

Hot Shots ...

Friday 23 August 2019

With applications for 300 summer project firefighters (PFFs) closing this Sunday I am reminded of the recurring calls for American-style “Hot Shot” fire crews for Victoria...

In fact, we had our own version from the mid-1960s but they were known by a different name – Mobile Support Crews (MSC).

Ted Gill, who was the Forests Commission’s Fire Chief at the time, introduced the idea after returning from a study trip to America.

Like their American counterparts, MSCs were based on the temporary employment of fit, young university students as mobile, highly trained, well equipped and well-led firefighters to give additional surge capacity when needed.

Each MSC employed between fifteen to eighteen young people and was self-contained with vehicles, radios, camping and firefighting equipment, including chainsaws, rakehoes and axes. Depending on where it was based the MSC may have included a camp cook.

I believe that women entered the MSC program from the early 1980s.

Their training covered fire behaviour, firefighting techniques, weather forecasts and interpretation, map reading, chainsaw and axe safety, first-aid and four-wheel driving.

Each Crew was allocated an experienced crew leader, sometimes from the local FCV District or the National Parks Service.

MSCs were based at Benalla, Bruthen, Broadford, Heyfield (Surveyors Creek) and Stawell over summer.

MSCs were often deployed to remote fires which were difficult to access and they could be away overnight or longer constructing control lines by hand.

When not required for firefighting, MSCs undertook other jobs like seed collection, tree planting, road and track maintenance or maintenance of recreation sites.

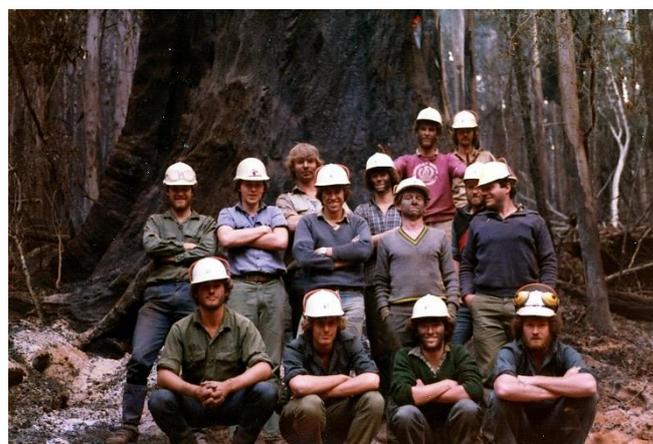
However, lingering perceptions around the “elite” status MSC crews (who often unofficially referred to themselves as hot shots) did not sit comfortably with some of the other fire crews.

The formal MSC program ended in 1990 when it was decided it was better to have all summer fire crews embedded into Districts.

And nowadays it’s much more common for entire Regional or Head Office taskforces, as well as specialist incident teams, to move around Victoria when needed.

<https://www.victoriasforestryheritage.org.au/images/external%20articles/hodgson-msc.pdf>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interagency_hotshot_crew



The Mobile Support Crew – Ash Wednesday 1983. Photo: Athol Hodgson



Toyota FJ55 Land Cruiser Mobile Support Crew vehicle – circa 1980. Photo Athol Hodgson.



Geoff Kennedy was the leader of this Heyfield MSC Fire Crew. Circa 1980. Photo Athol Hodgson.



MSC Personnel Carrier – circa 1980. Photo Athol Hodgson.



MSC was based at Surveyors Creek - 1983. Photo Athol Hodgson.