

Video Transcript: Mics & Sirens Episode 02

[Silvana Pulitano, Podcast Host] You're listening to Mics and Sirens, the official podcast of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. DFES acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which this podcast is created, the Whadjuk people.

[Sirens sound while news footage of fires play]

[Glenn Hall, District Officer] I remember saying to a colleague before I left, look, I'm not that worried. There's only two metres of water in the Fitzroy. You know, once we got past 12.5m and it just kept going and going and going, that's when we had the inundation. Literally there was metres of mud and I could see the, the tennis court and the fence around the tennis court. It was - the water had gone over the fence level of the tennis court. This is different than my previous exposure. This is the next level because we actually have people at risk. I was fearful that we would lose lives.

[Silvana] December 28th, 2022 Tropical Cyclone Ellie crossed over the coast of Western Australia and dumped around 500ml of rain in less than a week. River levels in the Kimberley town of Fitzroy Crossing got to almost 16m high. That's nearly ten average sized household swimming pools stacked on top of each other. More than 200 homes were damaged, several roads and highways, too, and remote communities were left isolated.

The destruction was widespread and one of the people leading the response was District Officer Glenn Hall. Glenn led an incident management team of about 70 people each day, coordinating emergency response efforts to make sure people were out of harm's way. How does someone lead a 1-in-100-year flooding disaster? Where do you even begin? I'll let Glenn tell you himself. Glenn, welcome.

[Glenn] Thank you.

[Silvana] Let's start with January 2023, when the aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Ellie very quickly became the worst flooding disaster in Western Australian history. You became the incident controller or the IC. Do you remember what was going through your mind when you were put in charge of this record-breaking incident?

[Glenn] So I was deployed as a level three Natural Hazards Incident Controller, with the potential that there could be the tropical low after the impact of Ellie, and it traversed across the region. And it's a situation that was seen a lot of times in the Kimberley, where we'd had tropical lows, travel across the Kimberley and have the resultant cause of flooding, which would bring isolation issues and the like. So and I was deployed with a small team. I had a planning officer, a management support officer, and we flew up and I remember talking to the planning officer, giving him some idea of structure and how I'd fit into the work that had already been done in the Kimberley and the work that had been done by the staff up there in regards to preparedness, which is just normal activity, which you'd expect for something like this.

So headed in and then we had a night shift as well. And so those days that started and in my head as we flew up there, and I'd been to, you know, I was the District Officer for central Kimberley. So I knew that area that really benefited and helped me. And I'd been to a few events in Fitzroy Crossing. The 2016 event was notable where it got to 12.16m at the bridge.

So it was just underneath the or touched the asphalt of the bridge. And all that really bought was, you know, we had cut off at Plum Plain, we had cut off at Two Mile and Bluebush, and we had the resultant isolation. What we didn't have was that inundation of homes and the effect of impact of homes. So in my mind, that was the picture I was painting in my head.

[Silvana] So you thought, I've been down this road before. It's going to be like any incident I've led before.

[Glenn] Yeah, exactly. So and if you look at the track that the system took, and it did this loop, and it looped around and it looped around the Fitzroy Valley as it moved. And so it was fairly stationary. And so, you know, that was always the thing with those tropical lows, the fast-moving tropical lows. Great, because they don't have the opportunity to drop a lot of rain, whereas the slow-moving systems drop the rain and cause the flooding. So but this did a loop, to the point where we it got to the point where we were, you know, it was - we had the rain and then the rain was impacting Broome as well.

And we had another Incident Management Team or supplementing the Incident Management Team. They were coming up and they were bringing up into C130. So you know we had ADF assistance and they couldn't even get into Broome because of the rain. So this system just did this loop, loop. And I remember it saying to a colleague before I left, look, I'm not that worried. There's only two metres of water in the Fitzroy. It's got, you know, a billion. And thank God there was. But there's only two metres in the Fitzroy at the moment at Fitzroy Crossing. So it's got the ability to take up a lot of water. And, you know, then we saw the levels that we got. So it was this event in my head. Bearing in mind I'm based in Broome, running the Incident Management Team out of Broome. I had an operations cell operating out of Fitzroy Crossing, very capable people, both volunteers and staff over there.

And then it got to the point where it just grew and grew, and, so for the first - and it's unusual, you know, I think I did 13 shifts. Chief Superintendent Pipe came up, as the operations area manager. I think he was a day after me, but we were it, and, you know, for those basically first two weeks.

[Silvana] So you saw it at two metres. What levels were you seeing in previous incidents just to compare?

[Glenn] Yeah. So, you know, I remember doing a flood boat course in Fitzroy Crossing and we had lunch and right at the intersection of the Margaret River and the Fitzroy River. And we had lunch on the bank of the river. Three weeks later, there was 11m of water over that exact point. So the river's got an ability to take on this huge volume of water. I think it's the second highest flowing river in outflow at flood, after the Amazon. So, you know, once it's in, once the Fitzroy is in flood, it's the second highest outflowing river in the world. So it just gives you an idea of the capacity that it can take.

So, you know, knowing that, it had that ability, you know, ten, 11m, 12m brings the isolation issues, you know, so it's fuel into the towns and food into the towns and the outlying Aboriginal communities and the outlying pastoral stations, that are impacted by that as well. And I remember, going into Fitzroy Crossing for the 2016 event, and Superintendent Pipe at the time, gave me the use of a helicopter. And I worked with the volunteers there. We were only were a small team. But our main role when that helicopter was reconnaissance, resupply and medical evacuation; they were our three tasks. That's why we had the

helicopter. You know, but we were able to cope based on that level of flooding. And because it didn't bring that inundation. But once it got past that, you know, once we got past 12.5m and it just kept going and going and going, that's when we had the inundation.

[Silvana] Did you ever anticipate it would become as catastrophic as it was?

[Glenn] No. No. Look, I brutally honest. And I know we've got a plan for eventualities. But no, not at that stage. Benefit of hindsight now. But at the time, no.

[Silvana] What was the moment when you went - when you started to think, okay, this is bigger than I could ever have imagined?

[Glenn] Yeah. Look, the concern, obviously, you know, we work to the strategic control priorities. And, you know, that first control priority is the protection of life. And when we were conducting rescues, when we had the flood boats, you know, pushing up against - a volunteer. I cannot commend the volunteers enough for the work they did. The Fitzroy Crossing Volunteer Fire and Emergency Service, the work that they did in those initial days, you know, they had the flood boat, and thank God they do have one. And they were conducting those rescues. We were, you know, mobilising heavy lift, the heavy lift rescue rotary wings out of Broome, and, just to perform rescues, or the potential to, perform rescues as well.

So when we got to that point, and we were - this is different than my previous exposure. This is the next level because we actually have people at risk. And, you know, and I'll be honest, there was times there, you know, because I'm so far away and the team so far away, and, you know, we've only got limited resources in at Fitzroy Crossing. I was fearful that we would lose lives and thank the heavens that it didn't get to that stage.

[Silvana] Can you paint a picture of the devastation that you witnessed?

[Glenn] Yeah.

[Silvana] What does flood damage look like? You obviously - after a bushfire, you go and you see the wreck, you see charred remains. You see, you know, twisted metal and all these sorts of things that people can picture. But flood damage is a little bit different. What does that look like?

[Glenn] Yeah. So initially I, you know, working out of Broome. And it wasn't till I probably looked - must have been a good two weeks that I was - that I went in and I went in with the Deputy Commissioner, with Mr Waters, and got to witness it for myself. So I was relying on the intelligence from a team, what I was seeing on social media, on the media, and the reports from operations in regards to it. But, going into and seeing, you know, literally there was metres of mud, and bearing in mind these homes in those outlying communities from Fitzroy Crossing. They're built up.

So, you know, it is on a floodplain. And it, you know, it has happened before. But, you know, seeing that and, you know, seeing the lodge and, you know, the tennis court, I remember seeing - when we flew in and landed and I could see the tennis court and the fence around the tennis court, it was and the water had gone over the fence level of the tennis court, and you could tell. So it was definitely widespread. It didn't get into - it certainly impacted the very outskirts of Fitzroy Crossing the town. And there was certainly some damage to homes, you

know, within Fitzroy Crossing and the outskirts there. But it didn't go right through the middle of the town. It was those outlying, you know, the communities directly adjacent to Fitzroy Crossing is where it had the biggest impact.

[Silvana] How big was the team that you led?

[Glenn] At its height? It grew from, again working with the team from the Kimberley, and the Regional Operations Centre crew that were there. You know, I had a crew of, you know, 5 to 6, and that grew at its height was around 70.

[Silvana] And so where were you all based? So is everybody - can you paint a picture of that scene? Are you all in an office? Are you all kind of crammed in a little shipping container or What's that?

[Glenn] So and, you know, there have been some great advancements in that in DFES have just, you know, initiated that type of program where they, you know, the mobile. EOCs that we - Emergency Operation Centres that we mobilise, but we're working out of the Broome Regional Office. So it's not huge. It's the ex-Customs House. DFES have had it for a long time. But literally there were - you know I remember having a conversation early on do we branch out to, you know, do we go to the bushfire station? Do we go? Well, it's better to keep everyone in house. And there were disadvantages and advantages. And look, at the end of the day, we branched out to the convention centre next door. We'd run an Incident Management Team meetings next door. And we made it work.

[Silvana] Is there a lot of hustle and bustle? What's the vibe in there?

[Glenn] Yeah, definitely. And throw Covid in the middle, okay? So Covid was there and we had to, you know, try and best we can. And thank God we didn't have an outbreak. But police, people coming in and out and you know, the best we could do. And I remember we had a safety officer. He was pretty rigid on in those requirements in the early days.

But, you know, it literally got to the point where - and we did and it worked really well. We embedded where we'd have normally an Incident Support Group meeting. You'd have all your stakeholders, you know, your government agencies and non-government organisations, and you deal with them off to the side so you'd have Incident Management Team meeting and then you'd have your ISG separate. We combined and we brought in Communities. We brought in WA Country Health and we embedded them in with us because we had to. The work requirement really meant that we needed on, you know, decisions need to be made on the spot. So WACH could...

[Silvana] So you needed people face to face?

[Glenn] Yeah, yeah. And so that brought great benefits because as things were happening, we could make the required changes and we could talk to people face to face. And it really helped. But in the end, what it meant was, you know, there was - I can remember there were two people in the photocopier room and they had the headphones on and they were trying to do a Teams meeting, sorry, a Teams meeting. And then I looked directly adjacent and there's the training room and there's people sitting on plastic buckets doing the same thing because they're talking to their organisations. So they're having a Teams meeting with their organisation to say, look, this is happening.

[Silvana] So their seats were plastic buckets? Basically, you have to be innovative.

[Glenn] Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, there's good and bad things I suppose from that. But it just goes to show when the chips are down and you have to perform - people performed.

[Male Narrator] Not all heroes wear medals, but many do. Do you know any fire and emergency services personnel worthy of an Australian Fire Service Medal, Emergency Services Medal or Australian bravery decorations? Say thank you to those who make a difference, serve others and run towards the danger to protect us all. Nominate someone for national recognition at the highest level. Visit the DFES website: DFES.wa.gov.au to find out more now.

[Silvana] You're listening to Mics and Sirens. I'm Silvana Pulitano and I'm here with Glenn Hall, one of DFES' Incident Controllers, during the Kimberley floods that impacted the Fitzroy Valley in Western Australia. Is it difficult in with such a large-scale incident? Obviously the priorities of the day are the first thing that you're thinking about. Is it difficult to think too far ahead in those situations because there's such an abundance of work to do in the you know, each moment?

[Glenn] That trusting that I was talking about, if I can rely on my functional heads, there were times there when right now is I need to set time aside, because where am I going with this? What is - what's it going to look like in a week's time? Because I knew we were going to be there for a long time. What's it going to look like in two week's time? What do I need to be doing? So that was the thought process. And I remember a conversation. I had with the Commissioner. And now we have - we wouldn't have that same conversation now, because now we've got an SOP in regards to how to manage flood-affected structures.

But there was this real crossover piece in regards to what's response and what's recovery? And remembering that the Kimberley, you know, it's not the metropolitan area, so there's not the level of resourcing that there is in the metro area that there is in the Kimberley. So there was this definite crossover of how we could assist the locals to recover from the impact of this incident. And, you know, hopefully we, you know, I'm sure we had our struggles along the way, but hopefully we got to meet that. And, you know, the recovery process is still occurring to this day.

[Silvana] What was the biggest challenge you found with running this incident?

[Glenn] Dealing and making sure that we were meeting the needs of the community. Initially, I am going to say that the Aboriginal communities and the intricacies that, and the cultural considerations we need to make sure that we're dealing with those indigenous communities, so that we are getting the best for them and treating them with the respect, and also the rest of the community. You know, we cannot forget the pastoral stations, cannot, you know, forget the, you know, the teachers and Camballin, and all the rest of it, you know, etcetera, etcetera. So it was, making sure that we were trying to meet the needs of the community, and determine what they were, and then respond to those needs accordingly.

[Silvana] What were members of the community like? Did you spend time with them? Did you speak to them? What were they - what were they saying? What were their thoughts?

[Glenn] Yeah, look, I you know, I empathise with some of the things, you know, especially, you know, those people that had to evacuate and were put into very trying - you know, it was challenging in regards to the evac centre wasn't perfect. You know, it was hot, it was humid, etc. And the conditions that they, they were faced, but all in all, you know, people in that part of the world are resilient.

[Silvana] There were a number of Aboriginal communities, small communities that were left isolated. What was the impact on them?

[Glenn] Yeah, their impact to their homes. And you know, I know there's been some challenges in regards to and, you know, we've met those from a recovery perspective, those challenges. But it was that water through the homes. And then the resultant issues that come from that. So, you know, we may have been able to wash out the mud. The people, the responders there had some challenging circumstances in regards to doing that and washing out, cleaning out. And then there's everything, you know, the impact, the sewage impact, the ongoing health impacts, because, you know, low lying water, you know, and we all know the mosquito-borne viruses that are around that area. And then the process to make sure that the structure, you know, then the damage assessment - USAR would come through and the damage assessment. And we had some great assistance there from the local indigenous rangers, where we couple up the local indigenous rangers to our SES, and Urban Search and Rescue people doing the damage assessments.

That damage assessment work then correlated to, you know, the recovery payments. So it all interlinked, you know. So it was really important work that was done. But by having the indigenous rangers in the communities were able to then couple them with the responders, whether it be SES or Urban Search and Rescue, doing those assessments, giving us that intelligence, giving us that information, because we're obviously going into their community. So it was that link with the indigenous rangers who were able to help us and assist us that. And there was some great work done. There was a DBCA officer who had some great experience. And then just this we had this program, this navigator program morphed into being where we would utilise, you know, again, the indigenous rangers and more formalised it. So it really assisted us in that recovery process to go into the communities to determine what level of impact there was. So we'd record it, and then determine what work needed to be done so that we could then, you know, clean it out. And then obviously, if the structure is no longer viable, then it was deemed uninhabitable and written off.

[Silvana] Did you find there were times when you were thrown a curve ball and you had to pivot from what you had intended to do? You know, maybe transport or, you know, impact through roads or...

[Glenn] Yeah, heaps of challenges. And, you know, I remember a picture of the commissioner and I think from memory, the minister was up in Derby because we had some Derby shops were empty. There was significant impact to that road. I remember, police, you know, we had the police helicopter up there and that combined with the other intelligence that we were getting in. And I remember seeing the vision, you know, he asked me about the devastation earlier, saw that vision of that, air operations took through the in the Walpole helicopter of the impact to the road. There was no way in the world that we were going to get trucks back on the road between Broome and Derby any time soon. The level of damage to that road was huge. So, you know, I can remember having a conversation with the Defence

liaison. And again, you know, there's a lot of people who did a lot of great work on that, but, you know, need to recognise the work that Defence did.

And I remember we had the challenge of getting not breaking the cold store link. So the food would come in on the trucks, you know, the frozen goods, the cold goods. And then we couldn't break that link. So how could we get that into a C-130 and fly it out to Derby, not break.

[Silvana] Is this in Broome?

[Glenn] Yeah. So the trucks would come into Broome, they'd load to the aircraft and then, you know, it was an hour flight or something to Derby. But we couldn't break that cold chain link. And I remember having a chat with the Defence liaison and he said, look, give me 24 hours. Now it took him probably 36 hours to come up with a solution to get the cold stuff off the trucks into the plane and off at the other end. So it would go back into a cold truck to get. And the next thing you know, we had vision. And I think the commissioner and the minister were up there and, you know, some very happy people in Derby because they had some food back on the shelves. And it was only by people working out those solutions, you know, just and that's just one instance where we had to change tack and, and, you know, some people did some really good work and so we could, you know, get food into Derby.

[Silvana] You saw hundreds of people displaced, the roads were damaged, homes were damaged. I know that you're highly trained, obviously, in your role to respond to these types of incidents. Was there ever a moment when you thought, this is all too much?

[Glenn] Mhm. Look, there were times I had to just stand aside and, in my, you know, I'd close the door to my office, or I'd find a quiet area where I'd just had to take stock and have a think, you know? Bearing in mind that, you know, you step out into, you know, you've got a lead, a group of people. If people lose confidence in you, their performance starts to drop. So, anything I did like that was certainly done in the privacy of my own office by myself. I'd, you know, now, I've been with the organisation 20 years, and been in the emergency management field as an SES volly and the like for, you know, near on 35 now. So if I didn't have, you know, the benefit of, you know, being IC at Seroja and, you know, Damien and all those other larger jobs, I certainly think I would have been a bit more wanting than I was. But there was a job to do.

[Silvana] Did you find that your local knowledge helped?

[Glenn] Oh, absolutely. And I think that's why I stayed there. Was able to stay there, having that local knowledge, just knowing that, you know, there was: Yes, we can use that airstrip. Yeah, there's an airstrip there. Or how do you know there's an airstrip? Well, you've got that local knowledge. Going into communities, and, you know, we had a program prior to wet season every year, and we'd go out and, you know, I'd visit the ones in the Fitzroy Valley. The district officer in the East. Kimberley would do his, communities, etc, etc. And every year he'd knock on the door and, you know, check their level of preparedness, any changes to their infrastructure, etc. And that's how you build up those relationships, and go into those communities. And you knew, you know, what the size of them, if they, you know, there were going to be any issues there or there's a school there or there's a shop here. Having all that local knowledge really, really helped me out.

[Silvana] You find in times of crisis, communities often band together. Is that something you witnessed?

[Glenn] Oh, yeah, definitely. Absolutely. From both the Fitzroy Crossing perspective, from where I was, you know, certainly people were rallying together. And that picture that I described earlier is a good example. And even to the point where, the people and yes, I did have a large team, but, let me put it to you this way, even and it sticks with me in, in my team and everyone get just getting in and doing the work. They dispatched, up to assist. And I remember some, senior marine rescue vols, coming up to us, and I'm sure their normal role would be comms or whatever it would be, but they, you know, what are they doing at a flood? Well, these people just got stuck in, and there were 70 people out of the small building, as I've said. And the issues that that bring, and they made sure that the eskies were stocked, and the bins were - they come in a couple of times a day and we'd have meals, and then the resultant rubbish that they would occur, and these people just got stuck in and with no complaint, no - just got stuck in and got the job done.

[Silvana] So you feel like people were doing roles that weren't part of their usual role?

[Glenn] Because they had to.

[Silvana] Yeah.

[Glenn] You know, they were being asked to do things that they wouldn't normally being asked to do. And that was just a very small example of someone who, you know, this is outside their realm of normal possibility, but who cares? Let's just get in and we can help in some way. And they did. And it made running our team easier because, you know, people always - it was hot up there, you know, and even though we're in an aircon building, but you know, people always had access to, you know, cold drinks, you know, in the esky. It was stocked every day. The bins were emptied, you know, the food came in. We didn't have to think about things like that. It just happened. You know, the Covid issues, you know, people were managing that. So, you know, it just all...

[Silvana] Was your office or accommodation impacted at all?

[Glenn] No, not the office. No, no. And the impact, well, let's put it this way. There were certainly issues in regards to supply. And bearing in mind that. Broome at that time of year, isn't, you know, it's not the highest point of season. So not a lot of - the shops that would normally open be open. So we were relying on a lot the same suppliers to make sure that, you know, would keep us fed, etc, and all the other things that were needed. Bear in mind we had, you know, Defence were there, the impact - I'd love to see what the impact of the airport was, because there was a lot more aircraft in the airport than it normally was. You know, just to give you an idea, the level of aircraft that were being used, once we could determine that the Fitzroy Crossing airstrip was safe, and the aerodrome manager, he had to check it all and RFDS even. We're not flying in here because the floodwater had impacted right up to the - impacted about a third of the runway. And they said, look, you know, because it's saturated. So we had to do a touch and go with a medium lift, cargo aircraft from Defence. And then the aerodrome manager went out and, put a level of wood in to see the indentation on the runway. And only after that we could, we could bring aircraft in. And then the ADF had to bring in a mobile air traffic control. And it was different for the locals because they weren't used to air traffic control around Fitzroy Crossing. But there was that

many aircraft coming in that we were - Fitzroy Crossing Airport was meeting the same level of traffic to about 75%, that of the traffic that were going to Perth Airport every day.

[Silvana] Wow.

[Glenn] Yeah. So, just to, you know, not only Defence, but every - health, the helicopters that we were using.

[Silvana] So was that for bringing things in, taking things out?

[Glenn] Correct.

[Silvana] Medical evacuations...

[Glenn] We would bring in responders every day. Because there wasn't the accommodation in Fitzroy Crossing, so they had to work during the day. So we'd get them on an aircraft early. You know, there were SES volunteers flying around in CH-47 Chinooks. I've never done that.

[Both laugh]

So we'd fly them in and out every day. And then they'd come home and they would, we would accommodate them in Broome, and then they'd go out again the next day. And we also had to manage the fatigue as well, because during the, you know, the flood had long gone and the humidity hit. So we were only - we were working them in the morning, and in the afternoon. We couldn't really work him during the middle of the day because it's just too hot.

[Silvana] How many days did this incident run for? Actively response phase?

[Glenn] Around eight weeks.

[Silvana] Wow.

[Glenn] Yeah. Ran eight weeks.

[Silvana] Working in a disaster is obviously hard, but you must have seen some amazing and uplifting things.

[Glenn] Oh, yeah, definitely. You know, just working, you know, I won't name any names, but there's a few people there. I've, you know, there's an air ops bloke that works for DFES. My God, he - hardest working man I've ever seen in my entire life. What the ADF did, you know, the Urban Search and Rescue boys, what they were doing, the SES volunteers that went in there, and then the Fitzroy Crossing VFES. You know, everyone just got stuck in. You know, there were photos going around of responders. Didn't matter what service they were from, but they were just covered in mud.

[Silvana] Exactly. It's obvious it was incredibly devastating, the situation at hand. But can you take anything positive away from it?

[Glenn] Yeah, definitely. The first thing is never underestimate. If you're going into a job, you know, take the blinkers off. I remember going, as I said, going to that job thinking I'm only going to go to this. And it was way beyond that. So always expect the unexpected. It's

certainly given me a lot more experience to assist me in, you know, in any future events I might attend. I'm hoping that's the biggest of my career. I've got ten years to go, so let's wait and see. But, yeah. Look. And the relationships that you build up over time, you know, during the job... When people coming up and shaking your hand and saying, thanks very much and you're doing vice versa; it's very gratifying.

[Silvana] Was that unlike anything you've ever seen before?

[Glenn] Once I got to the - I flew in with the Deputy Commissioner, and I saw the bridge and I'd seen, you know, photos and stuff. And then I saw some of the homes and - yeah, it certainly gave me a new appreciation of, you know, of the level of impact that, that, you know, an event like this can bring.

[Silvana] Glenn, thank you so much for sharing your story.

[Glenn] Thank you. Appreciate it.

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[Silvana] This is Mics and Sirens. I'm Silvana Pulitano. In the next episode I sit down with the DFES scientist. You might wonder what a scientist has to do with emergency services. Tune in to find out. For more information on this episode, visit the show notes.