

EOD Testifies At Inquiry About Fire Caused By Training

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Sydney, Australia Australian EOD officers have testified before a commission of inquiry who are investigating the circumstances surrounding a fire at the Marrangaroo Training Area in Lithgow. The fire, which started on October 16, was found to be started during an EOD training exercise. As is continued burning for nearly a month, it became known as the State Mine fire and destroyed five homes and seven structures in the Lithgow area. Before being extinguished, the fire covered 50,000 hectares (approximately 123,000 acres).

Australian EOD Warrant Officer Andrew Newsome told the inquiry that his staff attempted to put out the fire with shovels and a hose, but the flames were just too high to control. Testimony also indicated that Defence personnel fighting the blaze were almost hit by fragmentation from UXO that exploded in the area due to the fire. In his testimony, Newsome told the committee, "There wasn't really anything we could do to fight that end of the fire... We couldn't get to the face of it ... there might have been more unexploded bombs."

So far, the inquiry has heard that hazard reduction had not taken place at the site for almost 20 years despite a Rural Fire Service (RFS) report was issued back in 2011 that found the area was at risk of a bushfire. The inquiry also heard that detonations were banned when there was a "very high" fire rating. On the day the blaze started, the rating was "high" in Lithgow but "very high" in the greater Sydney area, including the nearby Blue Mountains. The inquiry will investigate whether the fire caused injury to any person at the training area, whether it damaged property and the qualifications and experience of the Defence people involved in fighting the fire. It will also look at whether any of their actions were affected by drugs or alcohol, and the appropriateness of the training area.

The inquiry under the supervision of former Sydney judge John O'Meally continues as the Australian Defence continues to apologize for sparking the blaze.