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**fire** ENVIRONMENT  
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Title: **Fire in Myer Department Store  
Hobart, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2007**

Author: Gavin Freeman

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# Tasmania Fire Service



**Fire in Myer Department Store - Hobart**

**22<sup>nd</sup> September 2007**

**Presented by  
District Officer Gavin Freeman**

## **Myer Department Store Fire - Hobart**

Presenter: **District Officer, Gavin Freeman**, Incident Controller for the first operational period of the fire.

The fire in the Myer, Murray Street department store in central Hobart occurred on the 22 September 2007, the day after the 2007 AFAC fire conference in Hobart.

The Myer building was built in 1908 and consisted of 4 levels, including 1 below ground and contained a variety of merchandise ranging from cosmetics and records through to clothing and home wares.

The building was conjoined with a similar Myer building fronting onto Murray Street in Hobart as well as the Cat and Fiddle Arcade shopping complex, Fletcher Jones and Ellison Hawker Newsagency. The store was a shopping icon and pivotal to the main city block in Hobart.

What started out as a call on the Direct Brigade alarm culminated in one of the largest fires of its type in Tasmania's history with an the damage estimate now at \$AUS 200 Million. At the height of the fire every available career firefighter in Hobart was on scene, in addition to some volunteer crews a total of in excess of 100 firefighters. Volunteer crews were also providing fire coverage for the Hobart area throughout the night.

### **The Response**

The Hobart Fire Brigade responded to a Direct Brigade Alarm at the Myer, Liverpool Street department store on the 22 September 2007 shortly after 3 PM, which meant normal trading was underway. Pre-determined resources are 1 pumper crewed by an Officer and Three firefighters.

On proceeding to the zone indicated light smoke was observed and the OIC gave the chief warden an order to Evacuate. Evacuation was complete 13 minutes from this time (19 minutes from time of call)

Two crews in breathing apparatus and using thermal imaging equipment were having difficulty in locating source of the smoke, there. On proceeding to the first floor they detected a 20 metre by 2 metre strip of heat in first floor cavity. 2 firefighters exited via the stairs for a hose line, while the other 2 firefighters remained and prepared the area for work and collected Dry Chemical extinguishers from around the walls. There was still good visibility and little sign of heat. Firefighters decided to open the floor and attack the fire with extinguishers.

At this point conditions deteriorated immediately to zero visibility and a column of flame erupted from the floor cavity. The 2 firefighters attempted to retreat but subsequently became disorientated. They sent a distress signal via breathing apparatus communications. Only 1 firefighter heard the call as he was exiting the building and retraced his steps to the top of the stairs where he encountered very heavy smoke, he made a conscious decision to progress 3 metres in from the top of the stairs which was

the last place he saw the other 2, fortunately he found the firefighters laying on the floor and guided them to safety. Subsequently this firefighter was awarded a Chief Officer's commendation for bravery.

By now the ceiling had started to collapse on the ground floor and interior crews in reported it was becoming untenable therefore offensive attack was suspended in that sector and the focus shifted to the Murray Street and Cat & Fiddle Arcade entrances to the store.

At approximately this time I arrived and after a briefing assumed overall control of the fire. There had been requests sent for further assistance and additional crews were starting to arrive. Sectors were established and my main focus at that point was to stop it extending beyond the Liverpool street part of the building. We were still restricted in our offensive attack efforts due to a shortage of crews given the deep penetration that had to be undertaken and the subsequent fatigue on firefighters. Our immediate strategy was to persevere with offensive attack from the two unburnt sides that were accessible by positioning hose line crews at each fire door at each level on as well as preventing spread to the Newsagency at the Northern end with an exposure line.

The interagency cooperation was fantastic from the outset, a command post and breathing apparatus control point control had been established and the initial planning meeting comprised our operations, planning and logistics section, Tasmania Police, Aurora Energy, Hobart City Council. This cooperative approach was pivotal to the outcome and the initial relationships that were established ensured a smooth transition from the response to the recovery phase.

It was very obvious that smoke was spreading rapidly through all floors of the Liverpool street store. Ventilation was problematic, it was to dangerous to put people on the roof and the risk in breaking windows on the Liverpool Street side was considered inappropriate given we had crews still manoeuvring inside and it would have been on the upwind side of the building. We were still very conscious that opening this fire up at the wrong point may well have resulted in it going to the other side of the city block due the conjoined nature of the buildings.

Once crews were in position on all unburnt sides we were able to utilise the hydraulic platform to attack the fire from the front. At this point it was realised that there had been stud walls constructed in behind the windows. This had obviously compounded our ventilation woes and possibly aided the upward progress of the fire. These walls were breached by firefighters providing respite to the fire crews inside and allowed them to sustain the attack to contain the fire within the established boundaries.

There were two occasions where the fire tried to extend outside our boundaries. Once through floor beams into the conjoined newsagency and later in the night when an air conditioning unit fell from the top of the Myer building and penetrated through the roof of the Cat & Fiddle Arcade behind it. On both occasions the fire spread was quickly cut off.

## **Building Performance**

The building was over 100 years old and over that time had undergone many transformations and modifications. There were varying levels of fire separation and fire detection and suppression systems.

Essentially the building on the right hand side in Liverpool Street while conjoined, was a separate building with walls independent of each other which helped prevent lateral fire spread. The building on the left containing the Ellison Hawker newsagency was structurally integrated into the Myer Liverpool building at the time of construction. The timber bearers for the first and second floors of both buildings pass through the wall separating the two buildings

This integration of structural components led to the fire in the Myer Liverpool Street building extending into the first and second floor of the Ellison Hawker building.

This was compounded once the first and second floors in the Myer Liverpool Street collapsed and the bearers were “pulled” from the notches in the wall creating an opening between the two buildings allowing fire to enter the wall cavity then spread into the open floor areas.

The closing of the fire rated roller shutter in the opening between Myer and Cat & Fiddle was controlled by smoke detectors either side of the opening connected to the Fire Indicator Panel, staff did confirm this door was closed at the time of evacuation. The sliding fire door on the First Floor, Cat and Fiddle side of the opening was closed between 3.20 and 3.30 pm.

There were four (4) openings between the Myer Liverpool and Myer Murray Street buildings. One on each of the basement, ground, first and second floors.

The openings on Basement and Ground Floor levels were glass smoke doors only. The first and second floor openings had sliding doors controlled by glass bold links. Firefighters were deployed to all of these doors to ensure the fire integrity in those areas was maintained. Numerous sprinkler heads also operated on level 2 prior to crews reaching that point as fire had breached the sliding fire door, this was due to it not being fully closed as some debris wedged it open.

Essentially, where fire doors were installed they operated correctly and contributed to the prevention of lateral fire spread. The exception being the door that did not fully close, however the sprinkler system did it's job in that area until fire crews got into position. The lower level smoke doors would not have held without firefighter intervention and I am not convinced the fire doors would have either given the intensity of the fire.

## **Operations within the operation:**

### HazMat

The discovery of asbestos in the cladding of the building meant there was a HazMat component to the incident right through the overhaul and investigation phase.

### Demolition

The main walls of the fire affected building were structurally unsafe and had to be demolished, obviously this impacted on the fire investigation process. This was managed by ensuring the demolition engineer and the Fire Investigation team were integral parts of the incident management structure and attended planning meetings on a regular basis

### Urban Search and Rescue (USAR)

In one section of the building was the staff locker room, most of the staff had important personal items in those lockers. As this particular part of the building had partially collapsed, recovering those items presented a challenge, we subsequently mounted a USAR operation with great success.

### Recovery

The recovery effort started shortly after the response and was in full swing by the day after the fire. This fire was in the heart of the city shopping precinct, it not only affected the Myer premises and business, which had the obvious affect of displacing employees, but also impacted upon many other business' in the city. It kept people out of the city and actually had an emotional toll on people who really felt a genuine loss of something that had been there all their lives. There was enormous community and political pressure to restore normality as quickly as possible. To achieve this an assessment team was established consisting of experts in;

- Fire safety
- Asbestos and air quality monitoring
- Electricity
- Structural integrity

This team was a combination of people from various agencies and were able to assess and subsequently clear in excess of 100 premises, containing multiple tenancies in a matter of 2 ½ days.

## **Key Lessons:**

### Command

We are certainly better situated than we were 15 years ago in terms of our incident command structures and generally the systems in place worked well. It is my personal view that the ICS concept of modular expansion from the ground up does not allow for the rapid escalation of the command structure that is an absolute necessity and is pivotal to a successful outcome. There needs to be arrangements in place that bring an IMT over the top of the 1<sup>st</sup> response structure, this allows the people who have got in on the ground level to continue with what they have set up with support from senior command people.

### Interoperability

No single agency can handle an incident of this complexity from start to resolution including recovery. Sharing of resources and integration of key people from participating agencies at an early stage is crucial. Also, early inclusion in the incident management structure of areas within the emergency response agencies that have a role to play, like building safety and fire investigation. We are fairly well positioned in this regard, however more work can be done on operational preparedness.

### Relationships

Establishing relationships is 90% of pre incident planning. The fact that our command personnel were on a first name basis with key people from Police, Ambulance, SES, Aurora and a range of other agencies that were involved, enabled immediate positive and effective action. The benefit of multi agency training and exercises is not limited to improving technical capability.

### Whole of Government Approach

It was high profile incident and many individuals and agencies wanted to contribute in some way. The coordination of this called for a whole of Government approach. It was particularly challenging balancing the political pressure to return people to their businesses and hence the city to normal against ensuring that premises were actually safe to be reoccupied. Pivotal to this aspect was effective information management and transfer between stakeholders.

### Tactical Operations

As our roles have expanded and crew numbers rationalised some traditional practices (such as routine site familiarisations) have been seen as superfluous and largely ceased, in some instances this may impact on what should be 'bread & butter' operations. The urban environment is constantly changing and appropriate emphasis must be placed on systems to keep abreast of that change.

We have embraced technology such as thermal imaging cameras, but have we provided adequate training? Not only do we need to show our people how and when to use them, but to interpret what they see when using them.

As we become more dependant on technology such as breathing apparatus communications our procedures have become such that we rely upon them, therefore, the technology must be very robust and not fail or, at the very least we must ensure we understand the limitations of technology so we don't develop unrealistic expectations of it's capability.

*Authors note: At the time of writing this fire is the subject of a coronial enquiry which precludes discussion on some aspects including the fire cause.*