



INSIGHTS

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EX-ADF MEMBERS CAN BE A USEFUL RESOURCE IN A DISASTER

Utilising Ex-ADF Members in Disasters



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Australia has experienced some of its worst natural disasters this century. As a result of climate change, natural disasters are expected to become more frequent and severe in their impact on communities, flora and fauna.

In the last 20 years, major catastrophes have included:

- The 'millennium drought' from 2001 to 2009 across multiple states with devastating stock and crop losses.
- Cyclones 'Larry' (2006) and 'Yasi' (2011) in Queensland.

- the 2009 'Black Saturday' bushfires in Victoria which killed 173 people.
- major floods in Queensland (2011) and Queensland/NSW (2022).
- the 2019-20 'Black Summer' bushfires across multiple states.
- COVID-19 pandemic across the entire nation beginning in early 2020.

One thing in common for all of these disasters is the required emergency service response.

While the re-building phase is undertaken over months and often years by existing tradespeople and professionals, it is the initial search and rescue followed by securing temporary accommodation, food, water, clothing and medical care that requires timely activation.

After the emergency response has commenced by highly trained first responders (police, fire brigades, state emergency services), state and territory

governments can make a request to the federal government for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to assist operations.

The ADF in times of disaster

The ADF, comprising the three services of navy, army and air force, has provided assistance in natural disasters for many decades.

For example, the Royal Australian Navy embarked on its largest peacetime disaster relief operation, involving 13 ships, 11 aircraft and some 3000 personnel, in the 1974 Cyclone Tracey disaster which killed 71 people and destroyed much of Darwin.¹

More recently, the support requested of the ADF in the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires resulted in the first ever compulsory call-out of ADF Reserves to provide emergency functions to support and enable firefighter and emergency services.²

It was fortunate that Australia had withdrawn most of its troops from Afghanistan at the time of these bushfires meaning more ADF members being available than might otherwise have been the case.

The ADF's capabilities to be used for domestic disasters is dependent on the extent to which it has committed personnel to overseas conflicts or other missions.

The ADF is not a large military organisation by world standards, even when taking into account the federal government announcement this month that it will be increasing Australia's permanent personnel by around 30 per cent by 2040, some 18,500 men and women.³

As at 30 June 2021, it comprised approximately 90,000 permanent and reserve sailors, soldiers and airmen /airwomen.⁴

	<i>Perm.</i>	<i>Res.</i>	<i>Total</i>
Navy	15,285	3,932	19,217
Army	29,399	20,123	49,522
Air Force	14,885	5,685	20,570
Total	59,569	29,740	89,309

The 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements noted that the public perception was that the ADF could assist in every aspect and was always readily available when in fact this is not the case nor is it a reasonable expectation.⁵

The ADF is primarily for wartime and peacekeeping operations.

The effects of climate change are predicted to result in more frequent and more severe natural disasters like the recent 2022 Queensland/NSW floods which appear to have caught authorities off-guard.

The geo-political tensions in some parts of the world, for example, in the South China Sea and Taiwan, and the invasion

of Ukraine by Russia, means that the ADF may again be more active overseas. Australians therefore should not expect to always receive the same level of support from their military in future disasters.

It is now time for major reform of how governments and their agencies respond to natural disasters.

Organisational models for utilising ex-ADF members in disasters

One of the reasons the ADF is requested to assist in natural disasters is that it has well-disciplined personnel that operate within a well organised structure with clear chains of command and accountability.

ADF men and women also have useful skillsets, from working with ropes and tarpaulins, to driving trucks and operating forklifts and bobcats, to using inflatable boats and piloting helicopters.

Each year, 5,000 to 6,000 permanent force men and women leave the services and they take their skills and experience with them.

While some may leave the ADF because of physical injury or psychological trauma or reaching retirement age, many leave for other reasons including simply a desire to return to civilian life.

In this regard, there are likely to be many thousands of both ex-ADF permanent and reserve personnel who have left the services in the past 15-20 years who are capable of assisting in times of need.

Three possible models for the federal and/or state/territory governments to consider are:

1. Expansion of the existing state emergency services by actively recruiting ex-ADF members

This option is the simplest and likely to be the least costly of the three presented, that is, to utilise existing state governments agencies. The SES'

operate as separate organisations in the various Australian states and territories.

Cultural fit and the desire to join would need to be examined.

2. Utilising an existing organisation like the Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL)

Founded 100 years ago, the RSL is a support organisation for people who have served or are serving in the ADF. It has an existing hierarchical organisational structure with state branches and district and sub-branches located in many towns.

The RSL is well recognised and respected in the community.

An 'active' stream or membership within the RSL could be formed with grant funding from government/s to support the purchase of uniforms and the like along with dedicated depots, trucks and heavy equipment.

This would also be of value to people transitioning out of the military to civilian life and may be the most attractive option for them.

3. Federal and/or state/territory governments creating a new organisation

This option would likely operate in a similar way to option 2 however government/s would be directly responsible for the recruitment and management of ex-ADF members.

Recruitment would not necessarily be limited to ex-ADF men and women.

This option is likely to be the most expensive and challenging to establish.

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Stephen Thornton is an ex-ADF soldier and current member of RSL Queensland. The views expressed in this document are his own.

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www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/disaster-relief-cyclone-tracy-and-tasman-bridge
2. 'Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements', 28 October 2020 (p.187).
3. Australian Government (Department of Defence) 2022. 'Defence workforce to grow above 100,000'. Accessed 14.03.2022
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4. Australian Government (Department of Defence) 2021. 'Annual Report 20-21'.
5. 'Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements', 28 October 2020 (pp.190-192).