

Wagga Digs Deep for Victorian Bushfire Wildlife Victims

By Raylene Garwood

Summer around Wagga Wagga means scorched hills, straggling gum trees and the ever present threat of bushfires. As a large regional centre, it retains many of the rural values where mates pitch in to help one another through testing times and RAAF Base Wagga has been lending a helping hand since its establishment in 1942. In February this year, members of RAAF Wagga again demonstrated the spirit of mateship and community, raising nearly \$3000 to support the 'silent' victims of the devastating bushfires in North East Victoria – the wildlife, stock and pets injured, displaced or left without basic food or shelter.

Organised by Flight Sergeant Trish Higgins, Senior Non Commission Officer training Development, at the RAAF School of Administration and Logistics Training (SALT), fund raising for the Wildlife took many forms. This including a hugely popular 'free dress Friday', a hotdog morning tea for all courses 'in house' at RAAF SALT and School of Postgraduate Studies (SPS); a coin donation blitz at the Base Entry, 1 Recruit Training Unit (1RTU) and at a recent Airman's Club function. Flight Sergeant Higgins was inspired to act after reading of similar efforts across the ADF, coordinated on the intranet Public Pet Folders.

Ably assisted by many volunteers, and after a marathon three hours collecting at the Front Gate, Flight Sergeant Higgins said that all the collectors were overcome by the generosity of service men and women, APS staff and contractors.

'People were putting handfuls of gold coins into the collection tins,' she observed.

'Even those on pushbikes or delivery trucks gave all they had, it was quite an affirmation of people's generosity. You could really get a sense that we all belong to a 'bigger' national community where you do what you can for those absolutely overwhelmed by the disaster.'

No-one escaped the eagle eyed collectors, not even the Base Commander, Wing Commander John Herlihy, who having donated on his way to work, was again asked to dig deep when he paused to check on the progress some time later! Supported by Wing Commander Herlihy and CO RAAF SALT, Wing Commander Joe Cook, the results of the fundraising drive exceeded all expectations but, when every cent is going directly to the medical care, supplies, shelter or food for wildlife victims, all monies are critical.

It is estimated that over two million native animals perished during the fires and those that survived often die of injury, exposure, infection or shock if not adequately cared for. Vets and wildlife volunteers from Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service Inc (WIRES) have been working around the clock as people find dazed, dehydrated, injured or starving animals.

Anyone wishing to donate can do so at the Wires website.

Wires: www.wires.org.au