

The ABCs of Fire as a Weapon and Australia's Experience

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Professional Insight

ABSTRACT

In a recent ambush attack on police in Queensland, Australia, fire was used as a weapon alongside firearms. The application of fire as a weapon can be arranged into several categories referred to as the ABCs. These categories are Ambush, Barricade, Civil Unrest, Complex/Coordinated, and, added for this paper, Bushfire. A range of violent actors can employ fire as a weapon, not limited to terrorists, criminals, and those suffering mental health crises. While the risks associated with its use have been published in a previous Salus Journal article, this insight will explore Fire as a Weapon attacks that have occurred in Australia to highlight the broad range of applications this attack method has and the need for an integrated approach by emergency services, especially police and fire rescue services. Fire as a weapon creates a challenging and dangerous situation for first responders by further complicating scenes likely to already have injured victims and armed threats present. This paper illustrates that these events have occurred in Australia and continue to do so, reinforcing a need for discussions on how best to combat them within a multi-agency setting. Further awareness, doctrine, and training should be provided to prepare our first responders for these events to improve their safety and the service and safety they provide to the community.

Keywords: *Fire as a Weapon, Terrorism, Arson attack, Rescue Task Force, Integrated Response, Riot*

INTRODUCTION

The 12th of December 2022 will be a day that haunts some for the rest of their lives. The events that unfolded at a rural Queensland property demonstrated a disturbing reality that violent actors within Australia will use fire as a weapon alongside firearms and other weapons to target police officers and community members. On this afternoon, four police officers were ambushed shortly after arriving at the property

to conduct enquires about a missing person. Unbeknown to these officers, the missing person in question was actually at the property lying in wait with his brother and brother's wife, the property's owners (Kelly, 2022). With what has been described as a "sophisticated surveillance network" (ABC News, 2022, December 14) set up by the offenders, it appears that these officers had little chance, walking into a trap with offenders committed to killing as many police officers as they could. Shortly after jumping a fence, the officers came under heavy gunfire in an area that provided them little cover (Kelly, 2022). Constables Matthew Arnold and Rachel McCrow were struck down and fell to the ground. Constable Randall Kirk was shot in the leg but managed to escape in a vehicle (ABC News, 2022, December 14). A fourth officer, Keeley Brough, just weeks out of her academy training, managed to take cover in bushland. What transpired was an extremely brutal and concerning chain of events. Constables Arnold and McCrow were executed where they lay injured. The offenders then set fire to a police car (Tassell, 2022) and the surrounding bushland to draw Constable Brough out of her hiding spot. For this junior officer, her death seemed imminent – her options appeared to be burnt alive or shot trying to avoid the flames. Fortunately, she was eventually able to escape. The same cannot be said for a neighbour of the property, Alan Dare, who was ambushed and executed as he came across to investigate what was occurring. A siege ensued, with the Queensland Police Special Emergency Response Team eventually killing the three offenders in a shootout approximately six hours later (Kelly, 2022). The property appears to have been set up with underground bunkers and foxholes to shoot from (Tassell, 2022). The offenders appeared driven by extremist anti-government views fuelled by conspiracy theories, a lethal combination that law enforcement officers in the United States have faced with deadly consequences (Sarteschi, 2021) and Australian authorities have warned about (Thomas & McGregor, 2015).

A recent paper explored the risks that arise when terrorists use fire as a weapon during attacks and how the risks relate to the Australian context (Miletta, 2021). This paper intends to further explore specific occurrences of fire as a weapon within Australia, discussing a range of events beyond just those with a terrorism nexus. After considering definitions by Jernegan (2021) and ALERRT (2022), the author would like to offer the following definition for Fire as a Weapon:

The use of fire, smoke, flammable materials, or combination of, often used with other attack methods to create a diversion or to inflict harm on a person or group of people, while likely complicating response and rescue efforts, thus requiring an integrated multi-agency approach to mitigate.

The Australian Institute of Criminology defines arson as "the act of intentionally and maliciously destroying or damaging property through the use of fire" (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2004). FaaW incidents differ from general

arson by going beyond just the targeting of property, with terrorists or other violent actors using fire during attacks in combination with other methods or weapons to target specific victims or community groups, incite fear and panic, inflict injury, push an ideological belief, or increase the complexity and challenges faced by victims and responding emergency services. As stated above, FaaW can involve the introduction of smoke without fire to complicate a scenario, as was seen in an attack on the New York City Subway system in April 2022 (Gold, 2022).

Each incident explored in this paper will be aligned to one of the categories of FaaW known as the ABCs. These categories are Ambush, Barricade, Civil Unrest, and Complex/Coordinated. An additional category of Bushfire is also added, after terrorist groups have shown an interest in exploiting the death and destruction they cause. The incidents discussed will not be an exhaustive list of FaaW events within Australia, but rather a collection of incidents aimed to highlight the variety of cases experienced and the complexity these scenes generate. By highlighting the cases of FaaW experienced in Australia, it is hoped to encourage more discussion among Australian law enforcement and emergency service authorities. These incidents require a collaborative, integrated approach to combat them and achieve the safest resolution for first responders and the community.

METHODOLOGY

This practitioner's insight piece has been written to raise awareness of fire as a weapon activity within Australia by highlighting events, through open-source content, arranged into the categories (ABCs) of fire as a weapon (Wood, 2017). These categories are used by Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) at Texas State University and the National Fire Protection Association USA in their FaaW program. A qualitative approach selected a varied sample of incidents that have occurred in Australia to demonstrate the broad applications of fire as a weapon that exist.

Incidents were collated from a previous fire as a weapon piece in the Salus Journal (Miletta, 2021), global media outlets, court and coroners' reports, other academic research papers, the author's knowledge of content, and online searches. The search terms "Australian siege fire" and "Australian protest fire" were used to identify incidents to consider. Not all relevant incidents were included in this paper; rather, a cross-section was chosen based on their ability to provide relevant and varied examples of the application of fire as a weapon. Insert text

AMBUSH

Starting with Ambush, in an ambush, fire is used as a weapon to attack unwitting victims or as bait to lure responders into an area where they will be attacked with other weapons (Wood, 2017). Australia has experienced multiple ambush attacks

with a range of motives, including terrorism, disgruntled parties of disputes, and drug-affected offenders acting irrationally.

Childers Palace Backpackers Hostel fire

On the night of 23 June 2000, an offender deliberately lit a fire at a Queensland backpackers' hostel where most guests were asleep in bed (Office of the State Coroner, 2006). The perpetrator had previously been evicted from the hostel and had returned that night, telling witnesses that he wished to assault his previous roommate. The fire he ignited grew quickly and led to the deaths of 15 people due to smoke inhalation. The offender was arrested a few days later, but not before stabbing a police officer and police canine (Office of the State Coroner, 2006). The time of day and deliberate nature of this fire saw it grow and spread quickly, killing many unsuspecting victims caught up in the confusion.

Meadow Heights Axe Attack

In August 2015, an axe-wielding offender set three vehicles and a vacant house on fire before threatening responding firefighters with the weapon (ABC News, 2015). In self-defence, the firefighters were forced to turn their hose on the offender and back away with the offender then setting fire to their truck, which sustained moderate damage. The offender was eventually tracked down and subdued by a police canine a short time later. There's a significant risk that the first arriving firefighting crews could have been injured or even killed by the offender. Cases like this call for an element of training that teaches threat recognition and immediate actions if a general fire response transpires into a FaaW event.

Springvale Bank Attack

In November 2016, in Springvale, Victoria, an offender who had used methamphetamine the night before left a bank frustrated over difficulties in making a withdrawal (Percy, 2019). He attended a nearby service station and purchased 11 litres of petrol before the pumps were shut off due to him using an inappropriate container. He then returned to the bank, which had 39 people inside at the time, pouring the petrol on the ground and igniting it. Almost 30 people were injured in this attack, six seriously (Percy, 2019). This included elderly persons and a mother with a pram who were forced to escape the smoke and flames, which quickly developed. While the offender's intent to inflict injury could not be proven in court, the fact is that this act of violence occurred and resulted in several injuries. The fire was ignited in the main area of egress and caught the victims off-guard. It grew rapidly, requiring them to run from the building past the flames so as not to become trapped.

Bourke Street Terror Attack

On Friday 9 November 2018, around 4.20 pm, a terrorist ignited his vehicle containing three LPG cylinders and a propane canister in the middle of Bourke Street in the Melbourne CBD. As unsuspecting people approached to render aid, the terrorist went on a stabbing spree, killing one victim and injuring two more before he was fatally shot by responding police. The Somali-born perpetrator of this attack appears to have focused his attention on conducting a domestic attack after his passport had been cancelled due to security concerns after he tried to travel to a conflict zone in 2015. The placement of LPG cylinders in the vehicle was possibly an attempt at a secondary device with the potential for a Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion (BLEVE) (Hahn, 2019) as emergency services arrived on the scene. This case is an example of the risks experienced when fire is employed with other attack forms. Unaware firefighters or paramedics could have easily arrived on scene before police and before information of the knife attack was passed on, resulting in them too becoming victims.

By exploring a range of attacks that fall within the category of Ambush, a broader selection of observations can be made. Each example of Ambush above resulted in some form of injury to unsuspecting victims, and, in some cases, death. The ambush at Childers and the Springvale attack exposed many victims, complicating the response by requiring more resources for victim rescue and treatment. Treating multiple burns and smoke inhalation patients is likely to challenge the initial resources on the scene of FaaW events.

The motives of the attackers in the incidents above vary, with both innocent community members targeted as well as responding emergency services. It demonstrates a propensity for FaaW incidents to generate injuries and significant risk. Emergency services were exposed, likely having initially believed they were responding to an isolated fire incident, unaware of the malicious armed element present that directly targeted them. As with other arson activity, the threat of rapid fire spread that presented at Childers and Springvale is an element easily compounded within an ambush setting. Ambush incidents can delay firefighting activities, as firefighters are prevented from initially attacking a fire due to another threat, as demonstrated in the Broadmeadows incident above. This would have been the case in Bourke Street had it not been for a swift response by the police. The Bourke Street incident introduced the threat of a secondary device with the initial ambush targeting those drawn into the fire scene by way of edge weapon attack. Then as emergency services arrived, the potential of the LPG bottles exploding created another hazard within an already dynamic and dangerous scene. In some cases, a violent actor may transition to a barricade situation, or the FaaW incident itself may stem from a barricade or siege situation.

BARRICADE

The next category involves fire used by an attacker who may be holding hostages or prepared to attack from within a fortified fighting position (ALERRT, 2022). The threat of fire or self-harm occurs often in barricade or siege situations across Australia (Silvester & Howard, 2022; Towell & Preiss, 2019; Trigger, 2012; ABC News, 2013). Over the years, significant incidents have gained attention, with injury and death occurring and emergency services' responses hampered by the ongoing threat.

Hawthorn Kinder Siege 1989

On 9 May 1989, a disgruntled man entered a suburban kindergarten in Hawthorn, Victoria armed with an imitation firearm, tomahawk, canister of petrol, and matches. While most staff and children managed to escape, the perpetrator captured four children, holding them hostage in a toilet cubicle. His demands were for his wife's release from a psychiatric unit after she had been admitted the day before after threatening to ignite herself on fire on the steps of Parliament House. These actions stemmed from a dispute he and his wife had with a hospital. The dispute related to claims that the hospital's actions during the labour and delivery of their son were negligent.

During the siege, the four young victims were doused in petrol with threats that he would ignite them. After approximately seven hours, the offender surrendered to police, but not before the victims suffered chemical burns from being held captive soaked in petrol (Butcher, 2014). This was a challenging situation for police with the risk that the hostages would be set on fire if they had tried to breach the cubicle and arrest the offender.

Jolimont Siege 1993

On the morning of 29 November 1993, a lone gunman ploughed his vehicle, filled with LPG and petrol canisters, into the Jolimont Centre in Canberra, igniting a significant fire (Attorney-General's Department, n.d.). Having already shot a man at another location earlier that morning, the violent actor shot at arriving police and firefighters, creating havoc and preventing people from escaping the building. Fire crews were forced to use hose streams from behind cover on the street while the gunman ignited more fires within the building with petrol bombs and LPG cylinders wired to explode (Attorney-General's Department, n.d.). Eventually, trapped staff from a radio studio on the second floor were rescued via a window, climbing down a ladder set up by firefighters, while police, with firearms drawn, provided cover (Robson, 2011). After approximately two hours, tactical police wearing breathing apparatus entered the building, where they located the gunman deceased from self-inflicted injuries. The Jolimont Centre was where the gunman's estranged wife

worked, so the motive is likely linked to that. This is one of the most significant FaaW events Australia has experienced. Despite the fire and smoke requiring the specialist skills of firefighters in breathing apparatus, the ongoing firearm threat prevented them from entering. Instead, police were required to don breathing apparatus and enter first. These officers, while extremely heroic, were not equipped with the appropriate clothing or knowledge of fire behaviour to enter such an environment. They did so through necessity and were able to establish a scene safe enough for firefighting operations to begin internally. Police should not have to do this work without the appropriate equipment and knowledge to keep them safe. This is where integrated response doctrine and training are essential.

Heidelberg Heights Murder-Suicide 2011

In January 2011, emergency services responded to a house in Heidelberg Heights in suburban Melbourne to reports of an assault with a victim bleeding (Coroners Court of Victoria, 2014). This quickly escalated to reports of a house fire, with fire crews arriving on the scene confronted with a house engulfed in flames and reports of victims and an offender armed with a knife inside. Police and firefighters attempted to locate the victims but were forced out of the structure, with firefighting crews transitioning to a defensive mode of fire attack due to the hazardous conditions caused by the fire. Eventually, four deceased persons were located in the burnt-out house. This incident was described by the coroner as a prolonged psychotic episode in which a mother with a significant history of mental illness murdered her three children aged 11, 13, and 18 before taking her own life. Two of the victims had been stabbed over 20 times each, with the causes of death listed as effects of fire and stab wounds (Coroners Court of Victoria, 2014). Again, for police and firefighters, this event blurred the lines of who is responsible for entering first, with a significant fire coupled with an armed threat creating difficulty. Police and fire rescue service leaders should not be expected to make these critical decisions on who goes in the door first when confronted with a FaaW incident for the first time; rather, prior training and supporting procedures should be in place before the event. This will ensure first arriving crews are armed with some knowledge to assess the situation and make an informed decision.

Orange Siege 2019

On the evening of 17 April 2019, an offender attended a property in the town of Orange, NSW, where he threatened the two occupants with a knife (9News, 2019). While one of the occupants managed to escape, the other was held hostage at the home for almost four hours. It is believed the offender then lit a fire in the house before his hostage was able to escape. The offender then exited the property and threatened police with a hammer before being taken into custody. News footage of the incident shows a significant fire raging from the house as police escort the

offender away (9News, 2019). Without the offender surrendering, the police and fire services on the scene would have been required to make decisions and plan how best to control the fire while the armed threat remained. If the hostage had not escaped, the authorities' decision-making processes would have been further complicated with the need to consider a hostage rescue from within a structure fire with the ongoing threat of edged weapon attack against responders.

East Melbourne Clinic Shooting

An incident with the potential for disaster occurred at an East Melbourne Abortion clinic in July 2001. Here an anti-abortion activist entered the clinic armed with several items, including a rifle, kerosene, homemade door jams, and mouth gags to "shoot as many as possible before setting fire to the clinic and sealing the doors" (The Queen v Peter James Knight, 2002). After a brief struggle, a security guard was fatally shot before witnesses were able to overpower the perpetrator. The potential existed for this to be a significant FaaW incident with multiple injuries or deaths, and emergency services' response hampered by barricaded doors and gunfire. This event took place before the events of September 11 2001 in the United States, when terrorism was not a common consideration within Australia. Due to this timing and the fact that it resulted in just one death, this attack is often overlooked despite the potential for death and destruction.

When fire or the threat of fire is introduced into a situation where an offender is barricaded, it increases the complexity for authorities. The Jolimont and Heidelberg incidents above were extremely complex, with firefighters facing difficulties trying to contain and extinguish the fires due to the armed threat that existed. This threat limited their ability to safely approach and enter the structure. In both incidents, victims were present, requiring rescue. Hostages further complicate barricade incidents by creating an increased expectation for authorities to enter a structure to rescue them. This scenario then raises the question of who goes in first, with police equipped to counter the armed threat but generally not to work within smoke-filled settings where structures are on fire. During the Orange siege, it was fortunate that the hostage was able to escape. If the hostage had been unable to escape, the authorities at this scene would have been required to balance their actions between the potential of one victim being harmed vs. a team of police and/or firefighters attempting to rescue them. The Hawthorn siege would have been an extremely confronting scene for authorities. Here crews would have had to plan a hostage rescue of four fatigued children, against an armed offender, with the potential for that offender to ignite the flammable liquid he had doused the children in. In a setting like this, authorities may not have the tactical advantage to effectively end a situation without providing the offender time to ignite a fire and create further harm. The East Melbourne Clinic shooting could have easily ended in a massacre. If not overpowered, the offender could have shot multiple victims before

barricading the premises and igniting a fire. If deemed safe enough to enter, firefighters in this setting would have been challenged with door jams further delaying their ability to enter the building to contain the fire and extricate the shooting victims. All these incidents provided extreme risk to human life. Other incidents with extreme potential for death and destruction are bushfires, especially if ignited by a violent actor looking to cause harm.

BUSHFIRE

Bushfires can cause significant death and destruction and are a common occurrence in parts of Australia, with arson accounting for almost half of the reported 45,000–60,000 vegetation fires each year (Bryant, 2008, p. 2). Despite these numbers, it is quite difficult to categorise these as FaaW without determining a motive and actions that meet the definition. For some time, terrorist propaganda has encouraged the lighting of bushfires, especially in Australia, due to their destructive nature (Miletta, 2021). Two recent fires in Victoria are of concern.

Humevale and Kinglake West Bushfires

In March 2021, counter-terrorism police arrested two Melbourne brothers in connection with two bushfires in February (Cooper, 2021). Counter-terrorism investigators alleged the fires in Humevale and Kinglake West were attempts to engage in a terror act. The brothers were also said to have “brandished a knife, talked of spilling blood, and pledged allegiance to Islamic State” in several online videos (Hobday, 2022). The actions, in this case, may have been motivated by the propaganda put out over the years by groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Islamic State. While fortunately, these fires did not spread out of control, bushfires as a form of FaaW should be part of the considerations for police and fire rescue services in Australia. The offenders in this case displayed a willingness to undertake violent actions against the community and with the right conditions, this could see a catastrophic bushfire ignited, spreading across many communities and requiring an enormous response from emergency services.

CIVIL UNREST

In civil unrest, fire is used by attackers to destroy property, harm innocents, attack public safety officials, and mask criminal activity. An important factor in civil unrest scenarios is that fire incites frenzy, so it must be extinguished quickly before it encourages further violence and unrest (Wood, 2017). Typically seen in riots and incidents of domestic terrorism (ALERT, 2022) this category fits a variety of incidents that have been witnessed in Australia. Regarding domestic terrorism, incendiary attacks have increased, with 30 out of 41 (73%) recorded terrorist events

between 2000 and 2020 in Australia involving incendiary devices (START National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2022). These have all taken place since 2015 though mostly targeting vehicles and property.

Redfern and Cronulla Riots NSW

Occurring within two years of each other, these riots in suburban Sydney were significant incidents, the likes of which are not often experienced in Australia. Following the death of a 17-year-old Aboriginal boy, the Redfern riot kicked off on the night of 15 February 2004, resulting in some 50 police injured (ABC News, 2004). During the riot, fires were lit, including one at the Redfern Railway station. Images depicted in the news show firefighters working behind police lines in an ad hoc integrated response to this incident (ABC News, 2004). In December 2005, two days of civil disorder occurred with race riots between Caucasian and Middle-eastern groups around the Cronulla Beach area (9News, 2015). Serious assaults, vandalism, and clashes with police ensued, with a church targeted by arson two days later possibly linked to the riots (SMH, 2005). Scenes like this make firefighting difficult, with crowds likely to turn on responding crews. While police are quite mobile during riot situations, firefighting operations are generally quite static, with crews requiring appliances to be connected to hydrants and systems set up that are not often quickly or easily reversed. A better understanding of each agency's needs and abilities in these situations is crucial for an improved integrated response.

Old Parliament House Fire

In December 2021, several anti-government protests occurred around Canberra. During one protest, which a magistrate described as “mob rule and emotional dysregulation”, police were assaulted and the doors of the Old Parliament House were set on fire (Byrne, 2022). A scuffle occurred between police and protesters though eventually, firefighters were able to move in to extinguish the blaze. The fire caused more than \$4 million in damage; however, it was fortunate that no injuries were reported. Several arrests have since been made over the fire, with a Victorian man described as holding sovereign citizen beliefs charged by police for his involvement in the fire and assaults on police (Byrne, 2022). This is again a situation where firefighting was delayed with the potential for further fire spread or firefighters to come under attack if brought in too quickly without sufficient force protection.

5G tower fires

Globally, arson cases linked to conspiracy theories and targeting 5G telecommunications towers have increased (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Crawford, 2020). This trend has spread to Australia, with several such fires occurring here. In the NSW town of Mullumbimby, a fire at a 5G tower in early 2022 appeared deliberately lit (Ore, 2022). The construction of this tower had caused backlash from parts of the community who claimed it was related to the spread of Covid-19. The town, which had recently been affected by floods, now had a communications issue with phone services down while they still tried to recover post natural-disaster (Ore, 2022). In Melbourne, an anti-lockdown protester was charged over deliberately lighting a 5G tower on fire in the suburb of Mt Eliza. The fire caused extensive damage and also disabled phone services in the area (Vinall, 2021). These are examples of cases that link to groups involved in civil disorder around anti-government/anti-lockdown type protests which have been seen around Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each attack on a 5G tower creates an extensive damage bill, endangers responding firefighters, and affects the community's phone services and ability to communicate and call for assistance in emergencies.

Cairns Covid Quarantine Hotel fire

On Sunday 28 November 2021, 163 guests were evacuated from an 11-storey hotel in Cairns after a fire erupted in two bedrooms on the top floor (Khan, 2021). It is alleged the fire was deliberately lit by a mother who was in mandatory quarantine at the hotel with her two children, who later in court described the situation as being "stuck in a box" (Bowles, 2021). The magistrate denied the accused bail claiming the charges "if proven they show a disregard for life and property including staff, guests, your children and yourself" and that "the results could have been catastrophic" (Bowles, 2021). Using fire as a weapon to escape the mandatory quarantine location created extremely hazardous conditions for occupants of the building trying to escape and the emergency crews who had to combat the ferocious high-rise fire.

The civil unrest category covers a range of FaaW applications with unique challenges and difficulties. During riots, crowd movement is quite dynamic, with a key to public order policing being that officers are mobile and able to adapt. Structural firefighting is different, with firefighting crews trained to operate in a more static contained environment, connected to water sources. A key in these settings is not to let any fires that have been ignited grow and develop into a fire that threatens human life or structures. The difficulty then is bringing firefighting crews into this setting safely without exposing them to unruly or violent crowds.

With the igniting of 5G towers and the quarantine hotel, innocent victims were exposed both directly and indirectly. Those caught up in the hotel fire faced a rapidly developing fire and the need to evacuate quickly. While targeting 5G towers exposes responding firefighters and telecommunications workers to risk, it also indirectly targets the community by damaging critical infrastructure. This can

isolate portions of the community and limit their ability to communicate and call for help during emergencies.

COMPLEX/COORDINATED

In a complex, coordinated attack, fire is used as part of a symphonic attack, where multiple locations are hit simultaneously or in close succession to overwhelm the ability of defenders to respond rapidly and efficiently (Wood, 2017). Australia has been fortunate not to suffer from a complex coordinated attack like September 11 2001 (Pfeifer, 2013) or the Mumbai India attacks of 2008 (Rabasa et al., 2009). However, Australia has come close, including a plot in 2016 that was foiled by police after they discovered a group was planning to use explosives and knives to attack several locations in the Melbourne CBD just before Christmas (Paul & Percy, 2019). A notable incident that can be considered under this category was the Port Arthur Massacre, which generated a complex and challenging scene for police and emergency services.

Port Arthur Massacre

In April 1996, a lone gunman armed with two high-powered rifles went on a shooting rampage around the Port Arthur historical site in Tasmania, killing 35 and injuring 21 more (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, n.d.). During the attack, a vehicle was set on fire and hostages were taken inside a local guest house. A siege transpired, which lasted overnight before the gunman ignited a fire in the building. The gunman eventually emerged from the building suffering burns, and his hostages were dead inside (Sainsbury, 2006). Approximately 690 police, fire, and other emergency service personnel were involved in the response, which involved a complex scene, spread over multiple locations, with multiple patients suffering traumatic injuries and the ongoing risk of gunfire (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, n.d.). Adding fire to this situation further complicated the response efforts and endangered those involved.

Complex coordinated incidents require many resources spread over multiple locations. Difficulties can emerge from these events between authorities communicating and coordinating with one another. The threat environment needs to be considered with the risk of emergency services being targeted during additional phases of an attack. Additionally, leaders need to consider whether to commit all their resources or maintain a reserve for any further attacks that may take place. The Port Arthur Massacre demonstrates what can be achieved by one violent actor; the thought of multiple coordinated threats is quite concerning.

IMPROVING CAPABILITY

“The day of public safety silos is over” (Wood, 2017). This statement by subject matter expert Dr. Mike Clumpner is extremely relevant with FaaW attacks able to generate complex and chaotic scenes requiring an integrated response from emergency services. Fire as a Weapon scenes should be approached and designated into hot, warm, and cold zones relevant to the threat that presents (Mueck, 2017). The Hot/Warm/Cold terminology is already used internationally for active armed offender incidents and by the fire and rescue services in Hazardous Materials responses. The Rescue Task Force (RTF) and similar warm zone models, developed in the USA to reduce the time it took for paramedics to access patients within the warm zones of active shooter events, have applicability in FaaW scenarios (Mueck, 2017). These integrated teams of police, firefighters, and paramedics have been deployed to real-world situations and have proven beneficial (Akers, 2017). Now, agencies within the USA and Europe have explored the concept when confronted with FaaW attacks. It allows firefighters to be protected when attempting to rescue victims, reduce the spread of fire, or to operate building fire-safety features to support containment. While limited empirical data exists around warm zone models such as RTF an integrated warm zone model should be considered and further explored for implementation within Australia. This would provide policing and emergency service agencies with an improved ability to respond to FaaW incidents and save lives. While it may be considered that an integrated response by police and firefighters has occurred in some of these examples discussed, it is likely these were mostly impromptu activities without prior training, defined and shared understanding of risks and capabilities, or specific doctrine to support it. Without those supporting factors in place it is difficult to expect frontline staff and supervisors to implement an integrated response due to the risks, and if they do the likelihood of success is greatly diminished without prior training and guidance.

With the use of accelerants and the threat of violence often delaying fire suppression, the community is likely to see these fires rapidly grow and spread before they can be effectively extinguished. In cases with reduced risk with no hostages or threat to the community, the safer option is likely to involve letting it burn while preventing it from spreading to any exposures. This will not always be the case though, with the ability to safely attack fires and rescue hostages needed.

Footage of the Jolimont siege greatly demonstrates the need for integrated response plans with the situation requiring police to enter a smoke-filled environment in breathing apparatus, normally the domain of firefighters. During the exploration of integrated warm zone teams for FaaW a further focus area should be created around personal protective equipment (PPE) and clothing (PPC). The balance between performance, ballistic protection, and thermal protection should be the goal. Compromise will likely need to occur with an inability to functionally work in the highest grade fire and ballistic protection whilst also wearing significant respiratory protection. This is where a better understanding of the specific requirements and capabilities of an integrated warm zone team will help to inform

PPE/C requirements and research. There is no one size fits all approach to these incidents and PPE/C is no different.

Plans and procedures to combat fires during planned protests and civil unrest events must also be considered. Calling fire rescue service resources after a fire has already been ignited creates a delay and limits the firefighters' situational awareness going into the situation. An agreed understanding of what fires will and will not be combated relevant to the presenting threat within a riot situation should be made. A question can be raised – should public order policing resources be given some form of extinguishing capability? The goal is to ensure a quick knockdown of fires in the hope of preventing them from developing into significant fires requiring a fire rescue service response. This would reduce the risk of bringing firefighters into civil unrest scenes and the need to then provide a protection element for firefighting operations.

Police and firefighters need better training and awareness to help them identify the potential of a FaaW attack so they can undertake immediate actions to improve their own safety. Doctrine and procedures should reflect what can be expected of each agency with an understanding of each agency's risk appetite and capabilities. Common terminology and an understanding of sectorisation and incident command systems will improve the cooperation and response to FaaW attacks by various agencies.

CONCLUSION

This paper and the recent ambush of police in Queensland have demonstrated that FaaW is a relevant topic within the Australian context, warranting further attention. The incidents discussed are examples of situations that have compounded the considerations emergency services personnel have had to deal with during their responses. At the initial time of writing, the Melbourne CBD was locked down with police and firefighters responding to a man behaving erratically with what appeared to be cans of petrol and Molotov cocktails (ABC News, 2022 September 20). Once taken into custody, it was confirmed that these items were filled with water; however, this was only confirmed after the man was taken into police custody.

This paper has revealed the varied profiles of perpetrators Australia has faced employing fire as a weapon during attacks, including terrorists, criminals, the drug affected, and those suffering mental health crises. The use or threat of fire in each of these incidents has introduced another element of difficulty authorities must deal with during their attempts to combat the situations. Injury and death have occurred with both innocent victims and the emergency services targeted at various times. FaaW incidents have occurred in a range of settings from major cities to rural communities. Secondary risks exist with the potential of emergency services being subjected to extreme fire behaviour or building collapse due to fire or coming under attack from an armed threat. The civil unrest category introduces

perpetrators who may otherwise have never undertaken such activity but do so under the anonymity of a mob. These are settings where fires need to be addressed quickly to prevent a level of acceptance from being portrayed to groups who may continue escalating behaviour.

It is hoped that by highlighting these events and creating awareness of the dangers they present, this paper will encourage further discussions between police and other emergency services to better prepare for FaaW attacks. FaaW incidents continue to occur, so law enforcement and emergency service organisations must plan and prepare accordingly.

About the author.

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