

RESCUE RIFT SMOULDERS

- Relations between the AFP and the A.C.T. Fire Brigade are at an all-time low following a Brigade move to expand its role to include responsibility for roadside rescues in the A.C.T. Here, Chief Superintendent ALAN BIRD, A.C.T. Regional Commander, puts the AFP's views on the matter.

RECENTLY the Independent Committee of Inquiry set up to inquire into the A.C.T. Fire Brigade issued a discussion paper recommending that the Brigade be given road rescue responsibilities in the A.C.T. Until the Brigade has sufficient trained staff and equipment, the AFP is to continue its present role.

When the Minister for Territories, Mr Scholes, established the Committee of Inquiry, part of the terms of reference was to examine the Brigade's 'relationships with Government, the community and emergency services'. It is under this reference that the question of roadside rescue responsibility was examined.

In its formal submission to the Committee, the AFP's responsibilities to the A.C.T. community were emphasised. The submission said:

"Sections 8 and 9 of the Australian Federal Police Act 1979 define the functions, duties and powers of members of the AFP, including those members performing duties in the A.C.T. The sections state (inter alia):

- "The functions of the AFP are... the provision of Police services in relation to the A.C.T.; and
- "Police services include services by way of the prevention of crime and the protection of persons from injury or death, and property from damage, whether arising from criminal acts or otherwise."

"It is clear from those sections of the Act that the responsibility for the provision of a full range of rescue services in the A.C.T. rests with the AFP.

"The AFP also has a responsibility to investigate deaths and fires on behalf of the Coroner and, where necessary, to prefer charges for hearing before the Courts of the Territory. On occasions, quite serious charges are preferred, and by their presence at emergency scenes, police are able to ensure vital evidence is not lost. For these reasons, the AFP has a legal responsibility to attend all emergencies."

On the other hand, it was suggested that the Fire Brigade's powers and responsibilities did not extend to roadside rescues. As the name implies, Fire Brigades fight fires and this is emphasised in the Fire Brigade ordinance of the A.C.T. As the submission pointed out:

"Section 7 of the Fire Brigade Ordinance defines the powers and authority of the Fire Commissioner and members of the Brigade. The important words of the section are 'at, or immediately after, a fire'. Those words indicate that until a fire has commenced, be it in a vehicle or a building, the Fire Brigade has no power. The AFP has never argued nor sought to intrude into, the traditional duties of fire fighters, but until such a situation occurs, there must be a doubt as to the legal position of the Brigade to effect a rescue from a motor vehicle, or indeed a house or building;

"The Fire Commissioner may suggest that the provisions of Section 15 of the Ordinance (power to make regulations) read in

- *Members of the Rescue Unit in action at an accident scene... 'a clear legal and community duty to protect life.'*



conjunction with Regulation 5b of the Fire Brigade Regulations, 'permit him to direct his members to carry out rescue operations'. He may suggest roadside rescue falls within this definition;

"It is our submission that the rescue operations envisaged in Regulation 5b do not encompass roadside rescues. This is despite the provisions of Section 16(b) (ii) which allows the Brigade to render services other than 'duties at a fire'. Whilst these words widen the scope of a fire fighters' duties, they cannot be widened to such an extent to include roadside rescues;

"The whole tenor of the Fire Brigade Ordinance and the Regulations is to provide a fire prevention and fire fighting service. Nowhere are there words that can be construed to allow firemen to perform rescues other than at scenes of fires. Any service rendered by a fire fighter pursuant to Section 16 (b) (ii) must have a 'fire fighting flavour' and roadside rescues do not fall within the ambit of the Section."

The Police submission stressed the fact that whatever decision the committee reached, the AFP would still be required to maintain a rescue capability.

"It has to have members ready and prepared to be deployed as part of its overall command and operational response in case of emergencies and/or disasters. Rescues are just one component of the AFP's counter disaster/emergency capabilities, and its integration within the AFP's command, control, communications and logistics system is essential for its effective operation. Put simply, it is an efficient way of operating as it utilises existing, in-place, integrated systems. In addition, as these AFP members are in place, trained and equipped, it is an economical use of existing resources and simple commonsense to use them in A.C.T. rescues, including roadside rescues."

One of the other important considerations discussed was the cost factor. The AFP has the trained staff and proper equipment ready. The Fire Brigade does not. The Brigade admitted to the committee that its members were not fully trained and that it required additional equipment.

At a time when Government is endeavouring to reduce spending it is hardly practical to equip and train another emergency service when there is already a fully trained and equipped service.

It is estimated that it will cost the AFP \$500,000 to maintain the Rescue Squad in the 1986-87 financial year. Should the Canberra community be asked to afford a similar amount or even more, to enable the Fire Brigade to develop the skills and buy the equipment necessary to perform roadside rescue when it is a duplication?

The question of the Brigade's reliability also was raised before the Committee. The attitude of placing bans on equipment or withdrawing services by the Federated Firefighters Union must be of great concern to the citizens of the A.C.T. The record of strikes and non-co-operation is well known. Canberra people could hardly have confidence in such a service.

The AFP, however, is a fully integrated disciplined organisation with a second-to-none record of industrial stability. The community is assured that its police force will respond to calls for assistance and not withdraw services because of some industrial issue.

The AFP's submission to the Committee concluded:

"The AFP has a clear legal and community duty to protect life and property in the A.C.T. The Rescue Squad is trained, equipped and capable of responding to rescue situations in the A.C.T., as well as providing a national capability. The roadside rescue responsibility is clearly a legal requirement of the AFP as well as a logical one."

The final report to the Minister has been made by the Commission. Whatever final decision the government makes, the AFP Rescue Squad will continue to provide an efficient and effective service to the A.C.T. community. The only difference will be that no road rescues can be undertaken if the Brigade is given the responsibility. It would be unfortunate if the A.C.T. community had to pay for two services when one would have sufficed.

TOP APPRENTICE

A 21-year-old OAFP communications trainee has been named as A.C.T. Apprentice of the Year for radio mechanics.

He is Bob Rose, who is based at the Electronics Services Section at Weston.

Bob also has been nominated for a national apprenticeship award.

His success has focussed attention on a little-known area of AFP operations — the communications technical services area which has the job of installing, maintaining and developing radio communications throughout the force.



● Bob Rose... nominated for national award.

Bob's interest in radio began during his primary school days at Kambah when his parents bought him a communications project kit. He joined the OAFP from school and is presently studying for his Electronic Engineering Certificate which will enable him to obtain a position as Technical Officer with the AFP. He spends two nights a week at technical college and another two nights in a study group. He's already completed 18 months of the four-year certificate course.

"I complete my apprenticeship in December, after which I can apply for a job with the AFP as a Technical Assistant," Bob said.

"As for the future, I still have 2½ years of study and technology can change considerably in that time. Once I have completed the course I will have a better idea of what prospects are available."

Bob's present boss Senior Technical Officer Len Randall, said the AFP was able to provide an excellent background for training in the communications field because of its wide use of equipment and need for continual updating to meet operational requirements.

"Bob has been able to work in the VHF and UHF radio field as well as a wide range of workshop jobs from vehicle installations to remote site micro-wave link maintenance," Len said.

"He has been involved in assisting police in special operations, anti-terrorist negotiating exercises and in search and rescue activities.

"It is excellent training, but we still seem to have considerably difficulty in attracting suitable people to this area of communications," he said. "These days most young people prefer the push-button computer type of communications rather than 'hands-on' field radio."

Len said that the radio communications section had recently been involved in several big operations with NSW Police, providing technical assistance, equipment and across-border communications.

"Not all equipment used in these operations is compatible, but we can usually rig something up," he said.

The section, with a staff of nine, is one department of the OAFP which is essential to the continuing operation of the AFP. Its members are available 24 hours a day to meet any emergency.

"We know what's going on every hour of the day and are prepared for most eventualities," Len said. "And that's why it's such an excellent grounding for any apprentice."