

The Auckland Fire Brigade 1874-2024 Project

The 1990s (1990-1999)

The 1990s produced a turbulent time for the Brigade. Caught up in the politics of the Business Round Table and a government hell bent on 'destroying' the fire service; firefighters, admin staff and managers faced a rocky road that would not settle until the mid 2000s. It is necessary to understand the political environment the brigade (and the whole of the NZFS) faced and to understand the detrimental consequences of poor decisions that would affect the brigade for the next 20 years. Insisting that the Fire Service operate on the 'Corporate Model' was a big mistake. Universities would use the restructure as a case study to show how not to run an organisation like the Fire Service. In 1995 the Auckland Brigade was divided up into 13 Fire Districts, each with a Chief Fire Officer under the command of an Area Chief Fire Officer. Too many chiefs and not enough Indians!

A 1997 restructure saw the Northern Region abolished and the Auckland Area became Auckland Region.

Later in the decade a major power outage saw City Station and the Region Headquarters (incl. Control Room) run on generator power for 6 weeks.

The Late Allan Bruce wrote in his book *Into the Line of Fire, 2009* about the turbulent times. It was well researched and accurate and this posting uses mainly quotes from his book. Page numbers have been included for reference.

Page 308, on 1 April 1993, Maurie Cummings becomes the first civilian Chief Executive to the New Zealand Fire Service Commission. He held a Master in Public Policy from Victoria University, a BA (Hons) in Criminal Justice Administration from California State University and a Post Graduate Diploma in Business and Industrial Administration from Auckland University.

He was given the task "Mission Impossible"

The staff of 2000 career and 8000 volunteers in the New Zealand Fire Service, believed like any military, Police or Firefighters that their own officers are best qualified, experienced and trained to manage and administer their operations, with direct responsibility to the Commission.

It would take to 2001 for sanity to prevail when a well-qualified firefighter would be appointed CE/National Commander.

Kerry Everson, Deputy National Commander was appointed National Commander. He was a well-respected Senior Station Officer in Auckland in 1967, visionary and well suited for the changes that were occurring in Auckland at the time. Appointed Chief Fire Officer in Hawera in 1968 he went on to be Chief Fire Officer of Gisborne and Hamilton before becoming Chief fire Officer in Auckland in 1977.

Page 309. The government was seeking urgent change within the fire service which was mentioned to Maurie during his appointment process. The government intended to introduce a 'slash and burn' policy immediately. The Fire Service Commission was tasked with a 'green fields' review of the service. There was a need to respond to stakeholders to respond to fire prevention.

On day 1 the Minister of Finance Ruth Richardson imposed a 5% budget cut for 1993/1994 reducing the budget from \$179.5m to \$170.5m.

Page 310. The cut would put the fire service under huge strain due to previous restrictions. There was no more room to cut from operational expenses and the volunteers had been lobbying for some

time for resource deficiencies in their world to be improved/updated (Fire Appliances, Fire Stations, Equipment etc).

The only place that savings could come from was the reduction in firefighter numbers. The three-month ministerial review commenced on April 1993. This would affect the Auckland Fire Brigade more than any other brigade in New Zealand.

On 16 April 1993 the NZ Herald published a headliner:

- Fire engines could have fewer firefighters on board
- Station building programme could be cut
- Cost of new appliances to be reviewed
- Rethink of firefighters sleeping at night

Once the details of the report were revealed the old adage 'setting the cat among the pigeons' would be an understatement.

Page 311. The Minister was absolutely correct about the question of productivity. Brian Armstrong (Commissioner) had tried to negotiate with the NZPFU (New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union) regarding the routine hours. The Union had maintained the same routine hours from the continuous duty hours (84) when the 56-hour week was introduced in 1970 and the 42 in 1972.

Routine hours were maintained at 17 hours per week average dating back to when firefighters worked 84 hours per week.

This was a sore point since the Union sought meaningful work during the extended routine hours, and questioned what a firefighter could do after midnight.

The Unions reluctance to change in settling the issue caused subsequent reviews/reports to latch on to this and the general public were in no position to fully understand the complexities. For example, when Police go on duty, they 'work' the whole shift, similarly nurses and many other shift workers.

The Union was correct in resisting the question of manning of fire appliances. Many reviews and international studies had categorically stated that a four-person crew on a fire engine was the minimum and probably best of all-round from a firefighting capability and safety perspective.

A headline in the NZ Herald on 19 May 1993 read:

- The Fire Service hierarchy conceded yesterday that proposed crewing cuts would inevitably cause delays at rescue scenes, but insisted that these would be acceptable.
- The National commander, Mr Kerry Everson, said there was no doubt that halving the 4-member crews on high-rise rescue platforms, and other specialised appliances would slow things up. "There has got to be a delay, no question about it".

But he gave an assurance that the service would ensure that any delays were within acceptable limits, and endangers neither staff nor the public.

Page 311. One must feel for Kerry, having to articulate a political decision that didn't agree with nor have any control. Kerry was initially precluded from attending the Commission's regular meetings. This was an unprecedented departure from normal procedure and can only be seen as an exclusion based on more sinister undertakings. Kerry was also excluded from meetings that Maurie was having with Treasury and Internal Affairs Officials. To his credit Maurie said "if Kerry is excluded then I won't be coming to your meetings either".

In one of Maurie's visits to Auckland Assistant Area Chief Fire Officer David Neil was privy to a conversation with Maurie. Maurie shared the kind of behaviour he had to tolerate in Wellington. It was very clear that the government was determined to change the Fire Service without any input from its top Executives who had all the experience necessary to point out the folly or consequences of Government decisions.

Page 312. The Treasury and Internal Affairs Officials were absolutely furious with Maurie's insistence on being involved, as they had lost control of the process, something bureaucrats don't take well.

Maurie wisely initiated an Internal review, this allowing all NZFS employees to have a say. This was a wise move since there was a big push to privatise the service, giving him some sound data to argue the futility of privatisation.

Page 312. The scene was now set. Maurie and Kerry would fight to keep the integrity of the National Service and privatisation would never occur.

It was clear that the hub of the problem was the anomalous funding of the NZFS which had never been resolved satisfactorily.

The Insurance Council, backed by Federated Farmers and the Business Roundtable, lobbied the Government to change the unfair funding methodology (Levy on Fire Insurance) or drastically reduce the operating expenditure of the NZFS.

Once again, the option to resolve the funding methodology proved 'to be too hard' so was bypassed. The prime objective was to target the budget.

Reducing the budget by \$20-30m could only come from redundancies.

Page 315. A treasury paper put up as a Cabinet Paper believed \$50-70m could be made.

Options available to the Chief Executive:

- Change the duty system for firefighters from 42 hours per week to 56 hours per week. This would reduce frontline firefighters by about 330.
- Reduce crewing on fire appliances from 4 to 3.
- Reduce the number of responding appliances by closing fire stations.
- Delete crews from special appliances (Ladders, BA Tenders, Foam Tenders, Salvage Tenders)

Page 315. The Independent Review Team comprised of Malcolm McCaw as chair, and Richard Miller and Joe Auton as members. All had extensive business experience.

The team was directed to investigate and report on changes to organisational structures, management systems, policies, procedures and resources to improve economy and efficiency of fire protection and related emergency service operations. The crucial issue of funding was not included in the review.

Page 316. Maurie anticipated the funding issue and set up a project called MOFOR (Management of Fire and Other Risks) to come up with a better funding method.

The recommendation was a property-based funding system similar to the Queensland Fire Service which was widely accepted by stakeholders in the state of Queensland. In this case the levy was collected by Local Authorities, being suitably recompensed for their services.

This was submitted to the then Minister of Internal Affairs, Peter Dunne who supported it, but regrettably, further support died when Dunne was replaced by Elder as Minister.

The Independent Review Team Report was submitted to Maurie Cummings 5 days before Christmas 1993.

Some of the more radical recommendations were:

- Abolition of the existing NZFS Structure and replaced by an interim funder/provider split on the Regional Health Authority/Crown Enterprise Model.
- The creation of the three independent and competing regional fire enterprises, with ultimate aim of corporatisation and local ownership.
- Five-year fixed term engagement for firefighters, with maximum permissible service of 15 years.
- Change shift system from 42-hour week to a 56-hour week.

A couple of other extracts from the report were:

Central Government reform and growing interest by external interest groups in Fire Service outcomes and accountability, and internal review initiatives appear to be creating wide pressure for change in the NZFS. The stimulating effect is evident and in general we perceive a widespread desire for change and modernisation. We have been impressed with the commitment of firefighters, managers and staff to doing their best for the NZFS and the public on NZ, their pride in the service and their desire to take on new responsibilities in the emergency area is commendable.

The Independent Review Team recommended the establishment of three separate independent Regional Enterprises such as a separate Crown Entity. The Team went on to add that the Minister should note that this structure would lend itself in the future to Corporatising and the transfer of its ownership to local interests on some agreed shareholding basis.

So how did this affect The Auckland Fire Brigade as an entity? The Report of the Internal Review Team was published in March 1994 and this led to Auckland being divided up into 13 fire districts with a CFO (Chief Fire Officer) in each district. Frontline Staff were to be reduced by about 50, many taking Enhanced Early Retirement packages. All management positions were made redundant and staff had to reapply for the new positions. The Area Office was cleaned out of staff with some having to reapply for their positions, the Region Store was closed (1995). Frontline Divisional Officer positions were also made redundant and not replaced. They could of course apply for the new CFO positions or take redundancy. The staff reductions meant that the crewing for two Heavy Rescue Tenders (City and Manukau) were lost meaning they were taken off the run and not replaced, their status being replaced by Pump Rescue Tenders. The crewing for three other special appliances were lost (Command Unit, BA Tender and Foam Tender), their responses being provided by a pumping appliance being diverted to take the appropriate appliance to the fire or incident ground. The loss of 50 frontline staff from Auckland out of an establishment of 543 meant that there were 11 firefighters on duty per 100,000 population.

Things didn't stop there. In 1997 Roger Estall took the bold step to restructure the Fire Service again and introduced more financial and staff cuts. Roger had the hair brain idea that the Fire Service should only deal with fires and all the other work contracted out. Road Traffic Accidents were to be given to local tow truck drivers to handle. Posts like the Region Fleet Manager, established in 1995, were disestablished and the brigade left in disarray. Every manager reapplied for their positions which unsettled the Region for some time.

Fire Engineers were introduced and a higher focus on fire safety and prevention were introduced. Volunteer Support Officers (VSOs) were introduced to support volunteer fire brigades. This was a positive policy and one that still operates in 2023.

About early 1990, short lived, hot to wear, "yellow PVC turnout tunic and overtrousers" were issued to staff. This replaced the aluminised "silver" nomex firefighting bunker coats and black nomex overtrousers. This change was driven following the fatal ICI Riverview chemical warehouse fire, Bowden Road, Mt Wellington, December 21 1984.

All hook ladders were decommissioned and removed from appliances in early 1990's, largely on grounds of safety. Hook ladders made of straight grain English ash wood with high tensile steel one piece hook and bill, 8 teeth, 22" long and 6" hook.

An Auckland Fire Service Open Day was held in February 1990, a Sunday at Alexandra Park in Green Lane Road West and Manukau Road, Epsom. Held in conjunction with International Fire Chief's Association conference. Due to location, not as successful as earlier Open Days. The fifth Open Day held, two on Princes Wharf, two in Queen Street above Victoria Street. For the first Open Day SFF Chris Harrop became Fireman Sam on 1ZB Sunday mornings promoting fire safety and the Open Day. During the day he spoke live to Station Officer Jim Maclean via UHF portable radio, Jim was parachuting to 'land' just off the Wharf.

April 23 1990, Monday, the First World Firefighter Games commenced in Auckland, two months after the Auckland Commonwealth Games also in Auckland. About 1,500 competitors from 16 countries competed in 34 sports. Multiple venues including Mt Smart. Opening parade at Aotea Square, Mayor Dame Kath Tizard [later Governor General], parade up Queen Street. Organiser Divisional Officer Ray Warby led a large skilled team to deliver very successful first games.

January 1 1991, Tuesday, New Zealand Fire Service Amendment Act 1990 became effective, amended Fire Service Act 1975, including Section 47C, which gave 'Power to charge for services other than attendance at fire calls'. Attendance at hazardous substance emergency; where receipt of a false alarm of fire; fire safety activities; and firefighting involving commercial forestry in Fire Districts All charging for services revoked by Fire and Emergency New Zealand Act 2017.

January 1 1991, Tuesday, Forest and Rural Fires Amendment Act 1990 effective, amended Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977 in many areas. Revoked by Fire and Emergency New Zealand Act 2017.

Starting 1992, the transport of fire alarm signals moved from dedicated telephone pairs [to Area based Controlrooms] to sharing over existing telephone lines. NZ Telecom established ATS [Alarm Transport System] and the Fire Service contracted AFA [Automatic Fire Alarms] based in Christchurch to manage the system. Replaced from 2006 with a 'cloud based' system using cellular network or phone lines. ADT only monitoring company for two years, later Automatic Fire Alarm Monitoring and Alarm New Zealand started.

Mid 1992, Youth Liaison Programme started by Fire Safety Officer Ray Coleman. The programme targets juveniles who are fascinated by fire setting. It educates the young person and their parents of the dangers of fire, the speed fire spreads, and how easily accidents happen. April 1996 became FAIP [Fire Awareness and Intervention Programme] and established nationwide. Practitioners worked closely with other social agencies. Recidivism rate was low, between 2-5%.

Early 1992 CI Munro Oxford Caravan, registration M6331, commissioned new as Fire Safety Demonstrator. Very distinctive, two axle, large fire safety education Unit. Funded by fire industry, Wormald sprinkler fitted in front end compartment. Project driven and unit used by Fire Safety

Officer Graeme Dorset. 2001 converted to mobile command and control centre, used at long duration incidents or special events. First towed by Falcon car soon replaced by Jeep J20.

December 30 1993, Thursday, new two double bay, two floor, composite station, Station 81, 23 Lake Road, Devonport, near Mozeley Avenue, occupied. Site was part of old North Shore gas works. Cost \$800,000. It replaced 1923 built Devonport station on corner Calliope Road and High Street. Old Station still there 2023.

July 9 1994, about 04:23, Saturday, Firefighter Jim [James Christopher] Hughes [49] from Birkenhead Station died after being struck by Toyota Corolla car driven by Asofa Ioane Fa'asipa at already fatal motor vehicle accident, northern motorway, just north of the Bridge. At 03:30 Birkenhead pump with SO Roy Warren and Takapuna pump rescue tender responded, car versus taxi van [12 people on board], north bound, fast lane, passenger Adam Charles Roberts [25], thrown out of taxi van across the median barrier onto southbound carriageway. SOPs had been followed, somehow car drove through highly illuminated cordon including Police cars to reach the pump. Driver that hit Jim had to be cut free. Fa'asipa sentenced August 25 1995, Auckland High Court, six years imprisonment, disqualified from driving seven years. Jim's funeral held Takapuna Station. July 9 2019, twenty fifth commemoration held at Birkenhead Station.

1994, new one bay station [27], corner Kalmia Street and Great South Road [rebuilt on same site], Ellerslie. Appliance room in centre, daytime faculties west side, staff facilities east side. Crew relocated to St John Ambulance Headquarters, Harrison Road during build.

April 3 1995, Monday, Region 1 and Area 1A abolished. Northern Region [North Cape to Turangi], four Areas [Auckland with Trevor Bean, Northland, Waikato, and Bay of Plenty] and separate Brigades introduced. Metropolitan Auckland comprised twelve paid districts, each with their own Chief Fire Officer, said to reflect closer community attachment. Cummings restructure.

Beachlands, Clevedon, Greenhithe, Kawakawa Bay, Kumeu, Laingholm, Piha, Titirangi, Waiatarua and Waiemata (Now West Harbour) become independent Fire Brigades each with their own gazetted Fire District.

December 2 1995, Saturday, New Zealand's first CIR [Citizens Initiated Referendum] held. The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union raised sufficient signatures to petition Parliament. Question was "Should the number of professional firefighters employed full time in the New Zealand Fire Service be reduced below the number employed on January 1 1995?" Low voter turnout, 27%, CIR not held in conjunction with a general election. Just over 12% people voted "Yes" and almost 88% voted "No". The CIR was not binding; National Government went ahead with its proposal to restructure the NZFS.

Early 1997, Northern Region abolished, Auckland Area became Auckland Region (Paul McGill as Region Manager, Cliff Mears and David Neil as Assistant Fire Region Commanders Fire Safety and Operations respectively), same for Whangarei [Northland], Hamilton and Tauranga [Bay of Plenty]. Franklin District returned to Auckland Area, 52 stations, 26 paid, 26 volunteer of which 3 had day staffing - Silverdale, Waiemata [now West Harbour], Titirangi. Roger Estall restructure.

Thursday, February 19 1998 until March 27 1998, Auckland suffered major electrical outage crisis in Central City area. Brigade active because of risks of improvised lighting, extra-large generators throughout affected area and buildings with standby generators. Two forty-year-old 110 kV cables in Quay Street failed, first January 20, second February 9. Increased load caused two remaining cables to fail on February 19 and 20, leaving entire central city supplied by a single 22 kV cable from

Kingsland, about 20 city blocks [except parts in a few streets] lost all power. Temporary 110 kV overhead cable constructed along rail corridor between Penrose and Liverpool Street. In 2001, a 9 km tunnel from Penrose to Hobson Street via Liverpool Street completed containing two new 110 kV cables.

October 3 1998, Saturday, Metro Auckland reduced to five paid Fire Districts, each with CFO and a DCFO. North Shore [Takapuna] with Denis O'Donoghue and Wayne Highet, Auckland City Central [Pitt Street] with Brian Edwards and Paul Cowen, Auckland City East [Mt Wellington Station] with Ray Warby and Mitchell Brown, Waitakere [Henderson] with Bill Ellis and Benjamin Basevi, and Manukau [Kerrs Road] with Larry Cocker and Andy Clarkson. Reduced from the thirteen Districts in 1995 Maurie Cummings restructure each with a CFO.

Late 1998. Auckland Controlroom, covering Whangarei and Auckland Areas closed. Situated in the Region Building it moved in with Police at NorthCom, 159 Great North Road and Sussex Street, Grey Lynn, old Trades Hall building. One of three Controlrooms that cover their part of NZ, located Wellington and Christchurch. Operated a single national Intergraph [USA] CAD system. Each Controlroom able to dynamically assist another with others workload. In 2009 CAD system was modified to share data with Ambulance. Vacated area in region later used by Fire Engineer's group. October 5 2020, 06:00, moved to Police's Harlech House, 482 Great South Road, Otahuhu, lease expired.

June 24 1998, Wednesday, Albany, Station 85, new, two double bays, one floor station, 6 William Pickering Drive, through to Ride Way, Rosedale occupied. Site purchased December 1995, June 1997 construction started, planned completion January 1998, but construction delayed. An additional station, pump and crew moved from Takapuna No2.

August 1998, Fire Engineers [FE] first employed in Regions by NZFS, part of Roger Estall restructure. Three FE's were at NHQ for a few years. Dr Paula Beever was employed from Victoria University, Melbourne to principal role at NHQ, started September 1998 until December 2012. August 1998 Simon Davis from Beca Carter started in Auckland Region, others were employed in most Regions, some from overseas. Scotsman Adam Bittern [now Dr] was Auckland's second FE from 2000 until 2005. Jonathon Shelley came from Operations, May 2001 to December 2006. Jonathon was first FE sponsored through a Master's degree by Auckland Fire Region. Early 2005, with new Building Act 2004, effective 31 March 2005, National Fire Engineering Unit established, all FE's reported to NHQ.

August 24 1998, Monday, EMT [Events Medical Transport], a private ambulance service leased half the Albany Fire Station, Rosedale. EMT had eight vehicles based at Albany. They concentrated on sports events and did compete with St John's Ambulance. EMT had the contract for the then new Albany Stadium. Early 2000's company renamed Transitcare. EMT collocated at Albany Station for less than one year.

Firefighter James Maurice Taia [35] given two-year suspended sentence by Justice Sir Graham Speight in the High Court for selling morphine sulphate to an undercover Policeman and having a Smith and Wesson 45 revolver, which was found under search warrant at Parnell Station. Taia was dismissed and moved to Australia.

March 1999, Keith James Raymond [41], a Senior Firefighter at Laingholm and ex Te Atatu VFB's, was initially charged with twenty-two counts of arson in and around Piha, West Auckland. The fires were over a five-year period and most involved vegetation, damage was estimated at \$44,000. Raymond often helped fight the fires. One family felt traumatised by the suspicious fires and installed a security camera, that helped catch him. Raymond was sentenced to five years jail.

Friday, December 31 1999 into January 1 2000, midnight, Controlroom and everywhere worldwide 'held their breath' as Y2K computer problems were predicted. Also, a leap year. Computer software often represented four-digit year with only the final two digits making the year 2000 indistinguishable from 1900. Most systems upgraded to fix anticipated problems. Lot of planning throughout 1999. Fire Service had no problems. not many failures anywhere, no planes fell out of the sky.

Once again, my thanks to Cliff Mears for his dedication in recording the brigade's history in chronological order.

Also, my thanks to the late Allan W Bruce for the marvellous, well researched book that he left us with. This book will be a valuable resource for those researching the NZ Fire Service 1947-2009.

DMN September 2023