

# Thank You

*Stories from the frontline*



Central Coast Bushfires  
Summer 2019/2020

# Thank You

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## *Stories from the frontline*

During the summer of 2019/20, catastrophic bushfires impacted the Central Coast.

One year on, we share the unique stories of 15 courageous locals who stepped up to help our community during one of the most devastating natural disasters the Coast has ever seen.

This collection of stories is just one way we are acknowledging and thanking the many volunteers, frontline workers and residents who gave so much during this time.

Of course, these are just some of the many local stories to emerge from these bushfires. If you have a story that you'd like to share please get in touch.

Email Jonathan Gilbert at **[Jonathan.Gilbert@centralcoast.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Jonathan.Gilbert@centralcoast.nsw.gov.au)** to share your experience.



# Alison Wade

## Captain, Spencer Rural Fire Brigade

### *Last season is still a bit of a blur*

It was a pretty hectic time for all of us.

It got to a point where we knew that the Three Mile fire was coming. Eventually it did jump Western Commission Track and came onto Oyster Shell Road at Lower Mangrove. So it was very much in our community then. It was a constant couple of weeks of property protection and back burning. That's all we did basically day and night.

It was exhausting. It was like Groundhog Day.

You get up, you go out and you do what you had to do during the day and most of the night, you go to bed, have few hours' sleep, you get up and you do it all again.

I would assess what was happening out on the fire ground and have a look at what resources were available.

I did a lot with the group officers and managing what we call strike teams and placing them in different positions within the community. Then making sure my crew were out there and they had a task to do. Then a lot of the evenings were patrols and checking on members' welfare, then grab a few hours' sleep and do it all again.

We had the community well prepared, we had meetings at the community hall and said that this fire is coming, we knew it was coming. It wasn't a matter of if, it was a

matter of when. We wanted to make sure the community was prepared. Nobody expected it to escalate, to be such a large massive fire, but we knew it was coming.

For me, the things that sort of stuck out the most were the ember ashes and blackened leaves. The leaves, the gumtrees around here were just pitch black.

I live in a really old farmhouse. Some of the embers actually managed to make their way into part of the house, so that was a little bit confronting.

I look back now and I think, how did I get through that time. You live on adrenaline. I didn't get a great deal of sleep, I didn't eat a great deal, I lost 4kg, but it's the adrenaline that really keeps you going. But unfortunately, when it wears off, that's when the physical and the mental tiredness really hits you.

I spent 21 consecutive days on the fire ground. I haven't done that before.

For me though, the Brigade, it's a family connection.

My relative was a founding member of the Spencer Brigade. He was the Captain for 23 years. When he was dying of cancer and I was looking after him, I promised I would join the brigade. So, here I am. I know whenever I'm on the front line, I know he is there with me. I guess that's why I always feel safe. I carry his name badge in my pocket.

**[Watch video here](#)**





# Ryan Howard

## Community & Communication

### *The danger became very real*

I was pretty nervous.

I've been through three fires up here on Mangrove Mountain and I haven't seen one come that fast and at that intensity before. I was looking at the wind directions and I knew it was going to roar up the hill.

I was up on the highest point of our property just looking across at it and it just all of a sudden, I mean we knew it was coming through Ten Mile Hollow and then it just exploded through Dubbo Gulley and you could just hear the crackling roar of the fire and the whole sky just went red.

You could see the poor wildlife and the birds were just flying straight up in the air trying to get out of there and yeah, it came really fast.

We've got a little donkey sanctuary, so the danger became very real. We have 65 donkeys and we had to make sure all of them were safe.

It was an all-night expedition. We were aware of the Pemberton Hills Road fire, it was coming down the hill from the north as well. So we had a couple of fire fronts that we were watching.

I was just keeping in touch with all the locals and doing my best when the fire came across to make sure all my animals were safe and that we were in a safe place and could

protect our property as much as we could. Also, to have an escape route in place.

There were things that we could see ahead further up the mountain that we could sort of warn them how fast the fire was coming and let them know what to expect.

We kept in contact with the media too, we were giving them information on how the situation was panning out. I was just giving Central Coast ABC updates on where the fire was at and what the fire brigade were doing and just giving them updates on how we were all coping with it.

We just wanted to stay as long as possible as it was safe to and do what we could to protect what we had. It was quite a few weeks, if not a month, that we were threatened by the fires. 'Cause it came through the end of December and I could remember mid-November we were watching the fires and they were still 50 kilometres away.

A lot of the locals said to me because of the length of time that the strain and stress they were under just watching that and not being able to do anything was just very painful. I think that's why a lot left, just to get away and be away from all that stress.

And for those of us that stayed, I definitely think some of the people who stayed needed somebody to talk to after what we had all been through.

**[Watch video here](#)**



## Nicole Bergan

### Call out Officer, Volunteer Bushfire Brigade, Patonga

#### *They are all part of me*

The '94 fires were pretty devastating. And I remember waking up in '94 and the moon was blood red. Ash falling in Gosford. But never, ever have I seen anything like this. Never.

I'm a team member. I'm also the call out officer in Patonga. It's my role to put a team together to go out to the fire. I think it was really hard managing that last summer because there were so many fires, so many calls for crews and the fatigue levels were really high.

I was getting messages from loved ones during the fires asking "*have you heard from them*". That was the one thing that we put in place with quite a few of them. One of them from the team, the truck, the crew that was out, would always send their message as soon as they got a signal saying "*all good, let everyone know we are okay*". I would pass on that message to their families.

They are all part of me. It's my team. And yeah, I get scared and I get nervous and I get apprehensive when I hear things happening on the radio because I can listen. If I haven't heard anything from them over a certain period of time, I start to worry but I also know that these guys are an amazing team and they have been really well trained.

The crew leaders that go out with them, Zac and Matt, they are so intent on bringing them home that I have got to remind myself all the time that they will all be okay.

Matt and Zac have always been so focused on their role that whoever goes out comes home. And we come home safe. That's an awesome responsibility for those guys and a very heavy burden to wear.

When people call us heroes it's embarrassing because we don't see ourselves as that. We don't wear capes, we don't fly, we don't have any special powers. It's what we want to do because that's who we are. We don't join for any accolades we just want to protect what we have got. Our community. We want to be able to protect people's houses and their lives and educate. The biggest thing that I have is education. It's a passion of mine.

As a team, we've never experienced anything quite like last summer.

Usually a fire goes for a week maybe. But this was terrifying, it was all consuming. How long is this beast going to run for? We didn't know how long it was going to take. There was a possibility that it wasn't going to stop until it hit the ocean. That is exactly what I thought. There was a lot of people that I think even in the community believed that. The only thing that was going to stop this was when it hit the ocean.

**[Watch video here](#)**



# Tony Garland

## Community Volunteer

### *1994 was bad, but last year was something else*

I just love the bush.

I've got anxiety, depression, PTSD. For me, the bush is an escape. Growing up as a teenager I was out bush camping in caves and drinking out of streams and jumping in water holes.

I wish I understood a bit more about it, but I definitely like looking after it. Whenever my son and I go bushwalking there's this particular butterfly and it follows us. To me, that's my Grandfather. The funny thing is we were up here doing a patrol when the Three Mile fire was threatening and that same butterfly landed on a log right beside us. To me that was my grandfather saying you are doing a good thing, you're doing what you are meant to be doing. I took a lot of pride out of that. My grandfather took his own life in 2000. He was special to me.

During the Gaspers Mountain fire I saw that the Wildlife Park needed help evacuating animals because the fire looked like it was coming over here.

I've got 27 years' firefighting experience, so I volunteered to help prepare the site. I hit up a couple of mates who came up with me. We cleared around the exposures.

I've been through the 1994 bushfires... 2002, 2006 - all those big fires. I've got plenty of experience that I can bring up here to help defend this area.

But it wasn't just me acting alone. We had an emergency plan should things go pear shaped if the weather went wrong no one would be in here. So we had all these different contingency plans in place depending on temperatures and humidity and things like that.

My skill sets is with hazard reduction burns and dry firefighting and things like that. I just bought that up here so that they could defend it. I was actually one of the volunteer fire-fighters here involved in burning this park just after the electric fences went in. We burned this whole park just before the animals came in. I guess it's sort of part of my fire brigade history too if you like, that its sort of come full circle and I'm back here helping.

I just like helping the community. Helping people.

I spray paint my own ute with fire awareness murals. I joined the RFS in 1989 just after I got out of school and it's just been a passion. School visits, preschool kids and fire safety has just been a real passion for me. To the point when I'm pretty much spamming my Facebook page with photos. Some that I took up here and then I turn them into fire safety memes. I did a lot of work up here but to me that's just me being me. I raised ten grand for the Vinnies Bushfire appeal with my mates and another ten for the family of a volunteer firefighter who was killed fighting the fires. Helping at the park and the two lots of \$10000 I raised are my most proud moments.

**[Watch video here](#)**





# Sandra Hazledine

## Retained Firefighter 245, Budgewoi

### *You just hit a low*

It was a really tough time. There was a lot going on all around NSW.

It was unprecedented, it was ferocious. It was relenting. It was just horrific, horrific conditions. The fire was relentless. It was not forgiving.

I started in September going up to Drake and fighting fires up there for a week. Came back, went up to Lismore, came back, went up to Port Stephens, came back, went to Mangrove and finished in Charmhaven.

I've never seen conditions like it. It was completely different from the other fire seasons that I've experienced. It's almost hard to describe. Big flames, hot weather, not knowing what the weather was going to do. It created its own weather systems and was really, really tough.

The fire. It was thick. Heavy. It sticks in your hair and your pores for weeks. It stays months even. It's loud. It sounds almost like a thunderstorm approaching. It picks up wind, speed. Then it's just a blanket of smoke. It turns day into night. You wouldn't even know what time it was sometimes when you are out in the bush and it hits. And it stays with you. Just the smell. It comes rushing back, a reminder of what we had been through.

The raining embers were something I hadn't experienced before so it was very surreal. It was something out of a

movie. Just the darkness that fell over so quickly. The embers, the blood sun and at night it was just thick, dark, dense, black.

We were working 16 hour days, then you go back, have something to eat, sleep, get up and do it all again. But in the spare moments when you did have time to think it was really hard. Our families, our community and loved ones that we all left behind, sometimes that's what kept me going.

If we are on a deployment we go on for seven days and we do 16 hour days. Then sometimes, depending on the conditions, you can be out there for 18 hours.

It's a harsh reality. You have that moment when you realise you are away from your family and loved ones for that seven days. You're pretty much alone out there and in some dangerous conditions.

After you come back from a deployment you've been on this massive adrenaline rush and you get back and you just hit a low. That's when you stop and reflect on what you've been through.

By New Year's Eve we were all exhausted. We'd already been through months of fire, at a time when the season should have only just been starting. But I love helping the community and being a part of it. We're a pretty small community up on the Central Coast. So, to help protect and be a part of that is really wonderful.

**[Watch video here](#)**



# Jake Cassar

## Bushtucker and Conservation

### ***Bushfires are a reality now***

I was teaching survival to international military guys up north and I was on my way back when I found out that the bushfires had really hit. I got stuck around Port Macquarie. I got blocked in with the fires there, so I ended up spending three days trying to get back to the Coast. Eventually we had a break in the fires and I was able to drive through the smoke and got home and that's when the fun started.

It was pretty damn scary at the time to see these fires coming closer and closer. I ended up helping out at the Walkabout Wildlife Park. The park was full of smoke, but we had a job to do.

My job was to bring staff and volunteers out at night to try and catch as many wild animals in the sanctuary as we could.

I teach tracking and bush craft, so I won't say that I didn't enjoy it. It was great working as a team and seeing people from all different backgrounds coming together to rescue these animals.

But there was kind of a dark undercurrent at the time that if the fire reached the park and we hadn't got the animals out, or we only got them to step one which was an isolated enclosure before we moved them off the site, that we could have flaming emus running through the park and animals all burning.

It was incredibly heartening to see the community coming

together and dig so deep and at a risk to their lives, to themselves. But at the same time, it was quite terrifying when the fires were getting close. For our own safety to some degree but also to the hundreds and hundreds of animals within that sanctuary.

When you see the community bind together like this on the face of a potential disaster like we had at the Walkabout Park, it gives the community a boost. We start to believe in people a bit more.

We saw people from all different backgrounds and socio-economic demographics coming together. You see the heart in people. And I think that is what we need. You can't obligate people to want to protect the environment or to want to get involved in these kind of things. You can only inspire them, and there was a whole heap of inspiration going on at the Walkabout Park during that period.

It's really important. The more people connect with the land. I know the staff at the Walkabout Park, they love those animals. They love them like they love their family and friends.

Bushfires are a reality now but disaster certainly can unite the community.

Australia has the greatest extinction rate for any continent on the planet. I think there's been a large awakening. I think to draw a positive from the fires we just need to keep striving towards looking after each other and the country that we are privileged enough to live in.

**[Watch video here](#)**





# Danielle Captain-Webb

## Community Member

### *Country is my being*

In December 2019 the Three Mile fire swept through the Central Coast and had a significant impact on the Mangrove Mountain district and on me personally.

Once the fire actually hit us, it sounded quite dangerous. It sounded loud and painful. Painful for Mother Earth. Painful for Country. The screaming sounds from Mother Earth, from nature, from not only the trees but from wildlife that were injured as well.

I remember quite significantly, and this is something that has impacted me, on that night of the bushfires an animal was screaming out because it was being impacted by the fire. This was really horrible.

Our property was in the middle of the fires and surrounded on three sides, all around the main road.

We had set up hoses around the property. We pretty much had the hoses running all night. There were points in time when my father was on the tractor putting our spot fires that had popped up where the hoses couldn't reach.

The smell of the smoke was overbearing. I remember when we were fighting the fire we had masks on to cover our faces, but it was so intense that you could breathe better without the mask on. Not that you could really breathe at all to be honest. It was very overwhelming. The fire itself, it's nothing that I have ever seen.

It was a big decision to stay and fight the fire. But I think when you have a piece of land that you love and care for so much and you know it means so much to you and your family. I think in that point in time you don't really question whether you are staying or not. It's more, this is what I have to do and this is what I am going to do.

I don't think that it is something that you can describe to people to allow them to actually understand without them being there and witnessing it themselves. The only way I could explain it was to have hundreds of thousands of shooting stars going over you at one time. That is what it was like with the embers of the fire.

You don't actually realise how serious and deathly these bushfires can be until you are in the moment.

When the fire came up the ridge line, the fire literally came around us within a matter of seconds.

Country is my being. For me, making sure Country is treated in the right way and looked after accordingly is very important.

I'm an Aboriginal woman, a Wiradjuri and Gomeroi woman. I've lived on Darkinjung Country my whole life. I have a deep connection to Country, to look after Mother Earth. Especially given that I've lived on Darkinjung country my whole life. I am a mother of four and I'm a lawyer and Mangrove Mountain is my home. It's where I belong.

**[Watch video here](#)**



## Bob Barton

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### Deputy Commander, Fire & Rescue NSW

#### *There's a comradeship with firefighters*

On New Year's Eve we started at 11 o'clock in the morning.

The fire started at Blue Haven and went down the Central Coast Highway into Charmhaven. We had crews battling those blazes all afternoon.

We thought everything was under control then a southerly come through and it blew the fire back onto Birdwood Drive. That was one of the most harrowing positions I've been in. You could not drive down the street without the fear of maybe running someone over.

It was just that black.

It was just a matter of pulling over, making sure I could find out where all my crews were, and then going back along Birdwood Drive to make sure we were actually defending the houses that were at the far western end of the street.

That day I finished at about 3am in the morning.

A bushfire, a large one like this, can sound like a jet engine or a train. A steam train coming through a town.

The smell is nothing like you have smelt before, its unique. Especially when it comes through bush, it's a very, very strong smell and the heat can be quite intense. It goes right through your uniform, all through your hair, your skin - you can still smell it on yourself two days after.

It is very hard to decompress after seeing fire like that.

You go back to the station, sit down, have a drink of water or a cup of tea, write down a few notes in case you do need to go to court, and just get ready to switch off when you knock off that morning. It's also the time to talk.

There's a comradeship with firefighters. If one of our firefighters is hurting or going through a hard time, we feel that as well.

It is a tight knit community. What makes it good though is that the firefighters can speak to each other. It's like a debrief to get those anxieties and stresses out. We also have peer support and employee assistance programs to help with that.

You need to have the support of your family too. I went away for weeks on end round the state last year helping coordinate the efforts of Fire and Rescue with the RFS in places like Wauchope and Glen Innes. My wife is amazing. She looks after the kids while I'm gone. It can't be easy for her.

The community was fantastic too. Everywhere the firefighters went they were giving out water, refreshments, food. Anything that people needed. They took heed of what we had to say. They listened to the emergency warnings and when they had to relocate, they did. So the community was really, really good on the Central Coast last summer and that was great to see.

My name is Bob Barton. I'm a duty commander with Fire and Rescue NSW on the Central Coast. I've been with Fire & Rescue for 39 years.

***[Watch video here](#)***



# Jo Hilder

## Volunteer Community Facilitator

### *This time last year, it was just beginning.*

What turned out to be the most dangerous and widespread bushfires in our living memory were underway, impacting in terms of both personal experiences, and the community atmosphere.

People were anxious, I know I was. I live adjoining the bush, so my family were vulnerable as well. My friend lives at Mangrove Mountain, and her home was right in the middle of it. Despite the danger to her own property, and the potential danger to mine, we both felt like there had to be something we could do to help.

We discovered there was a need amongst firefighters on the front line for personal resources, especially those who had travelled from other areas to join local brigades. They had fire equipment and PPE, but lacked the basics like sunscreen, snacks, energy drinks and even toilet paper. RFS volunteers could be despatched to areas of emergency for weeks with sometimes not even a change of clothes. We wanted to help and saw we could meet this need - it seemed like the least we could do.

We made a list based on suggestions from firefighters and I made my shop at Green Point a central donation point. People responded and we were completely overwhelmed with goods. Folks came to the shop with full trolleys and cars, and every spare space was packed to the ceiling. It was amazing.

The effort took on a life of its own, and like the bushfires themselves, seemed to have its own energy. We'd all been feeling anxious and tense but managed to convert that into positive action. We felt like we were no longer helpless, and also that we were part of something bigger than both us, and the fires.

Charity organisations were taking care of people personally impacted by the fires, and they were doing an amazing job, but we supported the women and men on the front line. My friend and I loaded our cars and drove to brigade headquarters sometimes hundreds of kilometres away – wherever resources were called for. It was humbling to see people just like us, of all ages and walks of life, putting their lives on hold to be at the front line of the fires. They loved seeing us pull up with carloads of community donations, and asked us to thank everyone for their generosity, sometimes with tears in their eyes. They were not the only ones.

If what we did accomplished anything, it helped the community feel empowered in the face of danger, reminding us all there is always something we can do even when we feel overwhelmed and afraid. Community means pulling together when things get tough, and that's what we did.

I'm Jo Hilder, and I'm a volunteer community facilitator who helped support firefighters during the bushfires.

**[Watch video here](#)**





## Matt Hauser

### Senior Deputy Captain, Patonga Volunteer Bushfire Brigade

#### *Without my other members I'm nothing*

It was hectic. It was something I had never seen and something all of NSW hasn't seen before. It was hard. It was tough work. It was emotional, there were times there where you had to run. I had never had to do that before. Pretty much scoop my crew up, get them in the truck and get them out of there. We met some fantastic people from other brigades. Look, it was sad. It was tough and it was sad.

I was apprehensive, anxious, all of that.

So many emotions when you are out there you don't know what's going to happen. Anything can change at any time. Wind changes, things like that. You can spot fire over containment lines, which happened to us on many occasions. Then all of a sudden you're surrounded by fire and you've got to try and get that out before it goes into people's properties.

Big fires like that start their own weather system. You can have fire swirls. It was terrible. That's all I can say. It was hot, you were exhausted when you came back, you'd get phone calls saying "*can you go out again, we need the people*" so you just gear up and do it again. That's what we do. That's what we are here for.

The smell, for three months I just smelt like a BBQ. Just smelt like burnt wood. Couldn't get it out of my hair, my fire uniform and that. It just didn't matter. It just stunk. The truck smelt.

The noise. One of the fires, the Green Wattle I think it was, the noise of that fire coming up that ridge, it just sounded like a freight train. There's no other way to describe it, it just roared up that hill. Before you could see the flames coming up that ridge all you could feel was the radiating heat.

During that period nobody in Australia or NSW has ever seen that before.

When you came home, your wife and kids, they hug you because they don't know. There is no reception out there. They don't get told from comms how you are doing and they hear on the news that someone has died, they don't know who it is. So they are worried. Not knowing if you are going to come home or not.

For them to support you through that, as a volunteer, is the best thing you could ask. But that's it. Without that I don't think you could do it. They are very proud of me for what I do. My kids go to school and "dad's a hero" but I don't do it for that.

I've always wanted to be community involved. And you meet a lot of fantastic people. Since I've been in the brigade up here it's like my second family. I treat them all like I do my family.

**[Watch video here](#)**



# Kelvin Fry

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## Deputy Captain, Volunteer Bushfire Brigade, Narara

### *A sense of pride*

Last year was the biggest fire season I've ever seen.

I've been to a lot of fires in the time that I've been in the brigade but I've never seen anything like that. Just the conditions. How the ferocity of the fire was. It's a very good learning curve. I believe I learnt a lot during the last fire season.

The Gaspers fire was started by a lightning strike. Monday October 26. I'll never forget that date. It stopped at the McDonald River and then another storm come through and another lightning strike struck just above Wiseman's Ferry. I spent 13-14 days fighting the Three Mile.

The radiating heat, the smoke, you can get used to it but that doesn't mean it doesn't affect you. What I learnt last year, it's something I really believe in, the main thing is you look out for one another. If the slightest change in the wind comes you instantly tell your crew leader 'cause it can change so quickly.

The flame height can change really quickly too. It might be as high as your ankle or it can be crowning. You can't be in front of a crowning fire. But the main thing is knowing where your crew is at all times. Communication. We don't use radios talking to one another, you just keep things short and sweet. You've always got eye contact and always working in pairs.

Sometimes it can be very hard.

You might see something and you think well ok, you've just got to do your job. But some things you see can really stay with you.

You just try and block it away, put it in the back of your mind. Back of the filing cabinet sort of thing. It's still there, you will never forget it. But to me, it makes you stronger mentally.

Then again you can get a bit of a flashback. Like with Facebook now you are getting all of the stories of "this is what happened last year". It's just like little flashbacks coming back. 'Cause I've seen people that are still in the fire storm and it just brings back a lot of memories.

We have a critical incident group, we can ring them 24/7. I have spoken to them a couple of times.

I love peace and quiet. Serenity. I've got a good understanding of the bush. It's just nice to be out in the bush. Get away from the rat race. The noise, the cars, the sirens. That's why I do what I do. That's why I joined the RFS.

**[Watch video here](#)**



# Mark Griffith

## Deputy Captain, Kulnura Fire Brigade

### *It can become organised chaos*

We were pretty much on from November to the middle of February.

When we saw the lightning strike on Gosper's Mountain we watched the fire grow. The fire was behaving very similarly to the 1994 fires. We had very dry conditions and knew there was something big coming our way.

I liken it to my military background. 98% boredom and 2% sheer terror. That's very much how the fires played out here.

Four weeks out we started preparing the community.

We started to build containment lines, started to work with forestry and work with local farmers putting in bulldozed containment lines in between properties where we could. We then started some community meetings. We were surprised with how many people turned out.

There was some concern that we were spreading fear through the community but the fear was already there. People could see what was growing and they could see what was coming their way. They just wanted information on what they should do, how they should act, how they should prepare. We gave some pretty blunt messages, it was *"it's not a matter of if the fires come, it's a matter of when the fires come"*.

When they did I was getting up at 4 - 5 o'clock in the morning going through to 10 o'clock and then going out on

the fires and getting home at midnight. 14 hours on the fire but as one of the local leaders, there was the prep before and the prepping of the out of town crews after to get them working overnight. So, it was very long days, very tiring.

On the front line, it's working through your training, working through the processes. Everybody knows what they are doing and you get on and do the job. It's very quick decision making. On a very big fire, it can become organised chaos. All the time you just make your decisions based on am I safe, are my crew safe, is everyone else around me safe.

Imagine standing at a train station and having four locomotives go past you, all simultaneously, and double the noise. Then the wind, then put that on a 45 degree day where something is generating its own weather. It's hot, it's loud and it's an untamed beast. That is when it is raging and it's angry. That's what it was like.

It was one of those terrible situations where the only thing to stop a natural disaster was another natural disaster. So when those flooding rains came, the fires went out, it was a relief, but we were still working, only now we were pulling trees off houses not trying to put them out.

In Kulnura we have a crew of about fourteen active firefighters and they range anywhere from 19 years old anywhere to about 80 years old.

All of us get on the truck and all of us go out.

**[Watch video here](#)**





# Carly Pal

## Central Coast Disaster Relief

### *The suffering hasn't stopped*

This initially started with one box and a bag of clothes donated by my family.

Within days the support had just been incredible. We were inundated and it's just growing exponentially. I had never thought we would ever get to this spot. I didn't. And it's only thanks to our wonderful community that we have been able to.

When the fires hit, I sat with my children to see how we can best help them.

The Salvos were tasked with the relief efforts. I contacted them, put a word out to our community via Facebook and within days, we were inundated with members of our community wanting to help - local businesses, members to support us, as well as other organisations.

When the fires hit our region, it was dreadful. We made up food hampers as well as snack packs. In the snack packs we have juice and water as well as muesli bars, tins of tuna, spaghetti. All of our donations are sourced by members of the community or other businesses who offer their support by donating their products. We also provided cooling neck ties and launched a fundraiser to raise money for fire rated socks.

We distribute these packs ourselves. We pack them up at our storage facilities and then deliver them to every fire brigade, RFS unit.

We actually spent Christmas day delivering bulk water and much needed supplies to the RFS around our local areas. Even on Christmas day they were hard at work. Some of them were doing up to 20 hour shifts at a time.

Seeing first-hand the devastation, Aussies at their very worst, where they had lost everything. Their homes, their properties, their much-loved pets. It was devastating to see. We cried with them, but we were also humbled by their resilience and their sense of community and mateship.

Delivering to regions that had been fire affected was awful. The whole roads had been decimated. Either side, all trees gone. Signage had been burned. There was no GPS, no satellite. It was really hard to navigate our way around most areas. Then when we got there it was deathly silent. It was quite an eerie feeling. You could definitely still smell the smoke. Smell the smoke, see the smoke. There was a constant haze that permeated every fibre of you. Even after washing your hair and showering, you just couldn't get rid of the smell.

We have wonderful volunteers, we probably have around forty volunteers. There is a dedicated team that supports me incredibly. I think the greatest gift you can give anybody is your time and understanding. There's a lot of things you can aspire to be but if you choose to be anything, choose to be kind.

I ask that you please don't forget those fire affected communities. The fires may be out, but the suffering hasn't stopped.

**[Watch video here](#)**



## Tim Farlow

### **Acting Captain, Wyong Fire & Rescue NSW**

#### ***The camaraderie, honestly, it is unbreakable***

Last year was unprecedented.

I've been a firefighter for twenty years, I had never seen anything like it.

Speaking to a lot of senior guys that I know who have been in the job for thirty to forty years, they say the same thing.

Here at Wyong, we were really put to the test.

Our tanker was on the road at one stage for eight weeks and with manning the tank around the clock and maintaining our station it was really a test with our personal life and our work life. But, everyone comes together. We come together as a team and we push through it. It was really successful.

It can be frightening too. A lot of people were frightened last year. It comes down to a combination of heat - unbearable heat, even with the protective gear on and a smoke-filled environment - you do find it difficult to breathe. Also, the fire behaviour. A fire can sound like a steam train coming.

Seeing mother nature work at her true force is just awesome. We can never predict what mother nature is going to do and that's from storms to fires.

Last summer though. The fires. It was actually very difficult. We never knew when it was going to stop. I don't think anyone did last year.

Every time the phone rang, it was the Duty Commander asking for more crew. It was continuous phone calls, text messages, contacting everyone trying to get their availability in advance and then selecting crew to send away. We had to keep our other truck on the road too, to look after Wyong itself.

We're an on-call station.

No one is here permanently. We are all at home, we all have jobs. So, when the pager goes off we all turn out. Whoever is available at the time. Some of our shifts last year, we were going anywhere from 16 to 18-hour shifts. With fatigue management, most of the time they try and rotate us through pretty regularly. But as the season got on last year it was hard to find more trucks and more people.

Even though it was stressful last summer, the camaraderie, honestly, it is unbreakable.

It's hard to explain but everyone just comes together, and we all work through it together. You will always be looking over your shoulder checking on your partner next to you. Checking on the radio to make sure everyone is fine. Even the truck next to you, you make sure it's fine. That's just what you do.

Our relationship with the community around here at Wyong is really strong and that really helped. Wyong itself, we're actually the reigning state champions for firefighting championships. So we've got a lot of local sponsors that look after us. The community base around here is really good. We have a waiting list of schools and pre-schools that want us to visit the second we can.

**[Watch video here](#)**





# Tassin Barnard

## Walkabout Wildlife Sanctuary

### *We are resilient, we can do it*

The experience of the bushfires is the most life changing experience I have ever had in my life.

We got a call in the middle of November last year to say that the fires were between three and ten days away from slamming into us. It was a really surreal feeling. So we were notified by other places in the area and then we got the call from the RFS the same day and that made it real.

We have over 200 animals in permanent care. We needed to make sure we could move them safely and I just felt absolutely helpless.

I've never used social media before – I know the power of social media, so I posted something on Facebook because I didn't know what else to do.

Then I went to sleep.

I woke up about three hours later looked at my phone and found Facebook had gone off. The entire Central Coast – I thought everyone was sleeping. The entire Central Coast had organised themselves to bring us pet packs. I go back and read those Facebook posts sometimes, it just makes my heart feel warm inside. I was like "am I dreaming?" I think at that stage we had reached about 50,000 people in about 3 hours.

So we opened up the gates at 8am to a cue of cars and pet packs. We ended up with a mountain. It was just

fantastically ridiculous.

And it was incredibly humbling on the one side and it was incredibly uplifting on the other side. On the one side it was humbling because I realised that people thought that Wildlife Sanctuary was not only about Tassin and Gerald Barnard. There are people that care, they might not care about us, they don't know us, but they did. But that wasn't the point, they cared about the same thing we care about. And I suddenly realised there is a whole world out there who cares about wildlife.

The RFS were fantastic too and they supported us all the way through this.

They kept feeding us information. But there were days when we were told the fire is probably going to hit tomorrow. Now, in the early days when we still had animals on site, that was bloody scary. Once the animals were offsite, we knew we could leave if we needed to.

This was fire like none of us have ever seen before.

This is now real. So what we have learned is; 1. We are resilient. 2. We can do it. Bring it on, we can deal with it. We can make everyone and the environment safe. We just got to be smart about it.

The Central Coast community are the only people who have ever evacuated a multi-species wildlife sanctuary. It hasn't been done anywhere else in the world. We proved you can do it and that's just amazing.

**[Watch video here](#)**



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