

S.E.S. HISTORY

By Bernie McNamara ESM

Members might be wondering why a number of Units are celebrating 40th. Anniversaries at this time.

In 1976 the Government appointed a former Army Officer to lead the State Emergency Service and charged him with the responsibility to upgrade and expand the organisation. Up till then SES Units were generally run by the particular Local Government that they represented. The Controller or Manager was usually the Shire Clerk or CEO or Mayor or Shire President.

This was the Cold War era and Local Governments had been supplied with quantities of welfare Equipment to care for the expected mass evacuees after a nuclear war. This equipment consisted of such gear as furley stretchers, field coppers (ask your mother or grandmother what that was), large boilers, canvas man packs containing basic rescue equipment such as a handsaw, wrecking bar, and hammer. Shoulder bag first aid kits full of bandages (Made in India in 1946) and a dosimeter (which measured radiation). Some Units may still have some of this equipment tucked away in their store.

Some basic equipment and a rescue trailer was being supplied by State and Commonwealth authorities. Units were using donated or private vehicles to tow the trailers, and it was much later that vehicles were also supplied. Local Authorities were sending people to the Australian Counter Disaster College in Victoria to train as Rescue team leaders, Communications Officers, or Managers.

The state was divided into a number of Regions and Regional Co-ordinators were appointed to each of these regions to manage and start new SES Units in these areas. Each of these new appointees had a military service or existing public service background as the general feeling in those days was that the only people capable of managing an emergency was someone with a service background.

That is why most of the SES Units that started about that time were initially led by people that had a similar background.

As the State Emergency Service Headquarters at Belmont increased its staff in Planning, Operations and Training, this feeling prevailed, and all new appointees came from a service background. It was 1985 before a volunteer was appointed to a staff position. Since then the majority of staff positions have been filled by volunteers.

. The first Regional Co-ordinators were based at Carnarvon and Port Hedland as they were considered the areas with the biggest threats of natural disasters. State of the art operational headquarters were built at each of those centres. In other areas of the State Regional Co-ordinators used existing facilities. The Metro area was divided into two regions, North and South of the Swan river.

The role of SES volunteers has also changed over the years since 1976. There was no vertical rescue, aerial observing, flood rescue, or chainsaw training. If you attended a car in a house you cut a piece of timber to use as a prop. (Acrow Props were not issued till 1989)

A private roping school was hired in 1986 to teach SES Members vertical rescue. Three of their team joined the SES (two are still members) and we now train our own people.

A private Eastern States organisation was carrying out air searches in the east and in 1988 wished to expand to the West. They contacted the Regional Co-ordinator in Carnarvon to see if they could run a course out of Carnarvon, being fairly central along the coast. In those days we were under the Police and we were given permission to run the course as long as we had policemen on the course. Consequently four Carnarvon SES volunteers and four policemen qualified as the first air observers. The Police air wing then took over training in the West and the Eastern States organisation eventually folded.

Flood rescue boats were issued in the early 80s to some country Units that had a flood problem, but with no formal training provided. It was 1989 before any Metropolitan Unit got a flood boat, with one in North metro (Bassendean) and one South (Belmont). When the SES got involved with Skyslow they were also used as river ambulances.

When SES Units started using chainsaws there was no formal training, so some Units sent their members to do the Forest Industry course (I still have my qualification certificate), it was the early 90s before we ran our own courses.

Over the years Units have come and gone. A number of wheatbelt Units have folded as the population declined. In the Metro area Nedlands and Subiaco amalgamated with Perth and became Northshore. There was a Swan brewery rescue team and a Railways team based at Midland. The Midland group joined Swan SES, and the brewery team folded but some of their members are still around. One in Cockburn and one at Melville. The Mounted section were originally part of Armadale but became a Regional resource in the early 90s. The Canine section were originally based at Serpentine-Jarrahdale and over the years came under the umbrella of several Units but are now a Regional resource.

I hope that this article may be of interest to members, telling of the development of the SES over the years. I have deliberately not given names, however I would be remiss if I did not mention Ray Peake and Bill Budney, two of the best volunteer rescue trainers who ran rescue courses all over the state in the early days.

Editor's Note.

Bernie is a long serving and respected former SES Career Officer and Volunteer. As a Volunteer Bernie served at Carnarvon including 8 years as Local Manager and as a Regional Co-Ordinator with the SES and FESA. After retirement Bernie joined Melville SES as Volunteer. Bernie was a committee member of the SESVA for a number of years.