A short while ago I visited Tasmania, primarily to see how the Army had helped in the devastating bush fires that had taken place in and around the Hobart area.

A good many members of the Regular Army were involved, in addition to five or six hundred members of the C.M.F. When the fire broke out, large numbers of the C.M.F. were in the hills on an exercise and for some time there was concern as to whether they would be able to get out without difficulty.

This was, in fact, accomplished without any problems. The exercise was immediately ended and all members in Tasmania converted to fire fighting, to relief or to assistance of one kind or another.

Generators were flown from the mainland to relieve severe power shortages; hundreds of mattresses and other bedding were sent to the Army camp at Brighton where Army huts were immediately converted for families who had been burnt out. The Army drill hall in the centre of Hobart was converted to a make-shift hospital and acted as a collection point for lost children.

Special signal units had flown down from the mainland so that all localities would have adequate communications since the normal civil network had been completely destroyed in many areas.

A company of the 3rd Battalion, stationed in South Australia, were flown to the area to relieve C.M.F. members who had to return to their normal civilian jobs. In addition, a good many of the C.M.F. asked for special leave so that they could stay in the Army while they were making a direct contribution to fire fighting or to fire relief.

Army transport had shifted very large quantities of hay for stock, of water, medical supplies, food and clothing and bedding,
as well as general stores which were urgently needed. On one day 30 tons of lime were carted to different areas to help dispose of sheep and cattle that had been burnt.

Special buildings were taken to Snug and were erected there. This area was perhaps worse hit than anywhere else in the fire.

Every member in the Army in Tasmania has every right to be proud of the work that has been accomplished. They have provided a great deal of relief to a large number of people and this is still continuing.

There are still 40 families, for example, in the Brighton Army camp and members are still helping clear up rubble and removing rubbish from burnt out buildings. Some help is being given to local authorities to restore road communications. Water tanks and water supplies are being re-established in some of the devastated areas.

During the fire, over 50,000 sheep were burnt, up to 300 dairy cattle and 1,000 beef cattle, 600 pigs and 50,000 poultry.

About 1,000 square miles were affected by the fires, a very large mileage of fencing has been destroyed and many farms have been completely wiped out. Orchards, which have taken 10 years to mature have, in some instances, been destroyed. Over 1,410 homes were burnt and, worst of all, 54 people lost their lives in the fires.

I spent quite some time flying over the fire areas and one of the remarkable things about it is that a great number more homes were not destroyed. In many cases you would see where fires had come right to the house, but left the house untouched, whereas the house next door would be completely destroyed. The fire on the edge of Hobart had gone right to the edge of some streets without touching the houses. In other streets the fire had probably been no hotter and no more dangerous but all the houses had been burnt.
There was no obvious explanation for this. It was a wonder that more homes had not been destroyed.

I think everyone should be pleased at the way organisations and individuals have rallied to the cause and provided help and assistance in many different ways for the people who suffered as a result of the fires.

My purpose was to visit the Army units, in particular to examine the damage, and to see what we were doing to help and would continue doing to help. The Army has certainly gained experience in working with the State and local Government authorities and the assistance given by the C.M.F. and Regular Army to all the people concerned was greatly appreciated. I know very many people are most grateful for what the Army has done.

I believe there will be some valuable lessons learnt from this for future civil disasters of this magnitude.

We must hope and work to see that they don't occur again but we also must learn to profit from the experience that has been gained on this occasion.

I thought it might be possible to get some idea of the disaster by comparing the number of houses destroyed with some of our own local municipalities. I can't vouch definately for these figures but I believe they are reasonably accurate.

There were over 1400 homes destroyed in the fire, there are about 1,750 homes in the shire of Glenelg and 614 in Casterton. More than twice the number of houses in the town of Casterton were burnt, more than the equivalent of two Castertons. There are 1150 homes in the shire of Wannon and 450 in Coleraine, so the fire destroyed more homes than are contained in the whole shire. There are 2100 houses in Portland, so the fire, in terms of homes destroyed, would have burnt the equivalent of two thirds of Portland. There are 2900 houses in Hamilton, the fire, in terms of homes destroyed, would be equivalent to burning half of Hamilton. More houses were destroyed in the fire than are contained in the whole shire of Dundas.
This gives some idea of the magnitude of the disaster and the time it will take to re-build and re-construct. The energies of the Tasmanian Government and the Commonwealth Government and instrumentalities that are helping must be urgently directed to this end.