

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE - BACKGROUND BRIEFING ON INVOLVEMENT IN RECOVERY FROM 7 FEBRUARY 2009 BUSHFIRES

This document provides an overview of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) response to the Victorian Bushfires (Operation Amicus). This overview has been prepared for the purpose of providing Counsel Assisting the Royal Commission with a summary of the AFP involvement in the various affected regions of Victoria between the dates of 9 February and 2 May 2009.

1. Background

On 7 February 2009, a number of catastrophic fires broke out in Victoria after record temperatures and fierce winds. In response to this natural disaster, and at the request of the Victorian Police (VICPOL), the AFP sent a total of 274 personnel to the region to assist VICPOL in the task of accounting for those lost in the fires and in supporting the maintenance of law and order. It is important to emphasise that the AFP provided policing resources in support of VICPOL.

2. Legal Basis

The AFP deployment in support of VICPOL was provided at the request of the VICPOL Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon on 9 February 2009, following discussions with AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty at which the AFP offered its full support to the disaster response.

The deployment comprised both sworn and unsworn personnel. Sworn personnel were sworn-in as Special Constables of VICPOL. This provided them with the legislative basis to undertake policing functions in support of VICPOL. Unsworn AFP personnel (for example Forensic Specialists), supported VICPOL in functions as required, for example the Disaster Victim Identification Reconciliation Centre.

3. Command Arrangements

VICPOL were the lead-agency and maintained control of the policing response to the fires. AFP maintained command of AFP resources. This was managed by way of an AFP Police Forward Command Post, located at the Victoria Police Centre (Melbourne CBD).

The AFP Police Forward Command Post was physically located within the VICPOL Federal Resources Coordination Centre within the Victoria Police Centre. The AFP Police Forward Commander (Rob Gilliland) led and managed the AFP Police Forward Command Post and reported to the AFP Senior Investigating Officer, Commander Steve Lancaster.

The AFP Police Forward Commander represented the AFP at various VICPOL strategic management forums. This facilitated the coordination of AFP resources in support of VICPOL.

4. AFP Capabilities provided in Support of VICPOL

The AFP provided resources in support of VICPOL on an as needed basis. This was managed through the Federal Resources Coordination Centre. The Federal Resources Coordination Centre was the name given by VICPOL to the group of Commonwealth agency representatives, including the AFP, which were co-located with the VICPOL police operations centre.

The AFP commitment was comprised of the following capability types:

4.1 Command element;

The AFP support of VICPOL involved the key management tasks of command, control and coordination (C3) of AFP resources. C3 comprised two elements:

1. Strategic level C3 which was delivered from Canberra.
2. Operational and tactical level C3 which was delivered from Melbourne.

The functions of both elements were planning, logistics, administration, operations and other functions that managed AFP support of VICPOL.

4.2 Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) – both Field and Reconciliation Centre Teams;

AFP DVI support to VICPOL was delivered in both the field and at the Victorian Forensic Centre, Melbourne. See narrative at page 3 under DVI Tasks.

4.3 Investigations;

AFP provided investigations support to VICPOL on an as-required basis. AFP investigations support related to VICPOL Task Force Phoenix. Tasks included the canvassing of potential witnesses, the securing of potential evidence and the taking of witness statements.

4.4 Welfare;

The AFP Chaplaincy service deployed to Victoria and partnered with the VICPOL Chaplains. The principal function was to provide welfare support to AFP and VICPOL deployed personnel. The Police Chaplains also engaged with members of the community.

4.5 Media support;

The AFP provided Police Media personnel to support VICPOL Public Affairs. AFP Public Affairs took direction from VICPOL Public Affairs and undertook activities such as escorting parliamentarians and other administrative support functions.

4.6 General and specialist policing capacity;

AFP General policing support to VICPOL included static and mobile crime scene management, the manning of road-blocks, community escorts into secure fire scenes and general patrols of fire affected areas. All General Policing activities were delivered in support of VICPOL.

AFP Specialist policing capacity (not including the DVI effort) principally related to specific search and reconnaissance tasks in support of the VICPOL Search

Coordinator. These tasks were undertaken by the AFP Operational Response Group (ORG) within the International Deployment Group. ORG possesses specialist skills and equipment and is self-sufficient with a high degree of mobility. It can be rapidly deployed to domestic and international operational situations.

AFP Teams were allocated specific geographic locations and undertook search and electronic plotting of these locations. Additionally, AFP personnel also undertook specialist search functions in support of VICPOL.

AFP members received training and were allocated personal protective equipment from the Australian Defence Force (ADF). These members, in partnership with VICPOL and the ADF undertook search related tasks of destroyed and/or damaged premises and other scenes with the objective of locating human remains.

5. Roles

AFP personnel undertook the following roles:

- General policing, including scene security, patrols and community support functions;
- Rapid Assessment of fire devastated areas;
- Specialist search functions;
- DVI – both Field and Reconciliation phases;
- Media management;
- Liaison Officers;
- Welfare; and
- Investigations.

AFP Response

6. Deployment One

Commencing 9 February 2009, **118 AFP personnel** were deployed in the following capacities;

6.1 Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) Teams

Over the entire course of the operation (9 February to 2 May 2009), involving a number of rotations, **48 AFP DVI personnel** were deployed to assist VICPOL DVI Command and the Victorian State Coroner.

Tasks

- The DVI Response Teams were actively engaged in searching and re-searching properties for deceased persons and primary (teeth and bone) and secondary (clothing and personal effects) identification material. This involved the careful removal of debris, often in hazardous environments still under threat of fire. If deceased remains were located they were recorded and removed in accordance with International DVI Protocols;
- Ante-Mortem and Post-Mortem data entry and DVI Reconciliation in the Victoria Police Coronial Support Unit;

- DVI Systems Administration and the establishment of a Plassdata Network (an IT system for DVI);
- Reconciliation of DVI records and preparation of briefs for the Coronial Identification Boards; and
- Liaison Officer Duties for the Indonesian National Police DVI Team which provided services in support of VICPOL.

6.2 AFP Operational Response Group (ORG)

The initial ORG deployment comprised **60 personnel**.

Tasks

- The ORG Team was initially tasked with general policing roles and then undertook specialist search functions in support of VICPOL;
- ORG personnel also formed the AFP Police Forward Command Post; and
- ORG personnel undertook duties in the Gippsland, Marysville and Kinglake regions.

6.3 Melbourne Office

AFP Melbourne Office provided sustained support to VICPOL during the course of the operation. **68 AFP Melbourne Office personnel** undertook the following tasks;

Tasks

- Most of those personnel were involved in investigative support to Taskforce Phoenix (VICPOL state wide fire investigation). That involvement ranged from 1 day to 14 days; and
- Some of these personnel were also deployed to both the State Emergency Response Coordination Centre and The National Registration and Inquiry Service. AFP Melbourne Office members also provided support to the Police Forward Command Post.

6.4 Other key AFP roles

- Liaison Officers attached to the Red Cross National Registration and Inquiry System, and
- Administration, welfare and logistical support.

7. Deployment Two

Commencing 16 February 2009, a further **101 AFP personnel** were deployed to Victoria. These members were deployed to either relieve those from the first deployment and/or perform other duties. The bulk of Deployment Two were from AFP Offices including; Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane, Sydney and Perth. The original AFP Command Element remained in Melbourne.

Tasks

- Command element;
- Scene security. AFP general duties members were tasked to relieve members of VICPOL at various roadblocks in the worst affected areas such as Marysville and Kinglake;
- Community Policing. AFP members were tasked to conduct general duty patrols in township areas to manage potential criminal activity. These patrols were also designed to enhance community confidence in the context of moving from crisis to recovery;
- Search Duties. AFP members were again involved in general scene search duties as well as 'line searching' affected townships;
- Liaison Officers attached to the State Emergency Response Coordination Centre;
- Investigations support;
- Liaison Officers attached to the Red Cross National Registration and Inquiry System; and
- Administration, welfare and logistical support.

8. Deployment Three

Deployment Three commenced on 3 March 2009, with a view to relieving personnel from Deployment Two, and in some cases, Deployment One. This deployment comprised **55 AFP personnel**.

Tasks

- Specialised search personnel supporting the Coronial Search process;
- DVI, General Policing and Investigations; and
- Command Element.

7 October 2009