

# SENIOR FIRE OFFICERS

Strategic, Operational and Tactical Leaders  
of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service



*Photo courtesy of Grant Spicer*



A publication commissioned by...

**QUEENSLAND FIRE AND RESCUE - SENIOR OFFICERS UNION OF EMPLOYEES**

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The Queensland Fire and Rescue - Senior Officers Union of Employees (QFR-SOU)<sup>1</sup> is a professionally led industrial organisation operating within the Queensland industrial relations framework. In the interests of its members the QFR-SOU leads the profile of senior fire officers in partnership with the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS).

This QFR-SOU publication introduces senior fire officers and communicates the valuable function they perform in the QFRS.

### An overview

Senior fire officers have a proud history in the fire service in Queensland; a service that is built on a unique history of brave individuals with strong values to serve and protect the community from the ravages of fire. This cultural continuum with rank, symbols, traditions, strategies and tactics forms the fabric of the service.

In modern times the senior fire officer role has expanded from the tradition of firefighting and commanding crews to a professional, skilled and experienced commander, leader and manager of the 'all-hazard emergency frontline' and also the 'board room'.

This expanding role is driven by the high degree of internal and external change that typifies a modern organisation<sup>2</sup>. A fire and rescue service experiences change like no other and the organisation (and all its component parts) must be in a constant state of readiness and agility to smoothly transition to emergency response operations, which may occur locally, interstate or internationally.

The senior fire officers' evolving role is commensurate with this and the expectation of the QFRS to deliver the right resources, in the right time, to the right place to alleviate any emergency, disaster and/or humanitarian situation.

### Who are senior fire officers?

Senior fire officers are the professions strategic, operational and tactical leaders. During emergency response operations senior fire officers are clearly identified by their red helmet and associated striping.



The senior fire officer cohort is represented by the ranks of **Inspector**, **Superintendent** and **Chief Superintendent**. Senior fire officers occupy both state and regionally based positions to lead and deliver strategic and operational outcomes in partnership with the Assistant Commissioners, Deputy Commissioner and Commissioner.



Photo courtesy of Grant Spicer

### How many senior fire officers are there?

Senior fire officer modelling is based on span of control and surge command capacity for emergency response operations, including multiple, large scale and/or long duration incidents.

In the current QFRS model, there are 13 Chief Superintendents, 28 Superintendents, and 102 Inspectors who are responsible for 24/7 readiness and emergency response of approximately:

- 2019 permanent firefighters (including station officers),
- 2020 auxiliary firefighters,
- 242 urban fire and rescue stations,
- 125 fire communication officers,
- 7 fire communication centres, and
- 332 public service officers (non-uniformed).

This human and resource capacity performs, enables and supports emergency response capability for every foreseeable (and unforeseeable) emergency situation that may occur within Queensland's geographic area of 1,730,648 km<sup>2</sup>.

### Have the numbers changed overtime?

Senior fire officers currently represent only 3.4%<sup>3</sup> of the QFRS urban fire officer capacity. This percentage of senior fire officers has not significantly changed in 20 years, despite the significant 129% increase in fire calls over the same period.

Indicator	1991-92	2011-12	% Increase
Qld population	2,977,810 <sup>4</sup>	4,537,721 <sup>5</sup>	52%
QFRS fire calls <sup>6</sup>	29,913 <sup>7</sup>	68,489 <sup>8</sup>	129%
Qld public servants	162,359 <sup>9</sup>	243,250 <sup>10</sup>	50%
Permanent firefighters	1,800	2,019	12%
<b>Senior fire officers</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>7%</b>



### Who can be a senior fire officer?

As the professions strategic, operational and tactical leaders, senior fire officers are shaped from their first day as a recruit firefighter.

A firefighter progresses through the ranks after a rigorous path of obtaining skills, experience, knowledge and also after formal learning and development has been achieved. This path forms the underpinning requirements for a senior fire officer's higher level role as a commander, leader and manager.

Entering the senior fire officer ranks however does not preclude the continuation of skills maintenance, experience and development. Senior fire officers are required to:

- maintain technical skills, such as annual breathing apparatus competency maintenance, and develop new technical or specialist skills as required,
- maintain and continuously develop incident management skills and experience, and
- respond to and command complex and escalating emergency incidents.

### What do senior fire officers do?

Senior fire officers perform diverse and inter-connected functions as commanders, leaders, managers and change agents. Senior fire officers must therefore have the adaptability to transition through tactical, operational and strategic building blocks of the organisation.

Senior fire officers:

- respond under lights and sirens to emergency incidents to perform frontline functions at the tactical, operational or strategic level, as the situation demands,
- operate in a complex emergency environment which is characterised by the 'high 3 operations' of high technology (reliance on information and communications), high intensity (intense time pressures and urgency) and high reliability (errors can lead to unacceptable consequences),
- perform high level command and incident management functions in regional, state and inter-agency operations centres for emergency and disaster incidents and major events, including high profile, security and global political and sporting events,

- perform a variety of regionally and organisation wide functions in formulating and/or implementing the service's strategy for enhanced emergency response capability,
- operationalise and implement whole of government priorities and strategic objectives of the department,
- establish and maintain critical relationships with superior and sub-ordinate officers, the public, industry and also the interface of local and state Government, and
- perform a mentoring role to develop officers of a lower rank.

### Are senior fire officers frontline?

Yes.

Senior fire officers have a frontline emergency response role at a number of levels – tactical, operational and strategic. All of which contribute to and enable the effective management of an emergency incident whether that be a singular incident, multiple incidents and/or a large scale incident over a sustained period.

This frontline role has also been formally recognised by the Queensland government<sup>11</sup>.



### Is the hierarchy of command relevant?

Yes.

By virtue of rank, Inspectors, Superintendents and Chief Superintendents are the fire service's most direct, tactical mantle of leadership<sup>12</sup> to ensure operational effectiveness in preparation for and also during emergency response operations.

A fundamental input to QFRS capability is command and control, and the leadership paradigm of 'commander's intent' and 'mission command'. Senior fire officers fulfil commanding roles during frontline operations in their on-call capacity, which is crucial particularly for escalating operations.

The structure and function of the QFRS hierarchy of command enables the scaling of command capacity to meet demand and manage crews to effectively resolve the emergency situation. Every rank has an important role and function in the command continuum.

### Are senior fire officers leaders?

Yes.

Senior fire officers are skilled leaders who coordinate human effort and resources to achieve outcomes by operationally effective means<sup>13</sup>.

In leadership circles there is (still) an ongoing debate about whether leaders are born or made<sup>14</sup>. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, by virtue of rank, senior fire officers are expected to perform a leadership role and be adaptable to the situational context of frontline operations and also the 'board room'. This expectation is fundamental to the delivery of operational effectiveness of the QFRS and meeting the expectations of the QFRS public.

### Are senior fire officers bureaucrats?

No.

A bureaucrat is typically identified as an official or administrator in government concerned with procedural correctness, working by fixed routine.

Some functional similarities may exist between an equivalent senior (bureaucratic) officer and senior fire officers, for example planning, human resource management, and strategy formulation<sup>15</sup> associated with the department's administrative function. The fundamental point of difference that cannot be achieved by a non-ranking officer lies in the senior fire officers' professional and technical experience, knowledge and judgement when it comes to readiness and emergency response capability.

It is this uniqueness that drives the functional imperative demanded of senior fire officers to be commanders, leaders, and managers within the duality of QFRS business, which is emergency response and non-emergency response. This often necessitates senior fire officers to work from their emergency office - their emergency response vehicle.



### Are senior fire officers professionals?

Yes.

The fire and rescue service is a profession organised to produce and deliver a unique type of work and service to the public. This work and service is specialist, which by its very nature society cannot do for itself.

Years of training, development and operational experienced-based learning achieved by senior fire officers is fundamental to the continuation of the service.

This is also in addition to self initiated qualifications and professional / industry association memberships, which have been achieved by the majority of senior fire officers. This combined effect with their mentoring role creates the new generation of senior fire officers as strategic leaders.



### Supporting Sources

<sup>1</sup> [www.qfr-sou.asn.au](http://www.qfr-sou.asn.au)

<sup>2</sup> Lyons, J., Swindler, S. & Offner, A. 2009. The impact of leadership on change readiness in the US military. *Journal of Change Management*. 9 (4):459-475.

<sup>3</sup> 2011-12 figures - 143 senior fire officers / (2019 permanent firefighters + 2020 auxiliary firefighters + 143 senior fire officers) x 100 = 3.4%

<sup>4</sup> Queensland population on 6 August 1991 was 2,977,810. Queensland Government Office of Economic and Statistical Research, [www.oesr.qld.gov.au](http://www.oesr.qld.gov.au)

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australian Demographic Statistics, Mar 2012. [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)

<sup>6</sup> The number of QFRS fire calls (or incidents) does not include other incidents such as deployments and disaster management support.

<sup>7</sup> Staib, L. 1996. Queensland Fire Service Review.

<sup>8</sup> 2011-12 Annual Report. Department of Community Safety. Queensland Government. [www.dcs.qld.gov.au](http://www.dcs.qld.gov.au)

<sup>9</sup> Earliest figures sourced are for 1999 from the Office of the Public Service Commissioner Annual Report 1999-2000. [www.psc.qld.gov.au](http://www.psc.qld.gov.au).

<sup>10</sup> Public Service Commission. Queensland Public Service Workforce Characteristics 2011-2012. Queensland Government.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Community Safety Establishment Management Program – Exempt Frontline Roles (18/05/12).

<sup>12</sup> Laurence, J. 2011. Military leadership and the complexity of combat and culture. *Military Psychology*. 23:489-501.

<sup>13</sup> Snider, D. 1999. The future of American military culture – an uninformed debate on military culture. *Orbis*. 43 (1):11-26.

<sup>14</sup> Yardley, I. & Neal, D. 2007. Understanding the leadership and culture dynamic within a military context: applying theory to an operational and business context. *Defence Studies*. 7 (1): 21-41.

<sup>15</sup> Sessions, S. 1996. A comparison of leadership and executive decision making in the military and private sectors. *Journal of Management Inquiry*. 5:122-137



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