



# EVERYDAY HEROES

The true strength of Fire & Rescue NSW comes from the selfless service its people provide in the midst of danger. Nowhere is this better epitomised than through the organisation's leadership.

Images courtesy of Fire & Rescue NSW

Greg Mullins, Commissioner of Fire & Rescue NSW, started as a volunteer bushfire fighter in 1972 with his father, and became a full time firefighter in 1978. He rose through the ranks from station officer to inspector, to superintendent, and in 1996 was the youngest-ever assistant commissioner appointed. By 2003, Greg became the first person from within the ranks to be appointed both CEO and fire chief, bringing international experience in disaster relief and urban search and rescue, as well as postgraduate qualifications in management.

When Greg joined the volunteer bush fire brigade in the 70s, emergency services were siloed and there was little interaction between the different organisations. "What I've witnessed over the years, just by necessity through major bush fires, floods, and other disasters, is that we've had to link up. It's a really joined-up approach and what we call the 'all hazards approach'. If there's a storm in western Sydney and the State Emergency Service can't get there as fast as we can, we're the first hit, but then we pull back and support their volunteers. In terms of major bush fires in the state, we work seamlessly with the NSW Rural Fire Service.

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- Greg Mullins

team into Christchurch was from New South Wales. We had 72 people with 20 tonnes of rescue equipment flown in by the RAAF. We sent 75 people on a big RAAF transport to Japan following the tsunami, and then the US Air Force flew us into the area of operations. So, working with other agencies, I've learned a great deal. But the big thing is to leave your ego at the door, always be ready to learn, and look at ways you can support the other agencies."

The greatest challenge for Greg has been in aligning people across the organisation. "The emergency services tend to be quite conservative in their cultures, maybe because we're called to make things right when they go wrong; therefore, we rely very much on procedures and doing things by the numbers. So we have standard operational guidelines, commissioner's orders, and lots of rules.

"One of my big focuses, from 2003 when I became commissioner or even before that, was to say, 'Command and control is necessary at an emergency incident or disaster, and that management style works there; but don't use it the rest of the time'. We have to empower people, speak to them, engage with them, because they've all got great ideas. If we have a steep hierarchy, then people won't listen and we'll go back to the way we used to be—so, changing the

culture of management, but also changing the culture of a very heavily unionised workforce that historically was often distrustful of management. That has been a real journey, and there have been ups and downs, successes and failures."

Another major change Greg has seen is the increasing diversity of emergency services. "When I joined in 1978, only men could be full-time firefighters; but I'd come from the bush fire brigade where, for years, I'd fought fires shoulder to shoulder with women. I was being told women weren't strong enough or psychologically couldn't handle it, which is a load of rubbish. The union played a big role in the 80s in convincing firefighters that this is a job for both men and women.

"We've had a big push in recent years to increase the number of women applicants, so that the workforce better reflects the communities we protect. We've had a measure of success. We're not going to reduce the requirements; they're based on the educational, cognitive, and physical requirements to be a firefighter, and women can meet those. It is insulting to them to suggest otherwise. The challenge we've faced, though, is that not a lot of women even consider us a career choice. Where we've been focusing our efforts is getting to women working in the military, women who work out in gyms, surf >



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clubs—active and smart women who might consider this as a career choice.”

IT has played a substantial role in how Fire & Rescue operates. “I’m really proud of the progress this organisation has made, because we’re seen as a leader in the public sector now. We’re providing IT services for the State Emergency

Service, Rural Fire Service, Ministry for Police & Emergency Services, Attorney General’s Department, and there are others trying to get on board.

“I couldn’t get the information I needed as CEO back in 2003. I couldn’t draw decent KPIs. It wasn’t at our fingertips; it was all lag data, and our transactional areas were struggling. There were lots of manual processes. With all of our core systems, we’ve worked very closely with SAP, particularly on human resources, finance, and resource modules. We’re using SAP HANA for data mining, et cetera. So we’ve transformed the back room, and our focus is now very much on the front line. We’re doing some really exciting stuff.”

In the spirit of collaboration and breaking down silos, Fire & Rescue NSW participates in a range of forums to accommodate the sharing of knowledge and experience. “We have lots of different forums—the Bushfire

Cooperative Research Centre, and now the new Bushfire & Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre. There are lots of contacts there. We involve ourselves in different forums throughout government and universities, through ARC grants, but we’re always looking for different ways of doing things. What we’ve found is that people become aware of us and they come knocking at our door, which is fantastic—like CSIRO asking, ‘Hey, can we partner with you?’

“One of the projects that we’re looking at currently with a number of different partners is called the Miinder Project, which involves real-time risk assessment statewide down to every house and building, using 30 years of our response data, using real-time feeds like weather, seismic information, whatever we can get our hands on. We’re really excited about this and its predictive capabilities. We’re getting to the point of a proof of concept that

could potentially revolutionise how we provide emergency services in the future—imagine being able to deploy a fire engine to within a few hundred metres of where a fire is going to break out before it even happens. If we have to wait for the call, often it’s too late to save lives.”

According to Greg, Fire & Rescue NSW is underpinned by four key values—respect, integrity, service, and courage. “We respect people because they’re people; we don’t care what colour, religion, gender, sexuality. In the workplace, it’s even more important. So we treat each other like family, we look after one another, and we do the right thing. This flows on to how we treat those we’re called on to help.

“In terms of integrity, we go into other people’s homes when they are defenceless, possibly injured, or worse. People are disempowered and they have to know that they can trust us to protect their property and their lives.

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“Service comes from the altruistic nature of firefighters, who’ll do anything for anyone because it’s all in a day’s work. It’s why we’re here. Firefighters say to me, ‘We’re not going to get rich working here, but we become enriched’. It’s such an honour to be able to help someone in their hour of need.

“And the last one is courage. Yes, that means going into burning buildings when everyone is running away, or chemical spills, or working near Fukushima in Japan when the nuclear reactor is melting down and people have been washed away. But it’s also the courage to speak up for people and step in when things aren’t right.”

Greg is amazed at how far he and the organisation have come since he started. “When I joined 36 years ago, I couldn’t have imagined that in 2011 we’d be sending dozens of people to Japan, to Christchurch, and up to Queensland to help with disaster relief. I couldn’t have imagined that I’d be sitting on UN



committees, travelling around the world, and dealing with counter-terrorism issues.

“We’re moving slowly into assisting the ambulance service, as fire services in a lot of the rest of the world do. All firefighters are trained in first aid, so I can see us moving into that area, as well as increasing our work in proactive disaster prevention, mitigation, and building resilient communities by educating them. That is the big focus these days.” •

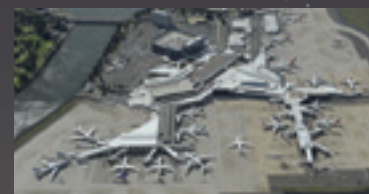
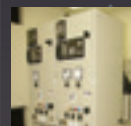
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