

# Making a Difference

WOMEN IN THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE





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On the cover are members of Martins Creek Rural Fire Brigade Sue Coutts and Rachael Prummel, with Group Captain Grahame Chevalley. Photo by Anthony Scully, ABC Open courtesy of Australian Broadcasting Corporation Library Sales.

Photos throughout this publication were kindly contributed by Steve Brown, Brendan Doyle, Narelle Koteff, Ben Shepherd and other members of the NSW Rural Fire Service.

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## Women in the NSW Rural Fire Service

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## Commissioner's Foreword

For over one hundred years, the volunteer firefighters of the NSW Rural Fire Service have been protecting lives and homes in some of the most fire prone places on earth. To be a member of the NSW RFS is to be part of a rich tradition to which both men and women have contributed throughout the organisation's long history.

Without a diverse membership a volunteer based emergency service risks becoming less relevant over time, less attractive to new members and eventually becoming less able to fulfil its role in protecting the community. It is in the interests of every member and the whole community to foster an inclusive and welcoming culture. "Making a Difference" is about the benefits of a diverse and vibrant membership. It's about encouraging more women to consider membership with NSW RFS and the opportunities it brings with it.

This booklet recognises and celebrates the contributions of our current female members. Right now there are thousands of women actively contributing across the organisation, in a huge range of roles. Women in the NSW RFS come from all backgrounds and circumstances. They live on the coast, the city, and in remote outback areas. Some are students, some are in the workforce, and others are retired. What this diverse array of women has in common is their dedication to their work and their commitment to serving their communities through the NSW RFS. Throughout this book you will find their stories, generously provided to inspire and inform others who are considering following in their footsteps.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Fitzsimmons', written over a horizontal line.

Shane Fitzsimmons, AFSM  
Commissioner



## Introduction

The idea for this publication emerged from a meeting of Women in Firefighting Australasia (WAFA), where a delegate from the Australasian Council of Women and Policing spoke about a booklet they had developed called *“Fitting in or Standing Out? A Woman’s Guide to the Policing Profession”*. A project commenced to put a similar focus on encouraging the participation of women in the NSW Rural Fire Service - to support them, develop their skills and work towards ensuring all members, both men and women, have the opportunity to get involved in the organisation at a level which suits their interests and abilities. The basis of the project was that a strong, diverse fire service is a benefit both for its members and the communities it serves.

This booklet draws firstly on a review of current research on women in fire services, and secondly on the experiences of our own members to explore practical ways to encourage women’s involvement in the NSW RFS. As part of the project a series of interviews was conducted with men and women across the NSW RFS to identify issues and gather stories and ideas. The content of this publication is based heavily on those conversations.

“Making a Difference” is divided into three sections: firstly, information on joining and the part women can play in the NSW RFS which is aimed at potential new members; secondly, stories and advice to help our current female members – especially those who are new to the Service – to get the most out of their involvement; and thirdly, assistance for brigade leaders who wish to encourage greater participation by women in their local areas.

We hope this publication will help brigades to support their female members and better utilise the talent, commitment and skill available among the women of their communities. Above all we hope it will inspire other women to recognise that they, too, can make a difference.

Bronwyn Jones  
Director Membership and Strategic Services

## Why join the NSW Rural Fire Service?

With over 70,000 members the NSW Rural Fire Service is the largest volunteer fire service in the world, and women have played active roles in the NSW RFS since its beginning. A growing number of women are choosing to become part of an organisation which is dedicated to helping the community, and these days around 20 percent of the Service's membership is female. We began by asking some of them to tell us in their own words why they joined, and what they have gained from it.

**"...I wanted to give something back to the community ... knowing what I know now, I should have done it years ago!"**

**"...it was the 1994 bush fires that came so close to our house and meeting the firefighters ... I was impressed by their professional attitude to the job and the friendly family atmosphere ... so I joined the RFS."**

**"...also I wanted to do something that wasn't everyday home stuff, something a bit more adventurous and out of the ordinary..."**

Many of the women talked about wanting to contribute to the community in some way. Other reasons included wanting to learn new skills, develop new friendships, or gain the confidence to deal with fires on their own properties.

### There's lots of different roles

**"I became a Rural Fire Instructor to help our girls learn about the many and varied roles women can play in the RFS. Sure, they could become firefighters, but they could also become radio operators, caterers, transport and logistics people, work with the helicopter crews...."**

Protecting our communities is not just about firefighting. There are plenty of other areas where you can contribute - you just need to decide what suits you. There are roles in training, community engagement, communications, logistics, catering, fire investigation and many others just as important as being out on the fireground.

**"Why did I join?  
I wanted to make a difference"**



“I joined because our house burnt to the ground twice ... I figured it would be a good thing to learn how to handle such matters before they happened rather than on the run during the event.”

### The NSW RFS can take you places

“I have had many memorable experiences with the RFS. These have included working on fires out near Coonabarabran defending control lines along a 45km stretch of road over a three day period; working on a helicopter winch crew where we successfully extinguished a number of hot spots in crazy terrain; working with landholders as a member of a community liaison team during the Upper Brogo fire near Bega; and being the crew leader of the winning team in the 2010 RFS State Championships in Dubbo.”

Being a member of the NSW RFS can offer you some amazing opportunities and the chance to do things you would never normally experience.

As well as protecting communities across NSW, the NSW RFS sends crews interstate or even overseas when requested - demonstrating the high regard held for our firefighters around the world. For example, more

than 3,600 NSW RFS members were sent to Victoria during the 2009 Black Saturday bush fires to carry out firefighting, backburning, mopping up operations and assisting with the recovery effort.

“I’m so glad to have been one of the many RFS people sent to Victoria to help after the fires, it’s rewarding to help others work towards returning their lives to some sort of normality and show them that caring”

### Meet new people, learn new skills

“I look back at the last eight years and can see that I have gained so much, not only in skills but in confidence and self esteem. Believe it or not I couldn’t talk to men without blushing; now I order them about.”

By joining the NSW RFS you’ll also have access to training and the opportunity to gain new qualifications. As well as the basic firefighter training, you can undertake more advanced or specialist training in



### Hannah

Hannah is a Deputy Captain of her brigade in a busy District on the edge of Sydney. As well as being a firefighter she holds qualifications in training, Breathing Apparatus Operator and Community Safety. Outside the RFS, Hannah is studying law and works with young people in her community through Rotary.

Hannah joined the RFS eight years ago to contribute back to her local community, to learn new skills and to meet new people. She credits her achievements to being actively involved in her brigade and wider district - particularly in training and mentoring new members of the RFS - and also in raising community awareness of fire safety. She believes that it is important to be a role model for other women.

As an active firefighter, Hannah says she often gets asked questions about how girls handle being firefighters when the work is so physical: “My standard response is usually something like - women can do everything men do, even wear breathing apparatus and extract people from burning buildings just like the male firefighters, we may not be naturally as strong but that just means we just have to be a little smarter about how we go about doing the same job.”



areas as diverse as aviation, catering, leadership and management. Many of the qualifications are nationally recognised and can give you an edge in your career, not to mention the sense of personal satisfaction which comes from developing your knowledge and skills.

“Probably the most challenging experience was completing my qualification as a Breathing Apparatus Operator. It was personally satisfying for me to complete the course and to now regularly wear BA at incidents.”

“Attending a new course is always challenging as most things push you out of your comfort zone. But what you get at the end of it is priceless in terms of understanding and confidence.”

The women we spoke to reported that being part of the NSW RFS had helped them form new friendships. Networking, making friends and getting to know their neighbours was both a reason to join and a benefit of staying for many of our participants.

“I joined initially because having recently left a full time job and moving to a new area, I needed to occupy my time and meet new people.”

“The fellowship and social experiences I have had in the RFS have been a happy part of my life...”

“The camaraderie that exists within your brigade and the Service is rewarding in itself. I can honestly say that after arriving back at your station after an incident (dirty, tired and wet) or standing down your final brigade after a section 44 and looking around you at the people you have been working with and seeing them not as volunteers or staff but as friends who give their all to this organisation gives you a great feeling of satisfaction.”

Many women find that active participation in their brigade gives them a sense of personal achievement and confidence.

“...meeting different people helped rebuild my self esteem and brought me out of my shyness. As I was

available during the day I attended the calls when others couldn't. As my confidence grew so did my love of the job, and I found there was nothing that I couldn't do the same if not better than the male members.”

“It felt so good to be doing something that was totally out of my scope. I felt a sense of achievement, just by turning up that first night. I was proud of myself, it was a big step.”

“I was recently asked if I would like to learn to be an instructor for Chainsaw Level 2 (which I am certified in) all the existing instructors are blokes but they supported me - that made me feel pretty happy and quietly proud of myself!”

Learning how to take care of themselves, their families and their properties in a fire was also seen as a positive outcome of membership.

“We had a big fire on our property and a lot of brigades attended, after that experience my husband joined and I did too”



## Elise

23 year old Elise knew she wanted to volunteer, but wasn't sure what organisation to get involved with. She considered becoming a surf lifesaver, but in the end a friend convinced her to give the local brigade a go.

Elise knew she already had skills that would be useful in a fire brigade, like the heavy vehicle licence she'd gained for her work – “I told them at the interview that I could drive trucks, and at first they didn't believe me!” She cites the looks on people's faces when she jumps behind the wheel of a tanker as one of the more satisfying experiences of her time with the NSW RFS.

Since becoming a member Elise has seen a number of other young women join and believes she has led by example. She also says her current Captain has been very supportive and recognises that encouraging a younger, more diverse membership is important for the long-term sustainability of the brigade.

In just two years the RFS has given her new skills and opportunities, says Elise. As well as the regular brigade activities she has represented the NSW RFS at the 2010 Women in Firefighting Conference and has recently been selected for the State-wide Young Members Group representing young volunteers.

“Seeing female firefighters has raised a few traditional eyebrows in this small farming community, but I and the other women in our brigade are proud of what we are capable of...”

### Not just for men

“It wasn’t so much that women weren’t welcome to join brigades in my area, but rather, that the women themselves felt that they didn’t have a role to play ...I wanted to show them that if I could do it, they could too”

When people think about firefighters, they often picture a big, burly bloke. When they think of brigades they imagine fire trucks, the station, and groups of men battling raging fires. They may also think about the dangers and the hard physical work associated with the job. This stereotype can sometimes deter women from applying to join. In reality, by joining the NSW RFS you’ll join a long tradition of women who’ve stood alongside their male colleagues, helping to protect their communities in many different ways.

### Taking the first step

“...so I got the phone number and gave the Captain a call, within a month or so of basic training, I was on a truck responding to my first fire. Wow - that was a buzz.”

You don’t need particular knowledge or skills to start with – in fact most people who join don’t have previous experience in firefighting. Once you’ve successfully completed the application process you will be accepted as a probationary member for 6 months so you can undertake the basic training you need to do before being able to attend fire calls. At the end of your probationary period the brigade votes on your membership and, if accepted, you are then able to undertake duties as an active member.

**For more information about how to join the NSW Rural Fire Service, visit [www.rfs.nsw.gov.au](http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au)**



### Lorna

Lorna and her husband were inspired to join the NSW RFS after the fires of 2001/2002 when they realised they did not know the best way to protect their home – “we thought that joining the brigade might prepare us and give us the knowledge to help ourselves.” They completed the basic training, intending to leave it at that, but as Lorna says – “found ourselves getting more and more involved.”

Since then Lorna has continued to develop her firefighting skills, eventually becoming the Brigade Training Officer and a qualified Crew Leader. She is also President of the District’s Communications Brigade.

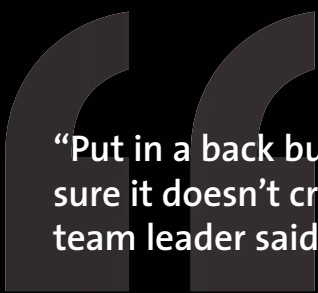
Lorna talks about the confidence she has gained - “If you had told me ten years ago that I would be a firefighter I would have laughed at you. If you had told me even five years ago that I would be able to stand in front of groups of 15 or 30 people and talk to them, much less instruct in aspects of being a firefighter, I would have thought you were crazy! I have had so many opportunities that I never would have had if I had not joined the RFS.”



“I am fairly strong and robust but I am aware that there are differences in physical capabilities between genders... I also don't have a great depth of experience with engines and mechanics and driving trucks so I feel that in order to prove that I am not the weak link in the team that I need to work twice as hard to prove myself. But having said that I have skills in other areas and when working as a team you work together and you will all have different skill sets and strengths and experiences. You also learn tips and tricks along the way that can be shared.”

## Being part of the NSW Rural Fire Service





**“Put in a back burn along this trail, and make sure it doesn’t crown or jump the road” our strike team leader said...”**

**Life in the NSW RFS can be challenging, but it can also be extremely rewarding. We asked our women what advice they’d give to new members to help them in the first phase of their journey, and to share their own experiences as new recruits.**

**“I was given good advice by the guys when I joined. My advice to newbies is to listen to anyone and everyone, form your own opinions. Don’t sit around waiting to be included. Ask someone to show you over the truck, ask if there is anything you can do. Don’t expect to be treated any different from the guys. If you don’t know, ask. If you think you know, still ask.”**

**“I remember my first ever fire, which was really scary – you go out there, you don’t know what to expect, people tell you all the things ... and it’s different when it hits you – the heat, the sounds around you...”**

If you choose to be a firefighter, being called out to a fire can be one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of your life - but it can also be stressful and daunting. You may be surprised at first by the intensity of the fire, the hot smoky conditions, the noise and the speed at which things can change.

The training you undertake is designed to give you the skills to deal with all sorts of incidents, and as a new member you will not be expected to know and do everything straight away. The most important thing is to speak up if you are unsure of anything, and remember that no matter what type of incident you attend the priority is always your own safety and that of fellow firefighters.

As well as working with your own brigade in your local area, you might be asked to work with firefighters

from other brigades or emergency services. Your crew may become part of a strike team or task force, deployed to a major fire anywhere in the State.

**“We were given our brief and headed out on the tanker with our team; I had been trained on the coast and knew the hazards and problems with getting certain areas to burn. With drip torch in hand I placed in a single line, only to find that this was not going to work, so I placed a two line burn in and away we went. Later, the strike team leader said I had very good fire fighting skills and he didn’t realise I was so experienced - which was a huge boost to my confidence”**

**“One thing I find satisfying is the physical work. My day job can involve mental tiredness but there I’m sitting at a desk or dealing with clients all day. It’s nice to do something that makes the muscles work hard – it’s a different challenge.”**

Firefighting can be physically demanding and you need a certain level of fitness to undertake some activities. It depends on what roles you take on – for example our Remote Area Firefighting Teams need to be very fit to cope with extreme work in rugged, inaccessible terrain. However, most firefighting is more about good training and teamwork than strength, and there are roles for people at different levels of physical ability. The key is to be realistic about your abilities and select your activities accordingly.

**“...I’ve started to “slow down a bit” physically as I get older and thought that I can probably be more useful in a large fire if I am able to work at Fire Control, so I joined the Communications brigade.”**

## Uniforms and equipment

When you become a member you're issued with a set of personal protective clothing and equipment such as helmets, goggles and gloves. The clothing is specially designed for fire fighting, to give you some protection against radiant heat and flame. Men and women wear the same basic gear and you might need to try some on to get the right fit. Over the years there have been improvements to the design of uniforms and range of sizes available, but if you still have problems bring it to the attention of your District Office.

"I find that slightly baggy yellows are much better, they will not look as good as close fitting ones but are more comfortable and easier to work in."

"Think ahead of what you might need on a "job" or call out that will take some time. Pack a bag that is always ready that you can pick

up as you head out the door. Put in it sunscreen, panadol, sanitary products, and either tissues or a roll of toilet paper, as you never know how long you will be gone for. Some things should be on the truck, but when you are a long way from anywhere and you have a basic need that can't be met, it makes for a very long and uncomfortable day. At the end of the day, the best person to look after you - is you!"

"I tell the girls who join our brigade about not wearing earrings to fires, they can get very hot – even underwire bras can be a problem in extreme conditions. I also tell them to avoid nylon socks and undies."

"No matter what others say clean uniforms are safer and more comfortable, you do not need them to be dirty to prove you go to fires."

"I wish that someone had told me when I joined that when you go away on deployment or the regional

training weekends – ALWAYS take earplugs! You'll need them to deal with the snoring!"

The equipment used to fight fires ranges from hand tools, pumps and hoses through to trucks and heavy machinery such as bulldozers and graders.


"It was the first time I had ever been off road in a 4WD, we were travelling along newly cut fire trails in steep timbered country and I was terrified. I really, really, really wanted to get out and walk but thought that would finish my chances of becoming a bush firefighter..."

Some equipment requires more physical size and strength or skill level than others to use. It's important to know what you can safely handle yourself, what you need assistance with and what equipment is beyond your capacity. Firefighting is a team effort so if you need help ask for it.



"In the early days we wore the overalls - no two piece uniform in those days. As you can imagine going to the toilet on the fire ground when surrounded by males was a bit difficult! On one day I remember there were around 10 tankers at an incident with two women, myself and Debbie on board. Deb walked over to me and said "I need to go to the loo, can you look out for me." She went off behind a tree and pulled down the overalls, I was keeping watch, when all of a sudden a tanker came from behind the burnt area to the rear of the tree. Yep, you guessed it right behind Deb... to this day we still don't know if they actually saw anything or not as no-one commented, but gee we laughed a lot.

Times have changed a bit with the newer gear, as we still have problems with the pulling down of pants, but now at least the top half covers things up a bit better!"

A female firefighter with curly blonde hair is sitting in the driver's seat of a fire truck. She is wearing a bright yellow fire-resistant uniform with reflective stripes. She is looking out the window to her right. The interior of the truck is visible, including the steering wheel and dashboard. The background outside the window shows green foliage and a fence.

“Often its little things you don’t think of – like I discovered that the hose couplings are awkward for me because my hands aren’t as big as the men’s. So I just make sure I carry my own small Storz spanner in my pocket everywhere. Nobody tells you things like that, but you learn from experience.”



### It's not just about fighting fires

"I've been to bush fires, accidents, house fires, rescued a cat from a drain, done flood rescue, storm damage, traffic control, hazard reductions, pile burns, search and rescue, training exercises, community meetings, presentations to children and adults, travelled interstate, done aviation radio communications, assisted with incident management teams, helped with logistics at big fires, taken on the roles of secretary and treasurer for the brigade, and I belong to the volunteer operations group in our area..."

NSW RFS members are called to many types of incidents besides bush fires, depending on the area you live and your level of training. Some brigades do a lot of motor vehicle accidents or building fires, some do mainly grassfires, and there is also hazard reduction work, floods, storms, search and rescue,

hazardous materials (hazmat) incidents and general emergency service. Often you'll be working with or supporting other agencies such as the NSW Police or State Emergency Service.

Besides these operational activities, there's also training, community events, brigade meetings, social activities, fund raising, recruitment, maintaining the station and equipment ... it all depends on your brigade and what you're interested in.

"I think many people join the Rural Fire Service because they perceive that the majority of their time will be spent fighting massive fires and there will generally be a lot of action. However, the reality is a lot of brigades do not attend lots of fires and are often quiet from a "fire-call" front which means that considerable time is spent at brigade stations training, carrying out equipment maintenance and also doing community education"





### Support is available

Working in an emergency service can at times be emotionally challenging. You may attend incidents where people have lost their homes, possessions or even their lives. In the NSW RFS, free counselling and support services available to members and their immediate family are the Critical Incident Support Service (CISS), Chaplaincy and Family Support, and the Member Assistance Program (MAP). These services can help you deal with the emotional impact of traumatic events.

“We do quite a lot of highway accidents in our area ... my hardest one was a lady had rolled her car on her way back from her sister’s funeral - she had her sister’s ashes in the car and they were spread on the highway - we had the hoses out ready to clean up. Another person and I got a small box and picked up what we could of the ashes and gave them to the accident victim.”

“At a house fire this year I was assisting the guys with the hose at the back door of the dwelling. They had gone back in to do some ventilation when the roof collapsed on them. I could hear and see what was happening, but couldn’t do anything, and the feeling of helplessness was terrible. Luckily they were both OK with only minor injuries.”

“...I just felt like bursting into tears. I went home and hugged my baby girl and just thought that you never know when your time is up...”



**“An important thing to remember is that the fire service, even for volunteers, is about equal opportunity. I tell new members to speak out if you do not like comments or the way you are being treated. If it is wrong in the workplace it is wrong in the brigade.”**

### **Know your rights**

Being part of the NSW RFS should be about developing your skills and confidence, making friends and contributing to your community. It should not be a place where you are subjected to bullying, discrimination, or harassment. Show respect for others, and respect for yourself - be clear about where you draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Remember that NSW sexual harassment laws apply equally to volunteers. No one has to put up with such behaviour, and everyone has the right to a working environment free from harassment, bullying and discrimination.

The NSW RFS has a clearly defined policy on acceptable behaviour

known as the Code of Conduct and Ethics, and processes for addressing issues which arise. The Code applies to all members. Get help - from your Captain, District Office or someone you trust if you are unable to resolve the problem.

**“It comes down to leadership – when I first joined the Captain at the time was anti female firefighters and a lot of the guys followed his example ... I can handle the comments but they got really out of line. Since then we’ve had a change of leadership and the new Captain couldn’t be more supportive – he treats everyone equally and expects them to do the same ... it’s a much happier brigade and we work together as a team now.”**

## Life happens – work, family, and the NSW RFS

Balancing work and family life is an issue for many Australians, not only women. They are juggling their careers with caring for their children, their grandchildren, their ill or disabled relatives or aging parents.

In this section we look at what women had to say about the competing demands of paid work, childcare, family responsibilities and being in the NSW RFS, and offer some tips for managing it all. The next section looks at how brigade leaders can assist their members achieve a healthy balance.

**“I love my work with the RFS but have occasionally thought about it as a time commitment I could live without”**

Surveys of emergency service volunteers consistently find that one of the biggest barriers to volunteering is the time commitment conflicting with work and family pressures.

**“One thing I didn’t realise is how addictive the service is! We started with the aim of gaining some basic knowledge, but now our spare time virtually revolves around the RFS!”**

**“It can be really easy to let it take over your life – but it’s important to have balance, and make the time to spend with family and friends.”**

Your involvement in the NSW RFS will inevitably impact other members of your family. Both male and female members report that they often depend heavily on the support of family and friends, for practical help such as child care and also emotional support, to enable them to continue actively volunteering. Talk to your family about your involvement so they know what to expect, and involve them in decisions about your commitments.

**“My family has also been supportive though my Mum worries about me doing such a dangerous job. I talk to her about all the safety precautions and protective gear so she feels better.”**

**“I sometimes feel guilty because we don’t have ‘normal’ family holidays anymore in summer, especially at Christmas – we’re usually on call, and I’ve had to cancel on family a few times because of callouts.”**



**“Any incident is challenging, but as you can imagine, being the ‘female’ officer in charge of an all male crew for the first time is quite daunting. I remember arriving at the station and heading to the back seat of the Cat 1 as usual until one of the members pointed out that I was the only field officer there. I climbed up in to the front seat and was so nervous I was shaking.**

**I took a deep breath and turned to face the crew. I checked that everyone was safely in the vehicle and had all their PPE and gave the OK to respond. We were heading to an MVA, a single car rollover. I was quiet for a while as I tried to remember my training, going through the steps in my head.**

**Again I turned and faced the crew who were putting on their gloves and looking intently down the highway for the incident. I knew I had a competent crew so I quickly briefed them and gave them their tasks. We arrived on scene and everything just came together perfectly. We achieved our goals, everyone went home safe, and much to my surprise, no one challenged my authority.”**

“My main concern was leaving the kids behind when I had a call out. The kids were pretty responsible and I made sure that I had a mobile phone on me at all times and that the neighbours knew what was happening. My parents live pretty close as well, so they minded the kids during the long shifts. It turned out the kids liked the idea of it and they ended up joining the junior brigade and stayed on to become senior members.”

Many NSW RFS volunteers are also in full or part-time paid employment, adding to the competing demands on their time. The nature of emergency service impacts on the employers of volunteers, who are asked to release their staff to attend fires at very short notice. It is important to have a discussion with your employer about your involvement with the NSW RFS and about leave arrangements when an emergency arises.

When it comes to managing a young family and being an active member of the NSW RFS, it seems there are no easy answers. Some women we spoke to talked about the challenge of re-entering their brigade after having children and the extra pressures on their time, but also said the confidence and personal satisfaction they got from volunteering helped them deal with stresses in their home life. The women who participated in this project had all developed different solutions based on their own circumstances, but having the support of family, friends and the brigade was seen as an important factor by many.

“Doing this with a full time paid job can be tough, especially if I have a busy weekend with training or call outs and then have to turn up for a full-on workday on Monday when I’m tired ... it’s like having two jobs”

“There’s only myself and one other girl in our brigade who have young children, it can be hard to put in the time when you’re raising a family. My husband is also a firefighter – when there’s a callout we decide who’s going and who will stay to mind the kids. We try to share it so it works.”

“When my husband and I decided to start a family, I kept up my involvement through the first part of my pregnancy. Eventually I stood myself down from operations after I attended a hazard reduction and realised I was becoming physically limited in what I could do – I didn’t want my pregnancy to affect other members of my crew.

When the twins were born they kept me pretty busy so I dropped right back for six months or so. I’d still try to attend meetings and social events, just to keep up with what was going on and to feel connected – but I do feel less involved than I used to just because I’m not there all the time. The other thing that’s changed is I now think about the effect on the girls if something happened to me – now I’m a mother I’m not just responsible to myself anymore.”



## Healthy life balance – taking control

**If you feel you're being overwhelmed by commitments, here are ten ideas to help you find the balance and regain control of your life.**

- 1** Slow down. Take steps to stop and enjoy the things and people around you; don't make plans for every evening or weekend.
- 2** Avoid procrastination. Putting things off because you're overwhelmed is stressful. Set realistic goals and deadlines and then stick to them.
- 3** Share the load. Taking care of the household, children or parents should not be the responsibility of just one person.
- 4** Let things go. Easier said than done, but learn to recognise the things that don't really have much impact in your life and allow yourself to let them go.
- 5** Get help. Within the NSW RFS there are counselling and support services for members and their families, or look around your community for support options.
- 6** Take charge. Develop a list, set priorities and then enjoy the satisfaction of crossing things off your list.
- 7** Simplify. Do you take on too many tasks and responsibilities? Drop unnecessary activities and start saying no where possible.
- 8** Take breaks. A break can be going on a holiday, but it can also be as small as time to just listen to music, meditate for a few minutes or take the dog for a walk.
- 9** Define your goals. Articulate them, and write them down.
- 10** Forget the guilt. No matter how much you get done, there is always more you could have done. Don't beat yourself up about it.

(Adapted with thanks from the CFA Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Guide)



## How can brigades support female members?

Your brigade will be strengthened if it reflects the diversity in your community. A healthy brigade is not one where everybody looks and acts the same. If you're a brigade leader it makes sense to encourage women to consider membership, bringing new skills and abilities to your team. This section looks at different ways brigades can support the participation of women.

**“When the pager goes off and we turn out we're all firefighters – what matters is doing the job and helping the community”**

### Create a healthy brigade culture

**“I say to women: don't let yourself be held back by preconceived ideas – your own or other peoples”**

One key to encouraging female members is to develop a brigade culture where all new members are welcome and people are treated as equals. Most of the women we spoke to didn't want to be singled out or given special treatment, but just to be accepted as members with their own strengths and weaknesses.

Once you find new recruits, a healthy brigade culture will help you keep them. Our participants greatly value the sense of belonging they find in their brigade, and the support of their fellow members encourages them to stay in spite of the discomforts, frustrations, and stresses which can sometimes be a part of the volunteer experience.

**“Once the men (a lot of them farmers) saw that I was working as hard as them and my knowledge was as good as theirs, they accepted me with no worries.”**

A healthy brigade also takes into account the community's perceptions of it. The image of your brigade, whether or not it is true, may be turning potential new members away – especially if they see it as a “boy's club” where people who don't fit the stereotype won't be welcome.

It's worth taking a look at the culture of your brigade and its image in the community when you're trying to attract new members or keep the existing ones. The checklist at the end of this section will help you think about areas you could work on to improve brigade culture.



“I now find that many of the other women in the brigade look to me as their mentor and they come to me when they have questions, because they trust and respect me.”

### Mentoring

Being a new member of the NSW RFS can be challenging at times. There is a lot to learn, not just job skills but also the culture and the unwritten rules which exist in any group. When we asked what had helped them to overcome those initial barriers many of the women we interviewed talked about finding a mentor. A good mentor provides support at difficult times, as well as passing on practical knowledge and skills.

There are big benefits for both sides of a mentoring arrangement. For the mentor there’s the personal satisfaction of passing on your knowledge and experience as well as the opportunity to learn a few things along the way. The mentee benefits from the mentor’s advice and the knowledge that they have someone to turn to.

Mentoring can be implemented by brigade leaders as formal programs, or you can foster informal mentoring arrangements between experienced members and new recruits.

“My Captain often asks me to talk to the new female recruits during induction, I tell them you don’t have to try and act like a bloke to fit in – just be yourself.”

Brigade or District orientation programs in which your senior women can talk to new female members is a great way to pass on practical experience and allow for those questions they might be too afraid to ask.

### Networks

One of the great things women can do for each other is to share skills and knowledge through networks. Networking can provide vital support if you are feeling isolated. A good way to build networks is to get involved in NSW RFS activities beyond your brigade when you get the opportunity, which can help you make contact with other women with similar interests and goals.

“I got selected to attend a conference last year ... there are no other girls in my brigade so it was nice to be able to meet women from other areas and swap stories”





## Role Models

Many of our participants talked about the importance of having female role models – other women who've been there and experienced some of the challenges. A good role model can inspire, motivate and give confidence.

“Being in a senior position now myself as Deputy Captain I think is fantastic because it does inspire younger women to remain with the brigade and aim for something bigger, even if it seems like a long way away.”

“... as the only female group officer in our Zone I am constantly ‘out there’ encouraging the women in the area to become not only active in their area but also to take on a leadership role. It is very encouraging to see our female participation rates increasing.”

Having female instructors on training courses provides positive role models for both men and women, and it can inspire confidence in newer members.

“I think that perhaps the thought of being a lone female in a group of male trainees is a bit daunting for some women. I don't have a problem with it as I have a history of male oriented occupations (farming etc) however, I think that if women were aware that there are other female trainees on courses and sometimes female instructors, then they would perhaps be more likely to come along to ‘firefighter’ type training events.”

“I didn't encounter a female senior member or instructor until eight or nine years into the RFS and it boosted my confidence immensely seeing another woman in a senior capacity and holding her own. This was particularly inspiring and motivating – she showed me that in the field, if you are good at what you do, and are prepared to pitch in and work as a team, gender is irrelevant to good team work.”

“...one thing I have realised is that it sometimes seems tough, being the only female in a brigade, however you can often be the person who motivates others to join. Once this happens, it is quite easy to build a critical mass and get other keen women involved.”

## Support for families

Many women rely on support from their families to enable their volunteering activities. Brigades can assist the families of their members by providing information about what it means to have a family member join the NSW RFS, involving them in brigade social events, or encouraging families to help each other during busy periods for the brigade.

“Last year we held a special Family Day at the station, mainly as a social get together for our family and friends, but we also gave a presentation about what we do and answered questions, there was a lot of really interesting discussion.”

For women in particular who take a break from active membership while their children are young, being included in social, training or other brigade activities can make it easier for them to re-join when their circumstances allow it.

“I’ve got a 4 month old daughter now too, I had some time out of the brigade and I’m only just getting

back to it. I’m lucky that my partner can look after our daughter if I get a call out or have training on. The other nice thing about this brigade is that they’ve been really welcoming to him as well – he’s not a member but gets invited to social events and feels included – I think that helps create a welcoming brigade atmosphere.”

Social activities are a great way to build connections within the brigade. Many brigades distribute a calendar which includes social activities, training, and community events to encourage brigade members and their families to stay involved at a level which suits them.

## Get involved in your community

The more your brigade is involved in the local community, the more likely you are to find new members. It’s all about visibility and perception – you won’t attract new members if they don’t know you exist.

“We have four junior members in the Brigade now, including my 14 year old daughter, as well as a number of young people under 25. We regularly attend fetes and other events in the community and I enjoy being able to pass on the safety message, plus show young people that women can be active firefighters.”

“Other people in the community are sometimes surprised there are female firefighters in the RFS, but I think just being active and visible as a firefighter who happens to be female has changed a few people’s perceptions in this community.”

Look for opportunities to raise the profile of your brigade in the community through local events or other community engagement activities. Activities like the New Residents Kit and the Women in Fire workshops demonstrate the power of engaging with your community.



I was always interested in joining the RFS, but the first brigade I joined had a really male dominated, “cliquey” culture. It was a big brigade and the guys always seemed to be given opportunities to get on the truck first – it was quite frustrating for us girls. Even getting on to training courses was a struggle. In the end it all got too hard – I lost motivation.

When I moved to a new area, I realised I still had the desire to be a firefighter so I contacted the local Captain. He encouraged me, and told me about his wife who was also a member. By that time I also had a partner who was much more supportive of the idea – that helped a lot.

There are three women in my new brigade out of about 25, but the whole brigade has a great culture and everyone supports one another. It’s so different from my last brigade. Right now they’re trying to convince me to get my truck licence and being female is definitely no barrier!



Introducing yourselves to new residents is a simple way for brigades to make contacts in the community.

## Fire safety workshops for women

Women in Fire workshops are targeted at women in the community who may not be confident they have the skills and knowledge to deal with a fire on their properties. The workshop covers basic fire behaviour and how to prepare for fire, and includes practical demonstrations of fire extinguishers and portable pumps.

In one District the workshops are facilitated by women from the brigade with other members helping and answering questions. There is generally a positive response from the participants, with many expressing an interest in learning more by joining the brigade after completing the program.

### New Residents Kits

Introducing yourselves to new residents is a simple way for brigades to make contacts in the community.

For example, one District has developed a New Residents Kit which contains a welcome letter, explains the basics of bush fire preparation, and also contains the contact numbers for local brigade Captains on the back. Local brigades deliver the kit when they know a property has changed hands.

One member explained that “when we deliver the kits, we put both guys and women on the crew, and get the younger members involved too – especially if there’s teenagers in the family – to show them that all kinds of people can join the RFS. That way we don’t have to tell them, they can see it for themselves. We’ve actually had a few membership enquiries from doing this.”

“...when we’re out visiting the schools or doing the local show the parents see me and say to their kids: “look, girls can be firefighters too”

### Encourage young people – the future of the NSW RFS

“We’ve got a high number of girls going through the Secondary Schools Cadet program here, it’s a great sign”

Supporting the involvement of young women through Junior Membership or a Cadet Program is an investment in the future. Your brigade will benefit from the fresh perspectives and skills young people bring with them and you will also increase the profile of the organisation through their connections in the wider community.

Through the Secondary School Cadet Program (SSCP) girls can learn about the NSW RFS in a positive way and develop skills in leadership


and teamwork. Districts who run the SSCP report increasing interest from girls, and almost half of the students who have gone through the program to date have been girls. The figures show that many young women are keen to be involved in an organisation which offers them something different.

Fire safety presentations for schools are another way to introduce the brigade to young people. Kids get to meet members of their local brigade in a fun, stress-free environment. Having both male and female members conduct school presentations provides role models for children and breaks down the traditional firefighter stereotypes.



16 year old Sarah joined her local brigade two years ago with a few friends from school to help her complete the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award program. Sarah and her friends all say they enjoy doing something worthwhile for their community, and also having a lot of fun along the way. Memorable experiences for her have been the day the girls took their test to complete basic training, and the first hazard reduction they took part in.

Hannah, also 16, says it’s fantastic and worthwhile and great fun, and she suggests joining with friends is a good idea so you can support each other. Another of her friends, Maddi, says her advice to other girls is just: “go for it! I think more girls should get in there to show them how it’s done!”

A young woman with dark hair is smiling broadly. She is wearing a red fire helmet with clear safety goggles resting on top. The helmet has a circular logo on the front and a black strap with "uvex fire" written on it. A yellow fire hood is visible behind her neck. She is wearing an orange fire jacket with a name tag that reads "MICHAEL HARDY". The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green grass and other people in the distance.

“We’ve got a high number of girls going through the Secondary Schools Cadet program here, it’s a great sign”

# Brigade Checklist

This checklist can help you identify actions you can take as a leader to encourage the participation of women, and in turn improve the performance and sustainability of the whole brigade. Each statement describes one aspect of a healthy, sustainable brigade. Every brigade is different, so use this list as a guide for discussion.

## Brigade culture

- Morale is high at your brigade and members enjoy being there
- The brigade membership reflects the diversity of your local community in age, gender and cultural background
- Brigade members treat each other with respect
- Your members have the opportunity to be involved in social activities, training, decision making and other aspects of brigade life
- Brigade members are aware of and follow the NSW RFS Code of Conduct and Ethics.

## Training, mentoring and support

- All brigade members have the necessary skills to perform their preferred roles
- New members undertake an induction process and are made to feel part of the team as quickly as possible
- Formal or informal mentoring takes place within the brigade
- The brigade accepts junior members and involves them in activities
- Brigade leaders monitor individual workloads and take steps to prevent over-commitment and burnout
- Members who want or need to change their level of involvement due to personal commitments such as family, career, or study are able to do so

## Community involvement

- The residents in your community are aware that the brigade is run by volunteers
- Your community understands the range of roles volunteers undertake within the brigade
- The brigade participates in local community events
- The brigade has a program of community engagement to assist residents prepare for fires
- The brigade works with your District Office to promote its activities with local media

## Further resources and information

**NSW Rural Fire Service**  
for information on what we do and how to join:  
[www.rfs.nsw.gov.au](http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au)  
or call 1800 679 737

**NSW Rural Fire Service  
Counselling and Support Unit**  
for enquiries call (02) 8741 5223

**NSW Rural Fire Service  
Association (RFSA)**  
[www.rfsa.org.au](http://www.rfsa.org.au)

**NSW Rural Fire Service  
Chaplaincy and Family  
Support Program**  
(02) 8741 5107

**Anti-Discrimination Board  
of NSW**  
promotes anti-discrimination and equal opportunity principles and policies throughout NSW  
<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/adb>

**Women and Firefighting  
Australasia (Wafa)**  
[www.wafa.asn.au](http://www.wafa.asn.au)

**International Association  
of Women in Fire  
and Emergency Services**  
<http://www.i-women.org/>

**NSW Department of Premier  
and Cabinet  
Office for Women's Policy**  
<http://www.women.nsw.gov.au>

**Rural Women's Network**  
<http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rwn>

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## The story behind our cover photo

Residents of the small rural township of Martins Creek, near Gresford in the Hunter Valley recently got behind a membership drive by their local brigade. After a community meeting was held around 20 people from a population of just 350 decided to join, and half of those new recruits were women. Nearly a year later the women of Martins Creek Rural Fire Brigade, including Sue Coutts and Rachael Prummel pictured on our cover, have completed their Basic Firefighter training and one has just signed on for a Rural Fire Driving course. All of them talk about the pride and sense of community they've gained through their involvement.

Group Captain Grahame Chevalley, also pictured, was at the meeting and says while the organisers didn't deliberately set out to increase the female membership, everyone from the brigade to other local volunteers and District staff made it clear that both men and women were welcome and needed. The revitalisation of Martins Creek Rural Fire Brigade was the work of many people, he says: the community leaders who turned out and rallied their friends and family; surrounding brigades who have helped train and mentor the new recruits; and the local NSW Rural Fire Service District office who've provided support and encouragement. While he says that there's still a lot of work to be done Martins Creek is well on its way to having a healthy, sustainable brigade which reflects the diversity of the local community.

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