

# In the line of fire

Rural fire brigades rely on the service of a loyal band of volunteers. Angela Tufvesson met 20-year-old apprentice carpenter Jake Cannon who juggles his trade career with a volunteer position at the Rural Fire Service in the ACT.

As a young boy Jake Cannon aspired to a career as a firefighter. But unlike most young boys who would soon forget their childhood dreams, Jake joined the ACT Rural Fire Service (RFS) aged just 16.

Now 20-years-old and a relative veteran of the service, having completed his fifth fire season, Jake is also pursuing his second childhood ambition. He is a third year carpentry apprentice in Canberra and says juggling the two roles can be difficult.

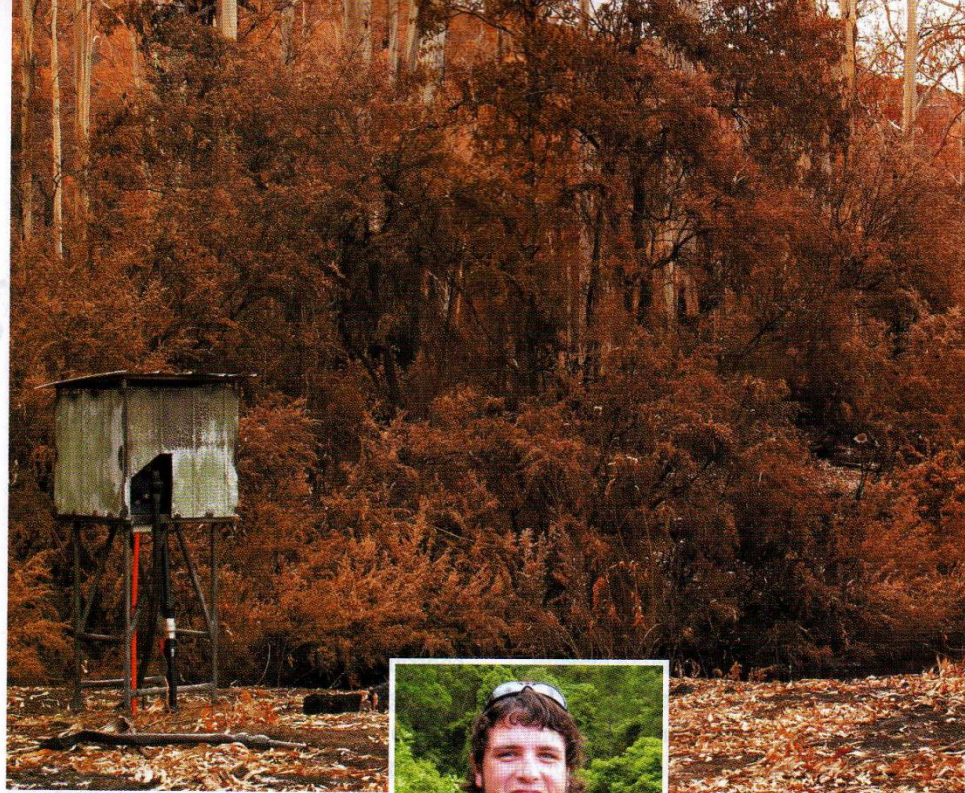
"I work for a small business – there are only seven of us – so it can be a burden financially and in terms of productivity for my boss to let me go. I take leave without pay but the company still loses productivity," he says.

Jake fought the Victorian bushfires in February and says his boss was happy to give him time off.

"My boss was really good with it this year – I probably had about a week off work. I was getting asked nearly every week whether I could go away as the fire season was so extreme.

"I turned them away a couple of times and then asked my boss if I could take time off. We worked out times that would suit us both so everyone was happy."

Stationed in Beechworth in north eastern Victoria, Jake says that like most places he has visited with the RFS, the job was made easier by the generous hospitality of the locals.



20-year-old apprentice carpenter Jake Cannon is a volunteer with the Rural Fire Service in the ACT and fought the Victorian bushfires in February.

"One of the things I always notice is the hospitality of the people. In Beechworth everyone was really nice and glad we were there giving up our time.

"I was in Beechworth on the second deployment that left the ACT nearly a week after Black Saturday.

"Where we were wasn't too bad. We didn't see the sort of devastation that was in other parts of Victoria, mainly because of where we were positioned.

"Some of those places in the Marysville and Kinglake area just wouldn't have stood a chance. An event like the Victorian bushfires is going to rewrite everything that people know."

Jake says that because rural fire services rely on the support of a loyal group of volunteers, numbers depend on employers and their leniency in granting staff leave.

"With the Victorian fires, in a way my employer almost felt obliged because it was such a huge event. But I know of a lot of people who had trouble getting time off – it comes down to your employer."

He notes that volunteer numbers are slowly dwindling as older members retire and cites this as the main reason for his support of the Extreme Weather Heroes campaign.

The program is run by Green Cross Australia (GCA) and aims to use young

volunteers to attract other young people to join organisations such as the SES and Red Cross.

GCA's American affiliate Global Green is working to rebuild communities that have been devastated by extreme weather – for example, New Orleans – in a greener, more sustainable way.

The organisation is also taking steps towards rebuilding Victoria after the bushfires, and is in discussions with the rural community of Flowerdale.

In his role as an 'extreme weather hero' Jake communicates with the target audience using social networking tools like Facebook, You Tube, Twitter and Flickr.

For the moment he plans to complete his apprenticeship and maintain his commitment to the RFS. And in the longer term Jake aspires to a career in sustainable building – and, of course, an employer who supports his firefighting endeavours. ■

**Extreme Weather Heroes**  
[www.extremeweatherheroes.org](http://www.extremeweatherheroes.org)

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