



Above: Markus Bucy with one of a fleet of Disaster Relief vehicles on King's Hill, Willunga.

## An army of volunteers

Story by **Emma Masters**.

When Markus Bucy emigrated from America with his pregnant wife and began volunteering to connect with the local community, he never imagined it would lead him to launching a charity that helps Australians recover from natural disasters.

More than a decade after the couple decided to call South Australia and eventually the Fleurieu Peninsula home, Disaster Relief Australia has attracted a workforce of over 2,500 volunteers.

With disaster relief teams based around the nation, the charity focuses on harnessing the skills of military veterans, engaging a group that is all too often positioned as traumatised and broken.

'While there are people who are affected by their time in defence, it's not always people's experience. It wasn't mine in the US military,' Markus explains. 'We need to be careful not to victimise veterans. Importantly, many have a sense of service and want to become part of a community, and we've shown they're actually really good working in disaster relief because they can repurpose all of their skills and experience.'

Markus started percolating the idea for the charity in 2014. The idea continued to grow, even as he worked late into the night after his day job, all the while juggling a new life in a new country with a new baby. Markus' intuition that the idea could work is what kept him going. 'It's not often you come across an idea that makes perfect sense; you take military veterans, repurpose their skills to do disaster relief and you're helping the veterans and helping the community,' he says. 'I didn't know anybody here, I had no political capital, but I was able to gather a few other people around me that could help make it happen.' The small team was originally focused on international disaster response, but Cyclone Debbie in far north Queensland made the members realise there was also work to be done domestically. 'We had a unique ability to take a military methodology about how we plan and execute our activities,' Markus says. 'We can go into a disaster-struck community, understand what the recovery needs are,

and adapt our operating model to work with individual communities to help them get back on the ground.' Then the devastating Black Saturday bushfires hit.

'Often due to the trauma of losing an entire property, people just don't know where to start and we find the most important work we do is giving people a sense of hope by just coming in and doing enough to help them get started,' he says. 'It's a really powerful change to see happen.'

With climate change increasing the threat of major disasters, the Federal Government has recognised the important role Disaster Relief Australia has been playing, and is in the process of committing \$38.3 million in funds over four years to help the charity mobilise its veteran-led army of volunteers.

Compared to the mere thousands the organisation raised in its first year, the support of multi-million dollar funding is testament to its work in the field. 'We can help take the pressure off the Australian Defence Force and we can work collaboratively with it, because we speak a common language and apply similar methodologies,' Markus says.

But Markus' story doesn't stop there. After undertaking the Fleurieu Future Leaders course led by Charles and Janice Manning, Markus was introduced to the head of the Australian Institute of Machine Learning at the University of Adelaide.

They've since teamed up on building an artificial intelligence algorithm to do rapid damage assessments with drones and aerial imagery. 'If we can develop a proprietary algorithm, that's a sovereign capability for Australia that will have a profound impact on assessing damage of large-scale disasters,' says Markus. 'It's a research project right now and these things don't happen overnight, but it's potentially an incredibly exciting outcome.'

But the greatest achievement for Markus is the opportunity to make a difference in the country he now calls home. 'As an immigrant coming here, and having a sense of service myself, to be able to give back to a place that's now my home and my family's home, it's an incredibly wonderful feeling,' he says.



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