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## MEDIA RELEASE

### VOLUNTEER DOING WHAT HE DOES BEST TO HELP THE COMMUNITY

Veteran volunteer firefighter George Calleja isn't one to look for accolades.

When the Singleton newspaper in NSW described George and his fellow firefighters as heroes, he was as embarrassed as he was honoured.

"We're not heroes, we're firefighters. We made the Singleton paper but we didn't go there for that; we went there to do what we do best. We're not there for ourselves; we just came to help the community."

What they did best was save a little town.

George is Captain of Bamawn Extension, just out of Echuca, and is now home after being strike team leader and sector commander at several major fires.

He was part of the first strike team from the region to go to New South Wales and followed with several stints in East Gippsland.

The strike team helped to save the small town of Greta.

"When we arrived, it was chaos because everyone was trying to get out," Captain Calleja said.

"People hadn't left when they had the warnings; that was one of the biggest problems. When it did come, they all tried to get out at the last minute which made it really hard for the emergency services but we got in there."

Alongside another strike team, they found a shed alight, a shipping container alight and a house under immediate threat.

"The fire was heading towards the houses so I sent two tankers in and they got to the head of it and stopped it, working with three helicopters and a bomber. There was a long line of 40 homes and the fire was heading to them. It came out of the trees and was in flat country so they were able to stop it and saved a lot of homes."

Captain Calleja has volunteered in many strike teams, but this fire was different.

"I've never experienced fires that moved so quickly," he said. "It's on to you in a minute. I've been to other big fires and you see them coming; these were just on to you."

After winning the battle, a new threat emerged. "Later on, one volunteer saw smoke coming from the back of a house. The ride-on mower and trampoline were on fire in the backyard. It must have been a spot that took a while to get going. Two tankers rushed in there and we put it out and saved that house. It was lucky he saw it."

Captain Calleja's region 20 team was later sent to the Taree district.

"The NSW Parks guys led us to Failford where they thought the fire was going to come out late in the afternoon. As we were getting to it, the plume was getting bigger and bigger. It was massive. We needed at least 20 tankers but we only had five so we asked for more and the RFS came to assist us.

"When we got there the fire was just hitting at the back of the houses but we got it under control. About 4 o'clock we moved to Krumbach to protect assets from a fire coming down extremely high hills. We had to wait for it to come down and our guys battled it as it came down to the flats."

Despite the huge fire threat, Captain Calleja said personal safety was top priority and his training and experience held him to good stead.

"I ensured everyone knew we were number one," he said. "We were there for asset protection and to fight the fire, but if anything went wrong, we'd be out of there. Safety is the first thing.

"The teams were brilliant. We had really good crew leaders who kept their crews close. It was a really tight team. We all do the same job and I don't ask any firefighter in my team to do anything I wouldn't do."

He was particularly impressed with the new wave of volunteer firefighters.

"We had younger team members on their first strike team but they were really well trained and were right to go."

Captain Calleja also led strike teams and worked as sector commander in East Gippsland, including leading visiting American firefighters.

The Bamawn Extension brigade has forged a close connection with counterparts at Cobungra and, showing support goes further than the fire field, has helped the small Gippsland brigade with fund-raising.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria CEO Adam Barnett said volunteers had made an incredible contribution this summer. "To be able to support interstate colleagues and then instantly redeploy to our own fires back home demonstrates the incredible size, strength and capacity of our world-renowned volunteer model," Mr Barnett said.

"We should be incredibly proud of our members and brigades as they defend and protect their communities and beyond."

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