

colour my world

A sky of blue, clouds of white,
Day begins with sun so bright.
A gentle wind creating breeze,
Green leaves fluttering on the trees.
Red rosellas, white cockatoo,
High above the ground they flew.

These are the colours that colour
our world.

Blue sky turns dark, it's thick with smoke,
With embers blowing and ash that chokes.
Green leaves burning, turning brown,
With fire roaring across the ground.
Birds of red and birds of white,
Flee as colours of fire stain the night.

This is what took the colours from
our world.

After the fire our thoughts were grey,
We stood with friends not knowing what to say.
Some individuals took a stand,
To those who were hurting they lent a hand.
They filled their cars with bits and pieces,
They delivered food, hope, hugs and kisses.

Help from others started to colour
our world.

A place was started for those in need,
Our relief centre began from a small seed.
People donated items of their own,
How much people cared about others was truly shown.
We had days of joy for the old and young,
And the Christmas in July was full of fun.

Little things helped add colour to
our world.

Friday night dinners are fun and bright,
The company of others is such a delight.
With raffles, Strzelecki Stringbusters and the Tassie crew,
With performers or friends there's always something to do.
The dinners are a chance to relax and not have to think,
So everyone should come on down and enjoy a drink.

Being together is helping to colour
our world.

So many places and supporters have been helping us out,
They all come running as soon as you shout.
They offer supplies to help ease the load,
As the path to recovery is a very long road.
Thanks to those who help ease the way,
Who bring light to the dark of that horrible day.

With their support there's more colour in
our world.

Our world of colour went from bright to dark,
Bringing back light was something in which we all took part.
Red rosellas and white cockatoo,
Return as green grass and leaves grow anew.
Though the danger has long passed,
What we've become as a community ... will for a long time
last.

And even though that day is something
we hate,
We will reunite, rebuild, regenerate,
As we take the steps to colour our world.

beneath
dark skies





Above: Smoke thickens as the fire builds in intensity.

Gavin Algie

Gavin Algie was planning to go to Tarra Valley for a swim, when a neighbour came to warn him of a plume of smoke. Gavin didn't have a radio so went to have a look, and in the excitement, backed into the mailbox and knocked it down. He could see smoke coming from Churchill/Hazelwood North. His friend Vincent Prigg was visiting and together they decided to defend, which had always been the fire plan.

The week before, suffering a bee sting, Gavin had used two days off to sort out the pumps. They had a stainless steel tank to circulate water from the dam. Gavin and Georgina had lived on their property for about 15 years, but had never been directly threatened by fire.

Gavin was in the CFA, had done a lot of training and attended many blazes, including a horror fire in Stradbroke 10 years earlier.

With no hefty build up of trees or bush, Gavin imagined the worst they would cop was a running grass fire. They watched the fire progress. They didn't think they would be directly hit, but that maybe they might get embers. They wet towels and tested hoses and pumps to ensure that the system would work if needed.

Gavin was overwhelmed by the speed at which the fire began moving. Flames were leaping from ridge to ridge 5-10 kilometres in the distance.

He doesn't recall the wind change that started bringing it their way, but it was suddenly in their faces. The heat and the enormity of it were incredible. Callignee Fire Brigade Captain Ian Ewart came to warn of fire threat and check their fire plan before leaving to evacuate his own house.

'I thought we were safe enough', Gavin said, but he got the generator out in case they lost power.

Their children, Ethan, 11, and Kaitlyn, 6, were kept distracted, watching TV and playing video games.

Gavin needed more fuel – it was crucial – but said in hindsight that leaving the property was probably his worst decision. At 5.15 pm Gavin and Vince left to get fuel. Georgina called, requesting ice-cream for the children. Gavin filled the car with diesel for running the tank, as well as three jerry cans.

By 6 pm it was pitch black, overwhelming and ominous, and they hit a roadblock on the way back.

'I just begged – "my wife and kids are alone, I've got fuel for them". Extremely worried that he wasn't going to get through the roadblock, Gavin decided to either run through it or go around. 'I just knew that I was going to get home with the fuel.'

In what was the longest 15 minutes of his life, he eventually talked his way through. Driving home he needed the headlights on and recalls the hills glowing red. 'There was no one on the roads – that was the eerie bit.' Back home, he handed over the ice-cream and got to work.

Georgina remembers the wind changing. 'I could feel it coming straight for us. It sounded like a jet engine, magnified 100 times, right on top of us – about two minutes before all hell broke loose.'

'We were in a fire storm', Gavin said. 'In the seconds it took to run from one door to the other it was suddenly just everywhere. It was just walls of flame. It was like a cyclone whirling around. It seemed to just surround us – engulf us.'

Georgina promised the kids they would keep them safe and changed them into clothing made from natural fibres, in case they had to leave. When the laundry caught fire she thought she

couldn't keep that promise. 'I beat myself up about how we could have evacuated them earlier.'

She called her in-laws, Terry and Erica Algie, when she saw the fire front was going to hit. 'My father-in-law said he looked up and saw a massive ball of flames and thought we were all dead.' At that point Terry and Erica fled their own home, but nearly killed themselves in the process.

Panicked, Gavin headed to the top of the driveway in protective gear to meet the fire and try to steer it around the house. He sat in the car, unable to see past the bonnet, and wondered where to start.

He watched the fire race up a paddock towards his neighbour's house, then saw a spot fire 50 metres away. By the time he got to it, it had jumped the road and was burning towards his shed. He drove alongside the flames, but he said it was a stupid thing to do – it was too hot.

Gavin then drove 10 metres to untangle the hose. He had a good flow of water but it didn't seem to have any effect. 'I knew there was no one else I could call on, that was when I probably panicked the most.'

He drove the car back into the driveway and parked, later realising the stupidity of having blocked the driveway. He grabbed a different hose and sprayed about 70 litres of water on one section, but the heat was evaporating it before it even got to the fire. He left the pump running and wedged the hose so it sprayed the car.

He had no goggles and fire was starting to affect his eyes, so he just sprayed whatever he could.

He could see flames burning the side of the metal shed fiercely, but didn't think it would burn. 'I was wrong – it incinerated.'

Embers were belting all over the place like a shocking hailstorm. 'My brain said I needed to shelter myself. I got into the trailer by the shed. The radiant heat was too hot and I was alternating between spraying myself in the face and then having another go at the fires', Gavin said.

The noise was overwhelming. 'Even if someone was yelling in your ear, you wouldn't have heard them.'

Embers were flying everywhere and at one point Gavin thought he was on fire. He threw the hose and flapped his arms. His eyes were streaming with tears and wiping them made it worse. 'I thought I was dead right there.'

The pool was filled with dirty, green water. He ran for it and realised he wasn't alright. The radiant heat was evaporating water and was causing steam burns. 'I was cooking like a dim sim', and couldn't breathe due to a lack of oxygen in the atmosphere. 'No living creature could be outside any more. You would be incinerated.'

Gavin splashed pool water on his face. He took a couple of good breaths and dashed inside screaming for Vince, who arrived at the same time.

Georgina gained comfort from the sound of the sprinklers, but knew that if they stopped, the family would be in trouble. She has no doubt the cheap system saved their home.

Gavin burned the back of his hand on a glass door. Total panic ensued. 'I knew I needed to be manning the hoses but I couldn't. I was basically praying that the house would hang on.' The children were lying on the lounge room floor, having problems breathing.

Georgina told the kids they were all fine, 'but in our minds we thought we were stuffed'.

Gavin was starting to scramble for new ideas. He thought about a 5 foot jump out the window to dash for the dam if they saw the house on fire. 'It was a last ditch evacuation if we needed it.'

He poked his head out a couple of times but had to come back in. Gavin finally got back outside and heard a massive explosion. He thought the bathroom was alright but later realised it was the shed exploding.

'The hose fell apart in my hands – it was incinerated. My mind wasn't clear and I wandered around carrying the end of the hose for a while till I realised.' He used buckets and a kettle to put out spot fires all night.

Georgina could hear fire inside the house. She told the kids to stay on the floor, went to the laundry and saw it engulfed in flames. She ran screaming to alert the guys. 'I was pretty scared.'

Gavin took to it with a fire extinguisher and Vince ripped the top off of the fish tank, filled a kettle with water and put out the last of the flames, extinguishing it 'just in time'.



The guys went outside to control the smouldering. Georgina wet towels in the fish tank to cover the kids with. The house was filled with toxic smoke and the kids were still having problems breathing. She told them to crawl with their heads down to the door at the front of the house. She followed them with wet towels in case embers came in.

They had 40 minutes of terror before Georgina was able to send a group text to say they were okay.

Soon there was 'nothing left except our house that could burn', including Vince's Land Cruiser filled with tools and emergency fuel, which was incinerated.

The terrified dog was hiding in the lounge room suffering smoke inhalation and they could hear the cat crying. They later thought that he was gone, but found him in a wombat hole a couple of hours later. 'He hasn't liked us much since.'

At 7.30 pm, they had survived and Georgina realised the kids hadn't had any dinner. 'I thought, "stuff it" and got the ice-cream and spoons.'

They heard their neighbour's place go up in flames and calling them the next day to say it was all gone was incredibly hard, as was having to shoot fire-ravaged animals.

On Sunday they needed fresh water but it was all contaminated. It was a challenge for Gavin to get to Traralgon South, where he was able to get water from the CFA and shop. However, it was still too dangerous to get fuel. He returned to 'isolation'.

It was also hard on their families. Gavin's sister was told by police that anyone who lived up where they were would be dead. It was a devastating feeling knowing people had perished.

On Monday a Traralgon South resident brought them supplies from Gavin's sister at the roadblocks. 'It was the first night I slept, knowing we had fuel to keep the generators going and fresh drinking water', he said.

Seven houses on their road were lost in the fires, 'but at least everyone survived'. They say they would never blame the CFA for not assisting them. 'They couldn't have got here.'

The Algies have plans to improve their fire system and would leave if it ever came at them from the same direction again. Whatever the case, Georgina said if there was another fire, they would definitely evacuate the kids, 'but if Gavin was staying to fight, I'm staying with him'.

Above: This fence remains upright despite the damage it has sustained.

Left: One of many distorted road signs which were damaged in the fire.



Angus Archibald

Angus Archibald jokes that he will die sitting on a toilet – but however he goes, he says it won't be on the roads. He's crashed a car, been hit by a car while he was riding a motorbike and survived driving through Black Saturday bushfires.

He's had a few 'second chances' at life and knows he was exceptionally lucky to survive the drive through blazing trees – a tyre blew and embers fell onto his vehicle but he wasn't stopping.

Angus, who works at the Traralgon Motorbike Shop, recalls first seeing smoke around midday from his Old Callignee Road property, where he was preparing to go to a bike swap meet in Drouin. He went inside to tell his partner, Sue Platt. They turned on the ABC radio and heard little, so Angus drove up Neaves Road, about 3 kilometres, to the highest point in the area. He could see the wind was taking fire away from them.

Angus talked to several people up there, including neighbour Ken Grigg. They discussed what to do if there was a wind change. Several fire fighters had left their cars at the viewing spot, so residents assumed that they knew it was all going to be okay. Not so – all the cars that were left there were later found destroyed.



Above right: The burnt wheel sits alongside Angus' ute showing the damage it sustained during his escape from the fire.

Above left: This view through the car windscreen was experienced by many as they fled the fire.

Angus had always planned to stay and defend against fire, but he wanted the children out – their son, Logan, 6, and Sue's daughters, Brodie, 19, and Caitlin, 16.

Caitlin was at work and lost pretty much everything. Brodie was at home and took Logan to a shopping centre to get away. They took a few things but not much. They were thinking things would be back to normal the following day.

Sue left at about 4.30 pm to go into Traralgon and the kids joined her at her brother's house.

Angus said they were perhaps a bit naive about bushfires. He'd lived there for 27 years and had only once seen a fire down the road years ago.

When the radio went out he figured it had hit Mt Tassie, which is about 10 kilometres from his place. He knew it was coming. Originally Angus thought the wind might blow it past or that he could do something about it if a bit hit the property.

It got dark and he lost all track of time. It was around 5.30–6 pm when it turned. He had a four-wheeler generator with a floodlight and a pump going off the tank.

The noise of the fire was like 1,000 freight trains. He didn't have time to get on the phone, instead concentrating his efforts outside with buckets of water. He saw his neighbour Ken heading to his dam with a bucket.

Embers the size of a rubbish bin lid began hitting the tree line between the properties. He and Ken were yelling at each other about where the embers were. Both were trying to attack them with buckets – but to no avail, the wind was blowing too hard.

Angus was still dressed in shorts. He hadn't had time to put overalls on. About 15 minutes after he saw spot fires start in Freddie's paddock (Angus's other neighbour), he decided he needed to get out. As he left, Ken was planning to run to his own house.

After making further attempts to extinguish embers, Angus quickly realised his efforts would be in vain. 'I thought this is bullshit and I'm getting out of here.'

Angus went into the house to grab his keys, watch and wallet. He found one cat but lost sight of two others. When he threw his dogs in the car the cat jumped out. Both dogs were pretty quiet and Angus said it probably helped having them.

He turned the car around and went down the driveway hoping he wouldn't hit anything. He wrongly assumed he could go down the driveway and then just drive down the road to safety.

Thirty minutes earlier there was no sign of fire past his driveway, but when he got to the end of the driveway he could see the whole road had lit up. 'I didn't even think that there would be fire on the roads.'

He trailed the car in front of him watching the car's taillights, as well as branches covered in flames fall onto the road. There were 60 foot trees on fire. He was just hoping that whoever was in the car ahead would keep going – and hurry!

Angus caught up with the car ahead, but as it went round the corner, the driver stopped because there was a massive wall of flames.

Angus didn't hesitate – he drove right past the vehicle and drove straight through the blaze – in second gear. All he kept thinking was that he just had to get a bit further down the road.

It's incredulous to think he survived as he retells the journey. He hit some things on the side of the road and it was all he could do to actually stay on the road. He passed a car burning on the way down. He thought it was empty, but was later shocked to find out it wasn't.

The front right tyre blew and he was getting worried as he drove on the rim in second gear for about a kilometre. Branches were scratching the top of his roof and it was pretty hot. 'I wasn't stopping.'

After about 100 metres he saw spot fires starting but had a bit more visibility.

He knew to be home free he could not stop.

As he had been crashing through, branches and embers had fallen between the tray body and cab of his ute. He could see them in his rear view mirror.

Finally, he stopped by a dam, and with nothing else to put them out with, he took off his shirt, wet it and jammed it between the car and tray body. He didn't want to waste time – there was no way of knowing how much more was going to light up.

The only other person he saw was a guy in a four-wheel drive going in the direction Angus had just fled.

He continued driving for a further 5 kilometres on the rim – he wasn't going to change it until he got to the Loy Yang lights.

'I was stupid, and very lucky.'

So many 'what if' scenarios have since gone through his mind – he could have had a head on collision, could have hit a tree, got stuck or the motor might not have run. If he had made different choices things could have been different. 'You don't even think of those things.'

When he was finally able to return, other than his Dad's old anvil, they had lost everything. 'Every blade of grass was gone.' Along with the house, more than 50 motorbikes in working order plus lots of parts were replaced with a 'big alloy river'.

It's been a pretty emotional journey and harder on Sue than on Angus. She lost her father last year and then all of his possessions. She's also had to deal with losing a brother and having another with cancer.

Surviving the fire changed the way Angus now looks at things – he says there's still plenty of life to be lived. He would not hesitate to leave if there was another fire.

While it's been hard losing videos, photos and mementos of the past, he says you've got to let stuff go to be able to move forward. Having said that, he's the first to admit to missing all his bike stuff.

Angus said community support had been fantastic. It was very humbling when people offered him and his family donations of clothes and money.

He and his family decided not to go back, staying in a rental property until deciding their next steps. It's been hard for the kids to lose everything, but the important thing is that they are all together.

Angus thinks he just got lucky – however, that luck hasn't extended to the lottery tickets he's bought since.

There's one lucky charm he won't be getting rid of – his beaten up ute. Its only value is to him – it saved his life and somehow just kept going.

Opposite: A view of the intensity of the fire as trees are engulfed in flames.





Paul Crowe

Paul 'Crowey' Crowe owed his neighbour a lifetime of gratitude and a large amount of beer for saving his house.

While Crowey managed to take three carloads of possessions to Traralgon, he felt underprepared to stay and fight a blaze. Luckily for him, his neighbour Rod Bechaz saved his house after defending his own.

Within two minutes of hearing an ABC radio report, two friends called to warn Crowey of impending danger.

'The first thing I did was unplug the computer, pack two cars and get out. It was always the plan to get out.'

He left with his wife, Leanne, and daughters, Sienna, 4, and Georgia, 1. 'I was not going to stay with the girls.'

Despite being able to see smoke, he returned for a second car load. Leanne thought he was making a mistake.

'I felt comfortable at the time, but now wouldn't ever go back to a fire like that.' Returning had not been worth the argument with his wife.

Above: The charred earth shows how close the fire came to Paul's property.

Crowey had a friend with him. 'We nearly stayed because we thought we could handle it, but it would have been silly to stay through fire – we weren't prepared enough.'

Instead they took a third car load to Traralgon to his parents. Crowey received mixed reports about the fate of his home but never believed that it would burn. 'I wasn't going to believe it until I saw it.'

Around 7.30 pm, he called his neighbour Rod on his mobile and was surprised to hear that he and his Uncle Jeff had stayed to defend.

'Rod said he didn't know if our house was still there, he couldn't see it from 120 metres away. He walked to the fence and reported that the girls' cubby house and shed were on fire, but the house was still okay at that stage.'

After confirming that Rod and Jeff were safe and that their house was okay, Crowey 'very cheekily asked if there was any chance they could have a look if there were any spot fires around the 'Crowes Nest'.'

'He grumpily said, "I'll see what I can do". I rang him half an hour later and his first words were, "you owe me a shit-load of beer", which we've since paid.'

'He was able to put fire out on our back deck. He came back three times in the night and put it out again. The next day I sent a text: Still there? He sent back: Yep.'

On Sunday Crowey talked his way through the police cordon, taking supplies for Rod, but knew he wouldn't be able to get back in or out immediately.

'When I got back I saw my house and I just couldn't believe it. I had seen devastation all the way from Traralgon South. It was like a bubble had surrounded the Crowe's nest, everything was still green around the house. Outside this little bubble, everything was black.'

He was just blown away that it could still be standing. All around, trees and fences were alight. 'Our house was standing like it hadn't been touched. I think there is no doubt it would have burned if Rod hadn't saved it.'

Crowey spent his first three hours back putting out spot fires around the house, using bucket after bucket from the tank, particularly on the pine deck, which 'was simmering away' and treated pine fence posts that remained alight three or four days later because of the chemicals in them.

After that, Crowey and Rod walked the area searching properties to make sure people were okay. 'I was worried about the status of people. One lot of neighbours was away and for a few days later were unaccounted for. We went through them being alive then dead, then alive again on day seven.'

They later learned that one neighbour who they couldn't locate hadn't made it through the fires.

'People were genuinely pleased that our house had survived, so I decided straight away to not be feeling sorry for myself. My most important things were with me – my wife, my children and three cars of stuff. It's just stuff really.'

Crowey said the trauma of what had happened to his 'beautiful community' was huge for him and it got worse as the weeks went by. After seeing the devastation and hearing story after story, he couldn't go back to work. He decided to put his energy into trying to help the community, aided by his landline being the only one in Callignee that now worked.

His relationship suffered. Leanne didn't feel safe to come home and 'I couldn't leave the house. The house was no longer our home. We'd been here ten years and there was a lot of good energy here that had gone in the fire. We didn't lose our house, but we lost our home.'

After a family holiday to Tasmania in September 'we were back on track'. However, Crowey said they suffered another blow when they returned to find their house had been burgled.

Items they'd managed to save from the fires were gone, including a computer with 'all of our memories and children's photographs'. Notes on the progress of Callignee Hall went, along with his online journal. 'I had been writing and had written 150,000 words after the fires, a diary of everything that was going on.' Losing all that 'was almost as traumatic as the fires'.

Crowey's two chickens survived, as did two steers and a dog. A cat survived, which Crowey thinks hid under the house. The only animals they lost were two budgies.

If fires were to threaten again, he would make the same decision and 'get the hell out'. He believes that people make their own luck and 'we made a decision to leave early'.

Now it's about trying to get their lives back to normal and helping their community to do the same. He said some people will never come back, and he can totally understand that. He looks forward to welcoming new people who move to the area.

For a while it was a very difficult time. 'I was manic from the adrenaline but it wore off.' He said that even though he hadn't worked, 2009 has been the busiest year of his life. Crowey is now working full time again.



Beth Cudmore

Beth and Tony Cudmore didn't even have time to pay their cafe bill when they learned a fire was near their home.

Searing temperatures and a house with no air-conditioning led Beth Cudmore, 33 weeks pregnant, into Traralgon to study for her postgraduate midwifery course. Tony, who works in occupational health and safety, also had study to do, so they had headed to his air-conditioned office for comfort.

The pair had seen smoke outside during a study break at a Traralgon cafe. They had no idea the fire was anywhere near their home until a staff member received a call from her boyfriend to report that there was a blaze in the area – coincidentally near the Cudmores' property.

Arranging to fix the bill later, Beth and Tony immediately jumped into the car and raced home where Tony told Beth she had ten minutes to get what she wanted.

Beth grabbed a box of photos and important documents, and 'shoved some clothes into a suitcase'. She didn't think to take anything else. Tony grabbed the two dogs and the horse, but couldn't coax the cat. Beth half thought she would be coming back to the house later that day, but knew that in reality she might not be.

Above: Ash covered earth and blackened tree trunks are all that remain.

Opposite: A wheelie bin in disguise!

Beth and Tony have children from previous marriages and were relieved that Tony's children were with their mother and Beth's had returned to Tasmania the day before.

They got back to town at around 2.30 pm and could still see smoke. Knowing the fire was behind them and a wind change expected, Tony returned home for more possessions, including some things for the baby that was soon to arrive. He was back in town around 4.30 pm.

As they shopped for toiletries, they saw people coated in ash and dust. 'It started to get really dark, it looked like it was 10 pm at night, but it was only 5 pm.'

While Beth doesn't recall feeling scared, she figured their house might not be there the next day.

Tony and Beth spent the night at Tony's former wife's house. They kept checking the news and the internet but there was no information about Traralgon South.

They received updates from a neighbour Kathryn, who had decided to stay and defend her property. At 9 am on Sunday morning, the news came – the Cudmores' home was gone.

Beth and Tony tried to get to their property that afternoon but they couldn't get through the roadblocks. People kept telling Beth to go and get checked out, but she felt fine and believes the pregnancy hormones protected her from feeling overly stressed. They weren't able to salvage anything beyond some of Tony's daughters' ceramic statues, but say the important thing was that they, and their family, were safe.

The next night Beth and Tony went to Rosedale and stayed with friends in a four-bedroom house. They stayed there until the week after new son, Noah, was born, before moving into a house in Traralgon, provided by one of Tony's workmates.

Beth and Tony decided to rebuild. Choices were made in April, just weeks after the fire, with both budget and a range of other distractions at the forefront of decision-making.

In retrospect, selections might have been made differently now, but they wanted to take their lives off hold. Regardless, one positive is that there will be room for all of Beth and Tony's children in the new house.



Beth and Tony have pinned their hopes on things going 'back to normal' in their new home, but say that deep down they know that's being unrealistic.

Beth believes counselling and having Noah helped her deal with the aftermath. Noah gave her a focus, especially in the months straight after the fire, and although she thinks maybe she should have deferred her midwifery studies, it also gave her something else to focus her attention on.

Stitch and Chat sessions at the Traralgon South Relief Centre provided an opportunity to catch up with other women in the community and provide mutual support. The Cudmores have met more people, become closer to neighbours and believe the fires brought people together. Beth is amazed at and grateful for the people who put their lives on hold to help the community.

Beth is very glad she didn't see or experience the house burning or get flashbacks to the day of the fire. While there is a sense of loss and some anger about the way life was taken out of their control, Beth and Tony are now trying to move on.



Peter Evans

Around 2.30 pm Peter Evans calculated it would take at least a day for fire to reach his Red Hill Road home. Instead, an inferno reached his property within a matter of hours.

He'd just knocked off from work, driving dump trucks at Yallourn, when his boss alerted him to smoke coming from Churchill. They initially thought it was from the Bunyip fires a week before, but when they looked further to the left they saw a big plume of black smoke.

Peter took an alternative route home to see if smoke was headed for his property. He dropped coworker Dwayne home, declining his workmate's offer of help. He didn't think he needed it as he could see the fire heading to Jeeralang.

A former CFA member, Peter wasn't concerned because it was heading the other way and he thought that it might take a day until it got to his home, but he went to Traralgon for fuel in case he needed the car at any stage.

Peter's home was empty – his wife Joanne, who had been informed and was on her way home, was in Bendigo playing badminton. He assessed the situation. Following the fire in Mirboo North, they already had tennis balls in drainpipes, had adjusted the sprinklers on the roof and had the fire pump ready

Above: Peter's house prior to the fire.
Above right: Peter's house after the fire.



with hoses. He had formed a fire group with three neighbours, Gavin Wigginton, Margaret and Chris Madsen, and Tony and Louise Mann.

Weeks earlier he had prepared the land and was 'kind of prepared for the unknown'.

Neighbour Louise Mann called Peter to warn him. He in turn rang a friend in Callignee, Sue Radford, to warn her and she left.

He rang his son Glen, 28, in Point Cook and said he needed some help. Glen headed down, but never made it – he was diverted through Leongatha as a fire in Bunyip Ridge began to cross the road and local roadblocks prevented him from reaching their home. They met up later at a friend's house in Traralgon.

Another neighbour Richard Ford came up to talk. While he knew about the fire, he had friends visiting and they were planning to stay. Peter warned Richard to look after himself first if fire did reach their homes.

Peter didn't expect the fire to come over the hill, but he still put his fire plan into place.

The plan was to stay and he was relieved his wife, Jo, wasn't there – he was concerned about having to look out for anyone else.

After Richard left, Peter didn't panic. He started the sprinklers, laid out the fire hoses and moved the barbecue out from under the verandah.

Dressed in a CFA hat, overalls, bandanas and protective shoes, he moved the wood box and then his daughter Kristie's car about 60 metres from the house and left the keys in it. He parked his four-wheel drive at the front door to load possessions into it if needed.

After ensuring the grass around the house was wet, he planned an escape route, which was to the neighbour's pool.

With a history of patchy phone coverage Peter is thankful that on that day it worked. At one point the number of calls became overwhelming and he had to tell his wife to stop calling.

Around 5 pm his boss, Rod Higginson, rang to say he was joining a strike team. Rod advised there was a wind change coming that was going to push the fire straight onto Peter's property. 'That got the adrenaline moving.'

Peter began preparing two knap-sacks of water and was tying them onto a trolley. He tied one on the back and walked 30 metres to the front to start tying the second one. Jo rang in a very desperate state and begged him to flee the house.

But Peter still had no intention of leaving. He said, 'I love you, I'll see you tomorrow. Don't call again'.

As he hung up, he had a sudden change of heart. 'I thought what the hell. It's only a house – it's not worth dying for a house.'

As an eerie silence fell, he rang his son and said, 'Ring your mother and tell her I'm leaving and I'll get the dogs and cat'.

He put the dogs in a canopy on the back of the car and got the cat. 'Even though I hated that damn cat, I couldn't leave it', he said smiling.

Peter collected photos, which were already packed, the hard drive from the computer and other photos off the fridge.

He'd accidentally hosed down the radio so he couldn't listen to reports. On his way, he drove past his neighbour's and told them he was leaving. When he got to the Loy Yang lights, Peter immediately called them to warn the side of the hill was on fire and told them to leave.

Peter expected he would return to find his house intact. Because it was in an excavated area, he thought the fire would come, hit the roof and pass over.

It was not to be. It was 5.29 when he got to the lights and the best estimations were that his house was gone at 7 pm.

He believes he got out in the nick of time.

The first shirt he borrowed was from a young guy with the sleeves ripped off. He jokes, recalling the image of himself aged 58 years old in a teenager's ripped t-shirt.

He received many calls, before getting one from a friend in the CFA, who was helping with blacking out. The news was bad. He said, 'I'm so sorry, everything's gone except Kristie's car in the paddock'.

Peter said the car had melted in parts, but on Tuesday, when he turned the key, it started. 'I think we will have it with us forever.'

However, his prized Mark One Austin Healey Sprite (Bugeye) was reduced to molten metal – puddles of aluminium.

One of the hardest tasks was to call their daughter, Kristie, 25, – who was leading a school camp in Alaska – to tell her everything was gone, including her 'hundreds of badminton trophies'.

Kristie didn't believe the news and wanted to come home. She came back for a month, bringing bags of clothing that had been donated by Alaskans – the town even donated money to pay for excess luggage.

She bought sieves and the family got to work, finding a small amount of jewellery including an opal ring from Jo's 21st and two fine gold chains with the couple's star signs – Virgo and Taurus – stuck to each other.

Peter said that for a long time they still couldn't believe or comprehend that the fire had happened. However, the reality soon set in. Peter, a seasonal worker, had five months off work, but spent it digging fence posts. He and Jo had to get used to changes, such as living in shared accommodation while rebuilding.

Peter said it's hard to know what they would do in the event of another fire, as each occasion would need to be individually assessed. However if it was bad, they would have no hesitation in collecting what they could and leaving. Despite his best intentions to stay on Black Saturday, he now doesn't think they would have been able to save their home even if there were ten people to defend it.

Peter believes the fires brought the community together. He and Jo developed a different relationship with their neighbours – talking every second day. And as for the support they have been given, 'we couldn't thank everybody enough'.

Opposite above left: The remains of a coin collection belonging to Megan Cheney. These were left to her by her late father.

Opposite above right: A fireproof safe which provided no protection against the heat for the money it contained.

Opposite below left: All that remains of an antique fire extinguisher.

Opposite below right: A child's toy found amongst the debris.





Left: A structure is consumed by flames.

Ian Ewart

On the day of the Black Saturday fires, Ian Ewart, CFA Callignee Fire Brigade Captain, was at home. He was the safety coordinator at Loy Yang B Power Station and also the emergency services liaison officer (ESLO). As ESLO, his role is to liaise with the emergency services for his company. Given the extreme weather conditions and the ongoing activity with the Delburn fires, Ian was waiting for the call from the CFA to assist in his company setting up an incident control centre at Loy Yang B in conjunction with the CFA.

Following the extreme weather warnings, the CFA Callignee crew had been arranged on Friday 6 February and were on standby as part of a strike team, ready for rapid deployment if required.

The call came at 1.42 pm to respond to an outbreak of fire in McDonald Road, Churchill. Ian heard his crew respond through the CFA radio network. At 2.21 pm there was a call that the Callignee Wildlife Shelter on Old Callignee Road was under threat. Ian responded in his own car. Upon arrival at the address there was no evidence of fire and there was no one in

attendance, but the sprinklers were operating. Ian radioed back to the CFA communications centre that no further response was required.

He then went up Old Callignee Road to several houses and advised people to activate their fire plans. Most people knew of the Churchill fire and some elected to stay. Some had laid out their fire equipment. He advised people to clear their gutters of dry material, clear trees and move things further away from their buildings.

Meanwhile, Ian's wife, Sylvia, was getting frantic because she was home alone and could hear the CFA radio listening set reporting on the fire's progress. Their sons lived interstate – Simon in Perth and Greg on the Gold Coast.

Sylvia called Ian by phone to come home urgently as she was very concerned about the reports that she was hearing on the CFA radio and seeing on the news. Knowing there was a predicted wind change, Ian returned home at about 5.30 pm and prepared his house for fire fighting.

They laid out their fire equipment and hoses. They were going to stay.

At about 7.30 pm they could hear and see the fire going over the top of the hill to the south of them. At about 8.00 pm they could see it getting much brighter.

'It sounded like a cyclone or roar of engines. There was a great glow in the sky.'

It was getting close. They went to the top of the hill on Whitelaws Track and could see the fire had crossed Callignee South Road onto their side and was burning on both sides of Whitelaws Track. It was progressing and they could see a lot more behind it. They thought they would be okay as their property is on a downward slope from where the fire was heading and they had firebreaks all round the house, which did help contain the fire when it finally arrived.

He was aware there was a hell of a lot going on because of his CFA pager and CFA listening set. At about 10 pm they lost power.

Sylvia and Ian sat down on the grass and watched the glow.

By 11 pm they were getting light embers on the property, the grass and over the house. Sylvia was wearing Ian's spare fire gear and had a wet mop and bucket to quell the embers. Ian had the fire hose attached to the petrol fire pump and was watching the other side of the house.

At about 11.30 pm an ember dropped and made a spot fire in the bush about 80 metres west of the house. It was travelling slowly through the undergrowth. Ian thought it would reach the firebreak and stop. It did, but the north edge burned through to the neighbour's property and burned out several vehicles and trailers.

He looked to the south of the house and saw lots of spot fires taking hold, which ultimately burned out about one third of their 10 acre block. The fire breaks held.

Given they didn't experience the roaring winds or large embers that occurred at Callignee earlier, Ian said it's hard to say if they would have lost their house if they hadn't been there. Sylvia and Ian remained, defending their home through to about 4 am, before feeling it safe enough to have a rest in the house.

Several CFA crews looked in on Ian and Sylvia during the night and they managed to prevent the fire from crossing Whitelaws Track. One house was lost and several sheds were destroyed on Callignee South Road.

The fire eventually went round their place with help from Ian and Sylvia. Luck was part of it, but preparation was crucial. The firebreak, Sylvia on one side with the mop, and Ian with the pump and hose combined to help. They now have roof sprinklers and an additional petrol fire pump.

They were out and about again at 5.30 am. Sylvia was dealing with smouldering fires on the block when Ian left to see how other people were faring.

It was like a war zone. The fire was just so random. It was amazing to see the complete change. Landmarks such as trees, sheds and houses had disappeared and it was very disorientating. This proved to be an issue for fire calls in the coming weeks. From 7 February to 31 March Callignee Brigade responded to some 70 fire calls.

Negotiating a path through the fallen trees, dead stock, vehicles and debris on the road was very difficult. One of the most amazing sights was at one home on Neaves Road where the residents had left their fire equipment set up ready for use. The house had survived but the sheds and trees were gone. The fire pump was there, but the hoses were burnt. There were half a dozen chooks pecking round, seemingly untouched by the fire. Ian hadn't expected to see any living livestock. Ian travelled through to Callignee South to check on other people. Everyone was stunned by the extent of the disaster.

There were also reports of bravery. Craig Woods, Willung South Brigade Captain, who was strike team leader in charge of the crews responding to Callignee, was amazed when passing by burning houses that belonged to three of the Callignee crew. They said to continue on to the oval where there was reported to be several people needing assistance. Along the way they came upon resident Charlie Richardson, who was 96 and severely burnt. The team went to the oval and they escorted 12-15 people in a convoy from the oval to Traralgon South. 'They were very lucky to get down, it was a good save', Ian said.

Of the 32 members of Callignee CFA, 11 lost their homes and 18 lost vehicles, machinery and/or sheds. Most are rebuilding.

Ian knows they did what they could as the CFA. Even if all of the 60,000 fire fighters of the CFA had been on hand at the time of the Churchill fire, they would not have been able to stop the Black Saturday fires.

Ian has been in the fire brigade for 42 years. He has been to some very big fires, both local and interstate. Black Saturday was certainly the most horrific. The fires were still vigorously burning in the area three days after the main front hit.

The Callignee community lost its public hall, a former Mechanics Institute building, an old school house that was being used by a children's playgroup and the Callignee fire shed.

Ian's home became the temporary fire shed, housing what equipment was salvaged and the CFA tanker. There was a benefit in this as several members live near Whitelaws Track resulting in faster response times for call outs. Fewer members lived near the original site as most had lost their houses during the fire.

Following the fire, Ian has helped residents get bulk drinking water, hay, and deal with injured stock. Months later he was still involved in helping people with welfare and carting water to people in caravans and sheds. Ian continues to help people who are still living in caravans and sheds.

It's been a year he would like to forget, although this horrendous catastrophe has 'strengthened the community and relationships, which is very much a positive'. People are interacting and working more closely together. There is community dining, and sharing of experiences and hardship gatherings are being held.

Ian is also the secretary/treasurer of the Callignee Community Centre. His sons, Simon and Greg, came home a week after the fire to assist their parents clean up the house and property. While there, Greg, who is an architect, spent two days drawing up concept plans for a new community hall. This concept plan was presented to Premier John Brumby when he visited the Ewarts at their home. The design included a new hall, meeting room, fire station, public toilet and cricket pavilion. The Premier committed to getting it rebuilt. Unfortunately, Greg was not successful in his bid for the final design.

The community received \$3.1 million in funding from the state government, insurance, CFA, Latrobe City Council, local industry and service clubs to rebuild the hall.

The community complex was subsequently built following public meetings and the village-like complex has taken shape. The road was realigned to give a connection to the buildings, the oval and a large barbecue area. The groups involved in the planning were Callignee Playgroup, the hall committee, the CFA, the CWA and local residents. The new complex will enable a more diverse use of the purpose built facility.

Opposite: Where do we go from here?





Charlie and Beryl Farmer

As sheets of fire attacked Charlie and Beryl Farmer's property from three sides, they never once felt they'd made a mistake staying.

'Why leave?' asked Charlie. He'd been through Ash Wednesday and had 50 years of CFA experience under his belt. His two sons each had 20 years of CFA experience – he was confident they could fight it.

That said, the Black Saturday fires turned out to be 'ten times worse than Ash Wednesday', worse than any fire Charlie, 73, had seen before.

He knew a wind change could spell disaster, and didn't expect to have flames hitting from three different angles.

They managed to save their home, but only because they had a plan, stuck to it and 'everything was spot on'. Charlie said there was 'no luck at all'; it was a combination of hard work and knowing not to panic.

'The main part of anything was not to panic. Once you panic you are dead.'

Above: From left, Charlie, Beryl and neighbour Stella Baker.

Neighbour Wayne Simmons visited earlier to warn them. He'd said, 'Either go now or you are on your own'. Their son also warned them that 'the Churchill one's coming'.

In all there were nine people at the Farmer's, including family members, former neighbours and one neighbour, Stella Baker, who had already lost her house.

Committed to staying, the Farmers started electrical pumps at about 2 pm because it was so hot. Rainbow sprayers had been going for four hours on the paddocks. 'The ground was just as dry when the pump stopped as when we started.'

They got the petrol pump started when the power went off. They could see it was no good watering down, so they left it until the fire hit, which arrived not long after they first heard it.

They knew the CFA couldn't get to their property. 'You can't blame them. There was nothing they could do in those conditions', Charlie said. 'There was nothing anybody could do. It was an inferno and there was no stopping it.'

The focus was on extinguishing spot fires. They ran out of water in the tanks around midnight and had to get water from the dam. Beryl said it came so quickly and the fire ran round, following the creek like a flood and bouncing out of corners.

Charlie said his grandson was on the top of the roof taking photos 'until I told him to get off'.

When the firewall hit, everyone except the three men went inside. As the men continued fighting, the others lay down on the slate entrance with the dogs and wet towels. Beryl believes their plastic blinds helped – damage to them only amounted to a couple of tiny pinholes where a spark hit.

When the third fire came at them, it moved like a roller down the hill. They had to bellow to hear each other above the noise that was like 'constant thunder'.

Charlie said fire burned the side of the house, but the fire front wasn't the issue – 'it's the after effects of spot fires when trouble comes'.

Inside was filled with smoke and they remember throwing something at the fire alarm to stop the noise, which was driving them to distraction.

While the work was exhausting, they were never scared. 'At no point did we feel like we had made a mistake staying.'

They were also comfortable with having their family there. 'My grandson wanted to come – he wants to be a fireman. He fought with us until midnight.' Every pair of hands counted, especially at the full force of the fire, when nobody could get in to help.

Beryl said they hadn't eaten and needed sustenance. They were fortunate to have plenty of bottled water. Because they had no power, they used the fire outside to boil a kettle, and made a cup of billy tea.

The fire started about 6.30 pm and they had their first cup of tea at 3 am – three hours after Charlie first wanted a cup.

They watched one neighbour's house go up, followed by Anthony Sexton's. Later, Charlie went and called out to Anthony and was pleased to get a response. 'It was a relief to hear anybody's voice at that time of the morning.'

Their next contact with anyone was when neighbour Benn came by at 4 am to make sure the Farmers were okay. Then Shayne and Megan Cheney arrived a few hours later. 'They were crying and wrapped their arms around us – they had thought the worst.'

The say the hardest part was not knowing who was safe. They were upset to hear the Jacobs family hadn't made it out. Charlie bought a new pump from Alan Jacobs about a month before the fires and said they always waved at each other.

Blocked in by falling trees, they were unable to leave until another neighbour, Wade Hodgson, cleared roads. Charlie said everybody had done their share.

Out of 21 houses on their road, the Farmer's house was one of only ten that remained. They lost the shed and barbecue area. Charlie said the only thing that surprised him was that his paddocks didn't burn. Fire burned both sides of a lane, the tree guard and creek on their property.

Following the fires, the couple still rode their bikes and walked every day – determined a fire wasn't going to stop them in their tracks. They've had more contact with neighbours and helped others by looking after neighbour's cows.

Charlie reflected on Ash Wednesday, when he took a Traralgon South crew to fight – he recalls 'only one bad spot there. This one, when it hit, was ten times worse than Ash Wednesday'.

Beryl, 70, had her first brush with bushfires when she was just days old – her family escaped the 1939 bushfires. Charlie remembers being only half a mile away from those fires.

Black Saturday is just another hurdle they've had to jump in life.

'It [the fire] happened and we got rid of it. If we'd panicked we would have been dead. As far as we are concerned it's in the past, but we've got a lot of forward work to do.'



Martin Flack

Watching through a window as flames hit his home, 11-year-old Martin Flack feared for the safety of his family, house and his own life.

Martin was at his Callignee home with his mother, Wendy, and brother, Trevor, 9, listening to the radio. He remembers it being really hot, with strong winds. He knew there were risks, but didn't think anything would happen – until the wind changed at midday.

Every summer Martin's dad, Greg, trained Martin and Trevor to ensure they were ready if a fire occurred.

Greg had been called out to fight fires. 'Mum rang him and asked what was going on.' Greg told them that the fire was heading towards them.

Martin and Trevor dressed in CFA overalls – Trevor had to roll his up – and began preparing the house, starting the sprinklers on the roof, shed and surroundings, as well as hosing the house.

'It was scary, but we knew what we had to do.'

They then had an anxious wait as they could see the fire heading slowly down the hill. Exhausted, Trevor fell asleep just inside

the back door and remained there when fire hit the property between 11 pm and midnight. 'We heard a bang and fire started roaring, right out the front of the house. We were sitting on the deck. I was scared then', Martin said.

Wendy called Greg to say the fire had hit and he returned home in his fire truck with a second truck in tow. Martin said that it was a relief to see his father.

'Dad said a quick "hello" and they started putting out the blaze.'

Martin went inside and waited with Trevor, trying to get some sleep, but unable to relax. Fire was about 30 metres from the house. Wendy and the boys had prepared hoses all around the house and the two fire crews hosed for about 20 minutes.

From inside, Martin could hear the sound of the fire – it was very loud and he could only just hear his parents talking above it. Watching it through the window, he became 'really scared for the safety of my parents, the house and us'.

'They managed to put out spot fires, but there were flames that were taller than a tree.'

They fought the fire for about two hours until the fire eventually passed around the house into the bush and kept on going.

The fire crews left but Greg stayed. He and Wendy were up most of the night, getting only an hour of sleep. Scared and tired, Martin finally went to sleep around 2 am.

In the morning it was completely black – 'it was awful'.

The Flacks lost a hay shed containing a tractor and parts, but were amazed that a shed in the middle of the bush – which housed a boat and a kiln – survived, even though a water tank next to it had begun to melt. The family also lost a truck and two vans.

Their neighbour Ian Ewart, CFA Callignee Fire Brigade Captain, managed to save his house, but another neighbour wasn't as lucky.

The Flacks stayed at their property for a week, only leaving the day after the fires to check on a friend's place, who were away in Tasmania, and to borrow their generator.

Martin was thankful that all of his friends were away or had gone into town to keep out of danger, but was very upset to see dead animals everywhere.

The family lost some chickens and a horse – other animals survived and were later found under a burning tree. 'Eighteen sheep that Dad had hidden under the deck of the house, where it was cool, survived, thanks to us hosing them down throughout the fire', Martin said.

Despite everything the family went through, Martin still thinks it was a good idea to stay so that they could protect their house. 'We were lucky and well prepared', he said.

Martin said if there was another fire he would stay, but he would need more training, which he will get through a junior CFA that his parents are starting. He does advise people to leave before fire arrives 'if they don't know what they are doing'.

It's the worst thing that has ever happened to Martin and he now always keeps an eye on the weather, especially during fire season. Even though he will soon begin training, Martin says he doesn't want to see a fire again. He's not comfortable talking about Black Saturday, even with people who have been through it.

Above: An aerial view captures the damage to the Callignee area.



Wendy Flack

CFA member Wendy Flack decided it was too risky to head out to fight fires. While she had done all her training, she hadn't been in a fire before. 'I wasn't going to put anyone's life at risk by going on a truck.' Instead, she and her children, Martin, 11, and Trevor, 9, prepared their house, receiving calls from Greg every 10–15 minutes. 'It was pretty scary.'

Wendy, despite having a stress seizure the day after the fire, has no hesitation in saying she would stay to defend their home again. She said that on a standard day, with the direction a fire was predicted to approach from, they would have had a better chance of fighting it.

Wendy also said she would stay, because leaving the property and not being allowed back for such a long time was more stressful than staying to fight it.

She worried most about not remembering what to do and thinks that they would have lost the house if Greg hadn't come back, because spot fires were coming from several directions. By concentrating on the front of the house they were able to save it.

Above: An ominous smoke cloud.

'Trevor was sleeping just inside the back door, just in case I needed to grab him and run.'

She said they were lucky that the two fire trucks that came to them had been going to Basslink, but couldn't get through, so they came to them instead.

Greg had planned to finish his shift but Wendy made him stay. His truck had to leave, and as they drove off, Wendy half joked, 'Don't go'.

They spent the rest of the night fighting spot fires and were grateful that the trucks had been there to help get things under control before they left. As the crew left they also managed to stop the fire from jumping the road onto Whitelaws Track. If they hadn't, she's convinced that more houses in the area would have been lost.

Wendy said that she was lucky because Greg was calling all the time with updates, so she knew what was going on. Wendy was able to warn people via her phone tree. One of Wendy's neighbours got her kids out just in time after being warned by Wendy.

There was a particularly scary moment when Greg cut off a phone call quickly, saying, 'Oh shit, I have to go'.

'Then I didn't hear from him again for half an hour. I was sweating, waiting for the phone to ring, having just heard how high it was, how fast and how bad.'

Wendy later learned that while on his shift, Greg got caught in a fire front. The crew pulled into a house and had to 'wait it out'.

She said they caught a break saving their house when an early spot fire back burned, killing the speed of the fire front. 'We were pretty lucky.'

On Greg's fire truck, three fire fighters lost their homes while fighting fires at Churchill.

Wendy and Greg have organised a junior CFA program for eight children to learn fire training once a month. They are learning how to use hoses and how to fight a fire.



Mandy and Mick **Flint**

In a day he describes as looking like Hiroshima, Mick received a phone call warning him of the fires and he flew into action to defend his home, and get his family and horses out safely.

Mick, a plant operator, had been napping and was woken by wife, Mandy, who said there was a fire coming and it looked pretty big. About 1.15 pm they knew it wasn't far away.

On the morning of the fires, Mick had been to pick up his car, which had just had its brakes fixed. His daughter Hayley was with their horses. Mick and his son Darcy had originally planned to go swimming at Le Roy. Had they gone, they would have been caught there.

The Flints set about rounding up their 11 horses and getting them into the horse truck. The horses went berserk and everyone was screaming at each other. As the kids got the horses, one of them stood on Hayley's foot and it became swollen.

The next move was to take the four-wheel drive into the paddock. When some of the horses wouldn't go into the truck, they had no option but to open the gates and let them run.

Above: Heat caused Mick's car to start itself and drive into a tree.

Mandy dialled 000 and was on hold for 10–15 minutes. She was told 'we can't help you' and that they needed to ring the hotline. She couldn't find a pen and was running round the house thinking 'what should I take?' She was overwhelmed and could only find the negatives of her photo collection. 'It was like a nightmare. The bushfire hotline said they didn't know anything at all.'

For Mandy, 'things' didn't matter – their son Jamie had a car accident 18 months before the fires and they nearly lost him. She just needed to make sure her family was safe.

So Mick and Mandy headed to Traralgon, bound for Traralgon Pony Club, with the horse truck, Darcy, two dogs and four horses, followed by Hayley and the other dog in another car.

It was around 2.30 pm and they saw people in front of the Traralgon South Fire Station. The people there thought it might be seven hours before the fires hit. Mick headed back home. Darcy wanted to go too, but they wouldn't let him. Their oldest child, Jamie, was away in Cowwarr. Mandy discovered the pony club was locked up so she headed to friends.

Meanwhile, Mick could see the smoke from Traralgon and thought he had better hurry. He sped home in Mandy's car. He thought he was going to get done for speeding.

There were cars coming down Red Hill Road from everywhere. He parked the car in the shed where he thought it would be safe, confident in thinking that steel would not burn. Sadly, he was later proven wrong and they lost the car and the valuables they had in it.

Mick, a former CFA volunteer, filled plastic, four-gallon drums and put water on every corner in and around the house, using buckets and ice-cream containers.

He went for a drive to the top of Red Hill Road and could see the fire was heading towards Mt Tassie. He met a couple of people who said they were going. That was around 4 pm. He walked down the track and thought he 'would be right'.

The next thing, Peter 'Ollie' Olorenshaw came along and said to get out, warning that the fire would soon turn into a front. But Mick's fire plan had always been to stay.

He thought he was prepared, but in hindsight said he was still under-prepared. There was garden rubbish that should have been cleared, and there was the wood bucket, stuff around the house and gas bottles that should have been dealt with.

He set up the pump on the tank out the front. He then sprayed the roof of the house, the front – everything he could.

He went inside and put on his fire gear. At 4.30 pm he could no longer see anything. It was 'dark as'. He put on his shoes and goggles – which didn't fit – at 5.15 pm.

The power was going on and off all the time. It happened about seven times in two minutes. He had never seen anything like it. He thought, 'this is it – it's coming'.

Mick jumped on top of the tank and could hear the fire roaring. It was dark and he was surrounded by smoke and ashes. Embers were hurtling from the sky, some more than half a metre wide and 10 centimetres thick, flying around him, showering the area. He knew the neighbours were at home and other people were around.

He saw the front paddock on the left of his house catch fire. Then there were fires everywhere and a roaring sound like a jet plane. They were coming as fast as he could put them out. He just did what he had to do.

A fairly big fire started near the pump and he finally extinguished it. Mick was then facing the dilemma of which fire to put out next.

Suddenly the roar stopped. There was still a lot of smoke and ashes and Mick was only able to see because of the goggles and could only breathe because he had a wet towel.

Embers were flying over the top of the house. Unbeknown to him, his shed caught alight, but he didn't see it or even realise. His neighbours later said it was quite spectacular to watch.

He looked up and could see the flames, some about 30 metres high.

'I thought shit, I'm out of here!'

He went inside and could hear the noise of flames hitting the front of the house, which gave him a scare.

He was standing in the lounge and saw another fire. He went out to try to deal with it. He only had a bucket and couldn't see. The wind nearly blew him to the ground and while he managed to put the fire out, he couldn't see 30 centimetres in front of his face.

The wind was pushing him and he found himself backed into his shed. He sheltered there, hearing flames hitting the shed.

The Laserlite in the centre of the shed melted and sparks were coming straight into the shed. He was standing just inside the door and the shed started to catch fire. It was full of gas bottles, cars, a motorbike, trailer and jerry cans of fuel. Then something went boom! He didn't know if it was a gas bottle or a jerry can. The car was now on fire.

He later found out that on seeing the inferno on his property, his neighbours the Madsens had called 000 to report him dead.

Mick opened the door and walked into a wall of flames. It was all he could see. 'I was a bit scared then. The shed was on fire and I thought the house was on fire.'

He lay on the ground. The smoke was so thick he couldn't breathe. He opened the fridge and it was full of water and beer. He used the water to pour on himself. Sparks were flying over his head. There were more 'boom, boom' noises but he didn't know what it was.

He thought to himself, 'I'm dead'. He rang Mandy to say goodbye, but she missed the call. He didn't leave a message.

He was struggling to breathe. The towel fell off his head and he started choking and thought he was going to pass out.

'I thought I might as well have a beer, it might be the last one I ever have!' But he didn't manage to drink it and was still choking up.

Mandy said she later saw the missed call and thought he had rung to say goodbye. 'I just knew it.'

He just lay there 'waiting for it to happen'.

'It seemed like hours at the time but it was probably only minutes', before the smoke started to lift and he started breathing through the towel. It sounded like someone was breaking in the sides of the shed with a hammer.

He got up and opened the door – there were no flames. 'I couldn't bloody believe the house was still there.'

The house was full of smoke and the smoke alarms were going off. He had to bash them to shut them up. At about 6.45 pm he walked out the door and then heard bullets going off.

All the ammunition in his shed started going off so he flew back inside and lay on the floor. There were noises everywhere – it sounded like fireworks. Mick was determined this was not going to get him. He had been 'through all of this shit and was not getting shot' – certainly not by his own ammunition. He lay there for a good five minutes.

When he got up, all he could see were trees alight and 'everything was on fire'.

There was a big glow from the hay shed – but he decided he was not even going to bother putting that out. All his firewood was on fire. It burned for days. He walked around the house to make sure the eaves were not on fire.

His pump then started working again, so he was able to put out spot fires around the house. He went next door to see Chris and Margaret Madsen. They were a bit emotional, having thought he was dead. None of them wanted to check on the fate of their other neighbours, the Manns, because they were fearful of what they might find.

Mick returned to his house to put out more spot fires before

going to look for their horses. He thought they would be dead, but then six walked up with nothing wrong with them.

He could see the fire at his neighbours Bruce and Alison Chalmers. In his windows he could see the reflection of their shed on fire.

'I heard my name.' Hayley's boyfriend, Tyson Taifer, 17, was calling Mick's name and had come looking for him. He and some friends helped save the horses by getting them out of a paddock. He found Mick and got the horses.

At the back of the property, the four-wheel drive had smoke streaming out the doors. Mick and Tyson opened the doors. 'There was smoke everywhere and it caught fire.'

Two minutes later the car started moving forward by itself – it drove 5 metres and then stopped. They couldn't believe it! One minute later it started again and hit a tree about 5 metres away. It crashed, bending the front bull bar and set the tree alight. Chris Madsen later came over and helped put the vehicle out.

Tyson stayed and the pair put spot fires out all night. Mandy called every half an hour to keep them awake, but Mick couldn't sleep. About an hour after the front went through, he watched another neighbouring house, Rob and Michelle Clerk's, burn down. He had no portable water – they couldn't put it out.

Around 4 am, their cat Oscar turned up badly burnt. There was a blood trail behind him; his paws burned and whiskers singed. While he survived the fires, he got run over six weeks before Christmas. There was nothing wrong with their other cat, Tigger.

Mick was stuck there alone for four days. The family reunited at the police cordon on Sunday. After hugs from his family, beer and ice were the only supplies he wanted. 'I hadn't had a beer since the fire.'

Over the next couple of days, Mick caught up with neighbours and helped others. He helped some friends in Koornalla to smuggle a horse out through a roadblock and fed cows for others.

Mick believes luck is what saved his life.

He's had a flashback while in his shed and said the more he thinks about the fire, the more he never wants to see anything like that again. 'I would leave next time.'

The Flints lost their garden and the trees surrounding their property. Mick said it's amazing they still have the house. He said help from other people has been huge and it has restored his faith in human nature.

Opposite: Early signs of recovery.





Jan Forbes

As panic-stricken Jan Forbes and her son, Oliver, scrambled to find car keys to flee their burning home, he said to her they should be nice to one another. 'This might be the last time we see each other.'

It's been a tough year for Jan and Oliver. Jan lost her brother the week before the fires, and Oliver battled serious health issues before being caught in both the Black Saturday fires and then the Queensland floods.

Jan barely had time to grieve for her brother when her own life was placed under threat, firstly as fires headed for her home, and then as she and her family made their escape.

Jan said Oliver was working at Monash University in Churchill and had seen smoke. Worried, he climbed onto the roof of the building to see where it was. He was unable to contact Jan by phone, so he called her parents in Tasmania before heading home.

She was receiving a warning from them as he arrived home.

'There was a massive plume of smoke and then it settled a bit', Jan said.

Above: The fire in its early stages.

The fire looked like it was heading to Jeeralang. After the initial reports, there was no news of it heading their way. Because of that, Jan wasn't concerned, but she was worried enough to turn on the hoses on the roof.

Fire meetings had given Jan a to-do list – fill wheelie bins with water, move garden furniture, fill buckets and sinks in the house and put doonas by the door. She moved indoor furniture away from the walls to the centre of the room – police later thought someone had ransacked the house.

She wound hoses through wire in the verandah and aimed them at the house. The hoses released so much water that one part of the house subsided from the drenching. Jan's water bill for Black Saturday was \$400.

The plan was to prepare the house and leave early enough to get out safely. They were always planning to leave as soon as they heard they were under threat, but they never received that message.

Oliver regularly ran to talk to a policeman stationed on the corner. Jan's partner, Rod, had a dilemma. All of his family were under fire threat throughout the state, so he didn't really know where to go. He decided to stay with Jan and Oliver.

All of a sudden it went smoky, then a glow came. It then got darker and darker. They lost power. About 6.30 pm, it went quiet and they thought the fire front had passed.

Jan was exhausted so she hopped in the shower. Soon after, police came up the drive. Jan couldn't hear a police siren or horn, she just saw flashing lights.

She looked outside. 'The wind had swung around like a tornado up the drive.' It knocked down 14 trees in its wake like a vacuum. They could hear explosions in the distance and a roar.

The police then left without stopping. She saw why – she could suddenly see flames over the road.

Rod said they had to get out. They started to close the doors and found it too hot to put on protective gear.

Jan wanted to get to her horses. She was hysterical about having to leave them. She thought she would be able to lead the horses around the road to another paddock, but couldn't manage to do so.

Once outside, she began getting ember burns on her neck and couldn't see or breathe properly.

The wind roared up 'like a willy nilly'. They had packed the cars already but couldn't fit renowned artist Rod's artwork in the car – they were too big. Besides, in the heat of that day, they would have buckled in the car with the heat.

Their photos were already prepared because of previous fire threats and they had each packed bags of clothes and 'three precious things'. Oliver packed his surf board, cricket bat and football jumper – and his sister Grace's horse trophies, which she thought was really nice. In the hurry Jan left behind her mother's rings.

By then everything was glowing. There were no embers then; rather it looked like 'a big ball of red gas coming towards us like lava. We could see it just coming towards us. I got so petrified. All of us really thought we wouldn't make it', Jan said.

Rod said they'd have to get going, but a new problem arose. The keys were on the bench and they couldn't see the torches.

Jan grabbed for the keys but didn't find hers or Oliver's. Oliver and Jan began crawling on the floor looking for them. Jan was getting upset.

'Oliver said, "Mum let's be nice to each other, it might be the last time we see each other".'

The combination of water and heat meant they couldn't shut the door, so they were inside with the door open.

She went next door to neighbour Matt's place – he'd offered his place as refuge in an emergency.

They were banging on his door but couldn't hear themselves knocking. They couldn't find him or even see the doorknob. They figured he had gone to help someone else.

There was no shelter and they didn't think the house was safe and decided they would have to go. They each hopped in their own car – Rod first, Oliver in the middle and Jan last. They could see flames across the road as they fled and believe fire fighters stopped the flames from destroying their home.

Jan was really scared and said she has blocked the journey out. She remembers getting to the corner of Traralgon South, but not how they got to Churchill. Oliver said he couldn't see anything in front or behind. 'It was so scary driving.'

They took the cats with them. One chewed his way out of the box when they were trying to save him. She had to throw them in the boot finally in desperation and hoped they were going to be okay. They survived, but both have been traumatised.

At the Traralgon South fire station, there were only two fire engines and they were both filling up. A fireman told Jan her house would be gone and they had to go because it wasn't safe.

Rod saw the trucks 'drive back our way'. Jan became hysterical, feeling sure that the house – and horses – would be gone and was humbled to receive comfort from a woman who had lost her own house and horses.

Jan was already numb. Her brother, Robert, had died part way through her holidays. Her Dad now had lung cancer. Oliver, 22, had multiple heart issues, including heart surgery, in addition to stress fractures and having three benign tumours removed.

For nine days following the fires they slept at Rod's studio. Oliver lost 7 kilograms and wasn't sleeping. He took it hard, having been to school with the Jacobs kids and knowing Nathan Charles, who had all perished in the blaze. Fire reports on the Sunshine Coast later in the year triggered a recurring nightmare for him.

The house has needed constant repairs and attention. It took 210 trips with the wheelbarrow to shift woodchips created after trees were felled.

The horses were traumatised and suffered burns. They still react to the sound of wind. Their troughs were filled with thick black soot and the animals were coated in a black tar-like substance. Her daughter, Grace, a vet, helped horses impacted by the fires in the region.

Since the fires, Jan has found refuge in a Stitch and Chat group – 'I hadn't knitted for 27 years' – tried 'retail therapy' and built a 'little oasis' in her garden. Jan's says some good has come out of this – she's met 'amazing people'. Her workplace was incredibly supportive and good news came in the form of winning a research scholarship.

Opposite: A former giant reduced to a smouldering ruin.





Royce Frantz and Brad Greenough

Repeated calls of 'mayday' were chilling for Royce Frantz and Brad Greenough as fire trapped their CFA vehicle, rendering them unable to provide help to anyone.

During a chilling shift, they managed to save several homes, but endangered their own lives in the process.

Royce, a CFA volunteer since 2000, was returning from swimming at Cowwarr Weir when he saw a big puff of black smoke around lunchtime.

He knew the conditions were going to be bad and that the CFA was concerned about any possibility of a firebug.

Royce went to the station. They had the full crew, including two young men, Jaethan and Lloyd, who were fighting their first big fire. He knew that what they were facing was a big situation and around four additional trucks were headed their way.

Mandy decided she and her children, daughter, Chloe, and son, Dan, needed to leave – which was always their fire plan – especially after a call from Royce.

Above: The metal frame is all that remains of this motorbike.

Their photos were already packed and by the door – a routine they practise each summer. Royce was worried about Mandy and the kids, but thought there would be plenty of warning to get out.

Royce had accidentally left his pager and phone behind. Mandy saw a continuous flow of 'horrible' messages. Later that night she took the pager batteries out in a bid to sleep.

Near Churchill, Royce's crew put the first spot fire out quickly with water from a nearby dam. They were soon advised to do asset protection only and to salvage what they could. It was the first time ever Royce had heard that radio call and he thought things were getting out of hand. He looked for helicopters and it was not reassuring to only see two.

The crew took a tanker to try to save a farmhouse and a shed. They were successful, but the fire had gone ahead and was spotting.

Brad requested the Traralgon South tanker go back to protect the township of Traralgon South, but it was still needed near Churchill. They found a safe spot where the main front hadn't yet arrived.

He could see another brigade 500 metres away, keeping an eye on another farmhouse, along with a water bomber helicopter over a pine plantation.

Then they received their first ever red flag warning – everyone stopped to listen. There was going to be a strong wind change at 5 pm. Royce was worried after calling his mother twice to check on Mandy and the kids and getting no answer.

Two police officers also heard the warning and came to wait with them. They were the furthest truck up the hill and went to check the road. Unable to get far, they returned quickly. There was not much to do but wait.

A helicopter was trying in vain to extinguish a large pine plantation. The police warned them that trees were down ahead. Then a dozer came past to clear the way.

The red flag warning had been spot on. Within a minute of the wind change, the radio chatter became a series of life-threatening calls and maydays. It was chilling. Maydays are never called unless crews are under imminent threat or there is a serious injury.

Another crew called in a 'mayday' advising they were out of water and were going to take refuge in the house they had been trying to protect. For about 45 minutes the fire control centre called every two minutes until they got a response that the crew was okay. Royce chose not to listen to the radio after that unless advised by Brad of messages directly associated with their own tanker.

Then the police came back to join them and stood next to the tanker. They couldn't go anywhere because the main front was below them. The crew could hear the fire coming through the trees and at one point had no option but to watch a house burn because they couldn't safely reach it.

Royce felt helpless and useless, as did the rest of the crew.

Gas bottles blew out, car tyres exploded and windows were smashing. It was already more intense than a normal fire because the temperature was so hot.

A wind tornado danced up and down the road. There was a spot fire near them, which they 'put a bit of water on', needing to conserve water.

Then the main front came over the top of them, pushing temperatures even higher. Because they were sheltered it went over and missed them. They say that if it had been a few metres either way it might have been a different story.

The fire whistled back to where it had come from 'at 1,000 miles an hour' burning what it had already burned. They had heard of it happening during Ash Wednesday. Previous back burning did nothing to slow this blaze – fire just gobbled everything in sight.

Brad said that there was lots of grass on fire and they couldn't put anything out because of the need to save water.

Royce rang his Mum again and left a message. He was worried about Mandy and the kids because he hadn't heard from them, but wasn't worried about the house.

Brad, an industry fireman with 20 years in the CFA, was getting paged regularly. He called home and left a message. His family, Wendy, Madeline and Joshua, had a fire plan to 'just walk away'. He called his parents and found out they had evacuated.

Around 5 pm they were told to return to Traralgon South. Royce didn't have to be told twice. He was feeling sick with worry about his family.

Brad said he couldn't have had a better crew on the truck. No one showed that they were scared, despite being unsure about what was going to happen to them.

At the Loy Yang lights intersection there were about 80 people standing around. Cars were everywhere, including many police cars, and all roads were blocked.

Sgt Tim McCormick advised them that Rifle Range Road was under direct threat and that they didn't know what resources were out there before wishing them good luck.

Brad had seen intense fires, but had never seen the skies change like that. The fires caused a change in the weather patterns and it began to rain. It was black everywhere. The wind was blowing 80-90 kilometres an hour and it was howling.

They arrived at the station and Royce jumped off the truck. He finally got through to his mother and learned his family were all safe and well. 'It felt like someone had taken a tonne of bricks off my shoulders.'

The crew got rations of food and bottled water. Royce, who hadn't eaten since 11 am, missed the food, but at this stage wasn't hungry.

Next stop was Rifle Range Road – it was glowing. They found a house under threat with the Lambert family there. They were surrounded by fire, but were able to manage it, and when they knew the family was okay, the crew went to another callout.

Five minutes later flames got 'really big, really fast'. The crew received a radio message to go to Carolyn Court on Red Hill Road. They'd had reports to 'prepare themselves'. One of the crew, Lloyd, was spent after five solid hours fire fighting, so they dropped him back at the station.

Chris Kourtis was driving the truck and said to the other four, 'I don't like this'. It was 'raining red' and all the street signs had melted, leaving them to rely solely on local knowledge. They stopped, and Brad and Royce got out to run ahead and take a look.

They could hear something 'like a hurricane or a herd of horses'. Royce followed Brad saying, 'If you're going, I'm going', because he didn't want him to go alone. It's safer with another person. They could hear explosions and were surrounded by burning plastic, carpets, rubber, glass and animals – all unfamiliar smells for a bushfire.

Brad couldn't hear over the noise. There were no normal noises like cars. It was surreal – strange. Everything was on fire – cars, trees, trailers – and windows were smashing. He had not seen anything on that scale.

They knew there was nothing they could do, so they made a decision. The fire was overwhelming – they knew they had to save their own lives. They waved a torch and yelled to see if anyone was in the vicinity, but weren't expecting to see anyone walk out.

They found a couple dressed in fire gear, their house had survived and Brad and Royce reluctantly left them to return to the tanker.

Brad and Royce ran, jumping over tree branches and logs to get back to the truck. Further down the road they tried to pick a house they might be able to protect. Finding one with a large swimming pool, they managed to save it by using water from the pool and for a while it provided them with safe shelter.

Over a four hour period, with intermittent help from other trucks, they saved about seven or eight houses in that area and while they are reluctant to admit any heroism, others believe it was a major contributor to the township being saved.

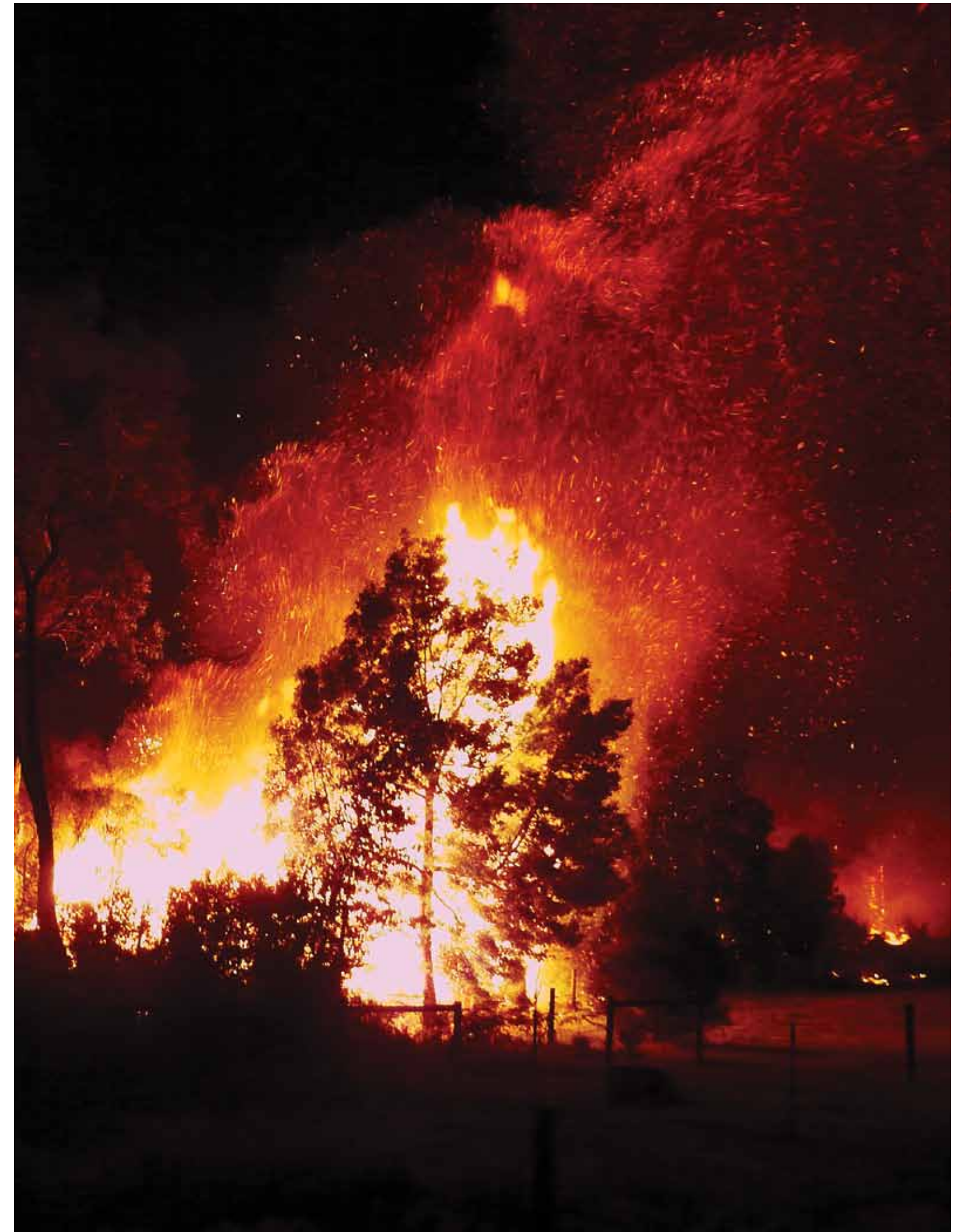
The crew suffered a blow when they discovered crew member Jaethan's parents' place was destroyed.

Brad wasn't sure if his house was safe, so he tried to amuse his crew by planning to build a new one.

Royce said Brad gave everyone a job and made sure everyone was okay. He kept them motivated even when little errors were made as people became tired and worn out.

At one point Brad kicked a hole in a fence to get water through and thought he had broken his toes. As embers landed he struggled to get the pump going. He suffered smoke inhalation and chaffing, and there was no time for toilet breaks.

Opposite: Embers burst from another violent explosion.





Opposite: The warped corrugated iron roof is all that is left of the Harding's house.

From the station they started hearing rumours about deaths, people missing and houses burning.

Brad jumped in a car with the incident controller and spent two hours looking for people. Through Callignee everything was alight and they could see hundreds of metres of clear space where bush had been. There were reports of winds blowing 180 kilometres per hour that snapped the latch off the front door of one home.

Along Callignee Road, Brad found the remains of a person who had perished.

They drove 100 metres and he saw a friend's parents' car burned out and empty. They were identifying people's homes as they went up the hill. They drove past Callignee oval and saw the old primary school hall had burned down. Brad was worried they would find more people dead.

Very early Sunday morning Royce and Captain Pieter Van der Leest were looking for people and trying to access roads that were filled with trees and cars. At one home they found a house gutted, but a tractor was still running, so they didn't know what to think. There was nothing they could do.

At first light they went out with the volunteer captain up Balook Road, cutting down trees. At some point they drove over the remote control for the winch.

They found local resident Lindsay Pump clearing roads and advised him not to push cars as it was a crime scene.

Brad got back around 5 am, went into town and filled up with fuel. He quickly dropped in to tell his concerned family he was okay.

His father, who was in the CFA for 55 years and a fireman for 20 years, took him aside to ask what 'it was really like'. He told Brad to focus, worry about things he could fix and that the rest would sort itself out.

Brad left and drove 300 metres up the side of the township, and saw that the bush and sides of the track north of the township were on fire. Operations Officer Daryl Hunter identified a house under threat, which was Brad's own, but Brad told them not to bother trying to fight it.

'So many fire fighters saved and defended other people's property. Their selfless acts saved other people's property while their own houses burned. It often gets overlooked', Brad said.

Royce saw people with burns being taken away in an ambulance.

The night's events took their toll on Royce. Thoughts of not knowing if he would see his wife or children again combined with seeing burns victims was too stressful and he became violently ill, but he felt there were people worse off, so he toughed it out.

He lay down in the fire station for 15 minutes with fellow CFA volunteer Jaethan. They were worn out. When food finally arrived, it was fish and chips in plastic containers. It was the worst and best fish and chips they'd ever had!

The crew spent the rest of the night keeping an eye on the township and areas of Red Hill Road where houses had survived, although they were limited with what they could protect.

Support from people like Wayde Hodgson and his friends, and Luke Morris and his mates also made their job easier.

Royce said the circumstances brought out the best in people.

Royce came home, showered and rang Mandy. It was an emotional reunion when Mandy and the kids came home.

At one point, as flames were just a couple of feet in front of him, Royce thought, 'this might be it'. But he 'couldn't let my mates down' and that pushed him through. 'I thought - I can't die here, not on Brad's watch.'

Brad, who had just started a new job, an operator in the Loy Yang Coal Mine, fought fires for 30 hours straight until 7 pm. He managed to sleep and was back at 7 am the next morning for his next fire-fighting shift of 24 hours.

The fires took their toll on the crew. Royce couldn't watch the news for two weeks.

Brad has tried to focus on the good, including the way his crew all got on really well and that 'they did everything they could to the best of their abilities, given the resources they had at the time'. He has no regrets.

The Crew - Brad, Royce, Chris, Ian, Jaethan and Lloyd



Benn Frederiksen

CFA Volunteer Benn Frederiksen's first fire-fighting experience was, literally, a baptism of fire – Black Saturday.

Unwilling to risk staying to fight at their own home, he and his wife, Robyn, headed to fellow CFA Volunteer Wayne Simmon's place at 4 pm.

Wayne had visited Benn and Robyn's home a couple of days before the fire to do an assessment and give advice, including trimming trees for access. Benn's original plan was to stay and defend. After he and Robyn hosed around their house, tied up their dogs and packed their gear for 'Justin – just in case', they made the decision to leave.

At Wayne's it quickly became dark, dead calm and completely still. Benn doesn't recall any sound, and thinks he may have blocked it out, as he is sure it was noisy. He doesn't remember any radiant heat either and thinks it was because he was too busy.

Benn's first task was to fight a small grass fire. Wayne and his son, Nathan, took up their positions on the opposite side of the house to Benn. Robyn helped put wet towels on the windows.

As the fire front came, the stillness was replaced with winds that 'almost knocked you off your feet'.

He cleared the pot plants away from the house, but as he pulled a hose, one hit him in the face. 'I felt as useful as a pin prick in the back of an elephant.'

As the situation intensified, Benn knew he wasn't stopping the fire – he was just staying alive and putting stuff out. Everything was alight and he was just hosing what he could.

He got a glimpse of Wayne and Nathan, which gave him confidence. Then flames began coming in sideways like '200 blokes on angle grinders throwing sparks at you'.

Benn could see sparks bouncing off the lens of his goggles. He believes that having the proper protective gear saved his life and while he doesn't recall being burned he did find a small burn on his finger.

Above: A view across the paddocks of the approaching fire.

Benn could see about 100 pine trees fully engulfed in flames, 300 feet in the air, not far from Wayne. 'It was like a big claw of death coming at you. It was like a movie scene.'

When the full force of it hit, it nearly knocked him off his feet. The flames started licking the corners of the house and were beginning to catch. Benn was tripping over pot plants left, right and centre.

The fire was blasting from two sides and it knocked him back again, forcing him against the window of the house.

He tried drinking from the hose and there was a moment of uncertainty when he couldn't breathe. It took him a few minutes before he realised that his face mask was still on. It felt like he was sucking on a plastic bag stuck to his face. He pulled the mask off and gasped for air, but the air was full of smoke.

Suddenly the water pressure slowed. He thought to himself, 'If I can't sort out the pump then we're all going to die'. He dropped the hose to the side of the house so he knew where it was. Then he did the one thing they tell you not to do – he ran to the dam.

'You should walk as running means you hit things harder', he said. Benn ran, hitting a barbed wire fence. He didn't think about cutting the fence – it didn't even cross his mind that they might need to go back there.

In fact, he completely forgot about the fence and on his return, hit it and almost completely somersaulted like a cartoon character. He ripped the front legs of his fire suit and ended up lying flat on his back in a pool of gushing water.

He got up, took two more steps and tripped over a tree that wasn't there before the fire.

He found the broken hose and had a spare, but couldn't get the broken hose off.

'Then I did the dumbest thing and decided to check the fuel in the pump.' Benn had flames licking up the back of his neck and was bent over the pump, gasping for air and trying to see if there was any fuel.

His next mistake was to try to move the log, but instead, he created a foot long hole in the hose that his limited gaffer tape struggled to cover. He did what he could to stem the gush of water.

Benn ran back to the fence and fell over going the other way, ripping his gear again. He 'freaked out' but picked himself up and ran back to the hose. There was no water, so he dropped the hose, ran back and tripped over the fence for a fourth time. It didn't occur to him to stop the pump that was still running.

The next few minutes were like a comedy of errors as he tripped over fences, pot plants and parts of the hose. He realised he needed a breather.

He went to the laundry door and slipped in just as it was closing. Nathan and Wayne had just gone in and were doing it tough.

Smoke alarms were going off incessantly. Deciding it was better outside than in, Benn ditched his mask, put his helmet on and followed Wayne back outside.

Then the two lost contact for ten minutes. The pump stopped again and Benn went to try to fix it. He poured petrol in but the pump didn't start. Ankle deep in mud, he was hot, tired and angry. The pump finally started.

When he returned, Ben started to calm down a bit as the frenzied fire assault abated a little.

He saw Robyn. She had copped a bit of smoke, was emotional and needed to leave but trees were blocking the road and the driveway. They had to cut their way through and were assisted by local resident Wade Hodgson, who was checking on everyone in the area.

Trees were on fire, gas bottles were exploding and there was a plume of yellow flames. Benn remembers cars leaving from neighbouring properties. He thought it was too late, but the cars made it by seconds. He was fearful of the outcome if there had been one log on the road.

He took Robyn to the fire station and the police took her into Traralgon. From there she went to the hospital and then to the emergency centre.

Benn returned and spent the rest of the night taking turns hosing spot fires. He still had fears for Traralgon South and also thought he had lost his own house, but he was too exhausted to care.

When he finally got to pick Robyn up they had a big hug. Everyone was cheering and crying. They had some food and Robyn slept, while, still pumped with adrenaline, Benn continued hosing, sawing and checking houses.

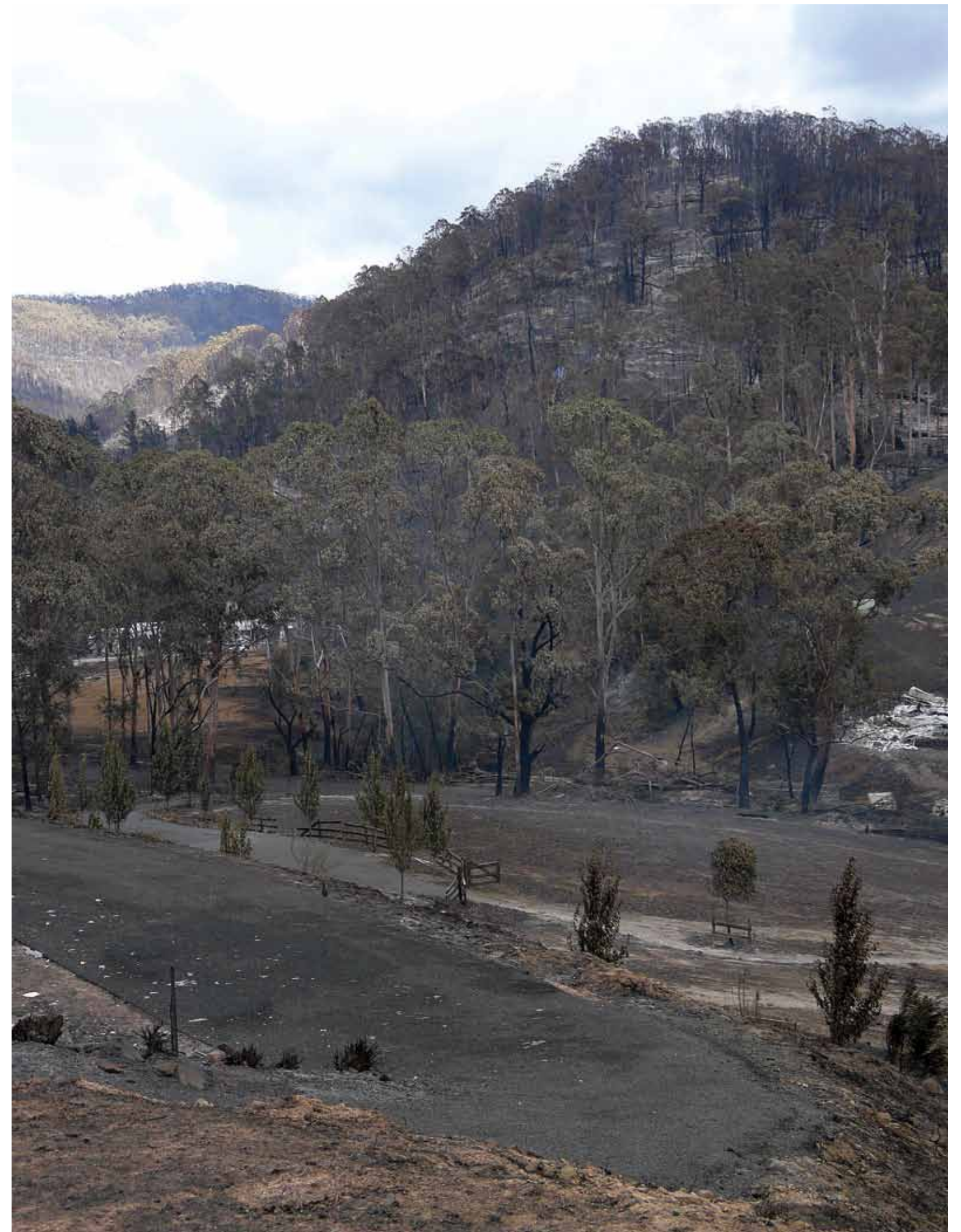
He stayed at Wayne's that night, but got no sleep. In the morning he got up and tried to cut through to his house. It took six people with chainsaws five hours to get through.

They got to the driveway and he could see part of the house. It had survived but they had lost a machinery shed, a boat, Robyn's car, farm machinery and tools. There were still spot fires around their property.

Hearing other people's stories often brings a tear to his eye. Five years ago his shed burned down. He was 18 during Ash Wednesday and had driven through the flames on his way to surf in Lorne. Black Saturday was by far the worst.

After the fires, Benn volunteered for two months to help with fencing and was then given a paid role to coordinate fencing projects for the community.

Opposite: The scarred landscape of Traralgon Creek Road Koornalla.





Aroha Gillespie

Not only did Aroha lose her house on Black Saturday, but she also lost her sister Maria five months after the devastating fires.

Aroha had gone swimming with her son, Shane, and her sister Maria, who had lived with them for ten years since their mum had died.

The three had travelled to an area known as the pondage around noon. Hazelwood Cooling Pondage was a man made lake that was closer than the beach. Maria loved the water and she would splash to her heart's content during the heat of the day. They were aware that they had to watch Maria in case she lost her balance in the water, as she couldn't swim, and she was intellectually disabled and non-verbal.

While in the water, Shane and Aroha noticed a fire in the distance at Churchill. The wind would come up and then you would see smoke and a flicker flames. An hour or so later Shane asked Aroha, 'How come they haven't put the fire out yet?'

Aroha had also wondered that. 'Don't worry', she said, 'they will eventually put it out'.

At approximately 3.30 pm Aroha turned the car radio on for a

bit of music. A man from the CFA was broadcasting a message 'we are a little concerned that if there is a wind change Traralgon South and Callignee will be in the direct path of the fire'.

'Oh my gosh!' Aroha looked at Shane with shock.

They immediately rushed to Morwell where Shane phoned his dad, Pat.

'Where the bloody hell are you', Pat said.

'Calm down dad, we are coming to get you.'

Shane knew his dad 'was in a really bad mood' and wondered why.

Meanwhile at Coles, Aroha had been buying drinking water as it was on special and the day was warming.

Shane was on a learner's permit and Aroha knew he was a good driver. 'He wouldn't panic like me', Aroha thought, and if he drove today he could build up his driving experience and hours.

On arriving at Loy Yang lights there was a police blockade. Aroha told the officer that she needed to get through as her husband and animals were up there. 'You can't go through yet', said the officer. Another guy wanted to get through as well, without success. They waited for what seemed like ages and eventually the policeman came back and said, 'You can all go through now and grab who you have to, but get out as fast as you can'.

Driving up Callignee South Road, Aroha suddenly felt that she should have left Shane and Maria at the roadblock. A little too late she thought. She knew that Shane wouldn't have allowed her to go back to the house alone. He would have probably said, 'Don't be stupid mum'.

The sky was orange; the smell of smoke and ash was in the air. It was scary. Aroha remembers thinking it would be scary if you were a child.

When they arrived at the house Aroha told Shane to leave Maria in the car, empty the car of what they didn't need and only grab what they needed.

Aroha asked Shane to get the cat box from the shed while she got their cats. Sparky was 14 and Delmo was 12. 'Sparky hardly moved in my arms, she was like a mouse.' Aroha suddenly realised that Maria and Sparky both sensed the danger. Aroha didn't know it, but they did – a fireball was heading their way.

Shane ran back from the shed screaming, 'Mum the sheds locked and I can't get the cat box, but I can hear the flames'.

Aroha looked at Shane and said, 'Quickly, get in the car'. She then yelled to Pat, 'We've got to go'. Shane tooted the horn two or three times.

'Come on Dad, we're outta here', Shane said.

Maria and the dog were already in the car. It was 5.50 pm when they left the house. Shane started the car and drove up the driveway and down the road. Aroha said to Shane, 'Don't worry about looking back – just drive'.

'Thank goodness there were no fallen trees.'

They arrived at the Loy Yang lights at approximately 6.05 pm. They pulled into a side road to get fresh air, and for themselves and the dog to have a drink of water. The dog needed the toilet, and so did Pat.

They listened to the ABC radio, which sent out constant messages for those affected by fires to go to the Traralgon relief centre. A fire truck with sirens zoomed past followed by an ambulance with flashing lights. Maria recognised the sound of the ambulance, which meant an urgent situation, just like their mum's ten years ago.

Later in the evening they learnt from two CFA members at the relief centre that their house was gone. Aroha suddenly thought of her two cats and pet pig, Matilda. A few days later she learned that her neighbours had found the remains of their pet pig. Amazingly the ducks, Lemon and Brownie, survived amongst the reeds.

Pat later told Aroha that their neighbour Merrilyn had phoned, warning him several times of a coming fire. Pat had run to the dam to try and start the pump with no success. He then ran back to the house and grabbed his briefcase and the dog, and ran up the driveway a couple of times to check if Aroha was coming.

Aroha feels that they were very lucky to get out when they did. She said that they had been at the pondage during the Boolarra fires a week earlier. Ash was falling all around them in the water and they saw Elvis, the skycrane, collecting water for the fires. They had taken a couple of photos.

Aroha said that if her husband wasn't at home they wouldn't have returned. She never thought the fire would be as bad as it was. She thought she might be home the next day to get her cats. Something she now regrets.

The fires had a devastating impact on Maria. Instead of her usual routine of getting home from school, shopping or the pondage, and having a cup of tea, Maria understood that day was different – something more serious – dangerous. She had stayed in the

car with the dog with an anxious look on her face, still dressed in her bathers under three-quarter pants and top. The smell of smoke and ash had said it all.

After the third day Aroha knew that it was becoming too traumatic for Maria to be lugged around from place to place. She had to be somewhere safe and stable. Aroha eventually organised respite for two months for Maria, through the Department of Human Services. They only had the dog to worry about now, Aroha thought, and of course themselves.

They were grateful that a lovely couple were very kind to try and look after the dog for about three days. Unfortunately, the dog was slightly noisy and misbehaved with the other doggy, so they had to go and pick him up again.

Aroha took Maria home when she came out of respite care. She knew that she had to explain to her that their house was burnt, but she had to be tactful as well as honest. Aroha said to Maria as they travelled up to the property, 'Maria we had a little fire and our house got burnt'.

'By the time we arrived she was already prepared – I hoped.'

Maria began to cry when she saw the house was burnt. Maria never recovered from the shock of seeing the house. Her and Shane's room was in direct view of the driveway, where the SEC meter box now lay strewn. It was normally on the wall of the house outside the room that they shared.

Aroha said if there was another fire she would flee. While seven in the neighbourhood saved their houses, the rest lost their homes.

Aroha was dealt another blow when 15 months after the fires her twin sister, Arahi, died. On the morning her sister died Aroha woke at 3 am and couldn't sleep. Normally she slept really well, but she couldn't lie down any longer. She was awfully restless. Then she received a phone call.

Aroha says her strength and her faith in God have helped her get through. 'If I didn't have my faith I would have nothing', she said. Material things aren't important when it comes to survival.

The Gillespies, who lived in Callignee from the eighties until the fires, have lived in temporary accommodation since the fires. Finances and health issues have stood in the way of returning to Callignee, where one day they hope to rebuild.

Aroha rues that the house was not insured. 'I always felt that the land was worth more than the old house.'



Opposite: Suffocating plumes of smoke fill the air on Red Hill Rd.



Above: All undergrowth destroyed - an all too familiar sight.

Steph and Frank **Gissara**

Hiding in a large water storage unit as fire destroyed all he owned earned Frank Gissara the nickname 'Frank in the Tank'.

Frank and four other men sought refuge in the giant water tank after seeing a large fireball emerge from trees and head towards them at their Old Callignee Road rental property.

They'd battled to extinguish spot fires and flames as the fire front descended upon them, but knew they were in trouble when their pump caught alight.

Frank, his friend Brett and three other men helping to protect the property initially sheltered behind one of two large, concrete water tanks, but were forced to take sanctuary inside one of them in a bid to survive.

Frank and his wife, Steph, and their two young children, Sammy, 4, and Belle, 2, had lived in a granny flat on the property of Julie and Ian Gilroy – Frank's aunt and uncle – for about a year. They bought their own block in October before the fires.

The whole family was camping about an hour away at Stratford and returned when they were advised there was an extreme weather warning. It was very hot, but at that stage they weren't

overly concerned about their home because there were no reports of fire near them.

At about 1.30 pm Frank got a call from a friend in Callignee saying smoke was heading towards the Gissara's place. Frank was out and decided to go home and check things out. The Gilroys were away in Coffs Harbour and Frank initially told them there was nothing to worry about and that it was all under control.

He arrived home around 3 pm. Seeing a lot of smoke, he assessed the situation and sent Steph and the children into Traralgon to her sister's place.

Steph said she initially thought there was nothing to worry about and left to 'keep the peace', taking a couple of photo discs with her, but forgetting her wedding rings. Steph was studying nursing and had taken them off the previous day because she wasn't allowed to wear jewellery in the lab.

Frank grabbed the wedding album and said to her, 'Take this,

because we're not going to get married again'. He didn't give her the video camera – the only thing he 'was spewing about' after the fires. 'All the other things are just things and can be replaced. You realise just how much junk you collect really – they're just things.'

Frank got changed into work pants and a shirt and called his boss, Brett Crosby, to ask for help to put out spot fires as he expected maybe a few embers. 'I thought I might need a bit of a hand.'

Frank had some hoses, and a pump his uncle had set up before he left, 'just in case fires come'.

Brett, who works in demolition, arrived around 4 pm still in his work clothes. They filled the gutters and got extinguishers out before having a small rest.

Knowing Ian and Julie were away, one of Ian's workmates Paul Andreou arrived with two of his friends, Tony Fleischer and Colin Aylett. Frank had met Paul and Tony before but not Colin.

The trio joined them in hosing the house and filling gutters again. Paul was a bit hungry and brought out all the food he could find in the fridge – cheese and capsicum dip – along with a packet of corn chips. There were 18 beers in the Esky from camping and given they didn't think the fires would be that serious, they had two or three beers each.

They listened to the radio but then lost all power. Reports said if the wind changed then 'it was coming'. They could hear enough information from locals through the UHF radio.

About 6.15 – 6.30 pm they were sitting on the roof looking out for the fire after hearing it rumbling like continuous thunder. It grew louder and they knew it was coming.

They probably could have left, 'but we were going to save everything', Frank said.

It was around 6.45 pm and hot with red and black sparks flying around. Some were like sticks and others orange, the size of tennis balls. 'It was like the start of a Star Wars movie.'

By the time they saw the fire it was less than 1 kilometre away. They jumped down and got the hoses and pump going 'within a minute, tops'. Suddenly everything around them was on fire – trees, the shed and the neighbours' places.

Frank called Steph's mum in Callignee to say it was coming and by the time she had repeated the words to her husband, it was already upon them.

For about 15 minutes they were in control. They put out flames

on the shed, house and anything near the house. Then the petrol pump caught fire. 'It wasn't good – we lost all water once that happened. Within a minute of that burning, the house caught on fire.'

Frank was concerned but tried to stay calm. They had already planned to meet at the corner of the house if anything went wrong. Everyone was pretty composed and managed to get to their meeting spot.

Frank had already planned to hide behind the water tank because it was concrete. They wet all of their clothes and hair with water from the Eskies – they pulled the beer out and had to let 12 cans burn. They took the Eskies with them because they still had water in them.

Brett ran the first 2 metres toward the tank and complained it was very hot, but they knew they had seconds to get there.

It was hot, windy and smoky, and they were breathing through wet shirts that dried in the time it took to run the 40 metres to the tank. They all sat down behind it, feeling its radiant heat.

Brett and Frank began swearing at each other as Brett realised there was a manhole to get into the tank. It had not been opened in about 20 years and he struggled to dislodge the cover. It was a relief when he got it open.

They realised they were extremely lucky. The tank was about half full, about waist height, and contained about 25,000 litres of water. Any less and the water would have boiled and more and there would not have been enough oxygen. The day before it had been full, but Frank's uncle had drained it.

Everyone got in the tank. They spent an hour and 15 minutes in there. 'Every now and then someone hopped on someone's shoulders, poked their head out and had a look. We were joking about what was getting burnt – making fun of a bad situation.'

One by one, things went up in flames. The camp trailer, car, house, Colin's car, two boats, the shed and a motorbike were all destroyed. The only thing that survived was Brett's car.

They saw Frank's cat running away.

Inside the tank they leaned against the wall to get some warmth from the freezing water and one of the men was forced to urinate in the tank as there was nowhere else to relieve himself. 'We didn't worry about it at the time.'

During their time in the tank, there was 'a bit of carrying on'. One of the guys was a bit stressed that they might suffocate or run out of oxygen at the start. Frank didn't think they would die and didn't want to even entertain the thought that they might.

Frank was worried about Steph's parents and thought they would be dead. He'd seen many people leave before the fires and assumed there wouldn't be many people left once it began burning.

Once the fire had passed they got out of the tank. It was like a deserted battle zone – there was no sign of life anywhere. Everything was just red and black and they could only hear the crackling sound of trees falling.

Frank had filmed images of the fire hitting them, but the camera burned when they jumped in the tank.

Outside, he found two stubbies of beer that had survived and they passed them around, each having a mouthful. They rolled Brett's car out, but didn't want to start it in case it blew up. They used his UHF radio to make an emergency call to say there were 'five guys here who have had enough'.

Emergency services initially said they couldn't come, but it was a relief when they turned up about 15 minutes later. They knew one of the fire crew, Lee Baston, and he told them the road was reasonably clear and they could drive out in the car. Heeding his warning about falling trees, they drove slowly and were amazed at the sight that greeted them – nearly every house had gone.

Frank distinctly remembers driving out at 8.22 pm and hearing the song 'Burn' by Jessica Mauboy on the radio. Everything that had been green was now black and in the distance they could see blue skies.

It was like everything had been turned off. There was no phone coverage – but it wouldn't have mattered as their phones were either burned or wet. Paul had left his on the top of the tank and it had melted.

Steph had no idea what Frank was going through. Oblivious, she was planning a video night and wondering if they would be staying the night.

Frank's sister had been concerned and his mother had started to panic after calling Frank's phone about 50 times without an answer.

It wasn't until Steph went to check out what was happening at the roadblocks 'to see if anyone could tell us something' that she started to freak out. She said she never had a bad feeling about Frank, although she did have a feeling that the house was gone.

Steph started crying – she didn't know where her husband was. Just before they were reunited, Frank heard Steph and they both got goosebumps. He still gets them when he thinks about it. They were wet and covered in black soot. Like in a movie, they ran to each other and hugged.

'Frank said everything was gone – we don't own anything', Steph said and the pair had a bit of a cry.

The crew went back to Brett's. Steph went with them, needing to debrief. Nobody got cleaned up, they just sat up drinking 'a lot of beer and talked'.

After the fires, Frank and his family stayed at Steph's sister's until July. 'We went for a barbecue and moved in.'

The Gilroys returned from holiday to learn they had lost their house. During their rebuilding process they moved into a caravan.

Frank and Steph's son, Sammy, was a bit upset every now and again, such as when he learned the freezer burned down – 'Oh no, my paddle pops'.

'Sam wanted to know why we didn't put the fire out.' He wants to be a fire fighter like his father.

They lost everything they owned, except a car, photos and a small baptism frame, the only thing they salvaged intact. They also found a clump of gold that was their wedding rings, which have now been replaced.

Steph said people were very supportive. Brett helped build and outfit a shed for them to live in and her brother-in-law built them a kitchen.

Brett and Frank started building two weeks after the fire and just kept going, working nearly every weekend. Following the fires they met up with the other three guys a couple of times.

Known for being pretty easy going, Frank's attitude is that 'you cut your losses and move on'. They came so close to losing Steph's mum and dad and say that 'things' don't matter.

Frank is unsure if he would stay again. Two weeks after the fires he realised how lucky they had been. 'It could've been a lot worse. They could have pulled five bodies out of the tank. We were lucky that day that we didn't lose a family.'

Top: The night sky is lit up by the glow from the fires.

Bottom: Fencing in a new art form.





Daryl Goodwin

CFA volunteer Daryl Goodwin said he's been to hell and doesn't want to return.

The 43-year-old was one of many CFA volunteers faced with a fire that they couldn't have fought with 5,000 trucks, let alone the tankers they had.

Daryl had taken his daughter to a party and visited a friend to water an aviary to cool birds in Callignee South when his pager went. He went home, woke his wife, Tanyah – a nurse who had just finished nightshift – and began packing the car with photos and possessions.

Tanyah and the children, Marlee, 15, Hayden, 13, Brodie, 8, and Tiannah, 7, left. After tidying what he could, Daryl checked on nervous neighbours and advised people, including a woman who was eight months pregnant, to leave, before he headed off to fight fires around 4 pm.

A CFA volunteer for nine years, Daryl said the main fire front was in the hills and too big, ferocious and dangerous for them to tackle with the equipment they had.

Even if the CFA had two fire trucks on every house under attack they would 'have just ended up with a lot of burnt fire trucks'. A CFA member came down the road and warned them not to go up because everything was 'just getting smashed up there'.

The paddocks between the hills of the town lessened the intensity of the threat to the township. Instead of trying to stop a fire roaring 20 metres above the trees, they were fighting a 2 metre grass fire.

Daryl was one of the fire fighters lined up on the main road, focused on stopping flames at the road so fire didn't get into Traralgon South. As embers spotted behind them, they jumped on fires as quickly as they could.

Daryl said it was scary and the crew were very edgy. They had the added frustration of wanting to do something but having to wait. 'It would have been suicide to go to try and stop it. It was only going to roar over the top of you.'

Above: Terror embracing our district.

They protected the town as much as they could, losing track of time because of the darkness caused by the smoke.

When the township was deemed under control, they started branching out as much as they could. If a house was still standing they would hose it and put out fires on retaining walls or verandahs – anything to stop the house catching on fire.

They were faced with 'so many houses that were gone already'.

When Daryl saw houses of people he knew reduced to piles of charcoal and burning wrecks, he desperately hoped that everyone got out. His pager beeped continuously with messages of people calling for help. Because of delays on the pager, he didn't know when the actual calls had come in and if those people had escaped.

Driven by adrenaline, Daryl was in a 'get the job done mode' and the team were following clear and precise directions from their crew leader.

They headed to Callignee via Callignee North Road. At the Sunday Road intersection they heard reports of people waiting to come down from Callignee oval in cars. Travelling up the road, they found it surprisingly clear, so escorted cars back to Traralgon South.

Later that night they had less luck. After the main front had gone through, leaving houses and trees still burning, they tried going up Red Hill Road in a slip-on (a ute with a water tank, pump and hose in the back), making it 3 kilometres before finding it totally blocked.

There was no way around or over it and they were forced to turn back. They knew people had fled on this road and were aware that if one tree had fallen when people were trying to make their escape, it could have been a completely different story for many of them. The wind was strong enough to topple a tree and people could have been trapped in their cars.

The elements made it difficult to travel. Daryl was driving the truck and struggling to see the road through the smoke and embers and saw many people trying to escape, possibly in a panic after their fire plan had gone haywire.

Daryl said people were prepared for a slow moving 'normal' fire, which is often defensible. On this day, it didn't really matter what a house was built from or what was around it, it was more the topography of where the house was.

This was evidenced where a house made of cedar survived next to a brick house that burned. In some cases it was just luck.

Daryl sent Tanyah text messages whenever he could to let her know he was okay and to let people know what was going on.

He knew his family was out and that they were safe and guessed their house had survived, but he knew the only way to know for sure was to stop fire getting into the township. Daryl later discovered there had been fire 100 metres behind their home, but because the wind had died down, it burned more slowly and stopped being a threat.

Daryl said that if anyone deserved to be 'stuck on a pedestal to say thanks', Wade Hodgson was 'way up there'. They kept doing patrols as far as they could see. Wade was on his brand new tractor, pushing trees that were on fire off the road, as well as joining mates in continually filling a 1,000 litre tank and fighting fires.

Many roads were blocked and Wade also cleared the roads so they could get to people.

After spending the night patrolling, Daryl worked through until about 6 am the following day. Others put in even more hours than him. He went home, but he couldn't relax enough to sleep, 'because everything was so intense', so Daryl went into Traralgon to be with his family.

It was an emotional reunion and they were relieved to see him. After some rest, he returned to Traralgon South and was back on the truck on Monday night for another overnight patrol, continuing to put out spot fires and to see if locals needed their help. Daryl was amazed to see so many people had survived.

They quickly ran out of water to deliver. People were very stressed and annoyed by roadblocks but really happy to see crews. They all wanted to get food or petrol for generators.

One guy asked if his house had survived and when Daryl told him sorry, it's gone, he said 'Yes!' It was a moment's delight. 'I'll get a new house out of it.' Later it probably hit him that he had lost all his personal possessions, but he was pleased to get a new home.

Daryl continued working all week and the intensity began to reduce each day.

It took a few weeks after the fire to get back into things. 'People were very jumpy, but the community pulled together', he said.

Daryl would do exactly the same again – get his family out and do as much as he could on the truck. He said a house is just bricks and mortar and has no doubts that family is more important. However, he doesn't want to face anything similar again. 'I've been to hell and don't want to go back there.'



Ken Grigg

Ken Grigg and his girlfriend, Sonia Brown, sat in their bedroom as the rest of the house burned around them.

Ken said he totally underestimated this fire that killed a neighbour, Ken's dog, Stan, and left the couple fearing for their lives.

In the afternoon, they'd noticed a big plume of smoke and went to warn neighbours Elaine and Fred Frendo. They agreed to stay in touch.

Ken had been in the CFA and gone through Ash Wednesday, and to him, this blaze looked serious. He changed into more suitable clothing and drove up to the ridge past the fire station on Old Callignee Road. He watched the fire and talked to neighbours.

His fire plan had originally been to leave his brick house. He had 44 gallon drums full of water at the house and two dams, but neither had pumps. He'd taken precautions such as filling the bath, preparing wet towels, raking, clearing the gutters – although he'd been unable to block them. He'd also prepared fire-fighting gear for them both, including overalls, gloves, hats and glasses.

Above: Petrified windswept trees on a Koornalla hillside.

They went back to the ridge to have another look, then continued on Traralgon-Balook Road to look across Mt Tassie. The fire was really starting to take hold. 'It seemed to take up the whole horizon.'

They went back to prepare the house. Ken suggested Sonia leave but she wanted to stay. They listened to ABC radio while periodically going outside to see if they could spot anything.

'About three o'clock, I think, the power started to flicker. The radio went first and we switched to the AM band on a battery operated wireless.'

There was a noticeable change in the conditions, the air was a bit cooler and it became very dark. There was a lot of smoke above, but not at ground level and they noticed a few embers flying by, about 50-100 feet in the air.

Ken told Sonia to stay on the balcony with the dog and went to check on embers in the paddocks.

There, his neighbour Angus had the fire pump going. Between the two properties were 6 inch embers alight in the grass and debris under the gum trees. A little fire started down near the fence and the pair tried to put it out with a bucket of water and a rake.

Ken suddenly heard a roar. 'There were fires in Fred's paddock directly above us and behind the cypresses to the west of us, near the entrance to my property.' Angus ran towards the back of his property. 'I heard him say, "We're f**ked".'

Ken started to run back towards the house and yelled out to Sonia to get inside. He looked back and saw his paddock alight.

Through the kitchen window they could see fire coming at them. A big fireball went through, torching the chicken coop and surrounding trees and shrubs. 'It was like an oxy torch, it was that fierce.'

They continued listening to the radio. Ken looked through his bathroom window to check his wooden porch when suddenly the window cracked and then smashed in. About 30 seconds later a bedroom window at the other end of the house also went and embers began flying in.

Thinking the house was done for, Ken closed the doors to the bedroom and doused the blankets and towels in the bath. He wrapped them round their heads and shoulders and they went to a bedroom at the other end of the house, the furthest away from the direction of the fire. Outside was a brick carport and concrete floor so he thought this would be the safest place to be.

Ken, Sonia and his dog sat in that room until he thought it was safe to go outside. He told Sonia to breathe through the wet towel to act as a filter. 'Sonia remained very calm and did what I asked of her.'

They were in the room for 15-20 minutes. The smoke was getting thicker and they could hear the rest of the house banging as it burned around them.

'Every 30 seconds I went to the door and checked whether we could go outside. I remember one time I opened the door and it just sucked the air out of your lungs so I quickly closed it again', Ken said.

'The smoke got so thick in that room that we couldn't breathe. I knew we would have to make a move. It was at this time that I thought we were gone but I kept reassuring Sonia that we would be fine. She didn't say anything.'

Ken opened the door, whistled for the dog and he and Sonia went outside. Everything was burning. Trees, decking and the house were well and truly ablaze.

The room they had been in was on fire and he said they were lucky to escape. 'The wind was incredible and trees were exploding all around us.'

They found a spot about 20 metres from the house on the driveway, which seemed to be relatively calm.

Ken went back in search of his dog. He went back into the house, to the bedroom but the heat was overwhelming and the smoke too thick and acrid; he couldn't even breathe through the towel. 'I only got two steps into the bedroom and I had to hightail it out of there.'

Ken went back to Sonia and grabbed her hand, and they walked off the property. He called his father and a friend, and told them fire had taken the house.

For a couple of hours the pair sat on the boundary line, watching the house burn and trying to collect their thoughts. They could see Fred Frendo's tractor about 100 metres away in the paddock, with the lights on and the motor running.

After initially thinking someone was in the tractor, Ken reluctantly went to check after hearing the motor idling for a while. He could hear the sound of buildings burning. He decided to also check on Angus.

The Frendo's tractor was running and the wireless was on, but there was no one around. Ken turned the tractor off.

He walked through the smoke and saw that while their sheds had gone, the house was miraculously still there. He bashed on the door with his torch but got no response, hearing only a smoke alarm. Seeing the cars were gone, he hoped they had gotten out.

Next he went to Angus's property. Both the house and a car were burning. Again he got no response and assumed his neighbour was either in the house or had gotten away.

There was nothing they could do at the property. There was still fire in the area, but the front had passed.

As they walked away, neighbours Brian and Merrilyn Ward called to them. 'Their house was intact and they were in mop up mode' and putting out spot fires. Ken and Sonia stayed for an hour, drinking water to rehydrate themselves.

Ken decided he wanted to go back to check on Fred and Angus. He checked his own home and then both of their places, to no avail.

He met CFA officers in his driveway and they delivered terrible news. They'd found bodies in cars down the road. It wasn't till later that Ken learned that Angus was safe, but Fred Frendo and his son had not made the journey out.

Ken got Sonia and made the decision to get off the mountain. The strike team leader drove them to Callignee Cricket Oval, where they were greeted by other members of the community and a field of cars and boats laden with possessions.

They evacuated in convoy, picking up a person along the way. Logs and debris had to be moved off the road as they headed for Traralgon South. They reported in to the command centre before being taken to a relief centre in Traralgon. One of Sonia's daughters came and collected them.

Ken, who has decided to rebuild, was devastated at the loss of his dog, Stan. He also lost a car, guitars and amplifiers in the house.

Ken said staying calm and focused helped and that they timed it 'just right' in getting out of the house. 'If we had been there for any longer, we would've been stuck.'

Opposite top: 2:23pm – A view of the Jeeralangs taken from Hazelwood North.

Opposite bottom: 5:55pm – Taken from the same vantage point as day turns to night!





Tony Harrup

As Tony Harrup drove his two children home from Melbourne, fire jumped the Princes Highway in front of their Nissan X Trail.

He'd driven his wife to the Tullamarine airport early that morning and he and his daughter, Zoe, 9, and his son, Nathan, 7, had watched her plane depart for Sydney. On their way home at about lunchtime, whilst travelling along the Princes Highway, they could see fires in the hills to the north.

As they approached the Drouin bypass section they suddenly heard a 'whoosh' and there was a big fireball in front of them, lighting up the vegetation in the medium strip. Another fireball lit up an old farm shed on a hill to the south of the highway. Scared horses were bolting around the paddock.

Cars began braking as flames jumped the highway and the visibility became poorer due to smoke. Tony kept driving and a helicopter dropped water next to them, extinguishing a fire on the middle medium strip of the highway.

It was hot and after travelling to the Moe / Yallourn section of the Princes Highway Tony saw more smoke, and looking to the south, he saw what he thought was the Mirboo North / Yinnar fire starting again. He had avoided that fire the week prior after taking

Above: Smoke begins to envelop the district.

his children to the beach for the day – returning to Mirboo North they were diverted around to Boolarra through thick smoke.

At Morwell, as they travelled along Firmans Lane, the fire was south of them near Jeeralang and was moving easterly – parallel with their vehicle and at the same speed. It was getting bigger – the winds had whipped it up and it was moving eastwards very quickly. Tony pulled into the fire station at Traralgon South and learned the fire truck had already gone out. He went home and started preparing his house and property.

Tony rang his younger brother in Melbourne to say there was 'a bit of fire out back, south-west of the town in the hills' and that he might lose his power and phone line.

His brother Paul headed down in his car, avoiding roadblocks by travelling back roads to get to Traralgon South at around 4 pm.

Tony didn't have a fire plan, but he had a fire pump. He blocked down pipes, filled the gutters with water and hosed the house, and filled rubbish bins and metal milk cans with water. However, his efforts were wasted, as the water hitting the bricks evaporated immediately.

Zoe put rubbish bags full of stuffed toys and possessions from

her room in the X-Trail. Tony gave Zoe and Nathan a digital camera to take photos of everything in the house and shed, whilst he kept preparing the house and laying hoses out.

At 5 pm they lost power and within half an hour the sky went dark. The children started to get uncomfortable. Inside the house was now dark. It was really hot and smoky, and the town water had stopped running. When a red/orange glow and roaring noise of fire set in around 6 pm, Tony decided to evacuate the kids.

He put them in neighbour Marie Charleston's car as she was leaving with her third load of possessions to take to her mother-in-law's in Morwell.

At around 6.30 pm they saw Red Hill Road get swallowed up in the red orange glow. They saw houses alight and heard the popping noise of gas bottles from the intersection of Cashmere and Keith Morgan Drive.

'It was like looking through the glass door of a solid fuel wood heater with a fire going inside.'

About an hour later Tony, Paul and some neighbours who had stayed behind gathered in Tony's kitchen to have a few beers – 'stress relievers'. The local Mt Tassie tower had been taken out by the fire. Tony put some batteries in the radio and managed to pick up a Melbourne AM station to get some information.

At around 9–10 pm the fire front was now approaching from the west and everyone went back to their homes to prepare to defend again.

A radio report at around 11 pm reported that the Traralgon South township had been flattened by the fire. Tony was constantly answering calls on his mobile phone from concerned neighbours and family wanting to know if they still had a home and how it was all going.

The next front approached the town from the north. At 1.30 am the blue gum plantation was alight on the township boundary and at 2 am the wind direction changed, luckily, pushing the fire front south-easterly around the back of the houses to the east of the town. The fire had been heading directly at houses on the northern boundary of the township. 'How lucky everyone was with this wind change.' It saved properties from being attacked by the fire front that came from the plantations.

Tony and Paul moved inside to the lounge room as it was too smoky outside and 'you could not breathe properly out there'. They pulled two armchairs up to the window, put their feet up on the windowsill, had a beer and chatted as they watched the fire.

Despite not having slept for more than 24 hours, Tony rose early Sunday morning, packed a chainsaw in his X-Trail and headed to Koornalla. His grandparents, aunts and uncles were all originally residents of Koornalla. He went to see the former family property,

'Bonnie Barks', an 1880 weatherboard homestead surrounded by 120-year-old apple, pear and oak trees. The house had – again – survived another bushfire in the district, but the shearing shed, stock, fences, trees, grass and vegetation had been 'hammered' and badly burnt.

Tony then headed around to his friend Brent Wilkerson's place off Red Hill Road to see if they were okay and to help. There were burnt cattle on the side of the road and trees were down across roads everywhere. The fire was still burning in some trees around Brent's house when Tony arrived, but his house was still there. Brent and his wife had stayed, fought the fire and won the battle to save their house.

Late Sunday afternoon Tony was having a few beers with the neighbours, who were still there. One had returned from Melbourne and his home was vacant due to selling and moving. He and his wife had decided to offer the house, which was not furnished, to a family that had lost their home. Whilst having a few drinks it became known that the Cheney family had lost their home, so they decided to give them the first offer. They accepted.

The next day, Tony, along with three other locals set about rustling up furniture from their sheds and had the Cheneys moved into the Keith Morgan Drive home that night.

That first week, Tony helped to set up three families. Families that were okay and still had a home helped by adopting other families.

On Tuesday Tony started to help set up the relief centre, which was moved from a school room to the church, and he also helped with the distribution of water and food, along with many other volunteers.

Due to roadblocks and the fire still burning in areas, Tony was reunited with his children on Wednesday, when he felt it was finally safe for them to return home.

Tony quickly became a go-to man for the media, doing a number of interviews. He was no stranger to helping others, having done a lot of community work with the Traralgon South and District Association, which supports many clubs and groups in the district.

The region received a number of high profile visitors, including Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Premier John Brumby, Minister Peter Batchelor and other ministers, Bill Shorten, Gary Ablett Jnr, Alastair Clarkson and players of the Hawthorn Football Team. Tony drove some of these people around the district to show them the impact of the fire. He always carried a chainsaw.

Working with Ange Gordon and Peter Harrison to form a relief centre at the badminton courts, Tony's focus turned to seeking funding to tackle urgent community needs. He helped set up the toilet and shower blocks at both Koornalla and Callignee, organised the Men's Shed Project, community van and

community trailers, to name a few.

Hay distribution for surviving livestock of affected farmers was organised through John Black.

Tony helped run the first two community meetings, as well as organising training to assist volunteers with first aid, chainsaw certificates and food handling. He also worked hard on behalf of township residents in removing the pine regrowth north of the town – deemed indefensible if it caught fire – a major concern and worry for the residents still living within the township.

Tony has grown up in the area and met new people through the tragedy, seeing many residents at their lowest point.

He has dedicated a lot of his time to the fire response, and recovery and rebuilding.

Tony commends all residents in the district for galvanising together as one, becoming stronger than ever, assisting and helping friends, neighbours, and fellow residents in their time of need, and continuing to support those affected.

Tony Harrup Media Statement – Friday, 13 February 2009

The community's first official contact with the outside world was on Friday 13 February 2009 in the form of an emotive statement that was written and spoken by Tony Harrup (TSDA representative) on behalf of the district.

A table and chair was set up outside the church at Traralgon South in front of the relief centre and the horse float that was being used to deliver food, water and supplies to residents in need. Television channels Win (9), Prime (7) and ABC (4), and several radio stations, including ABC were present.

'On the afternoon of Saturday the 7th of February, Traralgon South and District, which includes Traralgon South, Callignee, Koornalla, Le Roy and Loy Yang, faced its darkest hour in history.

A day of 44 degrees plus temperatures, and strong winds. As many of us here know, living amongst the mountains and hills, the wind direction changes constantly.

A firestorm so fierce, swift and brutal, which you could only compare to a category ten cyclone, engulfed our small community of some 500 properties, spread throughout the Strzelecki ranges over many, many square kilometres.

As the firestorm moved towards our district our local CFA volunteers had only one tanker for Traralgon South and one fire tanker for Callignee. God knows what these eight

Traralgon South CFA volunteers thought as the unknown approached.

At 5 pm the power failed in the township and the mains water to houses came to a trickle as the sky turned black and darkness fell. The township of Traralgon South was evacuated by 6 pm by families with the last of the women and children leaving. Approximately twenty men stayed to defend their homes within the township. Smoke started to engulf the township and at 6.30 pm the roar and wall of glowing orange fire ravaged through our district...

A day the bush telegraph failed!

To fellow Victorians in the areas of Kinglake, Marysville, Bunyip, Beechworth, and other affected Victorian communities and their outlying areas, we share your horror, pain, suffering and everlasting memories.

Our steep terrain and valleys nestled in the Strzelecki ranges have made accessibility difficult. To our friends, neighbours and community members left in out-outlying areas, hampered by crime scene tape, not able to move from the home you live in, with no basic services of power and water, and no contact with the community. You are not forgotten.

To all Gippslander's, Victorians and Australians, your prayers, words and genuine outpouring of sympathy and support continue to lift the spirits of all.

Our immediate aim has been to place families, whose homes have been destroyed, into accommodation, where possible, in nearby Traralgon, to ease the impact and keep them close to their community. These homes also need to be furnished and this is where we ask for your help immediately for furniture and white goods.

We ask the media and general public to respect the families affected by this tragedy and let them have some space.

We will rebuild homes, properties and fences, the forests and the bush will regrow, and the wildlife will return. We will rebuild the infrastructure and the district will galvanise as one – stronger than ever.

Currently the Australian flag flies at half mast at both the CFA shed and Traralgon South Primary School, and will do so until the last loved ones are laid to rest.

We plan to build memorials to mark this tragic event and loss of life.

Each year on the 7th of February when the sun goes down we will remember them, and a day that changed Victoria and Australia forever.'





Above: Devastation as far as the eye can see.

Stephen **Hickman**

Every year Stephen Hickman's sister, Katherine, rang to warn him to get out of his house when there were bushfires. This year there was something in her tone that made him take notice.

Stephen doesn't handle heat very well and had planned to sleep the day away in his Lyndon Road home. Katherine phoned to say her husband was out fighting fires and he'd passed a message on advising Stephen to leave.

'He'd told her to tell me to get out because they couldn't stop this one', Stephen said.

While he normally didn't take much notice, this time Stephen packed a few things 'just in case'.

Katherine began calling every two minutes. 'She normally doesn't do that – I thought she must be serious.'

'I jumped in the car to have a look. You couldn't see smoke at that point.'

Stephen pulled out of the driveway, turned the corner and there it was. 'I got really worried – it was scary and I thought, shit, I'm out of here.'

He threw a couple of shirts into the car and at that point kept going and didn't look back. Stephen initially regretted leaving his photos, but says if he'd returned for them he might not have lived to tell the tale. 'I was thinking about going back, but I would have died if I did.'

'It was so ferocious, the heat and smoke. I'd never felt one like this before. It was just incredible.'

He describes red and black ash falling from the sky. 'It was so scary. It was mayhem; spooky. It was like a horror movie. It created its own storm.'

Stephen's best guess is that he 'probably made it out by half an hour'. By the time he got to his sister's around 3 pm, she said his house had burned down.

While describing himself as generally a bit of a thrill seeker and says he would have stayed to fight it, his sister was really worried and that stopped him. 'She didn't think I could get out.'

He'd lived in the home for about 14 years. 'We weren't allowed up for a week.'

Stephen says he was somewhat complacent this year. He was

going to stay and fight as he does it every year. 'Everyone has done their best to try and help us.'

Despite his loss, Stephen says the destruction of his photos, home, and money is not the end of the world. He's been through worse than this in his life.

'Life goes on.' His 27-year-old builder son, Leigh, gets the opportunity to construct his first home. 'Good things come from bad, you've just got to look for it, that's all.'

He does think of stuff from time to time, like the diaries he'd kept since 1972 and the trophies his kids had won. Stephen says a lot of people have given him photos. 'Everyone has been wonderful. A lot of good has come out of this fire. Goodness brought out in humanity. People have been so great.'

He said he will be more prepared in the future and knows he's lucky to be alive.

'We've learned from this. You can't keep an old dog down.'

Previous page top: Trees reduced to matchsticks on a hill.

Previous page bottom: A stump continues to smoulder weeks after the fires.



Wayde Hodgson

Many Callignee, Koornalla, Le Roy and Traralgon South residents wouldn't even realise they have reluctant hero Wayde Hodgson and his mates to thank for saving their homes.

Wayde, an agricultural contractor, and his friends, including brother Nick – whose own home perished – worked around the clock for three days continuously putting out spot fires.

Using his tractor, shovels and 'size eight boots', Wayde stamped out fires wherever he could find them.

At one point Wayde held off flames heading for the township while waiting for fire crews to return with water. People have said his actions helped save Traralgon South from falling to a similar fate as Marysville, but Wayde refuses any accolades, simply saying he got to 'point the wet stuff at the red stuff'.

He modestly said he and his crew 'were able to do stuff because we had gear'.

Wayde's partner, Trudy, said the police initially thought that Traralgon South had burned down. 'The way those flames moved through Traralgon South, it's a miracle that it hadn't gone.'

Above: This image represents the thousands of hours of fencing to come.

These were Wayde's second fires in a week. He had been in Boolarra the week before where he and fellow CFA volunteer Wayne Simmons copped a fireball over their ute.

They ran out of oxygen and 'got gassed', taking about two minutes to find air. 'It was bloody scary.' They managed to save a few houses in Boolarra and one man brought them bags of potatoes and onions for saving his house.

Wayde said the Boolarra fires were actually scarier than on Black Saturday because they didn't know their way around that area.

On Black Saturday Wayde and his family were in St Leonards, on the Bellarine Peninsula, when a neighbour called around lunchtime to alert them, saying there was 'a bloody big fire' coming over the hill.

Wayde's fire plan was always to stay. So he, Trudy and two-year-old Maddie headed home – 'That was a story in itself', he said. Because they had to detour around other fires, it took them three hours to get home. They kept getting messages from people and were very concerned.

They dropped Maddie off in Morwell and Trudy and Wayde headed back to Traralgon South. They made the decision for Trudy to get some of their possessions and head back to Maddie. As she was driving off around 5.45 pm, Trudy became 'a little bit anxious' when she saw a paddock start to catch on fire.

After 15 minutes the fire came through. Wayde's father, Gavin, had already hosed the house. Knowing Wayde and Trudy weren't home, friends Ben Dunbar and Dennis Neal had come over earlier to set up the fire-fighting pump before leaving to defend their own homes. They had a full 1,000 litre tank on the back of the ute and 100 litres on the back of a four-wheel motorbike.

Grateful for the help of their friends, Wayde is sure that if they hadn't come over he wouldn't have had a home. He and Trudy wouldn't have had time to prepare to fight the fire alone.

Wayde got in his CFA gear and his Dad stayed to help him, keeping the house wet while Wayde tried to stop spot fires. 'They ripped over half of the farm on one side.'

They had issues with the pump, caused by having the hose through one window and out the other. Wayde had to continually go out to restart it. In retrospect, putting the hose through the windows was 'probably not the best thing to do', he said.

They were successful in extinguishing fires 'before they hit really bad' and say they were lucky with the direction.

Another piece of luck happened when he called Clint Leviston, the owner of a pump shop. 'He came out within 15 minutes with the best pump he had.'

When Clint couldn't get through the police cordons, Wayde's father picked up the pump. Clint, Wayde's 26-year-old brother, Nick (Nugget), and Clem all jumped on the back of the ute with him and headed to Wayde's place.

It was all go – they had a good crew. They needed one – they were 'putting out fires left, right and centre for three days'. 'It was insane – we'd never even seen anything like it on telly.'

The air was filled with what sounded like jumbo jets going overhead. 'It was like massive fireballs rolling over your head. It was pitch black, but the glow of flames really stood out. The wind was insane but there was a bit too much to do to be worried about it. There was a lot to do.'

Initially they were trying to save the fodder and hay but had to give up on that idea. They thought maybe they could have lost the house. In the end, his dad couldn't see properly and was a bit giddy at 6 am the next morning.

'A few times Dad said he thought we should go but he wouldn't leave me.'

They knew they had the gear to push the trees off roads, so as soon as Wayde's place was under control, the team left in their protective gear and went to the township, taking with them the ute, a four-wheel motorbike and Wayde's new tractor.

The team spent the night going backwards and forwards, keeping an eye on the farm while Wayde's father stayed at the house, kept busy constantly putting out spot fires.

There were a few trees over the driveway to clear and then they drove up through Koornalla and along Traralgon Creek Road. They went up with the ute and four-wheel motorbike, but couldn't even get next door.

Wayde went back, grabbed the tractor and went to the CFA shed where there was a meeting. He saw Pieter Van der Leest in a fire truck and asked him for help to go up to Koornalla. Peter grabbed a chainsaw, slip-on and another fire fighter, and followed Wayde.

They then proceeded to push trees off the road – 'it was taking a bloody long time' to enable a large number of stranded people to get out. Peter cut the trees and the crew – 'all fit blokes' – pulled them off the road.

Along the way, they put out a fire at Pete Leitner's house (later returning to extinguish another one), before they got to Wayde's brother, Nugget's, house – 'but that was all gone'.

Nugget and Lisa had been in the house for three years. Known in the community as the 'Love Heart House' for its unusual front window, it had now burnt to the ground, despite the sprinklers on the roof.

The wind had blown part of the roof off before the fire got there – it was that intense. Wayde said Nugget was fantastic. 'I gave him a hug – he was awesome.' Despite losing everything, Nugget continued clearing and putting out fires and no-one even heard him say anything about his house burning down.

Wayde, Nugget and the rest of the team carried on for somewhere between three and four days without sleep, constantly clearing roads and putting out fires.

The first night was challenging. They were clearing trees, but more were falling on the road and they had to keep going back. They cleared about 5 kilometres of road, but had to return five times with Wayde's 'relatively new' tractor.

They came across Wayne Simmons, who was trying to get back to his property after dropping his wife to safety. With 'Simmo' on the chainsaw, they cleared the road again.

So much happened that it is hard for any of them to remember the exact timeline of events. Even with the passing of time, Wayde says his recollection is muddled and he finds it hard to remember the order of things.

Wayde recalls them trying to stop the blaze going into Traralgon South, using the four-wheel drive to 'rip around and put out spots', but the fire was just so quick and they were fighting to try to stop it jumping the road, while two fire tankers and a slip-on went to fill up their water storage units.

At one point, Wayde's four-wheel motorbike was the only vehicle keeping flames at bay. He had just enough water to stop flames from going over the road, and said it 'was good' to see a fire truck come back to be able to put it out properly.

Wayde modestly says it wouldn't have been a minute before they would have been in 'a bit of drama'. Other people credit him with helping save the township of Traralgon South from being razed like Marysville.

But Wayde shrugs off any mention of heroics and said he just got to 'point the wet stuff at the red stuff and that was it'.

He said everyone was very level-headed. His partner, Trudy, said Wayde was a very reluctant hero.

He said the guys were swapping vehicles left, right and centre. Around 4 am he went around the township on his four-wheeler to check nothing was alight and put out any spot fires that he saw.

The police wouldn't let his neighbour Shayne Cheney back into the fire area and he found himself in the awful position of having to inform Shane that his house had burned down.

He took another neighbour Peter Leitner back to his home on his tractor. They put out spot fires at Peter's home, saving it for the third time.

The first time Wayde and his crew got there, a tree was alight and had fallen on the house. In a lucky break, one of the team, Clem, services Peter's bobcat, so he knew the code for the machine. Using it, they pushed the burning tree off the house and saved it.

Opposite: The firestorm rages.

