than other workers even if management undertake the most extensive risk management."

The pressure of budget cuts to fire services is also impacting on the stress levels of firefighters.

Organisational stressors include inadequate staff, and a lack of communication and consultation.

Firefighters – one of the fittest sectors of the workforce when they begin their career – suffer above-average rates of cancers, heart attacks, chemical and asbestos exposure, PTSD, and other risks.

They often keep their concerns to themselves, and some take to self-

medication through alcohol and other drugs. The increased fitness of the workforce when they begin their firefighting career also helps mask health issues (the healthy worker effect).

Support services have not kept pace with the changing role of firefighters. Management may view its support programs as successful, but often the reality is otherwise. Management is disconnected from the workers on the fire ground. In the CFA, peer support personnel are predominantly volunteers with less incident experience than fulltime firefighters.

The hidden cost of these physical and psychological injuries falls on the firefighters, family, fire services and communities, as firefighters are self medicating, taking unplanned time off to recover and going untreated as they do not have access to adequate support to address the root causes. Increasingly firefighters are using such coping mechanisms to mask the true effect of the acute and accumulated exposure that they are confronted with in the workplace.

There is a high cost to the individuals concerned, their families, and the fire services which employ them.

## FIREFIGHTING: A DANGEROUS AND DEMANDING JOB

The work of a firefighter is unique. It is physically hard, mentally demanding and exposes the firefighter to hazards unlike most other jobs.

Firefighters perform physically demanding work, encompassing multiple fire ground tasks: fire attack, search and rescue, exterior ventilation, and overhaul activities, where there is a high risk of exposure to hazardous substances.

Firefighters also respond to other emergency situations and are frequently the first responders on scene - before police and paramedics. These situations include emergency medical response (EMR), motor

vehicle accidents, and other emergencies such as floods, earthquakes, cyclones and terrorism.

Emergency medical response (EMR) is part of the job in the MFB and is currently being trialled in the CFA. Firefighters often work for lengthy periods trying to resuscitate victims, while waiting for paramedics. Despite often being first on-scene at accidents and EMR incidents, firefighters cannot administer pain relief and also are required to assist distraught family members.

On many occasions a firefighter may go to a combination of a suicide such as a hanging, respond to SIDS and then be deployed to a motor vehicle accident involving fatalities and/or injured members of the public. Firefighters will finish their tour of duty and be expected to assimilate back into family life with the accumulated affect of the trauma still raw in their mind.

In addition to the emotional impact of EMR calls, there is concern at biological exposure and physical danger. The growth of social problems such as social unrest and increased drug use, exposes firefighters to significantly greater risk than in the past. Firefighters face possible exposure to HIV, and deal with people with mental illness and drug problems.

Also firefighters often are required to do the heavy lifting, and the 'dirty' jobs. They cut people out of cars and they deal with biological substances at accident scenes.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL COST

Firefighters interviewed for the project shared their experiences:

*"You go home and you sleep at home the next night. You can't sleep because you're waiting for the bells to go off."*  
*"It's really traumatic when you work on someone for 45 minutes, sometimes 10 minutes before the ambos turn up ... families stood beside you crying ... and you're just drained; I mean emotionally, physically, mentally."*

***“I think it’s like our job is a filing cabinet and one day the file is full.”***

Firefighters

- work in situations where their physical safety is threatened
- attend traumatic incidents such as EMR or motor vehicle calls
- have long periods of performing non emergency duties followed by periods of emergency response (calm to chaos)
- provide 24 hour coverage

These factors are inherent to the job.

A number of incidents cause higher levels of stress in firefighters including:

1. rare incidents such as major disasters and terrorist events; and
2. incidents that firefighters deal with in the normal course of their duties such as
  - a) witnessing the death or injury of co-workers or patients,
  - b) sustaining a serious injury,
  - c) being exposed to hazardous substances,
  - d) attending multiple fatalities or
  - e) incidents involving infants and young children.

The most common adverse psychological impacts include acute stress disorder (ASD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorders, hypersensitivity and substance abuse.

International and Australian studies have reported high levels of PTSD in firefighters:

- 22 per cent in SA Volunteer Firefighters after the 1983 SA bushfires (MacFarlane, 1988)
- 17-26 per cent in the US (Del Ben et al., 2006),
- 22 per cent of US firefighters and 17 per cent of Canadian firefighters (Corneil et al., 1999)
- 18.2 per cent of German firefighters, while 27 per cent had a mental illness (Wagner et al., 1998)

The CFA told a WA inquiry into trauma arising from disasters such as Black Saturday that:

*...based on the previous research, in the first 12 months post the disaster something like 25% of exposed people potentially developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, 26% of exposed people potentially experiencing clinical depression symptoms, and something like 10% experiencing generalised anxiety ... we also anticipated a 40% increase in drug and alcohol use-*

*substance abuse, if you like-and a 50% increase in partner conflict.*

Due to the psychological impact of firefighting there is a probability that firefighters are more likely to commit suicide but there is a lack of available data on this.

The psychological cost is heightened by organisational issues including:

- inadequate staffing
- inadequate resources
- poor communication and consultation
- lack of management support

A common example of inadequate staffing which causes considerable stress is when a three-person crew attends a structure fire where a person may be trapped inside.

The dilemma is whether to wait for adequate staff before entering the building (a minimum crew of four is required) or breach Standard Operating Procedure and attempt the rescue despite the risk of injury.

The most stressful incidents for Victorian firefighters are:

- Death of a co-worker
- A fire with multiple deaths
- Sudden infant death
- Seriously injured child
- Death of a patient after a lengthy attempted resuscitation
- Assisting a seriously injured friend or relative
- Serious injury to a co-worker
- Multiple casualty motor vehicle accident
- Exposure to hazardous chemicals

Section 4 of the report provides detailed insight into the difficult and demanding role of firefighters as explained by Victorian firefighters. This section is important to read to comprehend the extent of the precipice that firefighters face.

## THE PHYSICAL COST

***“One incident captured by the study involved the rescue of children entrapped on the second floor of a fully involved residence. The incident resulted in severe physical and emotional stress on the firefighters driving heart rates to levels in excess of 100% of their predicted maximum. Two hours after returning to station (some three hours following the completion of rescue operations), heart rates of individuals involved in the rescue remained in excess of 100 beats per minute. Essentially, the***

***physical and emotional triggers for heart attack stay with the firefighter for some time after an incident.” (Brown and Stickford, 2009: 70)***

The health impacts of firefighting are understated. Studies that compare outcomes for firefighters with the general population or even the working population understate the health consequences for firefighters due to the healthy worker effect.

Despite this firefighters are three times more likely to be fatally injured at work. (Clark and Zak, 1999)

Firefighting is a significant trigger for heart attacks. Heart attacks are a leading cause of on-duty fatalities. There is also a high number of non-fatal heart attacks. (Brown and Stickford, 2009)

Firefighters work in hazardous situations and are exposed to very high concentrations of a range of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals. International studies have found firefighters face increased rates of numerous cancers. (LeMasters et al., 2006)

## THE WIDER COST

The physically and emotionally demanding role of firefighters - combined with the impact of 24 hour coverage - causes high rates of physical and psychological injuries. This also leads to self medication, family conflict, and workplace absence.

The impact of psychological injuries is often worse than physical injuries. The time lost due to a PTSD claim is 2 to 4 times the average time off work due to injury (Comcare, 2008). However much psychological distress is undiagnosed and unreported. It is likely that both the national ABS data and WorkSafe Victoria data significantly understate the injury burden from psychological distress.

Recent cuts to the budgets of the MFB and the CFA do not auger well for implementing effective strategies to minimise workplace stress such as ensuring adequate staffing and operational capacities as recommended by WorkSafe Victoria and Comcare.

## SUPPORT FOR FIREFIGHTERS

***“I’ve had family members turn up while we’re trying to do our job and they’re***

continued on page 28

continued from page 27

*screaming and yelling .... You rely on your shift mates to support you when you get home, and your family."*

*"Most of my stress and anxiety goes through the way that management especially in the CFA and obviously in the MFB do not understand what we do and how we do it and I find that extremely disappointing and stressful."*

Support services have not kept pace with the changing role of firefighters.

Management may view its support programs as successful, but often the reality is otherwise. Management are disconnected from the workers on the fire ground.

In the CFA, peer support personnel are predominantly volunteers with less incident experience than fulltime firefighters. They are expected to provide peer support to firefighters with significantly different experience.

*"... there's no career person who's going to sit there and have a volunteer that turns out 20 times a year come and sit down with them and then start to debrief them over an incident. It just doesn't, the whole system just doesn't work. It's totally inappropriate."*

The MFB and CFA have specific programs

to minimise or prevent adverse psychological effects, but there is a perception that there is inadequate support from management, particularly for CFA members.

One participant elaborated concerns for individuals who have PTSD and also for firefighters who may succumb in the future:

*"We've got a couple of people in the CFA that have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome. The CFA just feel that that's a person's weakness. They just think that's a weak minded person that couldn't deal with what everyone else deals with. They just throw them on the scrap heap... They don't recognise that it's a syndrome, they don't recognise it's a problem. They don't recognise that there's a whole heap of older blokes walking around there at the moment that [it] could be the next job that gets to them, that pushes them over the edge."*

This perception of lack of support from management presents a significant problem for the successful implementation of the welfare programs established to deal with psychological stress.

Further there is a reluctance by firefighters to use welfare programs:

*"It's expected as a firefighter you're a rock and nothing can break through that shell*

*and you're there to help other people."*  
*"People don't want to give away weaknesses ... I don't want someone else to think that I'm the weak link in the truck."*

*"You don't want management to know ... once they realise that you have some issues there, you're going to get pushed aside."*

*"They're a bit loath to let management know that they're going through something because it might impact on them. The fear is it might impact on them down the road."*

Firefighters face these demands every day in order to protect the community. This comes at a great personal cost.

*"You may be first on scene at something that's rather traumatic for everyone involved and you know none of those people will be going back to work that day or doing anything else ... But you know we're straight back in the truck after dealing with all that and we might go to the same thing again in half an hour's time ... I think there's also the stress of just maintaining that professionalism that the public expect and that you want to provide as well." ■*



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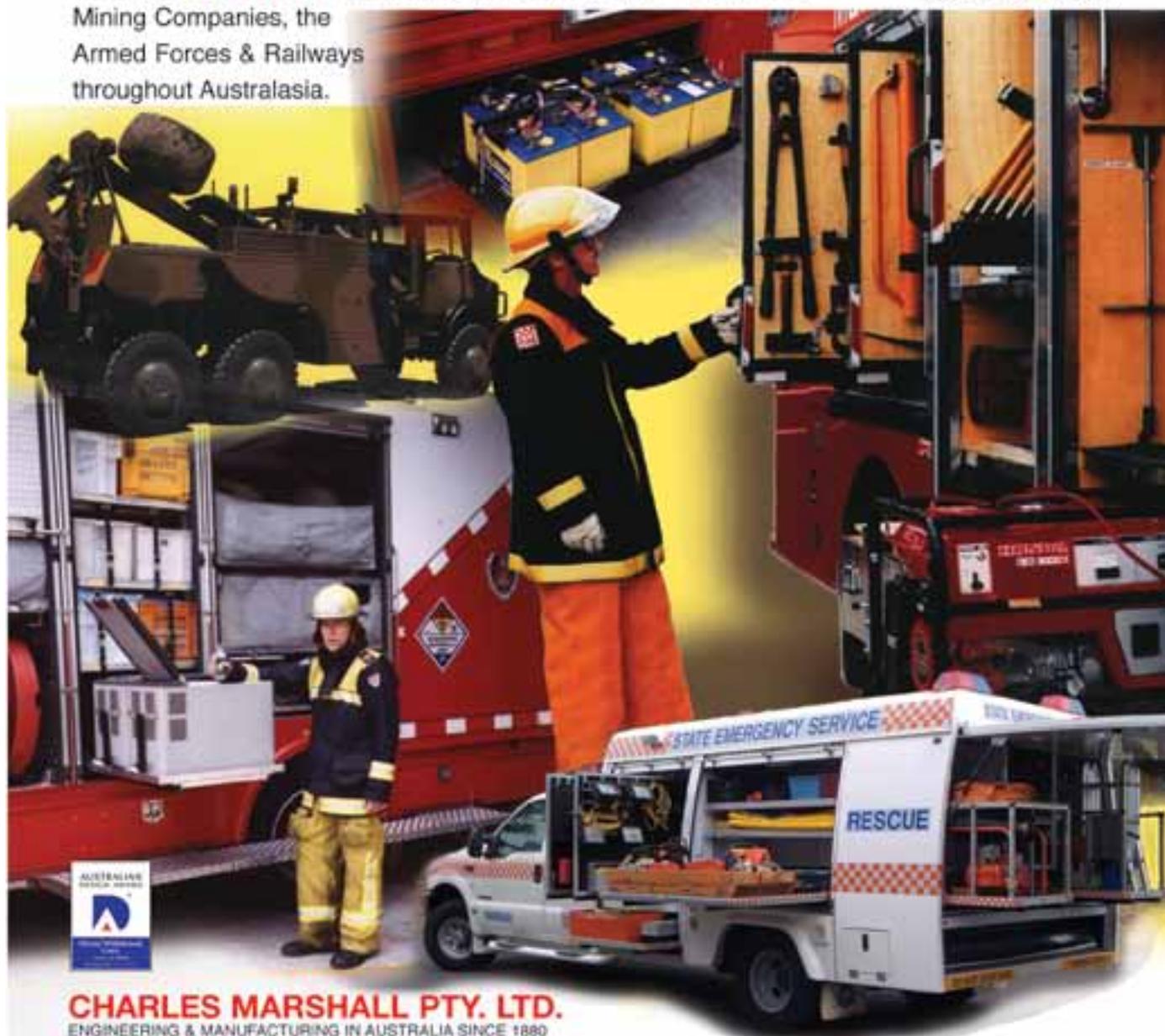
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