



# TROOPS GET STUCK IN TO HELP AS WAKEFIELD BURNS

By Judith Martin

As heat, dust, smoke and soot swirled around them, Defence Force firefighters worked long hours helping extinguish the Wakefield, Nelson bushfires earlier this month.

Our fire fighters were never far from the frontline, using hoses, hand tools and shovels, working alongside bull dozers and excavators to tackle the 2000-plus hectare fire. Some of the military firefighters were volunteers, working alongside their Regular Force mates to help out in what has been crisis time for large parts of the Nelson community.

Not far away a team of Army chefs from 3CSSB was equally busy, cooking three meals a day in field conditions for up to 700 emergency responders who were part of the operation.

Yet more soldiers and airmen were employed conducting roaming patrols, and establishing cordons throughout the most at-risk areas of Nelson. Personnel from the RNZAF were first on the ground in Wakefield helping extinguish fires and establish cordons.

The 75-strong Army team's Forward Operating Base is at Centennial Park Rugby Clubrooms north of Brightwater, and they are living, as *Army News* went to print, in tented accommodation.

Reservist personnel from 2/4 RNZIR were amongst the first emergency responders on the scene, helping with cordons and evacuations.

Service personnel have been teaming up with their police counterparts to help evacuate people, and to escort them back to

their houses when necessary. They have also been escorting people to check their farms and livestock.

Major Rik Moore, the NZDF commander in the local area, said the soldiers had been very well received by locals, many of whom were upset and frightened by the fires, and having to leave their endangered homes. "Often soldiers who go to buy a coffee have it paid for by some grateful person or they are not charged at all – people are just really pleased to see them here."

MAJ Moore said the experience had been beneficial for a large number of the soldiers who were new to their role and had not experienced anything like the fires before. "They have been working alongside police, and have been fully immersed in an emergency situation. It has been an excellent real-life learning experience."

Land Component Commander Brigadier Jim Bliss, who visited the troops in action in Nelson said he was impressed with how engaged his soldiers were in the task and wanting to make a difference helping the people of Wakefield. "Early on, it was the soldiers from the region supporting their own community, but equally those that I talked to expressed how they hoped this would be the type of support their home towns would get if the need arose in the future."

"The professionalism and preparedness of our troops was

commented on by all that I engaged with, in particular our firefighters and caterers who all felt were outstanding. Similarly, many people were surprised how junior our Army and Air Force personnel were but impressed by their sense of duty, empathy and desire to help.

"Our ability to integrate with other Government agencies, Civil Defence, Fire and Emergency New Zealand and other emergency services, is becoming second nature. The relationships we have at planning, command and control, and support on the ground level speak volumes of our people and their willingness to get stuck in and help."

Chef Private Joshua Frazer said he was really enjoying cooking for the huge crowd of emergency responders and his own Defence colleagues. "This is pretty much what I joined for – doing something useful when people in New Zealand are in need."



*Clockwise from top: A firefighter tackles the scrub in an effort to quell the blaze.*

*Food is prepared for the emergency responders.*

*Fire fighters serve themselves Army-prepared lunch.*

*Helicopters used monsoon buckets at the height of the fires.*

*Damping down charred vegetation.*