



## ***Firefighter arson: part 3 – a case study***

At the height of the 2001–2002 fire season, when volunteers firefighters were stretched to their limit, one of their members was busily making their job harder. From January 2001 to March 2002, 'Ben' (not his real name) lit at least 25 bushfires across the state. Ben's case provides an example of how a firefighter can cross the line and start creating the fires he is entrusted to extinguish.

Ben grew up in a regional city, and left school in Year 10. He worked at a fast-food chain for four years and also had a job washing trucks, which he lost for 'slacking off'. He had trouble fitting in. After a series of break and enters with a group of boys, he was given a 12-month suspended prison sentence. He harboured an ambition to join a salaried fire brigade but failed the entrance exam due to his poor academic ability. Ben believed that if he excelled as a volunteer firefighter, the recognition he gained would assist in getting him a job as a salaried firefighter.

Ben first joined the volunteer fire service in his home town. In January 2001, during his time as a volunteer, the town was plagued by a series of deliberately lit bushfires. Ben always seemed to be the first on scene, dressed in full firefighting gear. He was always a highly enthusiastic member of the brigade and gained some recognition in local newspapers. For a time Ben stayed away from lighting fires. His firesetting began in earnest when he saw footage of the New York City firefighters after the September 11 terrorist attacks. He began to crave the heroic recognition they received, and the praise bestowed on local fire service volunteers during the following summer. He began a firesetting spree that took him to three different areas of the state. As he moved to each location he became an enthusiastic member of the local volunteer brigade. Other brigade members found Ben's overbearing and attention-seeking attitude hard to deal with. Of greater concern were the fires that began in each place Ben appeared. Despite not having a brigade pager, Ben would appear, ready for action, when fires broke out. He often reported the fires himself on his mobile phone, sometimes claiming to have spotted arsonists and chased them through the bush.

In the three months leading up to March 2002, there were 12 mysterious fires in the area in which Ben lived. When Ben appeared at a local brigade barbeque asking to join, the captain made enquiries with his previous brigades. The close cooperation of the brigades, coupled with police investigations that were already in place, led to Ben becoming the subject of a surveillance operation. In April 2002 he was arrested. Confronted with the evidence gathered against him, Ben admitted under police questioning to lighting 25 fires. He spoke of wanting to become a hero. Sometimes, he said, he lit fires just because he was bored. Fire gave him a feeling of accomplishment. He fully realised that the fires might kill people. A psychiatrist's report found that Ben had no mental illness. He was fully aware of what he was doing. Ben was sentenced in June 2002 to two years in prison.

### ***For more information:***

Willis M 2004. *Bushfire arson: a review of the literature*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. Research and Public Policy Series No.61.

