

## The firefighters

Last summer, some of the most devastating bushfires in Australia's history claimed at least 33 lives, killed an estimated one billion animals, razed more than 2800 homes and scorched in excess of 18 million hectares. Many of Australia's 152,798 volunteer firefighters saw the red sky and grey shroud of smoke that settled on the east coast as a call to arms, working tirelessly for weeks – everyday heroes in horrific circumstances. We nominate the entire national volunteer firefighting force. Here, three share their stories.

Nº 012 / 100

### Neil Shankly

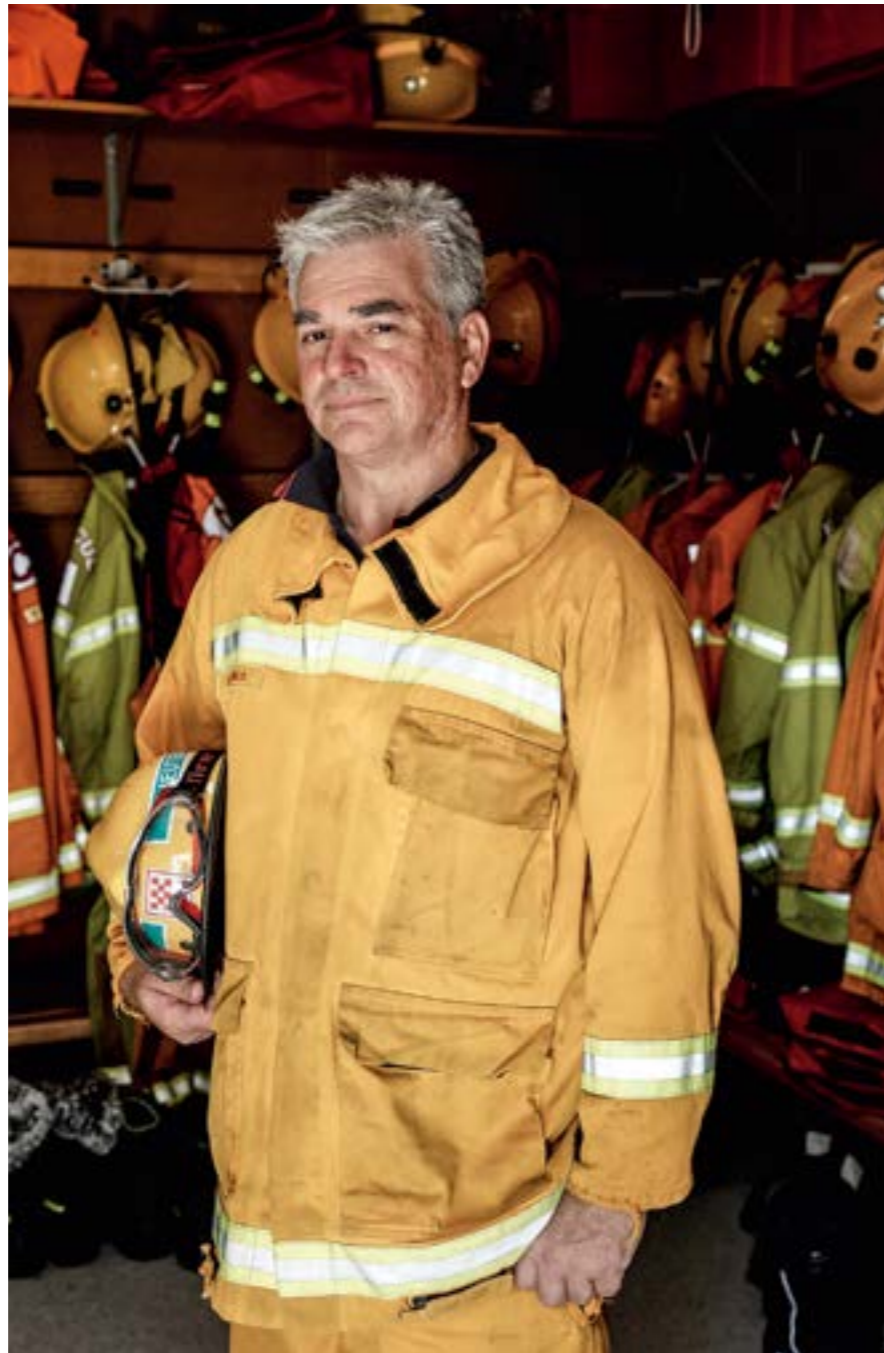
CFA strike team leader, Victoria

When Neil Shankly arrived in Mallacoota, a Victorian coastal holiday town perched near the NSW border and the site of one of the most harrowing episodes of the bushfire crisis, he understood why people were shaken. "I could see how far the fire had travelled, right to the shore," the 55-year-old says of the flames that overtook the town on 31 December, forcing thousands of people to the water, where they were evacuated by the Navy. "The locals were on edge."

But not for long. In the aftermath of the blaze, Shankly, a 20-year veteran volunteer firefighter for Victoria's Country Fire Authority, and his team – who had to be ferried into the town via boat – put out the remaining spot fires and were able to convince everyone that they were safe. "The community embraced us," says the married father of two, who runs a catering business. "They wanted to pay for our coffee."

A palpable sense of anguish returned on 4 January, when black smoke funnelled back into the township, plunging the streets into darkness. "But we had good information that there was no threat," recalls Shankly, who lives in Yellingbo, in Victoria's Yarra Valley. "If we saw people at the front of their homes, we'd stop and reassure them. It was an important part of our role."

It's one he relishes. "I like to help others," he says. "But it's not about me. There are many who do more than me. When you're a volunteer, you see the effort people put in. It's quite amazing."



Photograph by Julian Kingma



Nº 013 / 100

### Ilora Godwin

CFS volunteer firefighter,  
South Australia

Ilora Godwin saw the worst blazes and the best of humanity this season. During a November shift in Wingham, on NSW's Mid North Coast, the South Australian Country Fire Service volunteer stopped by a pub to use the bathroom when a woman rushed up with a bag of Panadol, cleanser and eyewash. Another gave her homemade lip balm with a thank-you note attached.

"And a young girl came to our accommodation with little painted statues," says Godwin, 30, who lives in Adelaide. "When you think about what these people are going through and they're being so thoughtful, it gives you a new view of humankind."

Godwin, a fly-in, fly-out refinery technician at BHP's Olympic Dam mine, has been a volunteer firefighter for nearly five years. "I've always had to do something," says the former RAAF cadet. "The fires were difficult but the spirit of these communities is incredible. I got lots of hugs."

She would need more for her next deployment on 14 January, to South Australia's Kangaroo Island, where blazes turned the lush sanctuary into a landscape of ash and animal carcasses. Some 30,000 koalas and 50,000 livestock, mostly sheep, perished.

"I've never seen so many dead animals," says Godwin. "It was a shock." In one paddock, her team found a koala with a broken leg. "We offered him water and took him to a triage tent," she says. "And a lot more needed help."



Photograph by Naomi Jellicoe

N° 014 / 100

**Nathan Barnden**

RFS divisional commander, NSW

Roaring along the Princes Highway near the historic NSW village of Quaama on 31 December, Rural Fire Service volunteer Nathan Barnden couldn't see more than three metres in front of his car for all the smoke and flames. Beside him, eyes locked on a GPS app, his RFS partner, John Gallagher, was counting down the metres to their destination: a burning house where seven members of a family were trapped. "I thought we'd find seven bodies," says Barnden, a divisional commander during the bushfire crisis in his hometown of

Bega on the NSW South Coast. "But we found them hiding under a wet blanket."

It was Jessica Gravener, her mother-in-law, Christine, and five children at Christine's home. "The kids were in pyjamas," says Barnden, a Canberra-based public servant. "They'd just woken up and the world was ending around them."

But help was there. Barnden, 26, an RFS volunteer for 10 years, scrambled the family, including Jessica's two children, her niece and two nephews, into the car

and hurtled back towards town. As they hit a pinch in the road and flames licked the car, "one of the kids asked if they were going to die," says Barnden. "I promised I'd do all I could to get them out."

It was a pledge he and Gallagher fulfilled to them and six others that day. Barnden lost his uncle and cousin in the fires but his grief spurs him on. "I don't want any other family to deal with what we're going through," he says. "That's what drives me to get up and put the uniform on. I don't want anyone else to feel that pain."



Photograph by Jonathan Ng

**The survivor**

N° 015 / 100

**Curtis McGrath**

Paralympian

It started as an ordinary day for former Australian Army combat engineer Curtis McGrath during a tour of Afghanistan in August 2012. It didn't end that way. As the then 24-year-old was sweeping an area for improvised explosive devices a blast tore through him.

Fully conscious, McGrath guided his colleagues through the first steps of emergency care – morphine, IV fluids and attempts to halt blood loss. "I knew the extent of my injuries and that my legs weren't coming back," he says.

Despite his trauma, McGrath offered his team solace. "I said, 'You'll see me at the Paralympics,'" he recalls. "I felt that whatever I said was in some way going to help their traumatic situation."

Following intense rehab and a trip to the Warrior Games, McGrath chose paracanoeing and began working to fulfilling his promise. He's since won gold at Rio, six world championships and two Invictus Games and he's now gliding to compete in Tokyo.

"Everyone's in the same boat," says McGrath. "It's a simple goal of doing the best you can." He's dedicated to his sport but has never lost his perspective. "A lot of people don't understand why military staff go through the tough times in a war zone. It's because of your mates," he says. "Sport is just a game."

Photograph by Damian Bennett

