



Between Lake Eildon and the Dartmouth Reservoir in Victoria, Australia, dozens of active fires churned out thick clouds of smoke in early December.

Kevin says the crews worked hard to continue the reputation earned in the States of being thorough, skilful firefighters, and the locals were impressed.

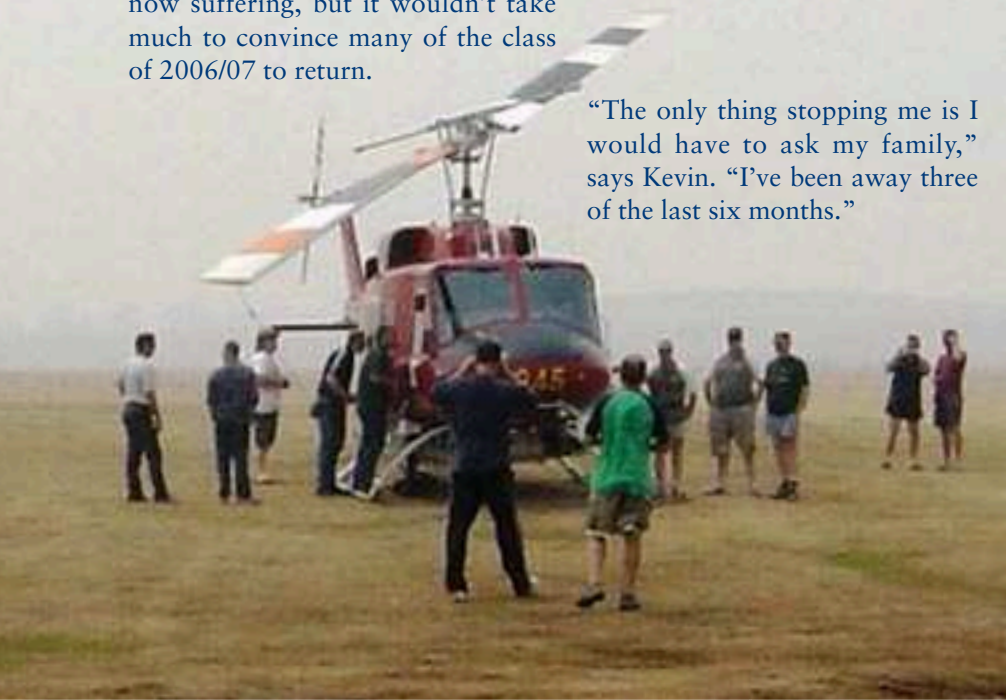
The pay-off wasn't just in improving trans-Tasman relations, though. Firefighters returning to New Zealand – particularly the less experienced ones – have brought back a wealth of knowledge and experience, particularly in handling fire without water.

“They’ve learned that water is not the be all and end all. There’s lots of techniques, like back-burning and hand-cutting fire breaks which we train in, but often don’t use. Now they’ve seen them working.”

Fire conditions in Victoria appear to have eased for the time being, although other Australian states are now suffering, but it wouldn't take much to convince many of the class of 2006/07 to return.



“The only thing stopping me is I would have to ask my family,” says Kevin. “I’ve been away three of the last six months.”



Packing heat

While about 100 people ended up crossing the Tasman to help out stretched firefighters, many more were queuing up to take their place.

In Taradale and many other parts of the country, volunteer firefighters did their best to simulate the hot and heavy work across the ditch by hauling 40kg packs in a fickle New Zealand summer.

Ultimately, a third deployment of firefighters was not needed as conditions in Victoria eased, but these guys didn't know that when they picked up their packs.



Packing heat pictures: Kerry Marshall