

# AJEM BOOK REVIEW

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Bell, Travis ed. (2005) *Queensland State Emergency Service: 30th Anniversary Book*, Counter Disaster and Rescue Services, Department of Emergency Services, Queensland

Keys, Chas (2005) *In times of crisis: the story of the New South Wales State Emergency Service*, Focus Publishing, New South Wales ISBN 1 920683 58 5

Given the emphasis that has been put on the role of volunteers in Australian emergency services since the United Nations declared *International Year of Volunteers* in 2001, and in particular the November 2005 edition of AJEM showcasing the work of volunteers, it is gratifying to see the origins and current activities of two long-standing volunteer emergency services being documented. The two books tell similar stories however in very different styles and perhaps targeted at quite different audiences.

Commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Queensland State Emergency Service (QSES), Bell's soft-cover "snapshot" (the term used by former director Ken Cullum in his brief introduction) is clearly aimed at the volunteer members of that organisation. It broadly traces its origins from the State Civil Defence Organisation in the Cold War era to the Service's formal establishment following the enactment of the *State Counter Disaster Organisation Act* (SCDO) in 1975. The text details its recent history and its current role and activities.

The book is interspersed with recollections of many former and present officers and members. Bell includes a chronology of State Directors and ministers responsible and lists all of the recipients of the Emergency Service Medal dating back to 1999.



Bell gives brief accounts of a variety of incidents, operations and rescues in which the Service has been involved, and outlines how the Service's roles and functions have evolved over time.

Keys' account of the New South Wales State Emergency Service (NSWSES) covers somewhat similar ground but, where the Queensland publication is patently a "commemoration", its NSW counterpart purports to be, as its dust-jacket indicates, "at once a history, a celebration, a critique and a search for the essence of the SES". Where Bell's target audience is primarily the QSES volunteer, Keys' hard-cover book is more likely to find an Australia-wide audience in public administration and emergency management specialists as well as students of the volunteer emergency services.

The first quarter of the book offers a detailed and analytical history of the development of the NSW organisation, and deals frankly with the many issues and problems in leadership, policy and practice which have hindered the organisation at various times (issues and problems which it shared with many of its other State and Territory counterparts). Most of the second

quarter is devoted to studies of the three major functions currently performed by the NSWSES—flood management, storm damage response and operations in support of other services. Each study offers brief accounts of a number of critical incidents and operational responses. In this sense, the first half of the book presents an historical perspective and critiques the past and current practice of the Service.

The last half of the book represents both "celebration" and "a search for the essence of the SES". Keys presents a variety of unit stories and recounts outstanding individual performances, an upbeat picture of today's SES (with appropriate credit being given to Hori Howard, its Director General in the critical 1989-2001 years). Keys provides an analysis of what it takes to be an effective member of the organisation and demonstrates the need for continuing government and community support. The book is well indexed, and illustrations and photographs complement the text.

Keys' book includes 44 pages of appendix listing the volunteers who died on duty, those who have been award recipients, group and unit citations, and staff and unit memberships as of 2005.

Both publications tell of organisations which had their origin in the civil defence concerns of the 1960s but which are now part of a multi-agency, comprehensive and integrated approach to broader community safety issues. The State-based stories they tell are valuable and informative in themselves, but together they point to an evolution in disaster and emergency management which ranks as a uniquely Australian achievement.