

## Forest Fortnight #20 – Fire Chiefs ...

Thursday 15 August 2019

Have you ever wondered why Victoria's unique bushfire arrangements are the way they are.... or why there are three separate fire services.... then take the time to examine the evolution of the Chief Fire Officer.

In the wake of the disastrous 1939 bushfires and Judge Stretton's scathing Royal Commission report, the Forests Commission Chairman A. V. Galbraith acted decisively and appointed Alfred (Alf) Oscar Lawrence as the new Fire Chief.

Alf immediately confronted the overwhelming challenge of rebuilding a highly organised, well equipped and motivated fire fighting force while lifting shattered staff morale.

Later in 1950, Lawrence wrote of the staff...

*"they were totally dispirited... their work of years lay in ashes... all the protection, planning and works had proved futile"...*

The Forests Commission was allocated additional government funding and assumed responsibility for fire protection on all public lands including State forests, unoccupied Crown Lands, MMBW catchments and National Parks, plus a buffer extending one mile beyond their boundaries onto private land. Its responsibilities grew overnight in a giant threefold leap from 2.4 to 6.5 million hectares, or nearly one-third of the State.

And despite the problems compounded by severe shortages caused by the War the Commission did not engage volunteers. But this policy was mainly because of the prolonged campaign bushfires, often deep in the rugged mountains, that the Commission characteristically encountered which were better suited to a specialist workforce trained in dry-firefighting techniques.

Also, in 1939 there was no CFA and bushfires on rural land were fought by sometimes rival volunteer fire brigades, with little statewide coordination.

Interestingly, one of Stretton's original 1939 recommendations had been to create a single fire service for country Victoria.

Then later in 1944, there were more deadly bushfires at Yallourn and justifiable public outcry at the lack of government action after similar events in 1939.

Premier Sir Albert Dunstan and Minister for Forests Sir Albert Lind, who had both delayed legislative changes in Parliament, decided there was no alternative but to ask Judge Stretton to chair a second Royal Commission.

Stretton's second report returned to his earlier themes and once again highlighted a lack of cohesive firefighting ability outside the Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) area.

The MFB was established from fractious beginnings in 1890 when Melbourne's 56 existing volunteer fire brigades were forcibly disbanded. The new MFB was based at Eastern Hill under the command of Chief Officer David John Stein. It was not until 1950 that volunteer and partly paid firefighters were discontinued and the MFB only employed a fully paid workforce.

Meanwhile, there had been protracted negotiations, stretching back as far as the 1926 bushfires, between fiercely competing and antagonistic interest groups representing country Victoria...

Notably, the Country Fire Brigades Board founded by legislation in 1890 at the same time as the MFB, largely represented urban brigades in cities and larger towns like Ballarat, Geelong and Bendigo. They already had a well-established command structure under Chief Officer Alexander McPherson and some firefighters were paid. But they mostly trained for... and responded to... structural fires...

On the opposite side of the table was the Bush Fire Brigades Association, which emerged in about 1914 to represent clusters of ruggedly independent landowners and neighbours who formed make-shift rural brigades that responded quickly to grass and scrub fires in their local farming communities. They operated under very different culture, had little formal structure, training or equipment but these firefighters were passionate and committed volunteers...

However, Stretton's vision was finally realised when legislation to establish a single CFA was passed in December 1944...

All the existing urban and rural brigades were invited to join the new organisation... most did... some reluctantly... but nobody seemed particularly happy with the new arrangements...

Maybe to appease the rival factions, the new CFA Board initially appointed two Chief Officers, with Alexander McPherson representing the urban brigades

and Charles Alfred Daw heading up the batting for the rural brigades.

The Forests Commission held two seats on the new 12-member CFA Board with Herbert Duncan Galbraith and Joseph Firth. Alf Lawrence was appointed later in 1946.

Prior to 1944, the Forests Commission had to some extent been supporting 768 Bush Fire Brigades with 35,000 volunteer members and £100,000 worth of equipment, which then transferred over to the CFA. Some of the rural brigades were incensed and proposed an alliance with the Commission rather than ceding autonomy to the newly formed CFA.

A major revision of both the Forests Act and Country Fire Authority Act in 1958 clearly enshrined the role of the two agencies and the Chief Fire Officers into complementary legislation. The CFA Act also defined the role of the Municipal Fire Prevention Officer and made their appointment mandatory.

More importantly, these events shaped and cemented Victoria's deep-seated approaches towards bushfires outside Melbourne. Both the Forests Commission and the CFA adopted clear policies to detect and suppress all bushfires and became very focused and skilled at doing it.

So when you look back, the ancestry of the Chief Officers of both the Forests Commission (now FFMV) and the CFA can be traced back to tragic bushfire events in 1939 and 1944, and Stretton's two inquiries.

Stretton also examined the inevitability of fire in the Australian bush and heard evidence from foresters, graziers, sawmillers and academics whether it was best to let fires burn because they were a part of a natural protective cycle or to combat them to defend people and the forests. Importantly, his balanced deliberations officially sanctioned and encouraged fuel reduction burning to minimise future risk which remains a cornerstone policy of FFMV.

A major element of the Forests Commission's new Chief Officer Alf Lawrence's strategy after 1939 was investing heavily in modern vehicles and equipment such as powered pumps, tankers, crawler tractors, expanding the forest road and track network, sinking fire dams, more fire spotting patrols with the RAAF, development of aerial fire bombing, as well as a statewide radio communications network - VL3AA.

He also encouraged innovation and the Forests Commission led Australia, and in some cases the world,

in fire equipment, fire bombing and tanker development over subsequent decades.

Alf Lawrence was a hands-on Fire Chief and one who set a very high standard of personal integrity, like all those that followed in his footsteps.....

From 1956 to 1969 Lawrence became Chairman of the Forests Commission and was later awarded an OBE.

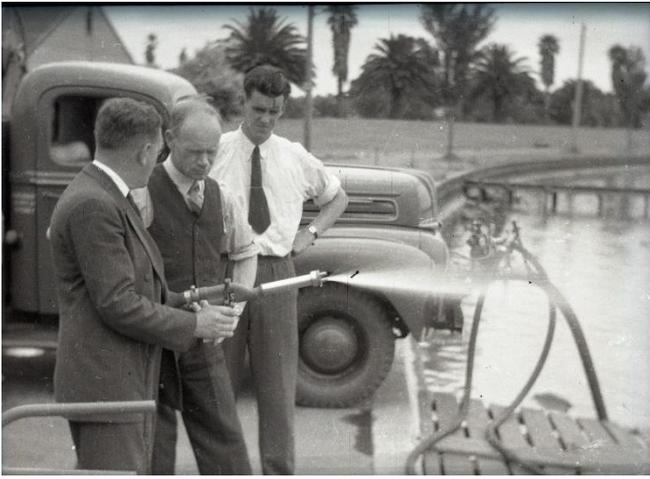
Sorry for such a long post, but it's complicated....

Footnote: The current formation of Fire Rescue Victoria and proposed realignments of the MFB and CFA represents a new chapter which will take time to unfold.



*A rogues gallery of Grand Exulted Poohbahs. Source: FCRPA collection*

<https://www.victoriasforestryheritage.org.au/images/externalarticles2/hodgsonfirechiefs.pdf>



Alf Lawrence (centre) was a very hands-on and visionary Fire Chief. He laid the foundations for a renewed, innovative and well-equipped firefighting organisation in Victoria after the setbacks of the 1939 bushfires

He later became Chairman of the Forests Commission from 1956 to 1969. Photo at Albert Park Lake circa 1950. Note the vehicle-mounted pump. Source: FCRPA collection.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Oscar\\_Lawrence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Oscar_Lawrence)



Legislation to create the CFA was passed on 6 December 1944. The new 12-member Board met for the first time on 3 January 1945. The Board divided Victoria into 24 Regions and appointed Regional Officers but the CFA had very rocky first beginnings.

Left to Right; Back Row – Geoffrey Graeme Sinclair (Secretary), Angus A. Cameron, E. Buckland, George Stewart, Joseph Firth (FCV), Charles Alfred Daw (Chief Officer - Rural), Alexander McPherson (Chief Officer - Urban).

Front Row – T. H. Grigg, W.S. Slater, Herbert Duncan Galbraith (FCV), P. Slouch, W. Charles Moyle, Alexander Mercer King (Chairman).

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11375460>



Sir Albert Dunstan was one of Victoria's longest-serving Premiers from 1935 to 1945. He commissioned both of Judge Stretton's inquiries into the 1939 and 1944 bushfires. Along with Minister Herbert Hyland, he also enacted the legislation to create the CFA in December 1944 and appointed the first Chairman, Mr. Alexander Mercer King.

This fire awareness slide was one of a set shown in Melbourne cinemas. Source: FCRPA collection