

# Supporting Government During National Emergencies

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In January 2020, I was privileged to fill the role of Senior ADF Officer (SADFO) and Air Base Executive Officer (ABXO) of the RAAF Base Wagga, as the national bushfire emergency unfolded across the NSW southwest slopes. The main concern to the residents of the Eastern Riverina and the Western Snowy Mountain communities were the Dunn's Road Fire, the East Ournie Creek Fire and the Green Valley Fire. These three bushfires merged to form a mega fire that burnt through over 600,000 hectares resulting in a number of smaller communities evacuating west to Wagga Wagga<sup>1</sup>.

The Prime Minister's announcement<sup>2</sup> on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 ordered all defence establishments in the fire effected areas to accommodate internally-displaced-persons (IDPs) who were forced to evacuate from their homes. The order has fundamentally changed how SADFOs and Base Managers (BMs) must prepare their bases to support emergency management services. Defence now bears the fundamental liability to be capable of supporting the evacuation of populations in times of disaster. In large capital cities, this is a requirement that may for the most part go untested, due to the availability of alternate resources. However, in regional centres where access to facilities capable of housing a large number of IDPs is very challenging. Defence establishments with sizable accommodation resources will be more likely to be called upon to support local disaster management agencies under the defence aid to the civil community arrangements. Scope to ignore or refuse assistance due to operational reasons has largely been overtaken by the expectation that this is inevitable.

Years of neglecting the upkeep of base infrastructure, particularly in regional establishments, has resulted in a situation where the accommodations and infrastructure are only suitable for fit and healthy young men and women. However, when used as an evacuation centre, these bases need to be utilised by elderly, unfit, infirm, and disabled members of the Australian community. Furthermore, there can be no discrimination over who can and can't be accepted: a young family; elderly bachelor; recently released criminal; or infectious member of the community. The bases must be capable of accepting all members of the community and providing them with a place to shelter that protects them from the disaster. The bases should also be able to meet their needs, and more importantly, are safe and protect them during their stay. This is irrespective of the condition of the base infrastructure, and the availability of resources (staff, materiel or funding). This message was clearly relayed to me in my personal call with the CAF, who reiterated that we were in a 'no fail' situation, where "no" is not an acceptable answer. So what does this actually mean?

Breaking down the problem into a series of basic requirements, defence establishments needs to be, at the very least, capable of:

1. On and Off basing of IDPs via a tracking system that safely inducts IDPs onto the base, tracks their movements during their stay, and ensures that when they leave, all necessary materials are returned (keys, bedding, etc).
2. Accepting any member of society onto a secure facility and ensure that there are no breaches of security. There should also be policing to prevent criminal activities that could take place in the base. Should a crime occur, there needs to be a mechanism to ensure that the required information is captured, and provided to the local law enforcement authority for prosecution.
3. Providing the necessary resources to ensure that secure facilities on the base are protected and remain inaccessible by unauthorised personnel. Resources for vulnerable people are supported and protected and that all IDPs have access to the welfare and support services they require including medical, government support and financial services, a place to socialise and relax.
4. Providing accommodations for IDPs, including their pets (of all kinds) and personal effects (including weapons) that they brought from their homes.
5. Ensuring that the facilities being used by IDPs are WHS compliant, or at least have a valid risk assessment completed that highlights all possible mitigations that can be implemented to make aging facilities acceptable for use.
6. Liaising with emergency management authorities such as Regional Emergency Operations Centres, State Government Disaster Accommodation Agencies, and State Government Health Services.



Whilst only a short list, the implied tasks are many. More importantly, the implied tasks are such that they should not be left to the last minute or until the onset of a national disaster, before conducting some planning. These are wise words from someone who found themselves in this very situation.

The key to being successful in any contingency is to, at least, have an initial plan that can adapt and evolve with the situation at hand, particularly in situations that would unlikely to occur during normal operations, but likely to occur during a contingency. For example, most bases have a security plan, but none of those plans, consider the possibility of a criminal residing in close accommodations with minors and vulnerable persons. It is safe to assume that this scenario is unlikely to occur during normal business. For this reason, it is worthwhile devoting some planning time now into how the base would cope with this kind of situation.

The mechanism that SADFOs and BMs use to enact the support arrangements necessary to respond to national level contingencies is the Joint Framework for Base Accountabilities (JFBA). Despite the simple nature of this document, when it comes to command arrangements on a base during contingencies, nothing can prepare potential SADFOs for the reality. Because these arrangements are rarely enacted, there is often conflict and resistance, and not only between these individuals but with the Heads of Resident Units (HRUs) as well. The inherent nature of Defence members to carry on normal business, in spite of the situation at hand, can lead to some completely irrational discussions in the heat of the moment. An afternoon spent war gaming a situation as a base could yield weeks of positive return during a contingency.

The 2019/2020 bushfire season has completely changed the landscape for Defence; SADFOs and ABXOs need to be prepared to provide support to our own population in ways which we have never expected. There is now an expectation both from our politician and populace that Defence will provide as much support as we can in times of disaster. The time to prepare is now, SADFOs, BMs, ABXOs and HRUs need to be making necessary plans that open our bases to support our Emergency Services. Most importantly, these plans need to be rehearsed and reviewed accordingly.

## References

1. Huntly, D. (2020, 4 January) Dunns Road bushfire merging with East Ournie Creek, Green Valley fires, RFS warns, The Daily Advertiser ([Link](#))
2. Morrison, S. (2020, 4 January) Transcript: Press Conference – Australian Parliament House, Prime Minister of Australia ([Link](#)).

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