

## WAINUIOMATA BUSHFIRE FORCE

Concern about the damaging effects of frequent scrub fires lead County Town Committee member Bill McCabe to approach the local fire brigade with an offer to help with mop up of these fires. The CFO agreed, and a public meeting was arranged for the 25 February 1970. At that meeting, the name of the group was decided, and 24 men signed up as members for training. The WBF was never to be part of the brigade - or the subsequent NZ Fire Service – and operated under the Hutt County Council as its rural fire authority. Its sole purpose was to assist with vegetation fires, although this was later expanded to include civil defence duties. Fortuitously, the WBF formation was at a time when the NZ Forest Service was looking to expand local RFA capabilities, and supplied the new group with training and equipment, including a Wajax pump and hose. The Council supplied a little funding to purchase regas and other handtools.

Bill was to serve as Controller through to 1993. Other raw officers and crew bosses were selected, and a cascading telephone system devised to call out members to fires. The first fire attended was a small scrubbie on 19 January 1971. However, this was quickly followed by a monster bush fire of 9 February that lasted five days on Wainuiomata Hill. The enthusiasm of some of the foundation members waned, and additional recruitment was necessary in 1971. A raffle was organised to raise funding for a trailer to house our gear. However, the plan was quickly changed when it was learnt that Eastbourne Fire Brigade were selling off a 1946 Ford V8 fire engine. With community funding, it was purchased by us for \$300, and housed in the new station of the brigade. Although double-cabbed, the rear seating was taken up by hose packs. We also scored cast-off 70mm hose, and other waterway gear, for it.

Although the Forest Service was our mentor, its style of fire fighting didn't suit our fires. Based on our experience, we replaced flaked hose in the packs with hose rolled on the bight. We wrote our own training manual, emulating that of the Fire Service with SOP's based on standard drills: each crew member had specified tasks and gear to carry. Overalls and helmets were supplied; boot costs were subsidised. Radio communications were adopted. And it worked. While we had been formed with the CFO's agreement, that didn't mean brigade endorsement. That changed when, on 3 successive days in October 1972, we chased scrubbies up hills with hoselines, and put them out. The firemen watched from below. We weren't just mopping up; we were extending the hoselines they started with, and we were the ones dealing with the flames.



**1946 Ford V8, WBF's first appliance, pictured in 1971 after refurbishment.**



**1974 Toyota Landcruiser, WBF's 2nd appliance, pictured in 1975 after building.**



**WBF garage, erected in 1981, and pictured in 1989 after rear extension added to house more fire trucks.**

Although our administrative environment has continuously changed, the mode of operation has remained relatively constant ever since. We got our first 4WD vehicle in 1974, a Landcruiser, and a succession of replacements throughout. They have usually been heavily modified to suit our style of working. Our fleet makeup is 3 rural fire engines, one ute, a base pump vehicle and a control van, all 4WD. We prefer double cab vehicles - of late, they've been Mitsubishi Canters - so that they go out with a full crew. In the 1970s, membership stabilised at 40, and that has been maintained ever since. Annual turnover is low, and we're probably the biggest VRF in the country. In 1981, we built a garage adjacent to the station yard to house the 3 vehicles we then had; that has been extended twice, and will be replaced this year. We do from 6 to 40 calls over a season.

Other than having to retrieve our Landcruiser, misappropriated as part of brigade assets, the 1976 takeover of urban fire by the NZ Fire Service had little impact on us. The 1979 rural fire regulations finally gave us the proper legal recognition that had been missing for units like us. The next big change was the end of the Forest Service in 1987. We shared the concern of others at the loss of expertise, and rallied to FRFANZ on its formation in answer to this. As the WBF was not entitled to join the UFBA, Bill and I decided to work through FRFANZ to foster rural volunteer firefighters. FRFANZ membership was extended to VRFs - WBF becoming the first VRF member, competitions resumed, service honours instigated, etc. The UFBA has since opened its membership to VRFs. Our Hutt County Council ceased in 1988 and, for one year, we were under our own district council. In 1989, Wainuiomata got amalgamated with Lower Hutt, so we had another change in RFA. However, Hutt City Council contracted its RFA responsibility to Wellington Regional Council, and it was the latter that became our RFA. This was deemed illegal in 1995, when HCC took up its RFA responsibility through its Emergency Management Office. The WBF Controller was made DPRFO, and all WBF officers became RFO's.

From the 1970 offer to help the local brigade mop up scrub fires, the WBF became the operational arm of HCC, assuming control at all Hutt rural fires from any of five different brigades. And crews frequently go outside the district to assist with other RFA fires. By 1970, it had been recognised that gorse provided a nursery for native plants and that, provided fire was kept out of the gorse cover, natural regeneration would see bush return to the hills. In fact, limiting damage done by repetitive gorse fires was the only practical way of eradicating it. Bush is less fire-prone. After 40 years of effort, there is noticeably more bush on the hills, the numbers of fires have fallen, and the areas burnt have been reduced.



**Typical aftermath of rural-urban interface fire:  
Wyndrum Av, Lower Hutt, 12 Dec. 1997.**



**How to empty lockers quickly! The end of ex-NZFS 4WD International D1310, 4 March 1998. It was twitchy in the rear end!**



**Wingate, Lower Hutt, 7 ha fire, 7 February 2010**

Gavin Wallace,  
Controller,  
September 2010

