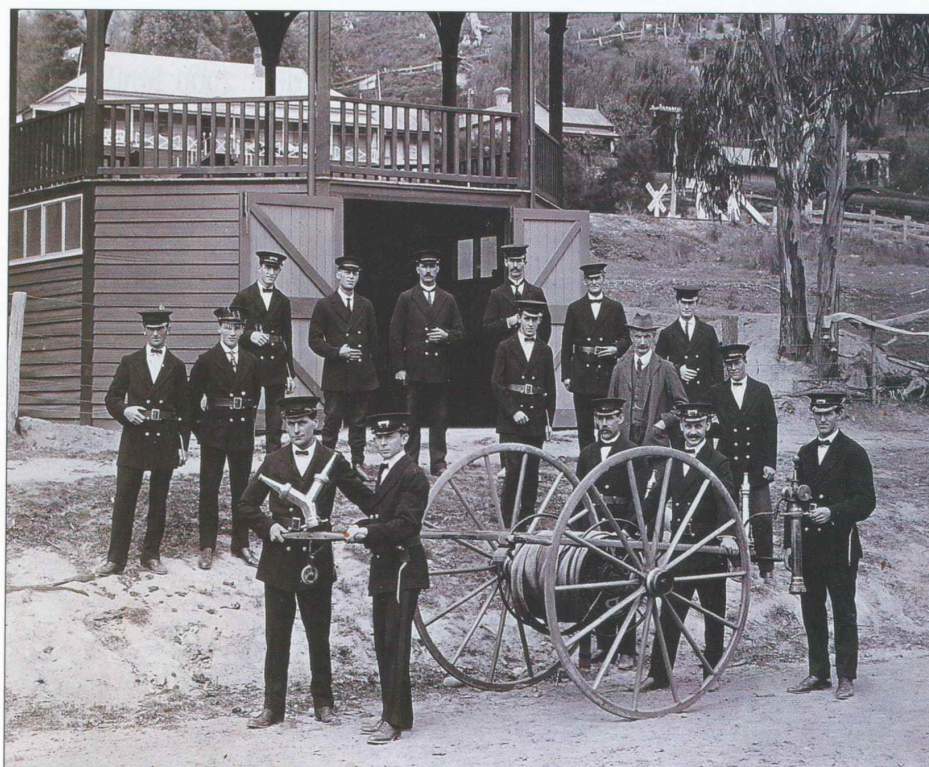


# History of rural fire services

Most fires in the early part of Australia's history were fought by farmers, land owners and other untrained **volunteers**. In the cities, insurance companies owned most of the early firefighting **equipment**, and there were no fire brigades for many years after European settlement.

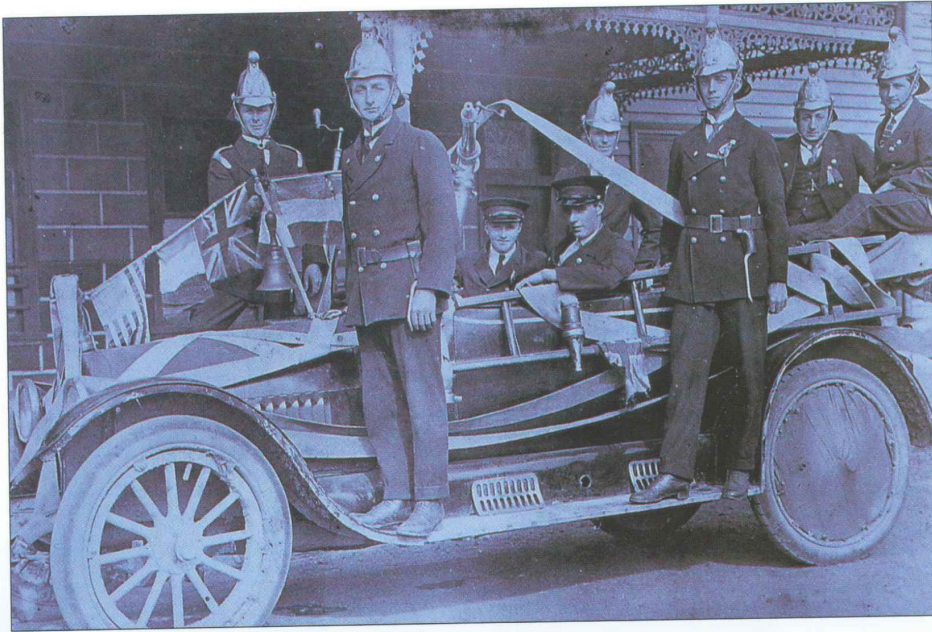
The first fire brigades were formed to protect towns. For example, by the late 1870s there were about 25 volunteer fire brigades in goldfield towns in Victoria. In 1885 the Country Fire Brigades Association was formed in Victoria, with about 100 brigades.

Some states organised bushfire brigades. Other states left people to look after themselves. Different fire services have different histories.



*The members of an early fire brigade stand outside their firestation in Warbuton, Victoria.*





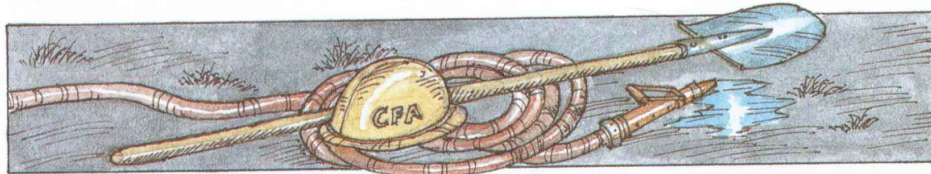
*Another early fire brigade, showing their uniforms and equipment.*

For example, the first bushfire brigade was formed in New South Wales in 1896.

Two years later in Western Australia, the Fire Brigades Board was formed to control both city and country fire services.

The Northern Territory Fire Service began during the Second World War when Darwin was bombed.

Tasmania and Western Australia did not organise rural fire services until the 1950s. In Victoria, the CFA controlled rural fire services from 1944 onwards.





# What do the fire services do?

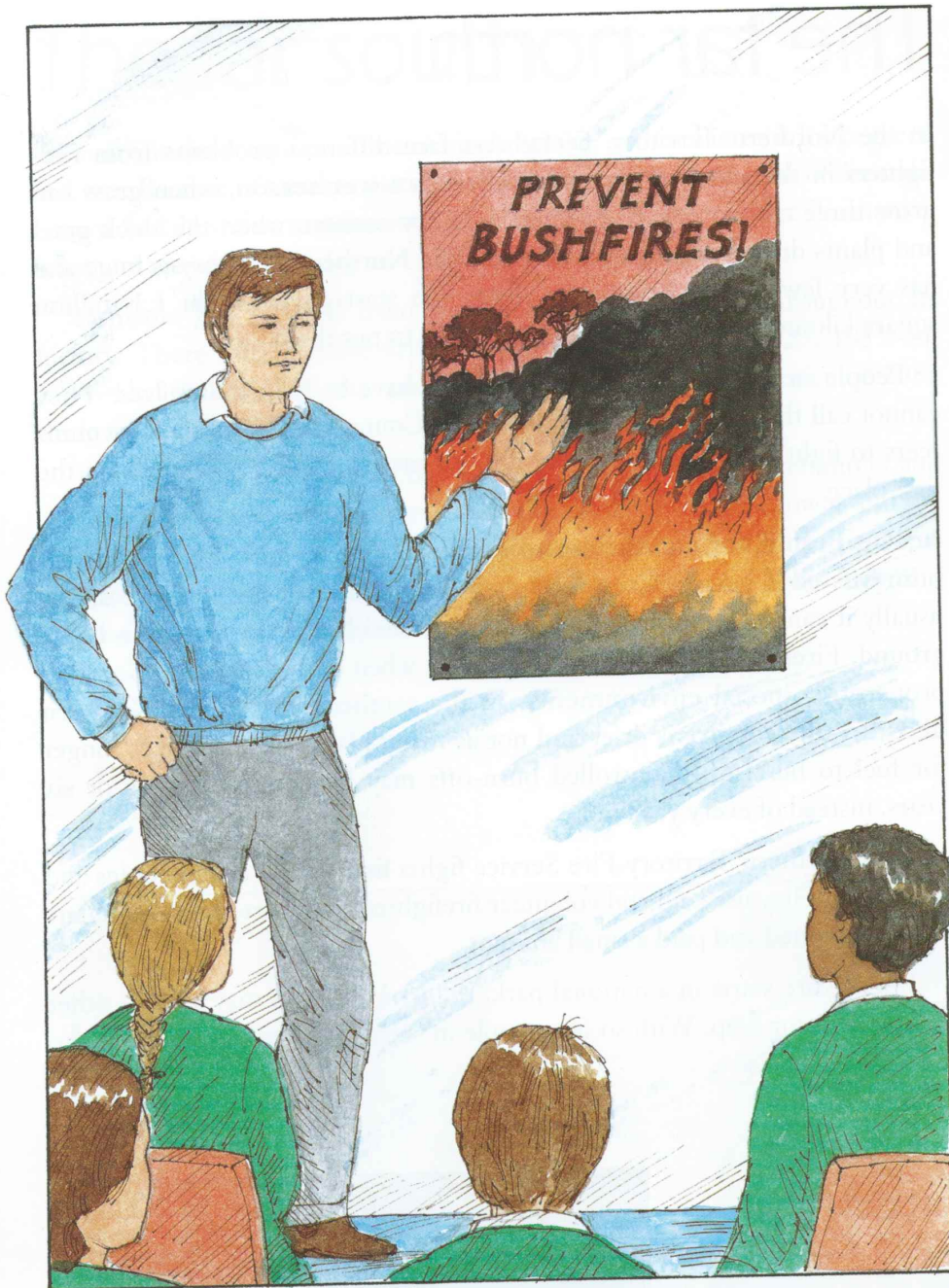
Fire services all put out fires. But they have other jobs to do, depending on where they are. They check their area for danger spots and have controlled **burn-offs** to get rid of the grass and plants that would be fuel for a bushfire.

Some fire services not only fight fires in the bush, but in houses, factories and other buildings. They may help at accidents on the road, in mines, trenches or factories. They may help to clean up chemical spills and other dangerous materials, or deal with **LP gas** problems.



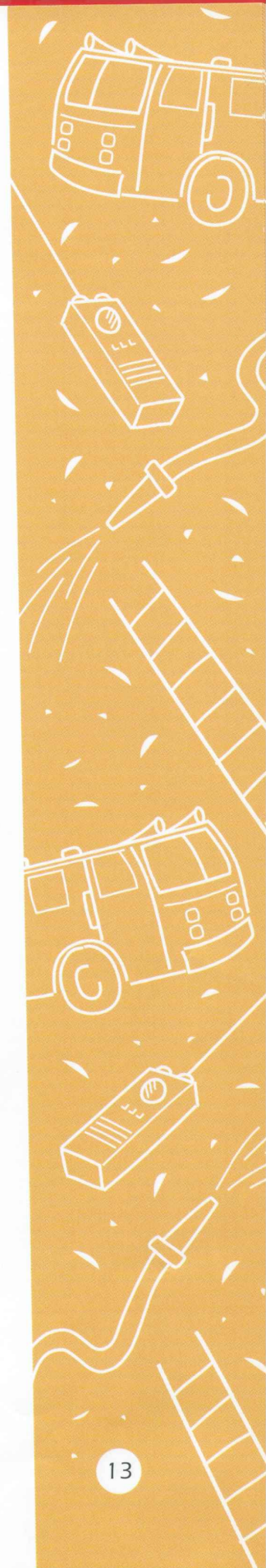
*Fire services have controlled burn-offs to reduce the risk of dry grass and plants that could fuel a bushfire.*





Many fire services try to teach people about preventing fires, about surviving fires and about protecting houses, farms, buildings and animals from fires.

Some Australian states want to combine their fire services with other **emergency** services. For example, in Queensland there is a Bureau of Emergency Services that controls the fire service, ambulance and the **State Emergency Service**.





# Firefighters

Many different sorts of people become volunteer firefighters. They are not paid for their work, even though they may train for two or three nights each week and be **on call** 24 hours each day right through the year. Firefighting used to be a job for men only, but today women are firefighters too. For example, in Western Australia, one out of every ten volunteer firefighters is a woman. The first woman volunteer firefighter to die fighting fires was trapped on a fire truck with other volunteers in the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983.

Firefighters are given special clothing or uniforms to protect them from fires and other dangers such as chemical spills and poisonous gases and fumes. They are also trained for the work they may have to do. Not all volunteers are firefighters. Some help with training, planning, **communications** or office work. Some go to meetings in their town or area, while others speak about fire safety at schools and to other groups in their area.

Not all firefighters are volunteers. A few work fulltime for the fire services and are paid for their work. Some are **professional** firefighters, and others help to run the fire service. For every full-time paid worker, there may be as many as 100 volunteers or more.



*Volunteer firefighters are given special clothing and equipment, such as breathing masks, to protect them.*



# Vehicles

Everyone thinks of firefighters driving fire engines, but they use many different **vehicles**. There are **aircraft** for **observing** fires and for dropping water. There are water tankers and fire trucks for pumping water. Some trucks have ladders that can reach fires or people in tall buildings.

In some states, fire services design and build their own vehicles. The CFA in Victoria build many different sorts of fire trucks. Some are for small fires, some can drive on or off roads to fight bushfires, and others are big enough to fight large city fires in factories or stores.

The CFA also build tankers that can carry water to fight bushfires. These tankers may be four-wheel-drive for rough bush tracks. They have flood-lights for work at night or in thick smoke; a radio so that the driver and crew can talk; hoses, reels and ladders; and they are built to protect the crew if the tanker rolls.

For fires and other disasters, there are rescue trucks that carry rescue equipment, ladders and the crew; communication trucks fitted with radios and computers; and special trucks for firefighters working with poisonous chemicals or fuels.

In the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983, two crews of firefighters died when their fire trucks were trapped. After that, most trucks were quickly fitted with heat shields to protect firefighters. Experts also designed and built a fire truck with a special fireproof box on the back for crews.



*Fire services often rely on helicopters to drop water on burning countryside.*





# Equipment

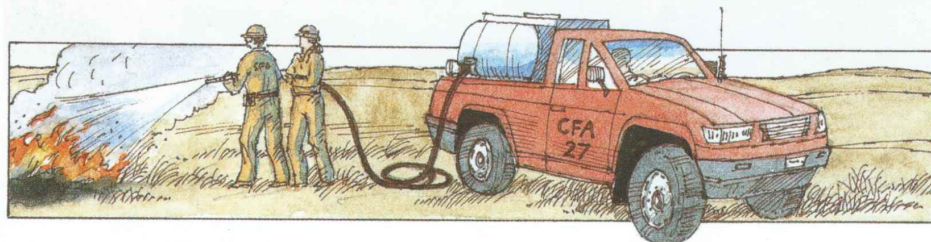
Firefighters today use a lot of equipment. Sometimes they need special breathing equipment or protective suits or completely sealed suits. They use pumps, hoses and different sorts of fire extinguishers.

Some fire services help out at car accidents, and they use powerful cutters, called the jaws-of-life, to cut people out of wrecks.

Before a bushfire starts, firefighters have to know how to use equipment properly. They practise using their vehicles and equipment so they are ready for a fire at any moment.



*Firefighters need special suits and headgear to protect them from fire, smoke and fumes.*





# Communications

Communications are very important before and during a fire. When someone calls the fire service, they want firefighters to come at once. But volunteers have to be called to come to the station quickly. In the past, a siren sounded to tell volunteers they were needed. Today, many volunteers carry **paggers**. When a call comes in, these paggers tell them to go to the fire station. But many towns still use sirens to warn people of a fire.

Firefighters need to know the best places to fight the fire to stop it spreading. But they may also have to protect a house or farm buildings, or fight to protect a country town. A **controller** gives them the information they want and sends them to the places where they are needed. The controller has to have the latest information about the weather and the country the fire is heading towards. Information from observers in aircraft has to get to controllers and firefighters on the ground.

To pass on all this information, fire services use modern communications equipment such as radios, computers, paggers and mobile phones. They have special communication trucks that can travel to fires and bushfires. To fight fires successfully, everyone has to have up-to-date information and firefighters have to receive their instructions quickly.



*Firefighters are trained to use modern communications equipment, such as paggers, radios and mobile phones.*



# Training and skills

Firefighting is dangerous work, so volunteers have to be properly trained before they are allowed to work for a fire service. They learn how to read a map, how to **plot** fires and work radios. They may learn **first aid**, or how to drive a special fire truck.

On some training nights, firefighters practise their skills. They might inspect all the equipment on a truck to make sure it works. They might practise using hoses or water pumps on tanker trucks. On other nights they might learn about the most dangerous places in their area for fires.

Some states send their firefighters to a special firefighting school. Here they can learn how to prevent fires, how to put out different sorts of fires and how to fight fires in buildings, grassland and the bush. They may also learn about dangerous chemicals or LP gas. Some firefighters are trained to observe fires from the air, and others learn about planning for disasters or how to rescue people.



*Firefighters spend time practising their skills and using specialised equipment.*

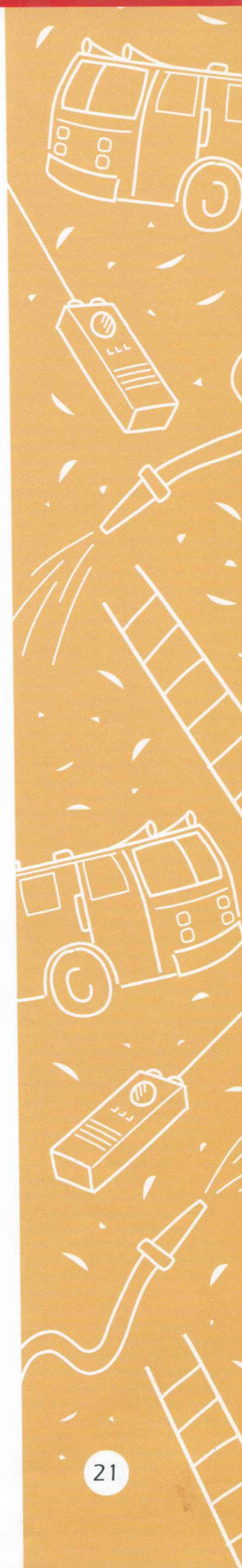




*Firefighters sometimes have to work in thick smoke.*

At the school, firefighters can practise what they have learnt. They drive fire trucks or tankers, or travel in firespotting planes as observers or **navi-gators**. They work in thick smoke or in darkness, with breathing equipment or protective clothing. They try to put out fires started with petrol, oil or LP gas, and practise dealing with dangerous chemical spills and fires.

Firefighters also learn how to keep themselves safe. This is very important because firefighting is dangerous work. Firefighters have been injured in bushfires, and some have been killed.





# Risks and dangers

Sometimes firefighters have to take risks, and during a bushfire they often face dangers. People can die from the great heat of a bushfire before the flames reach them. They can breathe in smoke or fumes. Sparks, smoke and grit can injure eyes. Strong winds tear off burning branches or blow down trees; these can injure firefighters or block roads or tracks and trap fire trucks.

If firefighters don't drink enough water, their bodies dry up and they get sick. Sometimes the heat alone makes them sick. Often it is hard to see through thick smoke, and road accidents happen more easily. People and animals can panic in a fire and make the work of firefighters even more dangerous.

Fires can start in chemical factories or petrol stations, and bushfires can burn buildings and depots where dangerous chemicals and fuels are stored. Tankers carrying poisonous liquids can crash and spill their load, or catch fire or be trapped by a bushfire. If this happens, there can be poisonous fumes, gases or liquids that could injure or kill firefighters.



*Firefighters have died from the heat of a bushfire. They face many risks.*