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MEDIA RELEASE

HAMILTON AIR BASE VOLUNTEERS KEEP SOUTH-WEST VICTORIA SAFE

In scenes reminiscent of the old TV favourite *Dad's Army*, volunteer firefighters are keeping south-west Victoria safe from above without ever leaving the ground.

The volunteers who run the Hamilton Air Base are aged from their 50s to their 70s, including many retired or semi-retired farmers, but they are a well-drilled team able to have a fire-bombing aircraft loaded and airborne within minutes.

They are proud to continue their service to their communities as they start to take a step back from active firefighting while finding a new lease on life as they mentor new members and use their experience and wisdom in other but equally important ways.

There are 15 other air bases in Victoria, all run by DELWP. As fire seasons become more challenging, the volunteer team at Hamilton continues to step up. This summer they've loaded a record number of aircraft.

Located at the Hamilton airport 11km north of the town, the air base has 40 volunteers in six teams of six, along with a communications unit and two logistics people.

The teams of "loaders and mixers" are on a six-day roster, on call to be at the base within 30 minutes if needed.

Their main tasks are to have water, foam or retardant ready and to load the planes. They are usually needed about 30-40 times each summer.

Air base manager CFA volunteer Leighton Wraith oozes passion for the task and says the teams are just as committed.

On Total Fire Ban days, up to 12-member teams could be at the base from 9am-9pm.

Mr Wraith reviews weather forecasts in advance and liaises with team leaders to ensure enough volunteers are available.

The base has been operating for about seven years in its present form. Two bomber aircraft are permanently based at Hamilton over summer, plus two support aircraft, and the base has access to four other bombers from Casterton and Stawell.

Like CFA ground crews, there is a spirit of regional cooperation and support. “The system allows for great flexibility. If there’s a problem near the South Australian border we can go over there and vice-versa,” Mr Wraith said.

Although south-west Victoria was spared the worst of the fires this summer, the base recorded one of its busiest seasons.

“With the Budj Bim National Park fires, between the bombers and support aircraft we were servicing 11 aircraft,” Mr Wraith said. “The teams had their skates on I’ll tell you; they worked their butts off but they were up to it.”

In the first two months of the season, the team serviced 310 plane loads

Volunteers come from different brigades around the Hamilton region, sometimes performing dual roles for their local brigade and the air base. It’s challenging but the volunteers are well prepared.

“When things are really going, we have three fellows just mixing retardant and another team loading the aircraft,” Mr Wraith said. “On a Total Fire Ban day, we have a reserve crew so we can swap if they’re getting too buggered. We have a second role where our communication unit monitors all firebombers and support aircraft who report “ops normal” each 30 minutes.

When the aircraft lands, the team springs into action. “From the time the aircraft touches down, taxis, stops, is loaded and taxis back to the runway and is airborne again is no more than six to seven minutes,” Mr Wraith said.

“It takes us two minutes 45 seconds to load 3000 litres.”

At the beginning of the season, the teams have a full training day and at the start of each day they go through a 30-minute training exercise and Mr Wraith leads a full air base briefing, with a focus on safety.

Most of the airbase volunteers are retired or mature-aged farmers aged from 50s to 70s. “We’re so lucky; whatever needs fixing they can do it,” Mr Wraith said. “These guys are old-fashioned farmers who can do anything and fix anything.”

Mr Wraith was recruited about seven years ago by the regional CFA operations manager to find volunteers to set up the base.

There is respect between the CFA and DEWLP career staff and the volunteers. “They let us run our own race and we’ve never let them down,” Mr Wraith said. “The roster works particularly well.”

The air base is primarily responsible for a 22,000 square kilometre region stretching from Peterborough and Warrnambool, to near Balmoral and Glenthompson.

Each of the aircraft carries 3000 litres of water, foam or retardant. “This year, we used primarily retardant because it was mainly for inaccessible bush country, but in previous years it was primarily foam,” Mr Wraith said.

While the base is well equipped, a new shed is needed to cover working plant and the unit is campaigning to Emergency Management Victoria for funds. “It would make it more efficient and comfortable for our volunteers, and it would be far better for our equipment,” Mr Wraith said.

“At the moment, all of our equipment is protected with covers but it’s outside for six months of the year.”

Many of the volunteers have been active firefighters for decades and no longer want to be in the field.

“They’ve had a lifetime on the back of a truck and in strike teams,” Mr Wraith said. “They’ve had enough of that but still want to be involved so this keeps them active and in the CFA. We firmly believe we are contributing to the bigger picture to protect not only our own patch but the whole of the west, south-west and north-west of Victoria.

“We have no trouble getting support; these men and women want to be there. You can sit there all day and do nothing and they’d have a right to be saying what could I be doing on my farm, but they’re prepared to give up their day just in case something happens and they’re ready to go when something does happen.”

On busy days it can be frantic and tiring work. “You pull those heavy hoses with retardant in them, load the plane then pull them back and the next aircraft immediately pulls up, you do that for an hour it’s bloody hard work,” Mr Wraith said.

“But we watch our people carefully and rotate the jobs as much as we can to make sure no one gets stressed.”

A farmer from near Dunkeld, Mr Wraith has flown his personal aircraft for 40 years and has special praise for the firefighting pilots.

“They’re real pros; the best in the business. They fly in very tough conditions down to 100 feet to drop their load. It’s high risk and I have the greatest respect for what they do.”

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) CEO Adam Barnett said the air base team might work in a different field to most volunteer firefighters but they share the same commitment and professionalism.

“Being a volunteer firefighter can mean many different things. We welcome people from all walks of life, including those who are keen to be responding to fires, accidents and other incidents, and those who want to provide back-up support,” Mr Barnett said.

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