

# TRANSCRIPT

## CLOSED PROCEEDINGS

### ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

#### **Inquiry into the CFA training college at Fiskville**

Melbourne — 15 June 2015

#### Members

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny — Chair

Mr Bill Tilley

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Daniel Young

Mr Tim Richardson

#### Staff

Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

Research officer: Dr Kelly Butler

#### Witnesses

Mr Norman Carboon, and

Mr Bruce Carboon

**Necessary corrections to be notified to  
executive officer of committee**

## CLOSED PROCEEDINGS

**The CHAIR** — First of all, gentlemen, welcome and thank you for coming to provide evidence today.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript.

Following your presentation, if you do not mind, we will ask you some questions, and both of you are free to contribute to that. I understand this is a private hearing, but the transcript will be made public. Are you still okay with that situation?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — If you would like to give a short presentation, then we will ask you some questions.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Why am I here — that is what I think of — and why did I make a submission? One of the reasons for that was that several of my work colleagues are no longer here. They were dedicated instructors. They were special people because they could work with volunteers in my time. I am just going to quickly cover some of those requirements that you wanted. We used safe practices for that time, when we were teaching people to be firemen. I would like to repeat that: we used safe practices that related to that time in the life of the CFA at Fiskville.

I had 29 years experience before I was transferred to the training wing, and I lived on fire stations for 25 years, so I think I had some experience. I was appointed as an instructor, transferred, and in my tasks I observed and conducted practical firefighting. We used unmarked drums of flammable liquid for fires. This is the subject — the chemicals. The extinguishing agents that were used to fight those fires were recycled water, condemned mechanical foam and dry chemical powder. Then we used lesser amounts of BCF and high-expansion foam, which are deemed to be carcinogenic. In relation to our operation, I do not recall the shops and factories legislation being referred to, the EPA was in its infancy, and there was no WorkSafe. That was not like it is today.

The management of Fiskville for the years 78 to 81: the officer in charge was Norm Winn, and then it was Brian Potter. In their absence, the senior regional officers, Athol Graham and Bob Dixon, deceased, assumed responsibility via the chain of command. Staff meetings were conducted every Friday afternoon to discuss the upcoming week's program, and those with teaching activities were allocated their tasks. A duty officer was assigned for each day; they were responsible for courses to start on time. There were times when we were running three courses a day, seven days a week, so there was quite a fair bit of activity going on.

My medical history, which is one of the reasons why I am here: as a family we only had one serious illness, and that occurred while we were living at Fiskville. My son, Bruce, here was diagnosed with ulcerated colitis. I retired in 1988, and in 1999 I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had to undergo a radical prostatectomy. I am clear of cancer now, thank goodness. My daughter, Susan, developed an autoimmune skin pigment on her forehead, and she is currently being monitored. She only lived there on weekends and holidays. She was going to RMIT in Melbourne. My wife, Jean, over here developed serious allergic reactions to some of the prescribed pharmaceuticals that are now available today.

I want to conclude by saying you have my submission, I hope. It is fairly self-explanatory. I would like to spend the rest of my time answering questions regarding my submission and help the committee with their investigation.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. Norman, I am looking at the times that you were at Fiskville, and I know the health and safety legislation came in around 1985. Were you aware of whether they had any health and safety representatives or any training around the handling and storage of chemicals at that time?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — I am not aware, in my time.

**Mr McCURDY** — How was your relationship with Norm Winn and Brian Potter? Did you speak to them about any concerns that you had at the time?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — No, not really. We met every Friday afternoon, when possible. We also accepted our tasks. A duty officer had to sort out the run-of-the-mill problems. I was not really aware of any major problems. We did not see a lot of them, in my view. They were there for special meetings and parades, etc. I think they were busy.

**Mr McCURDY** — So it is only as your health and your family's health deteriorated when you left, and when your son got ill, that is when you felt there were more issues to look at at Fiskville?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — I do not believe we related it to Fiskville. We accepted what we were diagnosed with. From a family point of view, Bruce was the one who got ill while we were there. Amongst the officers I do not think we ever discussed a task that would cause us some illness, from my memory.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Thanks for coming in, Norm. Going back to that period of time, were there any concerns raised at all about practices at Fiskville during your time, in terms of safety, water quality — any concerns in that regard?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — The quality of the water was poor. We even put in our own water tanks so that we would have rainwater available, but that was due to the old cast-iron pipes. They had been there from back in the 1930s and had to be upgraded. That was the problem there. But, no, I cannot remember anybody raising a problem that was going to concern all of us.

**Mr YOUNG** — Cheers, Norm, for coming in. Could you just tell us a bit more about the drums and fuel and the handling of it — how it came in, what you did with it, the sort of process?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Right. This is the subject we are dealing with, I hope. Yes, I can remember drums coming in on large tray body trucks, unmarked and stored behind the teaching centre for fuel for fires. A tanker left Fiskville at intervals to bring back — those that came in, the drums, were from the petrochemical industry, the aircraft industry and the paint industry. We have found out since then what they were and why they disposed of them. We were probably a suitable location at that time, because there were not a lot of rules enforced.

We were told that some of them were dangerous — 'hazardous' was the word — so they were placed in this compound, which consisted of a wire fence. I would not know whether it was locked or not; I cannot remember. By word of mouth it got around the training wing that they were dangerous substances. I do not ever remember going in there. I did not have to. I went past it every day, just about. I do not know much about it; I cannot recall much about it. When I was there in the latter time there was talk about a leaking drum or drums, but it was only mentioned at one of our gatherings or something like that. The people who would know more about that than me would be the PAD operators. They were the fellows that stored them, stacked them, brought out the drums to be put in the dams to be burnt and decanted into containers to use on all sizes of fires.

**Mr YOUNG** — All done by hand?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Yes. They had forklifts, but a lot of manual handling as well.

**Mr YOUNG** — When you say you went around the rooms and it was dangerous, was that coming from people on the site or was it coming from the people delivering it?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — No, I never spoke to them. They used to come while we were working. It was just mentioned among us that some of the drums or one of the drums was leaking. Now I do not know what happened, who took on board that problem. I cannot tell you.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Thank you, Norman, and I am pleased to hear that you have overcome your prostate cancer. It is a special interest of mine. One in five men are diagnosed with prostate in Australia every year, so it is a very common cancer for men. My point, though, is in relation to the independent Fiskville investigation, in relation to the Joy report and the three risks, I suppose, associated with those that served at Fiskville: the low, medium and high risk. Do you see yourself in a particular risk area, and do you think that is a fair representation of the risks associated with some of the chemicals and water contamination you had to deal with in Fiskville?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Yes. We learnt that the AFFF foam became carcinogenic later on after we had been using it for some time. We knew about BCF. They were the two that were carcinogenic. They were declared.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Can you remember what year they stopped using those foams?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — It came about halfway through. It would be 79, 80 — that is that AFFF, the chemical foam. I asked my specialist when I had my cancer operation what causes prostate cancer, and he said, ‘We don’t know’. I do not think they really know yet.

**Ms WARD** — Before I get to my question, I just wanted to clarify: did you say that drums were put into the dams to be burnt?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — They were placed on the walls of the dam and the bungs were taken out and the contents oozed into the liquid inside the dam or pit for lighting a fire.

**Ms WARD** — Which dams?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — The dams were purposely made dams to hold large areas — —

**Ms WARD** — Is it the ones very close to the PAD?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — The dams inside the training ground. They were not all that deep; they were shallow. But when you are doing repetition training one group extinguishes them at the end of their training so you have to prime it for the next lot, so another one or two drums — whatever was required. Sometimes there was enough fuel left on top of the surface of the water to re-burn, but not always. The PAD operator would undo the bungs — they were up on the bank and tilted towards the large, open area — and it oozed out into the dam. We call them dams. They were purposely made for training, large pits — large, half the size of this room some of them.

**Ms WARD** — What are your thoughts on how safety was managed at Fiskville and the overall culture at Fiskville? Some have said it was a can-do culture and some of them have said it was a bit of a paramilitary culture.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — In our time it was one big happy family. We had playgroups, we had barbecues, and we all probably worked with one another.

**Ms WARD** — During your time people felt confident in talking to their superiors about issues or concerns, especially safety concerns they would have had?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — It may have come up but I cannot recall it being an issue. Would you please speak up, because I do have a slight hearing problem.

**Ms WARD** — Sorry. My question was about safety at Fiskville and the culture of addressing safety concerns. Do you think that people were comfortable in talking to their superiors about their fears or about any concerns they may have about the water or the use of chemicals?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — No, not in my time. It was up to an individual. If an individual was unhappy, he had to go and see the boss.

**Ms WARD** — And did that happen?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Not that I was aware of in that time. As I said at the beginning, we used practices that were accepted by everybody. The volunteers loved to go up there and extinguish fires. That was one of the reasons why they came to the training wing.

**Mr TILLEY** — You earlier said, specifically talking about the donated chemicals and flammable whatever they were, that, ‘We found out what they were’. How do you specifically know what those chemicals and other — —

**Mr N. CARBOON** — When we say ‘they know’, that is probably a broad statement. We did not really know what was in the drums.

**Mr TILLEY** — Also, adding to that, I just want to qualify that you realise why the companies were disposing of them.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Because I think we were one of the few locations who would accept condemned fuels or contaminated fuels.

**Mr TILLEY** — I am going to make a statement, and whether you agree or whether you can expand on it — this is not putting words in your mouth — but would it be fair to say that the petrochemical companies used the Country Fire Authority at Fiskville as a dumping ground for their waste?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — It was a bit of both ways in this because their staff used to come up for training and they would bring fuel with them, but when they were not there an occasional truckload of drums came up, but I was never told what the contents were.

**Mr TILLEY** — For the purposes of training, is it fair to say there was a quid pro quo arrangement to satisfy training requirements as they were in the day?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — They would come up in groups to do a week's training — theory and then practical. We accepted the fact that they brought their own fuel, because we could not afford to be buying thousands of litres of fuel to be burnt unnecessarily.

**Mr TILLEY** — That is great, Norm. You are particularly helpful there. Going way back, when you were there and you could see that the training activities were taking place, do you recall any particular thing that you saw or you could smell or a particular taste in your mouth as a result of burning off these chemicals?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — When I mentioned that I had 29 years experience, I learnt to respect fire in all situations and all conditions. I always thought of safety for everybody first. I was always warned by some inner sense that something was not right. Taste? Smell? Occasionally perhaps. And black? I saw black on plenty of them — results of combustion.

**Mr TILLEY** — Can you describe for us that smell, that taste that you might have experienced?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — It was more like products of combustion. There was hot air mixed with it, so which chemical produced it I do not know.

**Mr TILLEY** — Some of the other items that were donated from companies were valves and those types of things. Did you have anything to do with those? The valves?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — The valves? Some of them did organise their own teaching aids. They sent up engineers and they built their own training aids alongside of what we already had there. We accepted them because it added another avenue of training.

**Mr TILLEY** — Sure. During your time there, did you dismantle any of these valves at all?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Not in my time. It was usually the PAD operators with the help of perhaps a tradesman. I do not believe instructors did that work. I did not.

**Mr TILLEY** — Yes, but did you see at any stage any of the valves dismantled?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — No, I have seen them dumped in the yard somewhere. But no, I never looked at valves personally.

**Mr TILLEY** — That is helpful. Have you taken the opportunity to read the Joy report to any large extent?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Yes.

**Mr TILLEY** — You mentioned in your evidence that you do not recall any burying of any drums or dumping of any hazardous materials whilst you were at Fiskville.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Yes, I thought I would get that question — page 102. In the nearly three years I was there, there were damaged drums and empty drums. They never came to us in good order. They were probably

disposing of their drums at the same time. From what I know, the damaged drums were put back in the compound. I do not believe any drums were buried while we were there, but I understand something else took place after I left.

**Mr TILLEY** — When you understand, is that something that somebody told you or you heard by way of rumour or something else?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — I did not know until I read it in the paper.

**Mr TILLEY** — Okay. Just in relation to the Joy report, if I may, the time period that was in the reference for Professor Joy to do his investigation, do you have any comment in relation to that time period? He was limited to a particular time period between 79 and 99. Do you have any view on his terms of reference being limited to a time line?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — You want me to comment on what happened after I left Fiskville?

**Mr TILLEY** — No, we do not want you to talk about anything you do not know.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Say that again please.

**Mr TILLEY** — Do you have a view in relation to Professor Joy's terms of reference, where he was given a specific time line between 1979 to 1999, rather than from the time when, for example, CFA first took up residence to 2012?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — I followed the progress of the training wing. I felt it went downhill at one stage. I do not know about the management of it. I did not get invited back. Really I considered that when we were there it was a good experience for all of us. No, I had not heard anything about Fiskville until I started to read it in the daily papers. I get the *Fireman*. I read of all the courses and passing-out parades, which were normal procedures that happen. But when it came to starting to investigate what sort of fuels were used, I made a recommendation at one stage that it be approved of by our research section before we could use it, but I do not know whether that was ever considered.

**Mr TILLEY** — Just a final question if I may. In your time at Fiskville, do you know of any person who might be able to assist this inquiry with knowing about the circumstances surrounding the donations from petrochemical/paint companies, aviation producers and those types of things?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — John McPhee was the manager, and he was responsible for maintaining the fuel quantities for training. The instructors — we did not have to physically get fuels ready, because we had enough on our hands to do theory and then the practical training. At knock-off time, half past four, there was about half, three-quarters of an hour spent on cleaning equipment for the next course or the next lesson, from washing dirty hoses, trying to get your clothes a bit cleaner, pumps. The vehicles had to be restored so they were ready to be used for the next class, whatever came up, at the end of each day.

I think that is where I would have come in contact with probably more hazardous materials than I did probably out on the fireground, because I always kept out of it whenever I could. When we had to fight fires, we had to go in and extinguish them. Today they stand out on the street and look at them. I am an urban firefighter by the way, although I grew up in the country and started to go to fires — burning-off — when I was 14 years old. But anyhow, you do not want to know about that.

**The CHAIR** — That is a long career.

**Ms WARD** — I have just got a quick question to follow up from one of Bill's questions, which was regarding the transportation of chemicals and the companies that would come with their own chemicals. Did the companies always come with their own chemicals and never use the chemicals that were stored at Fiskville?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — It was probably a combination of both. They were placed in the compound, and I am not aware which drums were brought. They may have asked for their drums to be used. They probably did, because they were getting rid of their waste materials.

**Ms WARD** — That is my question. Were they using waste materials for their own work?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — The PAD operators were the ones that were really involved in the dirty work.

**Ms WARD** — Sure.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — We were next because we were instructors, but we never had to do the physical getting ready as such. Some did. You helped occasionally if he was struggling, but I did not have to do it. It was nearly always ready for me. If not, the duty officer was there to see that training was ready to start.

**Ms WARD** — Okay.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Norm. What you had to tell us was really informative, and of course you can see we had lots of question. Thank you.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — I enjoy questions.

**The CHAIR** — None that you could not answer.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — No. I feel that my colleagues who are gone would have said similar statements to what I have said — if for our time.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, we have heard that.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — The practices in our time were accepted by everybody. I still think they did their best, but at some stage after I retired I got the impression things went downhill a bit and may not have been managed the same. I do not know; I was not there.

**The CHAIR** — You were still with the CFA, were you? This is where I got mixed up. You were only at Fiskville for a couple of years.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — I was promoted. I retired in 88.

**The CHAIR** — That is right. So you were with the CFA up until 1988?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, but you did not have any more contact with Fiskville after 78, 79 or 80?

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Not really. Several of my colleagues — we got promoted out and new officers came in.

**The CHAIR** — That make sense, so thanks. I was a bit mixed up. Thanks for your time.

**Mr N. CARBOON** — Thank you, everybody.

**Witnesses withdrew.**