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MEDIA RELEASE

VETERAN VOLUNTEER REWARDED FOR COMMITMENT

Barnawartha Fire Brigade has transformed during Howard Smith's 37 years of involvement, but the commitment of volunteers has never wavered.

Mr Smith has been awarded a Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) Gold Star for his dedication to supporting volunteers and the local community.

Like other volunteers, Mr Smith didn't become a firefighter for accolades but receiving the Gold Star was a welcome surprise.

"It came out of left field but it was nice recognition," he said.

He remains committed to volunteering, especially as demand grows on the brigade.

"When I joined it was a typical little small-town rural brigade," Mr Smith said. "Over the past 37 years it has moved into a structural-type environment with a distribution centre and rail hub set up outside town.

"There has been a big change of emphasis and our training regime has increased to learn new competencies in structural firefighting; we're no longer just a little bush brigade."

The former brigade captain said the structural risk profile had changed and the brigade had changed with it. "We have an integrated station at Wodonga which has been really helpful in assisting with training and our volunteer retention is good," he said.

The brigade has 24 active members and 20-30 reserve members with a good cross section of male and female volunteers who respond to about 80 calls each year.

There have been some notable incidents, including a goods train colliding with a passenger train, the Indigo complex fires in 2017 and surge capacity support at the 2009 Black Saturday fires.

Mr Smith, who joined his brother-in-law in the brigade, described volunteering as part of community life. "It's just one of those things you did when you moved into town – you joined the local CFA," he said.

“The brigade is virtually the hub of the community in little townships, as well as an active firefighting unit. Our little town has grown over the years and the CFA has always been a central part of it.”

Mr Smith went on to become brigade delegate to the VFBV and district state councillor.

“I’ve been the brigade delegate for nearly 34 years, starting with the old rural association in the late 1980s. The CFA is world-renowned as the best model. We wouldn’t be able to do what we do if we didn’t have volunteers.

“Having a strong volunteer body like the VFBV makes sure our rights and our voices are observed. If we don’t have a strong voice, we can’t be in charge of our own destiny. It’s through strong volunteerism and a strong voice that we have been able to achieve what we have.”

VFBV CEO Adam Barnett said volunteers like Mr Smith were an integral part of local communities.

“Volunteers are essential to public safety and our dedicated volunteers are continuing a great Australian tradition that is well respected in our communities,” Mr Barnett said.

“The contribution and commitment shown by Howard over more than three decades of service is immeasurable. Not only has the community benefited, but the whole state of Victoria. It is our absolute privilege to honour such service through the awarding of the VFBV Gold Star,” he added.

Learn more about CFA’s world-respected surge capacity on the VFBV website: <https://vfbv.com.au/index.php/component/k2/item/568-cfa-s-volunteer-surge-capacity-essential-for-victoria>

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