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MEDIA RELEASE

MORTLAKE VOLUNTEER COMMENDED FOR SERVICE

Mortlake CFA volunteer Doug Parker says the response to the recent St Patrick's Day fires shows how far the CFA system has evolved and improved over the past 50 years.

Like many teenagers in country Victoria in decades gone by, Doug used to jump on the back of a fire truck to help when a blaze broke out.

All that changed after Ash Wednesday in 1983 and Doug says the new professional and coordinated approach is a world away from when he started in the late 1960s.

"Our equipment is better, our management systems are better and our training is better," he said. "When I started we just jumped on the back of a truck and we'd squirt water on the fire. We weren't allowed to wear shorts but we didn't have much protective clothing; now we've got all the gear and facilities and you don't get on the truck until you've got a thorough knowledge of fire behaviour."

"It's not just putting the wet stuff on the red stuff; it's about where the water goes and how it's applied," he said. "You put out a fire with good management."

Doug, who joined the CFA at Torquay when he turned 16 and remains involved as deputy group officer for the Mortlake group, has received a CFA senior commendation award for his dedicated service.

He says the recent fires are a good example of how far the volunteer service has progressed.

At 71 Doug doesn't actively fight fires, but on St Patrick's Day he was there all night manning the local command, ensuring equipment and firefighters were going where they were needed.

"It was a fantastic result," he said. "Everyone did a massive amount of work to save property and houses. We talk about the houses that were lost but we should also look at the property and houses we saved and there were no lives lost."

Doug says Ash Wednesday remains the most devastating fire of his time in the CFA, and also the one that prompted the most change.

“Everyone was squirting water but there was no coordination,” he said. “After Ash Wednesday we brought in a coordinated approach for fighting fires which I totally embrace.”

Joining the CFA was an “accepted progression” when Doug was young. “If you’re on the land you’d join the fire brigade to look after yourself and your neighbours and the community. My father was a member and we had our own fire truck unit on the farm.”

Doug and his wife Jill moved to Mortlake in 1973 and became active in the Mortlake Rural Fire Brigade, as well as further contributing to the CFA and Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

“The first person I saw when we arrived at Mortlake was a neighbour and he wanted to know if I was in the fire brigade. Within a week we had a radio inside the house.”

Jill has more than 40 years volunteer service with the CFA, including time as a VFBV board member. Doug has been lieutenant and captain of the brigade, group officer and is currently deputy group officer for the Mortlake group. He has attended incidents locally, state-wide and interstate.

His first significant fire was the disastrous Lara blaze in 1969, which claimed 23 lives. “We were on the way to the Lara fires driving Dad’s truck. We went to Torquay to pick up some equipment and crew and we didn’t even get a kilometre out of town and a power line came down and started a massive fire in front of us. We put that out and then spent the next few days at Angelsea because there was another fire there.”

Doug says that working alongside Jill helped to cement their passion for supporting the community. “Jill is just as much if not more involved than I am these days and when I was off fighting fires she was on the radio getting more trucks or organising things.”

He says that volunteering for the CFA has personal rewards. “When you can move 800 firefighters and equipment from one state to another within 48 hours as we did for the Sydney fires, it certainly helps your management skills.”

The CFA Senior Award was won by Raymond Beaton of Hazelwood North.

VFBV CEO Andrew Ford said the value and professionalism of volunteers like Doug Parker make them a vital part of every regional Victorian community.

“As one of the most fire-prone places in the world, Victorians can be confident that with almost 60,000 volunteers and 1000 paid firefighters, we’re professionally trained and equipped for all fire risks and our huge volunteer numbers mean we have the ability to step up and respond anywhere in the state in times of disaster,” he said.