

The Auckland Fire Brigade 1874-2024 Project

The 1950s. 1950-1959

The early 1950s saw the introduction of VHF Radios in all front-line appliances, and the requirement that all fire appliances and ancillary vehicles had to be registered like every other vehicle on the road. Continued exemption and the argument that fire appliances did not ply for hire didn't cut it with the Auckland City Traffic Department. Many attempts were made to improve conditions of employment from wages to hours of work. The brigade establishment was strained due to staff shortages. A recruit's course of 7 firemen was run at Otahuhu Fire Station late in the decade to utilise the yard and training space offered by the new station.

Mid-January 1950, Auckland Third Officer Russell Preston [had replaced Ernie Ander], appointed Auckland Deputy Superintendent, replaced George A Mackenzie who was promoted to Superintendent. Preston joined Mt Roskill FB 1927, moved to Superintendent North Shore in 1951 replacing Ernie Ander.

April 1 1950, Saturday, Wally [Walter James] Langdon appointed first full time Fire Board Secretary. Previously role done by a Fireman with Officer's privileges and also turned out to fires. February 1 1966, Wally appointed member of Fire Service Council, Wellington for three years, appointed by the Council of Fire and Accident Underwriters' Associations of New Zealand.

April 25 1950, Tuesday, Auckland Fire Brigade Officers Union applied for a new award before the Arbitration Court. The hours of duty for officers in Auckland were 112 hours a week, including standby duty, or when they were within call of a fire bell, said Alex Monteith, for the union. Overseas brigades' hours of work did not exceed 60 hours, Monteith said the officers claimed they should have every second day off and should not be tied to a station for 48 hours on end. Young recruits would not stay on stations for 48 hours, and that was why the staffing position of the brigades was so serious. Opposing the increase in pay sought, EA Turner, for the Auckland Fire Board, said that the last officers' Award was made 14 months ago, and it was very unlikely conditions of employment had changed materially since then.

June 1950, VHF radio sets begun to be installed into all vehicles. Avondale fitted September 8 1950 - F40. Pt Chevalier fitted February 1 1951 - F36. January 20 1947 first trials started. By April 16 1948, Post and Telegraph Department had installed a mast and equipment on Mt Eden for VHF radio use by public utilities. New sets were manufactured locally, by April 30 1951, fifteen RT sets had been fitted in all front-line Auckland appliances except both Mt Wellington Stations.

In the 1950's to 1970's NZ used VHF B band for RT channels, this included Fire channels. Auckland had a main channel 106.9125mhz, a turnout channel 106.8625mhz and the channel for alarm testing RT band was AM mode.

In early 1980s B band became the band for commercial Radio stations in NZ so all RT users were moved off B band. NZFS moved to 75 MHz throughout the country. Auckland channels started to have problems with 75 MHz caused by propagation [interference] from Australian 75mhz radio users opening Auckland's repeaters. Auckland changed to F band to clear interference.

About 09:05 every morning, VHF RT sets on every front-line appliance tested, straight after start of shift parade, start of 24-hour shift. Began F30 [HQ No1 pump] this is Fire on radio test, how do you receive, over - F30 to Fire, loud and clear over. F31, F32, etc. Radio procedure changed late 1960's to Fire to F30, the national standard, gave the mobile called longer to realise and listen that a

message was being transmitted. Tests started when RT's first installed, stopped mid-1970's, sets and network more reliable.

November 30 1950, Thursday, appointment of Thomas [TA] Varley, OBE as Chief Fire Service Officer of the New Zealand Fire Service announced by Minister of Internal Affairs William [WA] Bodkin. Mr Varley was Chief Officer, County of Dorset Fire Brigade and had a distinguished career in the British Fire Service. Beginning Second World War was Chief Fire Officer of Blackpool Fire Brigade, in 1941 on the formation of the UK National Fire Service he was appointed Chief Regional Fire Officer, Wales. Later appointed to a similar position, northern region of England. When NZ position first advertised, no overseas applications, the pay was too low.

June 1951, all Auckland MFB appliances and ancillary vehicles were registered and fitted with number plates for the first time in the 1951 registrations, repeated in 1956, 1961 and so on. Back in July 27 1916, Auckland Fire Board receive a letter from Auckland City Council Traffic Inspector JB Lindsay, pointing out the Board's vehicles were not registered. Superintendent Charles Woolley said Brigade motors had never been licensed, never heard of any that had, they did not ply for hire so should not be licensed. Board members concurred, saying the suggestion that licenses should be obtained was ridiculous. Became national issue, September 1921 Government exempted, Councils opposed. September 1923 still correspondence passed between City Council and Fire Board. June 25 1925 Fire Board paid £359 to the City Council in heavy traffic fees on nine vehicles and was now desirous of having the fees remitted. Minister Internal Affairs had written saying payment not required. December 1933 still going. Mid 1934 test case by Fire Boards lost, Minister considering clarifying law. During WW2 all EFS [Emergency Fire Service] vehicles were Government owned, National Service Dept from August 1940 and in July 1 1944 Internal Affairs Dept and registered with GVT number plates. When sold later to Fire Brigades either had general plates or H plates for appliances. Brigades did not reregister them in 1946. Fire Brigades eventually lost and had to pay. June 1956 fleet numbers allocated to all vehicles and trailers.

April 1 1952, Tuesday, Superintendent rank name changed to CFO [Chief Fire Officer] and Deputy Superintendent to DCFO [Deputy Chief Fire Officer]. A national change, initiated by recently appointed National Chief Fire Service Officer Thomas ['TA'] Varley, approved by National Fire Service Council. The CFO epaulette had laurel wreath with one large impeller [representing a pump], and two small impellers. His cap had a row of silver ferns on the peak. Firefighting helmet was white, tunic epaulette was narrow rectangular. The DCFO had one large impeller and one small impellers. His cap had a row of black ferns on the peak. Firefighting helmet was white with black comb, tunic epaulette was narrow rectangular. Officers wore white shirts; Firemen wore heavy khaki shirts.

During 1952 Chief Fire Officer George [GA] Mackenzie travelled to Europe on a fact-finding mission. Purchased Dennis Metz TL, two Dennis F12's and five Dennis F8's. In his absence Russell Preston was Acting Chief Fire Officer, Aub Crook Acting Deputy Chief Fire Officer.

May 2 1952, Friday, most members of the Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board agreed that the dialling of a common number for the Fire Brigade would reduce any delay. Alec [AL] Monteith said he thought the dialling a common number, such as 999, would take too long to get through at certain hours of the morning. In his opinion it was just a joke. The telephone numbers on the dials in the UK were opposite to NZ. See photos below.

NZ Rotary telephone dial Setup



Photo Source Antique Phones Whangarei

UK Rotary Telephone Dial



Photo Source Unsplash.com

December 3 1952, Wednesday, new two double bay, two floor Fire Station officially opened at 16 Albion Road, Otahuhu. Three houses at rear for married quarters, in 1973 house on yard sold for removal to make way for Workshops. A large narrow but deep site, backed on to canal reserve zone. By 1948 the group of huts called "the hutment" at rear of Great South Road station had been moved to the rear of new site in Albion Road, used until new station built. A 10 foot [3m] drafting pit at rear of station. In 1976 front of appliance bays extended to enable Dennis F21 Metz TTL to fit under beams, always too low for Dennis Metz TTL to drive through. Front apron slopes down to road

September 1953 Gordon [GA] Drummond appointed Auckland Deputy Superintendent, from Chief Fire Officer, Napier. He replaced Russell Preston who moved to Superintendent North Shore FB. March 7 1956 DCFO Gordon Drummond appointed Acting CFO, March 29 1956 confirmed CFO, replaced George Mackenzie who was demoted to DCFO. November 15 1962 Drummond became National Chief Fire Service Officer, Fire Service Council, Wellington. Drummond started in Mt Roskill Brigade in 1928 as messenger, a year later joined Mt Roskill paid staff age 18, 1933 Wellington, 1941 Inspecting Officer. 1943 CFO Napier. Aubert WA Crook resigned as Third Officer after being passed over for promotion to Deputy. Crook was awarded the MBE January 1945, service as Firemaster Warrant Officer at RNZAF Station Hobsonville. Son Warren Crook retired SSO Auckland. In 1954 Chiller [Charles] Reid promoted Third Officer.

January 4 1954, Monday, Tom [GJT] Crafer and wife arrived in Auckland on the NZS Rangitane from London. Crafer was the new Deputy Chief Fire Officer for New Zealand, to be commandant of the fire training school which was later established in Island Bay, Wellington. He was formerly in charge of Britain's Northern Regional Fire Training School, and latterly Senior Staff Officer in the Dorset County Fire Brigade with Tom [TA] Varley. Late 1956 he was Acting CFSO. Replaced by Bill [WJ] Henderson, ex Liverpool FB. Crafer and his wife returned to England before the new Training School at Island Bay opened on March 11 1958.

April 28 1954, Wednesday, Thomas [TA] Varley of the NZ Fire Services Council asked local bodies to mark fire plugs "H" for hydrant instead of "FP," for fire plug was described as "stupid" by Mr FS

Stevens, Devonport, at a meeting of the North Shore Fire Board. "Because they call them hydrants in England is no reason why we should do it in New Zealand," he said. "Every child knows what 'FP' stands for. It is a New Zealand custom and should remain." Mr A Reid, of Takapuna, said "FP" was cast on the plates of fire plugs, and to change the plates would be costly. Mr S Head said that, unless all the Fire Boards protested, a protest from the North Shore Board would be "a voice in the wilderness." The Fire Board agreed that local bodies in its area with hydrants marked "FP" should leave them with that marking and use the new marking for new plugs when installed. There was only a few old FP's left, on wooden mains in the older parts of Devonport. All the rest were fire hydrants.

October 28 1954, Thursday, main City Fire Boards agreed to ask the Government to appoint a court of inquiry into the Dominion's Fire Service. The common problem was staff shortages and there did not appear to be any hope of improvement under present conditions. With the approach of summer and the peak fire risk season, the matter caused grave concern to the Fire Boards. The principal reason for the shortage were the long hours of duty in the Fire Service, Firemen were on duty for 48 hours at one stretch and that no overtime was paid. The Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board were thirteen understaffed. May 13 1955, Central Government declined.

March 3 1955, Thursday, a Royal Warrant introduced the Queen's Fire Service Medal. The Medal could be granted for conspicuous gallantry, specially distinguished fire service, success in organising fire services, special services in dealing with serious or widespread outbreaks of fire or other public catastrophes, special services to Royalty or heads of State, or prolonged service, but only when distinguished by very exceptional ability and merit. The ribbon of the new medal was red, with a narrow yellow stripe on either side, and a similar yellow stripe in the middle. When the medal is awarded for acts of exceptional courage, each yellow stripe will contain a thin dark blue line down the middle. The medal was later removed [late 1990's?] from the list by Government, only three awarded each year.

June 1 1955, Wednesday, agreement on several points for a new award for Metropolitan Fire Brigadesmen was reached in Conciliation Council. Auckland was not included in the application but some of their conditions were tied to the National Award.

(Unsure of the date). The working system of 108 hours a week [average] three days on, one day off, dropped to 96-hour week, average four days on, three days off, 96 hours on duty and 72 hours off duty system. Each Station had one Station Officer. All other paid Brigades worked two days on one day off for 122 hours a week.

June 29 1955, Wednesday, Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board resigned from the New Zealand Urban Fire Authorities' Industrial Union of Employers. Other Fire Boards committed to retain a national continuous duty system of operations and not be relegated to the position where a man would treat the work as a job and not a service. After two years of negotiations, no progress had been made towards an agreement.

July 1955, closure of Mt Wellington No2 Station, volunteer manned, Mt Wellington Highway, west side, corner Hamlin Road, opposite Sylvia Park Stores. Opened beginning November 1931 as No2 Station for Mt Wellington VFB. Both Stations incorporated with AMFB April 1 1933. Closed three years after Otahuhu Station, Albion Road opened. All equipment moved to Ellerslie Panmure Highway Station; their 1932 Morris Commercial sold to Whitianga for £55.

August 7 1955, Sunday, the thirty-six member Auckland Seafarers' Silver Band became the Auckland Metropolitan Fire Brigade Band. The Band was "orphaned and motherless" after the 1951

waterfront strike and the Watersiders Union was deregistered. The twenty-two members who lived within the boundaries of the Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board district were sworn in as Fire Police members. In 1957 the Band won the New Zealand Brass Band Championship in Napier under conductor Les Francis. In 1961 they became the Waitemata Silver Band, the better paying sponsors were Dominion Breweries, have had several name changes since. In September 1941 the Auckland Waterside Workers' Band were the official band of the new EFS. All bandsmen were Fire Policemen under the Emergency Precautions Scheme.

March 7 1956, Wednesday, Auckland MFB Deputy Chief Fire Officer Gordon [GA] Drummond appointed Acting Chief Fire Officer, March 29 1956, Gordon Drummond confirmed Chief Fire Officer, replaced George [GA] Mackenzie demoted to DCFO [reason never made public]. In 1962 Drummond became National Chief Fire Service Officer in Wellington [replaced Thomas 'TA' Varley QSO, OBE KPFSM, FIFE] until September 1972. Drummond started in Mt Roskill Brigade in 1928 as a messenger, one year later joined paid staff age 18, 1933 to Wellington [followed Superintendent Charlie [CA] Woolley Jnr], 1941 Wellington FB Inspecting Officer, April 1942 Station Officer Thorndon, October 15 1943 Chief Fire Officer Napier, September 1953 Deputy Superintendent, Auckland. Died in Mt Roskill December 3 1974 aged 63.

May 5 1956, Saturday, Archibald Bryant Culhane Marr [22], full time Fireman at Parnell Station [465 Parnell Rd], twice within half an hour called out the Auckland MFB to malicious false alarms. On both occasions, crews found broken alarm boxes, but no fires. The estimated cost of calling out the brigade was £30. Marr could not give a reason for his actions; he had since resigned from the Fire Service. Marr admitted two charges of wilfully giving false alarms, fined £7 10s on each charge. When asked for an explanation Marr expressed his regrets and attributed his acts to mischief. Magistrate Mr MC [Malcolm] Astley SM described the cause as "mischievous bravado".

May 31 1956, Thursday, Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board authorised charges for attending four false fire calls. In three cases firms had failed to maintain the electric batteries in the alarm system. The fourth company did not tell the brigade that a sprinkler system was being overhauled.

During 1957 series of meetings held with Auckland Local Authorities to improve the availability of water supplies for firefighting. Combined conference held. Water supplies slowly improved in many areas, but additional water required SOP's, radio messages and long feeder lines were common until turn of century.

February 27 1957, Wednesday, Auckland MFB decided not to paint its fire appliances white, but they may, if an experiment is successful, become luminous red to make them stand out at night. A recent suggestion that all emergency vehicles should be painted white was referred by the New Zealand Urban Fire Authorities' Association to Fire Boards. The Board decided to maintain the traditional red. The board had planned to have a vehicle painted white with red wheels. but on the suggestion of Chief Fire Officer Gordon [GA] Drummond and a Board member, JN Bradley, it will try a luminous red. Most members agreed that the main objection to white was that it would be too hard to keep clean. Some doubted the suitability of luminous red, suggesting that a glowing red fire appliance rushing through the night might frighten some motorists into accidents.

October 10 1957, Thursday, the annual connection fee for a private fire alarm were Auckland £8, Wellington £8 2s 6d, Christchurch £5 5s a year, and Dunedin £5 16s.

December 11 1957, Wednesday, ex Auckland Fireman 'Jumbo' [Alfred George] Pillinger visited Fire Headquarters and talked to Deputy Chief George [GA] Mackenzie. Alfred was a Fireman during the horse and cart days, joined Auckland VFB in 1898 at the Albert Street Fire Station. When a fire call

came, the men pushed the hose reels along the streets on a cart and then ran them out. July 3 1902 the Brigade moved to the new Pitt Street Station opposite the present Headquarters. With the new Station came the innovation of horses, he recalled how the horses used to gallop across from the stables to the tenders. The harness would simply drop over them and they would be off. snorting and clattering madly over the paved roads with the fire bell clanging on the tender. He had two years' war service in South Africa and more during WW1 as a driver. He had been an Auckland rugby rep as five-eight and a probable All Black. He later owned the Railway Bookstall on the main outward platform, 1934 to 1938 licensee of the Sterling Hotel, Waihi, then the Windsor Castle Hotel, Parnell Rise.

March 11 1958, Tuesday, first national training school for Officers and Firemen officially opened, The Parade and Dee Street West, Island Bay, Wellington. Opened by Bill [WT] Anderton, Minister of Internal Affairs. The Brigade Instructors course which was underway, plus some Wellington Firemen co-opted in, performed opening parade and display. Commandant and Deputy Chief Fire Service Officer was Bill [WJ] Henderson, ex Liverpool FB. Chief Instructor was Allan [AW] Bruce, back from London FB, later North Shore and Auckland. Instructors were Jim [JC] McKessar and Arthur James [ex Wellington]. Dave Stickings joined them soon after [Christchurch]. Stan Combes [and family] the first caterer and caretaker, later the Bedford family. Late 1971, the Fire Service Council changed name to National Training College. Closed in 1995 by Cummings restructure.

August 27 1958, Wednesday, Chief Fire Officer Gordon Drummond made a false fire alarm call to test the Brigade's efficiency. The Auckland Fire Brigade Industrial Union of Workers claimed 7s 6d for each man who turned out. The Union had also asked that a tribunal be set up to find out whether the Chief Fire Officer can make false fire calls. The Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board decided at its monthly meeting to advise the Union that the call was made to test the efficiency of the Brigade after it had been questioned in the area concerned. Efficiency had been established completely. The Board could not tolerate the intrusion of the Union into a matter concerning the efficient operation of the Brigade. The fire call was in accordance with the award, and was no different from any other false alarm to which the Brigade was called, the chairman Stan [SA] Gleadow said. There was no reason for special payment or review.

August 28 1958, Thursday, Auckland MFB received a £285 bill the Mt Eden BC forwarded from Auckland City Council for water used to extinguish the Mt Eden BC landfill rubbish tip, north side base of Mt Eden. The fire began in April 1958 and was still burning four months later. Brigade set up a monitor to flood the fire and used five million gallons of City Council's water and one million of Mt Eden's.

October 30 1958, Thursday, recent tests by the Auckland Metropolitan Fire Brigade, together with oil companies, proved the use of powder foam instead of liquid foam was a satisfactory method of controlling a major oil fire, Chairman Stan [SA] Gleadow told the meeting of the Fire Board. Tests had been carried out with portable equipment and it had been found impossible to project foam into the tanks even with the wind. Projecting with powder foam, however, had proved very satisfactory. The converting of existing oil tank fixed installations could be done at a reasonable cost.

May 30 1959, Saturday, Auckland Harbour Bridge officially opened. Construction started in 1954, originally two lanes either way. Toll booths at northern end. Auckland MFB Station Ponsonby responded to any incident north bound and North Shore FB Northcote or Birkenhead went to incidents south bound. Appliances rarely respond either way to support the other Brigade until Nationalisation in 1976. Auckland Controlroom advised Bridge Control appliance was coming, they

advised which lane to access and pass through. Bridge staff rapidly exited the toll booth before responding appliance[s] arrived. For routine movement, vehicles had printed tickets they passed over. Opening the Bridge saw rapid growth on the North Shore. In 1969 two clip-on lanes added either side.

During 1959, Fourth Officer Bob [Robert] Walker retired after 39 years' service. Station Officer Lloyd [LF] Wilson, Ellerslie Station appointed replacement Fourth Officer. Lloyd was son of retired Superintendent Bill [WL] Wilson. He went on to be Chief Fire Officer and on April 1 1976 appointed first Regional Commander, retired 1977.

November 14 1959, Saturday, Station Officer Reginald John Moore, Great South Road or Ellerslie Station, was thrown from their relief Ford V8 appliance and broke his left arm when the appliance clipped a kerb, Great South Road, on its way to a fire at Westfield Freezing Works, driver Fireman Owen H Woods. Mr Moore continued to the fire and remained until it was extinguished. Fire destroyed a section of the upper floor, including the meat inspectors' changing and lunch rooms and several freezing batteries. Several thousand carcasses of meat on the floor below were saved. Wheeled escape [at Otahuhu] used to access roof. Several Firemen treated for minor injuries. One-month earlier Ellerslie's F8 hit a bus going to a call in Onehunga, both bus and fire appliance damaged. Reg became Chief Fire Officer Kawerau, born 1920, died 1975.

December 30 1959, Wednesday, afternoon, Fireman Larry Webb [23] from Fire Headquarters, Pitt Street fended a runaway truck wheel away from three children in Queen Street. The offside front wheel on a old truck suddenly folded underneath, came off, and shot towards the footpath. It hit the kerb and bounced about four feet into the air. "I saw it was headed towards the three small kiddies, so I pushed at it with both hands and it went into the china shop window.

Late 1959, Auckland MFB recruit course of seven conducted at Otahuhu Station, instructor Station Officer Jack Kerr, Station OIC. Jack joined Otahuhu VFB 1932, a butcher, was Otahuhu VFB Deputy Superintendent before incorporation with Auckland MFB on April 1 1946. About 1962 he became a Senior Station Officer, February 2 1970, Third Officer [Southern Command], Jack died January 4 1971 aged 58. In 1957 first recruit course taken by Dick Webb.

Many thanks again to Cliff Mears who has tirelessly recorded the AFB history from log books, Fire Board Reports, Newspaper Cuttings and other sources making our job so much easier.

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