



Lindsay Pump

After seeing his own home was safe from fires, Lindsay Pump became a hero in the community by spending several days helping save other homes, clear roads and bury stock with his front-end loader.

Lindsay's home is filled with his hand-carved wooden sculptures and decorative fixtures, and he always knew his home was a fire risk. He believes his house was saved by his six-year-old sprinkler system as everything outside its reach was burnt.

Lindsay has lived at his property for 54 years. The home had been his grandparents, then his parents. The original wooden home was already built when they came in 1935 and then extended. Lindsay's father had been through ember attacks in 1939 and 1944. On Black Saturday it again survived an ember attack, but a walnut tree close to the house burned.

Lindsay recalls lying in bed, sheltering from the heat around the middle of the day – it was too hot to use his saws or tractor. He's not sure of the exact time, as he doesn't 'do daylight savings'.

Looking outside, he could see a cloud of smoke, which looked 'pretty bad'. He drove up Neaves Road and could see it was centred over Churchill.

Above: Lindsay and his family.

After taking photos of the fire, Lindsay headed home to get his truck ready – the plan was always to stay and fight. He had 1,000 gallons of water ready in a professional fire-fighting tank.

The first priority was to get petrol from Traralgon. On his way back, Lindsay was stopped by police, who reluctantly let him back through.

When friends stopped by at around 4 pm to offer assistance he sent them on their way, as he didn't want to be responsible for their safety.

He could hear the fire coming towards the house – 'You wouldn't have heard a jumbo jet go over with that noise', he said.

Lindsay has eight dogs – Copper, Rex, Two Spots, Winter, Phantom, Brutus, Xena and Ace. They knew something was going on – they had been following him all day. He herded them into his ute.

Lindsay didn't bother with protective fire gear. 'This is me fire unit', he grins, pointing to his hairy chest.

Lindsay was sitting on the road trying to prime the pump on the back of the truck when Terry and Erica drove past him. Lindsay could hear explosions. 'There were gas bottles blowing up. It sounded like a war', Lindsay said.

He didn't know what he was in for and was relieved when it passed through quite quickly. The entire east side of his property was glowing, as was his walnut tree near the house. He used water from the spring to put it out.

After the fire he looked behind him and saw a spot fire in the paddock. The top hill was aglow because the old hay shed on the top of the hill was burning. 'One minute the old hay shed was glowing and then the next it was gone.'

When it was safe for him to move around, Lindsay went to see if he could find his cows. The poor light meant that he couldn't see much and even though it was about 5 or 6 pm, it was dark. It wasn't until the next day that he discovered three of them had burned. One was lying against the fence and the other two were in the gutter at the end of the road near the hall.

Lindsay decided to investigate what was going on around the area.

The first flames he saw were from a house burning on the corner of Factory and Old Callignee Roads. He didn't know why there wasn't any sign of the fire brigade around, but at that stage he didn't know how bad it was elsewhere.

He went to Terry Algie's place and saw that a shed was burning. He put out the flames to keep it off the house. Lindsay is reluctant to admit that is what saved the home, but says it 'could have burned if I didn't do what I had done'.

His next stop was at Nick and Stuart Strachan's. The father and son were covered in ash and soot. Next was neighbour Gavin Algie (son of Terry) who was 'saved by the skin of his teeth' with the help of a friend, Vincent Prigg. Lindsay thinks it was a miracle they survived after fire got into their laundry and spread up the walls. 'They were lucky.'

He wanted to get to his brother's place, Alan, but he knew he couldn't get the ute there so he took the front-end loader, figuring he could push through if he couldn't get around debris.

He saw a number of vehicles including a ute stuck on a log, with a tyre melted on to the bitumen. Another vehicle was burned beyond recognition; flames were still coming out of it. He didn't stop to look if there was anyone inside, saying, 'I couldn't have done anything anyway.'

The first people he saw were Peter and Adele Zomer, who had just left their burning house. Adele was flashing a light. 'The first thing she said was 'just give us a hug will ya'. Peter and Adele then sheltered in Bernie and Karen's place (friends from Melbourne).

Over the next few hours Lindsay helped another couple of people save their homes, doing tasks such as pushing burning trees away from houses.

He got to the end of Callignee Road and was stopped by a log on the road that he couldn't move, so he drove down the banks to get around it.

Lindsay stopped at Peter and Rose Merigan's, who were flashing a light trying to wave someone down. He went in and said they were very grateful he had showed up. They had saved their brick house but Rosie was distressed.

The Merigans had lost three goats and didn't know what to do with them. He told them he would bury them the next day, and so began many days of work for many of his neighbours.

Lindsay then drove home to his dogs. He lay on the bed, but couldn't sleep. Ace and Phantom sniffed him and when they knew he was okay, 'I got the biggest hug'.

The dogs slept by his side as he tried to get a bit of sleep. The next morning, after a bit of porridge, he got the tractor and made good his promise to bury the goats.



It was then he could see what damage had been done. 'It was just a mess, like a bomb had hit.' He realised how lucky he had been to escape when he saw what had happened.

The power was off and it was quiet, highlighted by an absence of birds. 'It was eerie, terrible, shocking.'

After helping the Merigans, he buried 40 goats for Bernie McKay. He also used his loader to help move a cow being towed out of a garden. Cow bodies were scattered around everywhere on Old Callignee Road and all day, for a week and a half, he dug holes and buried them.

There were '50 odd cows and goats'. Lindsay lost count. He didn't have much sleep and he lost his appetite.

A week after the fires, he found some of his stock – 30 cows and 50 goats – barely alive, looking more like 'mummified corpses'. He had to shoot three because 'they were too far gone'.

Ten days after the fires, there were some gruesome finds, including decaying cows and horses in Callignee South Road.

Dallas Bye came and asked Lindsay if he could bury six cows and four horses on Jimmy Bell's property and a neighbour's place. Dallas wanted to help, so Lindsay got out the old front-end loader, as well as the one he was driving, and they went to bury the animals.

Since Dallas knew where the animals were, Lindsay told him to put the bodies in a spot where they could bury them. When Lindsay got there he started digging a hole to put the animals into and told Dallas that he may as well go and dig a hole for the two horses at Jimmy Bell's place. Lindsay saw Dallas dig a hole and then go off to get the animals. Dallas brought one horse back. Then he went to get what Lindsay thought was the other horse.

When Dallas came back to Lindsay without filling in the hole, Lindsay said to him, 'You're supposed to fill the grave in when you've finished'.

Dallas replied that he hadn't finished and that it was only the one horse he had placed in the grave, as it was so rotten, it had broken in half when he tried to move it.

Dallas said that he needed a sling to get the second horse, because it was four feet up a bank, but Lindsay 'didn't want to be touching anything'. Luckily, Lindsay's tractor was much bigger, so he could reach it with his tractor.

The images were devastating, but he had a job to do, so he just kept going.

During the limited time he was home, Lindsay handcrafted about 70 jewellery boxes for some of the local girls, who had lost possessions in the fires. Being creative helped keep his mind occupied and off the horrors he had experienced. He also put time into building a 'rock and rose' garden inspired by a garden his Grandpa once had.

Lindsay had never seen anything like the aftermath. In his area there were only three houses left. 'It was like back in the seventies, before all the neighbours.'

It took a while to see signs of new life. Slowly some bits of shrub regenerated and some lyrebirds returned to sing.

Most of his handmade, wooden dragons are named after characters from television soap operas. They include Irene, Martha, Matilda and Spur. He'd traded one of his favourites, Belle Taylor, for a post rammer and she was destroyed by the fire at that property.

Lindsay still managed to have a sense of humour. Someone had put bandages on one of his iconic sculptures – the Mona Lisa – after 'she got burned'. Lindsay then found some police tape, which he wrapped around her waist. When the Department of Primary Industry vets came out to the area, one of the girls secretly asked Lindsay what the crime scene was on the corner. His reply was that it was the Mona Lisa – 'she had got her tits burnt'.

Lindsay was hit hard financially in the fires. He sold the last of his cows and used investments to start a new business, ordering a bulldozer to create a new job clearing shrubs.

Opposite: More devastation.

Above right: Lindsay at home with his handcrafted furnishings including his smoke breathing dragon.



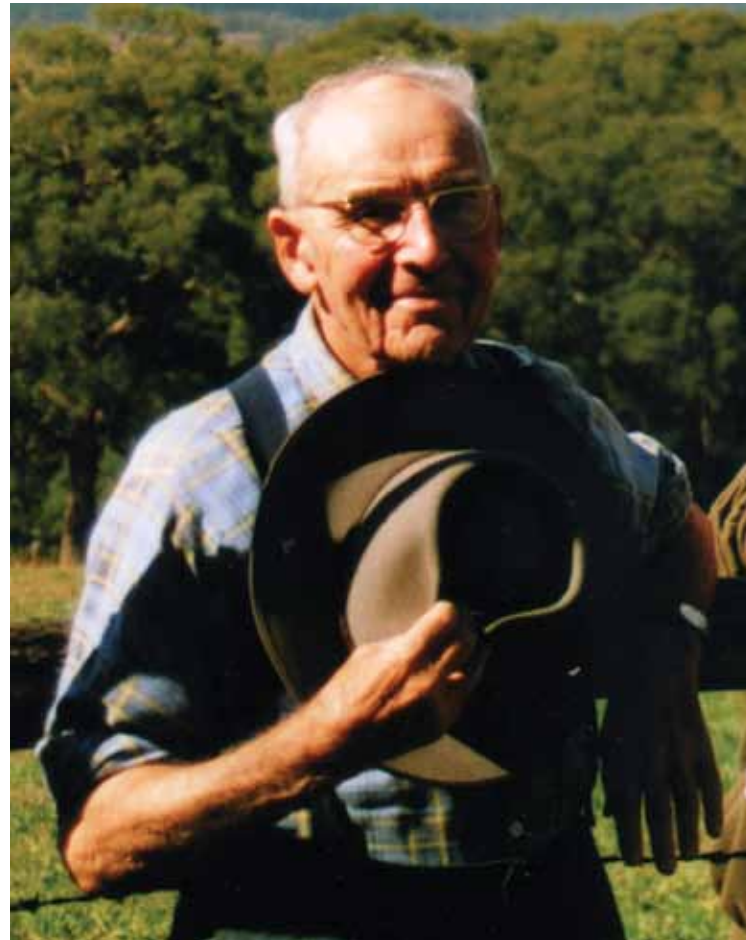
The intense roaring noise of the fires is what sticks in his head the most. He believes the only reason his house is still standing is because of his sprinklers, which created an oasis. 'I was safe here, it was so wet.' His biggest fear on Black Saturday was grass fires.

As time went on, and with no pressing deadlines, Lindsay was able to return to crafting his renowned wooden dragons, which he makes using wood from his property and designs from his head. Hours of work has gone into each dragon.

'It takes three days to make one wing. In two days you can have a nice looking head. Time's nothing to me', he said.

He said some people may think he doesn't have the academic skills others have, but his ability to create and operate machinery outweighs that – 'how many people have got dragons like mine?' he grins.

After everything that has happened, this reluctant hero is pleased that the only smoke in his home comes from the nostrils of his handmade dragons.



Charlie Richardson

Charlie Richardson was born on 12 December 1911 and was brought up on a farm near Gawsworth in Cheshire, England. As a child living on a small farm called 'Little Walkers Heath Farm', Charlie helped his parents milk cows and grow vegetables, and attended Gawsworth School.

Although not a studious child, he enjoyed reading and would often find it hard to put a book down until the candlewick had burned to the end. 'I sometimes ended up with very cold hands and arms', he recalled.

In 1925, along with his parents, sister, brother and his brother's new wife, Charlie set sail for Australia aboard the SS Bendigo, leaving from Portsmouth in England.

The first stop on the long journey to Australia was in Capetown, South Africa, where the family were greeted by poor beggars. On 3 July 1925, the family docked in Melbourne. Charlie recalled as they made their way down the gangplank in their cloth caps and English clothes, a group of wharfies were having their smoko, watching them. One of the wharfies looked up and said to them, 'Youse bloody Pommies want to get back to the Old Dart – you're not wanted here'.

Above: Charlie Richardson.

Above right: Charlie's home after the fires.



Charlie spent the next six months at the Elcho training farm for new immigrants in Lara, near Geelong. Having been told before they left England that in Australia they'd be camping outdoors with wild animals, Charlie and his family were very happy with this accommodation.

A land valuer by the name of Norman McInnes was looking for sharefarmers for his property in Loy Yang and would prove to be very good to Charlie's family. After six months at Loy Yang, Norman recommended a place for them at Callignee and released them as sharefarmers, provided they took some of the herd. They would name this property at Callignee 'Torr Gate' as it reminded them of a property in England of that name.

The property at Callignee had been a pig farm and Charlie vividly remembered the house, deserted for a long time, had been taken over by fleas. 'It was not a nice experience', he recalled.

The monthly trip to Traralgon by horse and jinker for shopping was an event, because, as Charlie referred to it, they lived in the 'woop woops'. It was at Torr Gate that Charlie finished growing up and learned to drive his father's Model T Ford in the paddock.

Charlie worked as a farmhand and carpenter and did road patrol duty during the war years. He enjoyed social evenings, cards

and dances at the Callignee Hall, although confessed he would rather watch the dancing than participate.

On 13 January, the day of the terrible 1939 bushfires, Charlie and his family sheltered in a watering hole with their cows as they watched their home burn to the ground. Charlie had managed to grab two mirrors, which were carved from English oak and had been given to his mother on the occasion of her first wedding in 1898. Charlie had buried these mirrors in the ground and later the charred pieces were restored to make one mirror, which would hang proudly above Charlie's fireplace.

While Charlie assisted in building a new home, he and his father lived in a spud shed at Torr Gate, while the rest of the family stayed at their neighbours – the Simms.

During the 1944 fires, Charlie's home survived, but the Simms' house didn't. Charlie remembers driving Mrs Simms, who was burnt from the waist up, to the Traralgon hospital. This arduous journey would take three hours as they negotiated roads covered in burning trees.



Charlie's mother passed away in 1962 and in 1964 Charlie moved to 'Heath Cottage' in Koegels Road, Callignee, with his father and sister, Marion. Charlie's father passed away in 1966 and Charlie remained at Heath Cottage with Marion until she too passed away in 1992.

Charlie became good friends with neighbour Pat Temple and the two shared many fishing trips and their ritual Wednesday shopping day. Charlie was shattered by Pat's death and adopted Pat's cat, Puss. Charlie and Puss were the best of friends.

Charlie was a quiet man who had never married. He was involved in the Callignee Rural Fire Brigade for 50 years and was a long-time member of the Callignee hall. He loved spoiling Puss and enjoyed a glass of wine (or three).

During the last few decades, Charlie became very hard of hearing. This was often frustrating for Charlie, but he cheekily said that it could sometimes work to his advantage. He enjoyed working around his property or in his workshop. He had made his own lathe and was skilled at wood-turning.

On Saturday 7 February 2009, a neighbour, Gary Pratt, told Charlie there was 'a hell of a fire' in the Churchill area. As the smoke got thicker and thicker, Charlie couldn't see very well and got a torch.

'It was that thick that it was very nearly dark', said Charlie. He started the pumps and sprinklers and thought he was perfectly safe but it soon got worse. A keen weather watcher, Charlie said, 'You wouldn't think that it was possible; winds that strong from the north-west'.

The pump was going and water started to spray from the roof, but within a few minutes he was surrounded by fire. The engine suddenly cut out and there was no water. Charlie couldn't do anything – everything around him was burning. 'It was just like a shovel of hot ashes dropped on me', he said. 'I hadn't a hope, it was that fierce coming in on me.'

He got behind his burning home to shelter from the wind. His legs weren't too good and he dropped to his hands and knees. He couldn't stand up but had the presence of mind to roll onto his back and using his elbows, pushed himself along, crawling backwards.

Opposite top: Charlie's devastated property.

Opposite bottom: Charlie's destroyed car amongst the ruins.

Charlie thought he must have passed out for a short while; when he regained consciousness he was on the road. His fence had burned down and he couldn't get up, so he lay there for a while to gather himself. He then made his way to the other side of the road where the shed was still standing. He drank some bottles of water he'd left in the shed for an emergency. 'I sat there for a while, gathering my senses', he said. 'I was as dry as chips. It was the best drink of water I ever had.'

Charlie heard one vehicle go past, and then another. 'I was in the wrong place', he said. He rolled to his knees and managed to get onto his feet, which were burnt inside his rubber boots. He began to walk towards the main road where he shone his torch at an approaching vehicle. It was a passing crew and they stopped to pick him up, taking him firstly to Traralgon South and then to the Red Cross in Traralgon. He was moved to hospital just before midnight when the extent of his burns was discovered.

He had burns to his hands and feet and his back was burnt all the way down to the back of his knees. Charlie spent five weeks in the Dandenong Hospital before being moved to Maryvale Hospital in Morwell for a further two weeks. Charlie then moved in with his great niece, Leanne who cared for him. He was desperate to move back onto his property, complaining of too much red tape. 'My life is in Callignee', he said. While staying with Leanne, Charlie discovered that there was more to cooking than 'meat and three veg' and talked of getting himself a cookbook when he got home. He missed his garden and made plans of re-establishing himself on the property.

When asked to compare this fire to those of 1939 and 1944, Charlie said, 'You couldn't compare this one with any of them. It was too big, too vicious. I thought I could handle it but I couldn't'.

Charlie organised a self-contained unit as a temporary measure and volunteers cleared space for a new garden. Charlie moved back to Callignee, but it was to be short-lived. Charlie was again taken to hospital and he passed away at the age of 97, never returning to his beloved Callignee. His much-loved Puss was found a week after the fires, her paws badly burnt, roaming around a paddock. Puss died shortly after Charlie passed away.

Charlie Richardson was a remarkable man who had a great fund of anecdotes. He underwent heart surgery at the age of 85 and a hip replacement at 92. Charlie loved the cricket and although he was loyal to the Poms, he was Australian in everything except his accent.

Charlie will not only be remembered as a humble man with a dry and wonderful sense of humour, he will be remembered as a true gentleman.



Garry and Elizabeth Roberts

As flames licked at his beloved motorbike, Garry Roberts picked up a bucket and threw the contents over the bike to put out the flames. It turns out the bucket was full of grey paint. Not amused at the time, he is now able to laugh it off as a minor issue on a devastating day.

It was an easy mistake to make. It was dark and he was frenziedly trying to contain fire at every turn. Every bucket was covered in a layer of char, embers and ash.

Garry, a power station technician, had 20 years experience with the CFA and knew what to expect on bad days. Initially, he didn't think the weather looked as bad as predicted. However, he took his daughter to tennis in Churchill and on his way home, the temperatures rose dramatically.

He and his wife, Elizabeth, have lived on their property for 25 years and had a long held policy of patrolling every 15 minutes on days of total fire ban and some days he would sit outside to keep watch.

Their equipment – a fire pump, buckets and mops, knapsacks of water and a box of protective clothing and goggles – had

Above: Garry's motorbike after the "paint job!".

been 'ready for years'. They had hoses in place but no sprinkler system and had prepared their property months earlier.

Before they could receive any warning from CFA pagers, Elizabeth noticed a column of smoke rising from beyond Jeeralang Hall. She woke Garry.

He thought it was further away in Churchill but expected a wind change. He warned the family. 'This is the one – this is the day we've dreaded.'

The plan was for the family to defend and Garry is thankful it didn't turn out that way.

They started filling buckets, the bath and every available container. They wet towels and blankets and put them around sills and openings.

His daughters, Monica, 17, (who went on to become dux of Traralgon College) and Lucinda, 14, 'instinctively' pulled all the furniture away from the walls in their room while Garry stapled sisalation (a flame retardant, reflective foil laminate) over the glass doors and windows.

Bill Rogers, a friend from Traralgon South, came to lend a hand. Garry tried to talk him into going home to defend his own place.

Garry's sister-in-law Mary Whelan and her husband, Michael, on Phillip Island, heard of the fires on the ABC and decided to come and help after talking to Elizabeth that afternoon.

While Elizabeth was reluctant to leave, they decided it was too dangerous for their daughters to stay. They packed hard drives, photo albums and a few clothes into the car. Garry asked them to take his Gallacher (a beautifully hand-crafted guitar) and assured them he would look after the rest.

Elizabeth and the girls first evacuated to Bill's house at Traralgon South, but that also became risky, so they headed to Traralgon. They met Michael and Mary on the way and helped them cross a police line at the Traralgon South lights. Elizabeth said she was concerned that people in Traralgon South weren't taking it seriously enough at that point.

When Michael and Mary arrived, the four wet everything within a few metres of the house, but left the sheds, tractor and the rest of the property.

It got extremely dark and hot. A small, localised thunderstorm started a couple of kilometres north of them. Garry saw lightning strike a few times and thought they might be in trouble.

They were concerned about an unkempt nearby block, the subject of a six-year battle with the council.

Garry knew it would be a huge problem if the front came from the north. They watched and waited. He felt the wind changing. Then it really kicked in and started to blow hard from the south-west.

Michael and Garry began spraying in the south-west corner. A flame appeared over the top of the range. The intensity of the wind had more than doubled. It was like standing behind a jet airline. It sounded like 50 freight trains coming over the hill.

He remembers hoping his roof stayed on. They had built the house themselves and had concerns about the integrity of it for a while there when the wind really hit.

It was like nothing they had ever experienced before.

Michael had been a paid CFA officer for years and was in charge of their research department and was well-versed in wildfire behaviour. He was an asset to the team. If it wasn't for him and Mary, Garry says he wouldn't be here or have a house. Mary later wrote her own account of the day, entitled 'It's Not a Bloody Miracle'.

The wind was howling and embers were blowing in and spotting. Some were quite large, others bits of stick. He remembers they were spraying in their overalls, goggles, gloves, hats – which blew off – and dust masks. It got to the point where he thought it was too intense and that they had to get out.

Garry ran to the back of the house. From his hips down it was like being in a swimming pool of embers, so thick that he couldn't see the ground. It was pitch black. He hoped his overalls didn't catch on fire.

Michael appeared around the other corner and they went inside for a few minutes. Mary was patrolling inside and checking behind all the curtains.

At one end of the house protective foam in an air vent blew out and a stream of embers shot through like a blowtorch. Garry grabbed a pillowcase from the washing basket, jumped up onto a table and jammed the pillowcase into the air vent to stop the embers. He didn't even think to wet it down.

They kept a good eye on it. Later, it probably got wet from outside. Outside was smoke and embers. Garry remembers trees below catching fire. He remembers seeing the block next door go up.



Right: The Robert's fishing boat. "Not much time for fishing anyway!"

He knew one lot of neighbours had evacuated. He heard cars moving, but didn't know what other people were up to, and he needed to concentrate on what he was doing.

After 10 minutes they decided it was safe to go out and patrol again. The fire had gone from the bottom of the block, past them and over the hill – around 8 kilometres in 10 minutes.

Outside there was heavy smoke and embers everywhere. The fire pump stopped and Garry couldn't restart it. He isolated the pump hose, went to the tank up the hill and created a gravity-fed system. It had nowhere near the pressure of the fire pump but there was running water for every hose. He could just make out where the mops and buckets were.

Seeing a glow of embers in one fascia of the house, Michael picked up a bucket of water and threw it, but not one drop got to its destination. The wind carried the water to the lawn. He climbed a ladder and poured it down, saving the house.

There was a sheet of corrugated iron on the grass that had flown 100 metres from its origin, despite having weights on it.

It was around midnight when the wind died down. They kept patrolling and hosing. It was very hot, but adrenaline and survival instincts kicked in. They kept up their intake of fluids, including energy drinks. Garry remembers both the bottom shed and wood shed being engulfed in flames. Garry then noticed a third shed was burning and spent a long time dampening it.

Just before the fire front hit, Garry's mother rang to say she had heard there was a bit of fire. Mary answered and said they were 'right in the middle of it', and couldn't talk. Smoke detectors were making a noise they didn't need.

They then started to try to relax. Garry remembers the wind dropping at about midnight. There was more smoke inside than out. He sat on the paving outside. Mary had talked to Elizabeth to say they were all okay and that they had survived it. Elizabeth and the girls had seen the total flame height, so the vision was worse for them.

Because they had such an open area and had cleared up, the fire split and went around the house. The trees were baked, not burnt. If it had come from the other direction they may not have been so fortunate.

At no point did Garry fear for his life, although he knew they were in grave danger at times. When they went outside after the fire front had passed for the first time, the paddock was burned black, but there was no radiant heat. If the house had caught fire, they could have gone to that area and survived.

Around midnight Garry started vomiting. Mary was concerned he was suffering heat stroke, but they couldn't go anywhere until daylight. They didn't know what the conditions were on the roads.

They tried to sleep outside on camp stretchers, but Garry could only focus on hosing to ensure their survival. Michael finally slept on the trampoline.

Garry remembers seeing another neighbour's house going up in flames before daybreak. They were also surprised to hear voices from another set of neighbours.

Around 7 am Garry became incoherent. They got into the ute and he vomited over Mary as Michael struggled to drive them out. Garry was semiconscious.

His next recollection was waking up in emergency with Monica holding his hand. He'd been unable to recognise his family for the past few hours. Elizabeth thought she had lost Garry and was very distressed when he didn't know who he was.

It was days before Garry was able to face returning. He was shocked to discover their neighbours hadn't survived and nor had the son of the cleaner at Garry's work.

At the time, Michael described it as – not a bushfire, but a hurricane of fire. As far as they'd known, the rest of the world could have disappeared, although they had no knowledge of fires in other parts of the state. 'You don't think about where a fire's gone after it hits you.'

Garry believes they have a responsibility to pass on anything they've learnt to people who might be thinking of staying to do the same thing.

He has promised his family that they will never stay through a firestorm again. He would take what he considers important and leave, knowing everything would be gone when they got back.



Laurel Roberts

Within 20 seconds of hearing a massive explosion, Laurel Roberts saw her property become engulfed in flames. There was no smoke in the air, no embers, not one sign that the fire was coming in their direction.

What followed was a combination of heat, wind, vapours, embers and pieces of lit wood, up to 1 metre long, flying through the air. A circle of fire surrounded the house that she lived in with her partner, Chris Van Donkelaar.

They had no idea a fire was even in the area until they received a call from neighbours around 2.30 pm saying they were leaving and asking what Laurel and Chris planned to do – the answer was to stay and defend.

Laurel looked over to the front of their property and saw a large red and grey plume of smoke many kilometres away and woke her partner by yelling, 'fire'.

They'd lived in the house for 20 years, and always knew they would stay – 'we had an excellent fire plan'. They immediately sprung into action, getting the sprinklers going, preparing water and stripping the verandah of everything flammable.

Chris moved the tractor and laid out the fire-fighting hoses on each side of the house – two for him and two for Laurel. The last time Laurel experienced a bushfire was when she was a child, but she had never fought one.

Chris had done some training with the CFA many years ago, but everything Laurel learned was from reading or the media.

Living alongside Traralgon Creek meant they had an unlimited water supply, combined with an electric and fuel powered pump and a generator operated pump near the house. Laurel had a spa full of water on the verandah. Outside she had set up 30 buckets of water – and also some buckets of water inside for drinking – along with hoses and a ladder to access the manhole.

They were confident that they had everything in place to fight.

They dressed in their fire-fighting gear, cotton clothing, hats and goggles. The intensity of the extreme heat of the fires would leave her branded with red marks on her face long after the fires had passed.

The heat was so intense that before she even began fighting the fire, Laurel hopped into the spa – clothes, shoes and all.

Their phone was working up until 6 pm, but they didn't want to answer as they had to concentrate on what they were doing.

Around 6 pm they heard a massive explosion that sounded like gas, but there was no smoke in the air, no embers, and no sign that the fire was coming in their direction. However, within 20 seconds, everything was on fire.

Laurel recalls a combination of heat and wind and the fire moved so fast 'like someone had poured petrol on the ground'. Their house was surrounded by fire.

They immediately started fighting the onslaught. Chris was on the west side of the house and bore the full force of the fire.

'We couldn't see each other. It went black and we couldn't see a metre ahead. We didn't think about if each other was okay, we were just concentrating on putting the fire out', Laurel said.

Chris became worried about Laurel and did check if she was okay some time later.

For the next two and a half hours the pair fought 'full-on' flames in their bid to save their house and then sheds. A fire in the roof of one shed refused to extinguish and Laurel had to fight it over and over.

There were times when Chris couldn't breathe and he had to go into the shed, but Laurel didn't know this at the time.

They finally stopped for a glass of water and realised that while there were still a lot of things on fire, they had managed to save the house. It was finally under control.

Chris said, 'We did it Laurel, we did it'. They kept walking around with buckets of water, putting small fires out.

They knew all of their neighbours had left and they had been warned not to expect any help.

Even after everything they went through, Laurel said they would do it all again – ‘I would hate to lose the house’.

They say there is no doubt they would have lost ‘absolutely everything’ had they not stayed to fight.

Too scared to sleep, they stayed up all night. They’d planned to take it in turns to patrol, but neither could sleep for a couple of days. Adrenaline kept them going until shock set in the following week.

Things began to go downhill. With no mobile coverage or other contact with the outside world, they felt a sense of isolation. ‘We didn’t think anyone else was alive.’ They didn’t want to leave because of the danger caused by trees falling on their property. ‘My family didn’t know I was alive.’

Emergency services didn’t get to Laurel and Chris until Monday afternoon. They brought some drinking water. It was eerie. They didn’t hear or see people, only snakes, bees, flies and bull ants on the verandah near the front door.

It was quite a few days later that Chris cleared a track up behind them and started to make a few calls. Family in Queensland and Melbourne were worried sick, not knowing if they had survived, until they finally made contact on the Monday.

Their message bank was full so no one could leave a message.

Emergency services came offering material aid but they didn’t want to accept it – only water. They wanted other people, who needed the aid more, to have it.

They learned about what had happened in other areas, like Koornalla, and that people had perished. That hit home. But the worst day was to follow when they drove through the area, shaking and crying as they saw what everyone else had lost.

For a while Laurel didn’t want to open her blinds, because she couldn’t face looking out and seeing a sea of black. The private couple’s home was also suddenly very exposed. The loss of vegetation meant ‘everyone can just see in’ including looters soon after the fires.

Chris struggled badly with the dead wildlife. Dead birds dropped out of the sky and animals suffering starvation came to die in the front yard – Chris had a battle trying to bury them without the dog getting to them.

Laurel says she never thought she was lucky – if she was lucky, she said, this never would have happened. She says they survived because they worked extremely hard.

She said following the fires, they’d suffered a range of emotions including survivor guilt, depression and post-traumatic stress, and health issues such as dehydration, insomnia and smoke inhalation.

Their 8.5 acres of vegetation and garden was burned to a crisp or stripped by animals desperate for food. The interior of their home was ‘putrid’ and her collection of dolls and antiques was covered in black dust and eucalyptus oil from the trees. The outside of the house was worse.

They showered in dirty creek water and, unable to be washed, clothes had to be thrown out when they got a ‘bit on the nose’.

Despite the emotional rollercoaster, Laurel is ‘110 per cent sure’ she would stay and defend again – saying she’d beat herself up about it if she didn’t stay and fight.

Laurel has found some comfort from counselling, eating chocolate, and from talking to other women, who also stayed to defend their properties. ‘It made me realise I wasn’t mad, that what we were feeling was perhaps okay.’

She and Chris have developed an enhanced fire plan, added new sprinklers and have finally learned to be able to ask for help.



Right: Naked ladies at the gate.



Marcus Roylance

Marcus Roylance faced an agonising decision – save his parent’s home or his own.

Excavating a hole for a pool, Marcus, 39, heard a fire alarm around 1 pm. He could see smoke on the horizon over the hill.

Marcus, a safety and training professional with Roche Thies Linfox Joint Venture (RTL), decided he was ‘too close to home to do nothing’. He went home, loaded his boat, and towed it into town. His wife Elena, also 39, had no knowledge of the fires, as she was inside the house because of the intense heat. She was shocked to look outside and discover it had turned black and hot.

Marcus wasn’t in a panic. He could see flames heading south-east from where it started and thought he had a bit of time. His plan was always to stay, but that changed on the day. He grabbed some jerry cans and took them to the shop to fill with fuel. He just made it before they closed the petrol station, as the staff had been ordered to evacuate.

He grabbed the generator and hooked the pump up. He put hoses around and realised they were a couple short of what they needed to feel comfortable with their defence. He asked Elena to go back into town and grab a couple more. It was around 4.30 pm and there was no roadblock at that point.

Above: This road is all that separated Traralgon South township from the fire.

Marcus was almost in systematic mode as he got stuff ready out the back. He could hear the roar of the fire from the Koornalla direction.

Marcus is a qualified military and industrial fire fighter. He was in the 1994 bushfires in Sydney and experienced a lot of fires then. He wasn’t really panicked until he heard the roar. Brooke (14 at the time) was starting to get really worried and panicked. Marcus asked Elena to take Brooke to Traralgon. Elena was going to try and drop her and come back.

Elena was in Marcus’ four-wheel drive with clothes and the trailer attached with motorbikes on it. She left photos, but took insurance documents that they knew they would need if things didn’t turn out favourably. Elena was pretty confident in the belief that the house wouldn’t burn down – she didn’t think it was possible.

They had gone for practical things rather than thinking they would lose everything. They had a dog and cat in there too and were pleased they didn’t kill each other in the car!

Elena took off. In hindsight it was too late to go. She should have gone a lot earlier. Marcus and Elena only agreed for her to go due to the condition of their daughter, Brooke. Elena went down Rifle Range Road and the fire was across the entire paddock. That was really scary. She couldn’t see; it was too smoky. She couldn’t turn around because she was towing the trailer. She didn’t know if she was turning into the fire or away from it.

While Elena was driving, a CFA truck at the Koornalla turnoff flashed their high beam at her. She didn’t know what that meant. She just turned and hoped for the best – and it was the best. The rest of the way was clear. It wasn’t until two days later that Marcus would find out how close his wife had come to peril, as she faced the fire when turning right onto Traralgon Creek Road.

Marcus and son Jacob, 16, were at the house. Marcus made sure all the hoses were on and that they were wearing their protective gear. Jacob was patrolling one area and Marcus was out hosing the sun sails. They planned to get back to each other every 10 minutes because it was pitch black.

They had an ember attack on one side of the house and at the back corner. It was coming from a different direction than expected. Marcus was trying to read the conditions, but it was confusing as to which direction the embers were coming from. They extinguished all the embers relatively quickly. Then, for a brief time, the attack stopped.

Suddenly it sounded like a 747 sitting on the side of the road with its engines fully engaged, ready to take off. The wind was drying their eyes so much that Marcus could only look down the hill for a split second.

Earlier Marcus and neighbour Bill Rogers had agreed to yell out every 20–30 minutes.

When it went dark, the embers that came through cleared the darkness slightly. Jacob and Marcus went back to the house. They could see the fire between Balook Road and Red Hill Road whipping across the tops of the pine plantation.

When Marcus’s father had come to Marcus’s house earlier, because he thought they would be in danger, Marcus had told him to go home and protect his own place.

Marcus rang his father to make sure he had everything ready. They went through the checklist. Marcus was very concerned and frustrated because he wanted to go there and help his father. He was ‘torn between wanting to go and needing to stay’. The wind was so strong they were nearly being blown over. Then it went totally still.

Marcus called his father again and said, ‘Brace yourself, it’s coming! And it’s big!’ He could hear houses going up as the fire travelled. He just hoped that everyone had left their homes before the fire hit.

They lost power and mains water. They hooked the generator to the pump and tank, confident they still had the capacity to defend.

The risk had gone, but they were unaware of what was going on at Traralgon Creek Road. Marcus called his father 10–15 minutes later – but with no response – he was worried. He finally got through about an hour later. His father said, ‘We’re alive’, but they’d been hit pretty hard. They had no water and everything was on fire.

Marcus went to the CFA in Elena’s soft-top Astra convertible and asked them to send a tanker as two people were trapped. Even though they said they would, he knew they wouldn’t get there. Marcus was trying to organise a 16,000 litre cart from work to go to his father’s aid, but they weren’t sure if they could get through.

Marcus just felt that he had to go there to ensure his parents' safety. He made sure Jacob was okay at home and that there was no more threat, and took off up the road in the convertible. As he drove up the road, he found that the fire had jumped the road – trees and branches were across the road.

He ran up the hill and tried to move burning tree limbs to give him enough room to get around them. He did that about three or four times.

It was like a movie where napalm had just been dropped. All the trees were just burning stick figures and the ground was hot grey powder. It was about 10.30 pm at this stage. He managed to make it to his parents' house. Marcus was pretty relieved to see his parents alive. He was pretty emotional and just needed to make sure they were okay as there were no communications – phones were disconnected and the mobile system was choked up. He was trying to assess the situation and decided it was not a good idea to get the tanker up, as it was too dangerous.

At that stage there wasn't much left to burn. Everything around the house was already burnt. He stayed about half an hour and then returned home. A few more trees had fallen on the road. It was a pretty spectacular sight – that environment with everything light and bright. It was all lit up and you could see everything for miles.

He remembers that by that time, all the smoke had gone. As far as he could see it was glowing, with everything burnt. Gas bottles started exploding at the bottom of the hill. He saw the CFA arrive to extinguish a fire at a neighbour's house.

At approximately 11.30 pm the neighbours were gathered at Coco's house when Peter Draper walked up the driveway. Marcus said Peter was happy to be alive, but looked like he had been dragged through the mud. Peter told them they had no real warning. He said he had heard it coming and then he saw it coming through the trees. He turned and ran and it was like someone pushed on his back. He saw the roof of his house fly off. He ran down the hill and hid behind a 44 gallon drum and then under a drain until it went over. He didn't know if his son was alive. He had a reunion with his son and his mate at 11.35 pm. Seeing them embrace made Marcus emotional. He was glad they still had each other, but he started to think about his mum and dad – it was a bit tough.

Elena was worried sick until she finally got hold of Marcus around 2 am. He didn't know his brother Darren was also in the firing line and had been evacuated from Gormandale.

As Marcus went to check on neighbours, some scenes made him fear the worst, like the sight of blown gas bottles, and at other properties, there was relief.

He went back to his mum and dad's in the morning. Spotting had destroyed a couple of houses that had been there on the previous night's trip. They were now gone. The fire had just crawled for several hours and taken out the houses that had no one defending them.

The next few days brought with them an emotional rollercoaster. Elena said every single day was devastating as they started learning other people had perished. She suffered survivor guilt, feeling bad that her house was still here.

Elena says they now do more stuff together and it has changed their perspective on what is important. They are now more family-oriented and care less about possessions. They spend a lot of the weekend taking local kids wakeboarding and to competitions.

Elena has learnt about making a plan and sticking to it. 'You commit to staying or going.'

Given the fire knowledge and experience he has, Marcus said he would stay again. It was a solid home – it was brick veneer and they had a water reserve. Fighting this fire has given him confidence, but 'if we were in a different home, we would have a different plan'.

Right: The Cheney property at Koornalla.





Rollo Roylance

As flames attacked his home, Rollo Roylance wondered if he should drink his 20-year-old bottle of Grange Hermitage wine. But with sheer determination, two decade-old fire extinguishers and some disposable nappies, Rollo and his wife Beverley managed to save their house.

The couple had originally been in Melbourne heading for Whittlesea for an annual country music festival. The intense heat led to a change of plans and they headed back to their Cooks Road home in a valley in Callignee North, calling into their son Kaine's place to give birthday wishes to their daughter-in-law Megan.

They left about 2.30 pm and saw the fire developing as they were heading back to their place. 'We scuttled home very quickly.' Worried, they put their fire plan into action, laying wet towels around the doors and windows, preparing buckets of water and laying out hoses. They donned protective long pants and safety goggles, and began watering down as much as they could.

The plan was always to stay – they had no intention of leaving. 'We have antiques, heirlooms and treasures and we weren't going to give those up easily', Rollo said.

Above: The Roylance property in Callignee.

Rollo had completed fire training through work – 'that helped'. They cleaned gutters and to help retain water, tore a hole in some disposable nappies and wedged them in. Rollo recalls it was later 'difficult' to get them out, however, two days later there was still water in the gutters.

They were listening to radio reports, but were mainly getting information by telephone calls, many from their daughter, Deearne, who was at a lookout in Hernes Oak near Coach Road.

They were also in touch with their son Marcus, who was under threat in Traralgon South. Rollo said it was hard for them both, knowing that the other was under threat. But they knew they were on their own, as for either of them to go to the other place may have resulted in the other losing their house.

Another son Kaine was called to work in Morwell (because of the fire!) and was 'reporting' in as well. Their eldest son, Darren, was 'on alert' in Gormandale and later evacuated with his family.

Their grandson, Jaydon, 18, offered to come and help, but they said no because they were worried about his safety. 'We were prepared to fight for our lives but didn't want to sacrifice his.' He decided to come anyway, but was stopped.

Around 4.40 pm they could hear the fire. It wasn't loud when they first heard it, but it built up to a crescendo. It happened fairly quickly but there was no smoke or embers, which was a bit confusing.

Rollo said the adrenaline started pumping through. He had never been involved in anything like this.

They weren't sure if they were in the line of a fire or not. It was only due to a warning from their daughter and son that they knew they were in a danger zone. 'The children were more accurate than the radio reports.'

The last words to their daughter were 'got to go, the embers are coming'. She wasn't game to ring in fear of knowing or interrupting. It was pretty traumatic for her; she obviously knew they were in strife.

She wanted to come and help but not after her 11-year-old son said, 'Mummy, I don't want you to go'.

It would have been maybe three hours before they talked to her again. They didn't think to call her to say they were okay. They were still pretty busy.

Three large pieces of bark floated down alight and Rollo started hosing those in the lawn area. And then all hell broke loose without any warning. He still can't believe it.



Above: Flames crept under the door damaging the interior of the house.

Fire burst through the bush edge like a giant blowtorch. There were embers everywhere, travelling horizontally across the sky and whirling around his feet in a cyclonic fashion.

Beverly screamed to 'get in quick'. They both dived for the house, feeling somewhat safe there and pushed their French doors closed with all their might.

He could see a brilliant red colour and plants exploding. His lovely garden was totally destroyed. Embers were going every which way. It was like the special effects in an action movie.

Trees, bushes and shrubs were exploding, coming straight towards the doors they were hanging on to. They were very worried. Beverley decided at that point that she could write off her ceramics studio.

For about 10–15 minutes they were pushing against the doors. Embers were coming through the cracks, through the foam sealing, and they were stamping them out while holding the doors shut.

Not long after the fire front came, Beverley noticed a cane chair on the verandah that had exploded and was starting to burn the house down near the bedroom. The bedroom window was on fire

and it was starting to scorch the curtains. It was a big learning curve about not having anything on the verandah.

Rollo ran out and kicked the chair off the verandah. He noticed the heat then. The flames from the chair and bedroom made it difficult to attack the fire.

He hadn't known if the fire front had passed but instinct said he had to go out there, knowing that if fire got in, it would have gone right through the house. At that point he thought there was no chance of saving the house and that they should have drunk their ageing bottle of Grange Hermitage!

After knocking the chair off, Rollo still had water, so he hosed off the window and put that out. He was relieved. He went back inside and the smoke was horrendous. The whole garden was burning and it was still pretty hot outside, but smoke forced them back out.

The smoke outside wasn't much better. They both started patrolling – one would go outside and the other would stay inside. Beverley has a farming background. Her house burned down when she was a child. She wasn't there, but Rollo thinks that gave her the determination to fight this one.

They talked to a neighbour about staying, but had no idea how he had fared – they were in survival mode. 'You couldn't do anything but fend for yourself.'

Next to be hit was an old wooden barbecue frame that they used as a potting table. It was on fire on the verandah. Fortunately it was up against bricks and nothing combustible.

The hose had melted out of the tank (it was plastic – they now have copper going into the ground). Rollo kicked it off and let it burn. It wasn't going to do any more damage after getting it away from the house.

The red gum sleepers, plants and garden were all still burning. The next strike was on the house. It was an ember that floated into the rumpus room. It was just in front of Beverley's face. She looked up and saw a glow in the roof – there was fire in the capping.

They had no water left, except for buckets from the dam, which was 100 metres away. It was then that Rollo remembered that their son, Marcus, had given them a couple of old fire extinguishers years earlier. Rollo 'was going round in circles' in a bit of a panic until he found them in the garage half buried with other junk.

Rollo tried to pull the pin out of one of them but it was rusted. He knocked it out with a hammer and tested it and it worked. He had to get a ladder and climb onto the roof. He gave a squirt

under the ridge gap and thought he had put it out. He checked five minutes later and it was still burning. He had to put it out. He took the crowbar from the garage (the sheds had gone at that stage), wrenched the gap open and had another squirt.

He thought it was out but needed to do it five times. By the last time he was totally exhausted – he gave it a squirt and lay down on the roof. He had thoughts of giving in – but only momentarily. He picked himself up and got going again.

They knew they were 'on our own with this one' and wouldn't have expected anyone else to come and help them.

Bev was screaming that they had a fire in the garage. The dog's bedding caught alight. The flames were 6–8 feet high. They had no water, so Rollo just grabbed it and carried it out.

At around 11 pm Marcus came to visit. He didn't stay long but just wanted to check they were okay. He had left his own son so he headed back.

They stayed awake all night patrolling. Sheer exhaustion led to 20 minutes of sleep in a chair outside. Rollo coughed most of the night and his eyes felt like they had red-hot poker in them. He'd lost his goggles earlier.

The wind would pop up and the wood chips would start smouldering. They were still burning two days later.

At some point they started ringing all the kids – who were all relieved to hear from them – and learned their eldest son, Darren, was evacuated from Gormandale.

They saved the house and cars but lost their ceramics studio – there was not a salvageable thing left in it. They lost a shed full of tools and collectibles, a cubby house and the garden shed.

They've upgraded their fire plan and say they would still stay and defend. From what they've learned, they are more confident now about staying to fight a fire.

'Whether we could save the house or not is another thing. That fire was so discriminatory. We're one of the lucky ones.'

Beverley and Rollo have rebuilt their studio and held an open day in April 2010.

Opposite top: Damage to the Roylance property.

Opposite bottom: The destroyed studio.





Dorothy Sellens

Seventy-six-year-old Dorothy Sellens refused to leave her home as fire loomed – and said she would stay and defend again.

'I thought I might be in danger, but thought I would do what I could do, and if I die, then I die.'

Dorothy has lived on her property for 35 years. She had a policy of not going anywhere on total fire ban days and only going on day trips during summer because of concerns about fire.

Her husband, John, died 21 years ago. They'd bought 104 acres and no house, living in a garage and caravan for three years without power, and having to cart water for two months, until they got a tank. A bucket with a shower rose in the bottom served as a shower.

Dorothy had a block of land in Traralgon – it was to be a deposit on a house, but instead it funded a tractor, so she had to get a job cleaning to raise the deposit. Her husband died in 1988. 'He loved this place.'

Dorothy had come close to bushfires once before. They had warning of a fire and up the road could see a glow come over the hill. The wind changed and it went away.

Above: Damage at Callignee.

Her husband had been in the CFA. She remembers him being called out before, three times in one night, because someone had been lighting fires. They put sprinklers in because of that. Each year she's increased fire protection including putting in wind-down shutters.

On Black Saturday, her friend Noel Shingles, 71, came up from Maffra to give a hand. She had the radio on but they didn't hear any warnings of fires in her area. Suddenly, on the UHF radio they heard news of a massive fire near Mt Tassie and when Dorothy confirmed it was coming their way, they 'just dropped everything'.

At 2.30 pm Noel started the pump at the dam to get water to the veggie garden tank. It ran from there to a new diesel pump that ran the sprinklers. They went for five and a half hours.

They didn't hear from anyone else. There was no sign of fire before it hit. Dorothy could still see blue sky, but there was no sign of smoke and they couldn't smell anything until it was on them.

As soon as they started the house pump it sent water to the roof. The only mistake Dorothy made was to panic and not plug the house pump into the generator.

Noel took the Land Cruiser to the back of the house and parked his car in front of the house. The sprinklers were covering all that. Dorothy and Noel turned their focus on hosing what they could, starting with seven sheds at the top of the property.

They were using dam water and the filter kept blocking and the sprinklers kept dying. Dorothy would have to turn off her hose and go and takeover Noel's while he cleaned the filter. At one point during this process, a spot fire started on the back of the house 'from nowhere'.

Dorothy said, 'Quick Noel, get my motorbike (four-wheel), it's got 100 litres of water on it'. But he never got to the fire with it because it had a flat tyre.

'He took the old Rover (a ute) with 200 litres on it, but that still didn't do any good. He got down to the back gate and the whole paddock exploded into flames. It was lucky because he wouldn't have survived if he had gone in there.'

Dorothy was too busy to be frightened. She went to shift the motorbike, but it wouldn't go. She doesn't know if she panicked and did the wrong thing to try and start it or not. So she left it there while Noel went to get the dogs. On his way he found and extinguished a spot fire near the hay shed.

Noel found the oldest dog, Trixie, but the two young ones wouldn't follow him and they perished.

They continued hosing, when suddenly, 'fire just came flying down in front of the house. The wind came in with it and nearly

blew me with it', Dorothy said. She'd already stripped the verandah and slopped water on the wooden doors. It was too hot to stay outside and the mop was covered in ash.

Noel decided to take a photo of the petrol tank going up, but as he walked to the corner of the house he heard the cat, Kittyput, crying in a dog kennel. He plucked her out and brought her inside. Not used to being inside, she was distressed. She was also covered in burns. Her paws, tail and ears were all singed and while her fur grew back, her ears never did.

Dorothy got round to the side of the house and saw Noel. He said to get inside and they did.

Dorothy was relieved to sit down at that point. She found out later that people had been ringing, but she had been outside and hadn't heard the phone.

They'd lost power and Dorothy was hoping they would get through the inferno. She thought they might be in danger but they had done all they could.

She believes the fire reached the heavily drenched area and then jumped over the house. The only thing that burned near it was a bag of blood and bone. She knew the fire was going over their heads and she just kept hoping they would be okay. Noel's fire plan was to leave but he didn't go. 'I said to him you can go but I'm not.'

She's always told people that if a fire takes her home, 'I'm going with it. What is the use of going on if you don't have anything?' Despite everything she's been through, she would do it again, defend and stay with the house.

The house survived, but the sheds, farm machinery and two caravans didn't. The hay shed burned for 24 hours. Amazingly, fire bypassed a small house on the property that the tenant had fled.

Dorothy lists her animal losses: 15 sheep, 7 cows, a bull, an alpaca, 2 geese, 4 goslings, 4 chooks, a pet lamb, 2 rams and 2 dogs.

Before the fires, Dorothy had started medical treatment for thrombosis and had nurses coming every day to check on her. They couldn't get to her for a few days so she met them at the roadblock to be tested. 'You do what you have to do.'

Noel hasn't stopped in recovery efforts since the fires. The community has rallied in support – Dorothy was given two dogs and Rotarians built dog pens for her.

Dorothy was surprised to see how many houses up the road had gone and while she doesn't want to go through it again, she would if the situation arose. 'You have to make the most of what you've got.'



Nick Strachan

Nick Strachan's mother wasn't happy to discover her son had used one of the 'good towels' to fight the Black Saturday fires! But everyday possessions were the last thing on Nick's mind as he fought to save the family home.

Nick Strachan knew it was going to be a bad day. His parents, Margaret and Stuart, had prepared for a fire. While Nick had originally planned to leave, 'I knew I couldn't get Dad out of here, so I had to stay, though I felt reasonably comfortable because Dad and I had a fair bit of fire training'.

The property hosts magnificent views and the house had been designed knowing it was at risk of fire. 'Being on the top of a hill – it was the worst spot you could be in – but we built the house in a slight depression where the cows used to camp years ago – there's less wind there.'

They have sheep on the property, which keep the grass at the rear of the house very short. That part of the house is stone with thicker glass in the windows to withstand the wind. They had a pump for getting water from the indoor pool and another pump and a small tank in the driveway. They'd filled troughs and anything they could put water in after the Boolarra fires, two weeks earlier – just in case.

Above: A gutted shell is all that is left.

The first Nick, 29, knew of fire was around 1–1.30 pm. He had just finished lunch when his mother noticed smoke. 'She had a bit of a panic', so Nick convinced her to leave, with the family photos, for Paynesville where they have a boat. She stayed on the boat for the next couple of days until the police allowed her back into the district.

She couldn't get to Melbourne (where other family members live) because of the Bunyip fire. 'She didn't cope really well because she felt isolated, but it would have been worse if she had stayed', he said.

For the next couple of hours Nick went around looking for any smouldering bushes and trees. He also saw the neighbours and found out who was going to stay or go. He told Bill, a tenant on the property, to pack up and go. It was a relief when Bill rang about 4 pm to say he was at the Loy Yang traffic lights.

Seeing the fire start, and knowing of wind change predictions, Nick knew if it got far enough along the ridge, there was no chance they would be spared. A marine engineer by trade, Nick had done a lot of fire-fighting training and had faced a couple of fires on ships.

He said that being in those situations, he learnt to stay calm and work through problems as they came to him.

He tried to log on to the internet for updates. He dressed in protective gear, overalls, balaclava and boots, but when the fires hit he forgot to put gloves on, resulting in cuts to his hands.

They had filled the bath and used wet towels to block doors. They wanted to make sure nothing was going to get into the house. When his mother later found out he'd used one of her 'good towels' she wasn't very happy!

He worried as he saw how fast the fire was travelling. 'I turned away and turned back and it had moved a huge distance.'

From the deck at the back of the house he could see 'a big lick of flames' go over a house in the distance. 'It touched down in a plantation between that property and ours and started spotting.'

When the wind shifted 'we started getting embers. We just knew there was no chance it would avoid us'.

'It was just bad, how it spread and how quickly. The noise was just roaring. We normally had a good view to Mt Tassie towers but they were just black smoke. It was moving upon us and we were dampening down the best we could.'

When they lost power, the roof sprinklers stopped, but they had done their job.

Nick concentrated on trying to control spot fires out the back. Suddenly, his father could see flickering at the front of the house as well.

'I went through and saw the fire had spotted over the top of the house and was burning back towards us. It still felt like we had it reasonably under control. I had no idea if it was just us, or if other people were being affected. There wasn't time to think much', said Nick.

Busy with the task at hand, Nick never had time to feel scared. The fire pump on that side of the house was normally easy to start, but this time it took forever, possibly through Nick panicking. 'I said a few choice words and eventually it started.'

Nick tried to keep 2–3 metres around the house free from flames. Around one side of the house the wind was blowing flames across the walkway so he couldn't get past. 'A big fireball hit and went straight over the top of us.'

A big gas bottle and three smaller bottles vented, creating another big fireball around them.

'I remember looking at the shed thinking something didn't look right. I realised later that was because I could see right through it.' Stuart was dampening down inside the house, having put the fire hose through a gap in the door, as sparks and embers blasted in through the gap.

'It was really noisy. It was like a jet plane taking off, but louder and more intense, but we could still hear each other.'

'When the main front hit, I thought Dad was gone and he thought I was gone because we were on opposite sides of the house. It was a relief when we met up in the middle of the house.'

The main front lasted about 15 minutes. As the fire slowly died down Nick was able to go back outside into the horror of the flaming landscape.

The eaves over the garage had caught fire. Nick knew they had to put it out and thought they had a good chance. 'I used the last of the water in the tank on that.' They got it to the point of just smouldering. They were then using buckets, leaning over the roof eaves and sloshing water up under them. It was too hot to look at the fire and there were trees burning above them, dropping bits on fire.

'Any timber that could be burning on the side of the house we pulled off. I had to hang off a piece of the verandah until it gave way.'

Stuart noticed the fire had gotten into the eaves of the lounge room. Nick said he was buggered and not really keen to get on the roof, but they both went, taking two buckets of water and a crow bar. They'd gathered a ladder and tools earlier.

They got onto the roof and ripped the ridge capping up while trying to put the fire out. As Nick looked down there was fire as far as he could see. 'Stuff was burning everywhere. It was surreal.'

Nick got more water onto the roof and then slipped. 'I slid down the roof but managed to stop myself from falling off.' He got off the roof and continued his work.

Stuart got a call from Lu Pease saying she couldn't get through to her husband, Richard. 'We made the decision to try and find him, to see if he was okay. We thought the house would be okay to leave for a short time.'

On the way they called into neighbour's Don and Betty Sykes – their house was a ball of flame. 'We made sure no one was there as best we could and kept on going.'

A large tree was blocking the road, so they headed into bushland with trees still flaming and branches falling. To get back onto the road they had to drop off an embankment almost a metre high and nearly rolled the ute. 'That wasn't so smart in hindsight.'

They went past the Callignee Hall as it was going up in flames; again the roads were blocked by trees and a power pole. They could feel the heat coming through the windows of the car.

At the oval, they found Erica Algie, who asked them to also look for her husband, Terry.

Finally, another tree on the road forced them into a decision that they didn't want to make. They had to abandon their search for the men. It wasn't an easy call. Just then, Catherine, Richard Pease's daughter, rang to say he was, at least, alive. Richard had taken shelter in a fish pond under a blanket. He was now walking the 2.5 kilometres up to the Strachan's house.

Tree branches were falling down around them and they weren't sure they would be able to get back. On their way home they heard Terry had been reunited with his wife.

They managed to get back home, arriving with little fuel left in the ute.

Richard suffered from a lot of smoke inhalation and was not in a good way. He had a bath in the pool to get rid of the smell of smoke and the slime that coated him.

Nick and Stuart took it in turns to put out spot fires around the house. At about 3 am the three of them had a few beers – they had lost power so they had no house water. 'We were all dehydrated and that was all we had.'

Richard went to sleep and Nick got some rest until about 5 am, when he and his father swapped places. Nick took over finding and putting out little fires on the house while Stuart rested.

The next morning Nick and Stuart went to check on neighbours. They also stopped to check Nick's farm. The news wasn't good. He'd lost all his stock, more than 80 cows, but the bull he had just bought had survived.

'I had spent ten years building up a herd and there were dead bodies everywhere. That was probably the hardest thing for me. I would rather have lost the house than lost the cows. It wasn't very good. I had pedigree goats and lost them too – six goats and five kids.'

Opposite top: Wreckage in the wake of the fire.

Opposite bottom: New growth emerges.



Even months later, talking about it still reduces him to tears. 'The biggest mistake I made was that I knew all the cows and was really attached to them. They were family.'

Defending the family home took its toll. 'We worked really hard to save the house and had no other option when we decided to stay.'

Soon after the fires, Nick felt isolated and alone as he fell through the cracks for financial assistance. He doesn't think he would stay to defend again.

He was grateful for the support from fencing volunteers Alan and his CFA mates from Lindenow. They would ring every couple of weeks and then arrive for a few days work. They too had been burnt out, and knew what it was like and what was most helpful. But he said there's still a long journey ahead. 'Everywhere you look there's something to do.'





Lindsay Swift

A fear of not seeing his kids again led to Lindsay Swift's decision of abandoning his property as the threat of fire loomed. He calculated what would be needed to defend and decided that staying wasn't worth the risk.

Lindsay had been considering joining the CFA just a couple of weeks previously and had received advice on how to prepare to fight a fire. 'They'd given us advice on what to clear, a pump, sprinklers on the roof.'

They had a big dam full of water and were quite confident they could fight a fire based on those instructions. But with the conditions that presented on the day, Lindsay decided against trying.

He and his wife, Mandy, were out shopping with their sons Aaron, 3, and Troy, 2. Around 1-1.30 pm they came out of the shopping centre, got into the car and heard the ABC radio reports of fires in the area. They drove out and saw a 'big red sky over Churchill'.

Within 15 minutes they were home and packing their gear. They knew it was on the cards that a dangerous situation was threatening Boolarra, 'but not our place'.

Above: "Not available for the clean-up!"

They'd already put personal items such as photos, motorbike, rally jacket, collectables and documents aside, ready to go. It turned out to be a good decision.

Lindsay said they didn't save the world, but had grabbed 'a couple of toys for the kids and clothes'. They thought that 'in the worst case scenario' they might be displaced from their Cooks Road home for a couple of days.

As an ember attack threatened, Mandy took the boys and some clothes and headed for Moe.

Activating his fire plan, Lindsay got the sprinkler going, used wet towels to block doors and put wet blankets in the bath. Every bucket and receptacle was filled with water.

He put his boiler suit on and was outside packing possessions in his bungalow and garage when it occurred to him how hot the wind was.

He realised this was 'something else' and that he would need at least another three or four guys to help protect his property – provided the pump didn't fail.

An ember attack he could handle. A fire he could handle. But he knew 'this was going to be hell coming'.

At about 4.30 he made the decision to get out and not delay leaving it until the 'nick of time'.

As soon as the wind changed and was heading towards his property, Lindsay left. He could smell the smoke of a 'full on bushfire'.

'I got scared about dying and that I wouldn't see the kids again. I knew I would have at least an hour, but I was worried about roadblocks like trees or cars. It only takes something like that and it's the end. I said a prayer and shot through.'

Lindsay rang Mandy to tell her he was leaving.

'I regret nothing, given those conditions I'd go. I'm a fighter but there comes a time when tactical withdrawal is necessary', he said.

Lindsay said he saw people leaving. 'I thought good – I didn't want anyone to stay. It still affects me to know that someone didn't make it in the same street. It could've been me, my family, or someone I know. It's pretty sobering.'

He went to see his family and then went to help a friend (Jesse James) at Tanjil, taking with him a pizza he picked up at Moe.

It was 5 pm midsummer and pitch black. 'The spookiest was black eucalyptus leaves flying down the street, some igniting. It was surreal.'

His thoughts were divided between looking forward to the pizza and wondering if his house was burning. While he suspected the house might be at risk, he thought he'd better get to Jesse's in case they needed him there.

As he headed to Tanjil from Moe, 'people were flying down the hill from Erica. I was worried someone was going to crash.'

He couldn't see beyond 50 metres. There was smoke and ash coming down from the direction of Marysville and Healesville. 'Sticks were blowing and there was a windstorm. It had all of the ingredients of a holocaust. That's what would have happened if someone had crashed.'

Lindsay stayed up there that night. At 7.30 ash was everywhere, some leaves were still glowing and it was pitch black, apart from the middle of the paddock where there was a 50 square metre patch of sunlight – 'it was very weird'.

He organised a motorcycle rally in May to support the Gippsland region. Through that he met an insurance broker who provided some help.

The Swifts moved to a rental house in Traralgon, but it felt like they were 'in limbo, on hold and not progressing or anything'.

They felt very restricted. 'It puts enormous strain on a relationship and tests your strength. We tried to explain to the kids that stuff got burned.'

The pressure took its toll. Lindsay and his wife separated after the fires. At a special Christmas in July event, Lindsay won a trip to Surfers Paradise in a raffle. 'I'd felt really strongly that I would win it', he said.

Mandy and the kids agreed to go with him and he was hoping the trip might bring them back together. 'We went to Surfers for our honeymoon – so maybe it's a sign', he said hopefully.

They'd come to the area for a 'tree change' from Melbourne. Initially Lindsay planned to rebuild, but later decided to move to New South Wales, buy a block of land and live in a shed while he built a house, so he could be near his children, whom he was really missing.

Retelling his story was hard but he sees his loss as material. 'I want to move on. We're lucky. We went through this and the very next day the whole country was behind us. Overseas there are people who didn't have a house to lose in the first place.'

'This can only make you tougher. Having faith helped me get through everything', he said.

There were also a couple of other people at Jesse's, so the thought of a possible ember attack was less daunting – 'we had every chance of defending'. Thanks to ABC reports, a scanner and Jesse's father being in the CFA, they knew they 'were pretty alright around 1 am'.

In the morning Lindsay heard that Cooks Road was pretty much all gone. 'Intuition had told me the house was gone. We couldn't track down the neighbours and I was worried about them.'

A report confirming the house had burned came from a neighbour's neighbour. 'Part of you wonders if he was looking at the right house.'

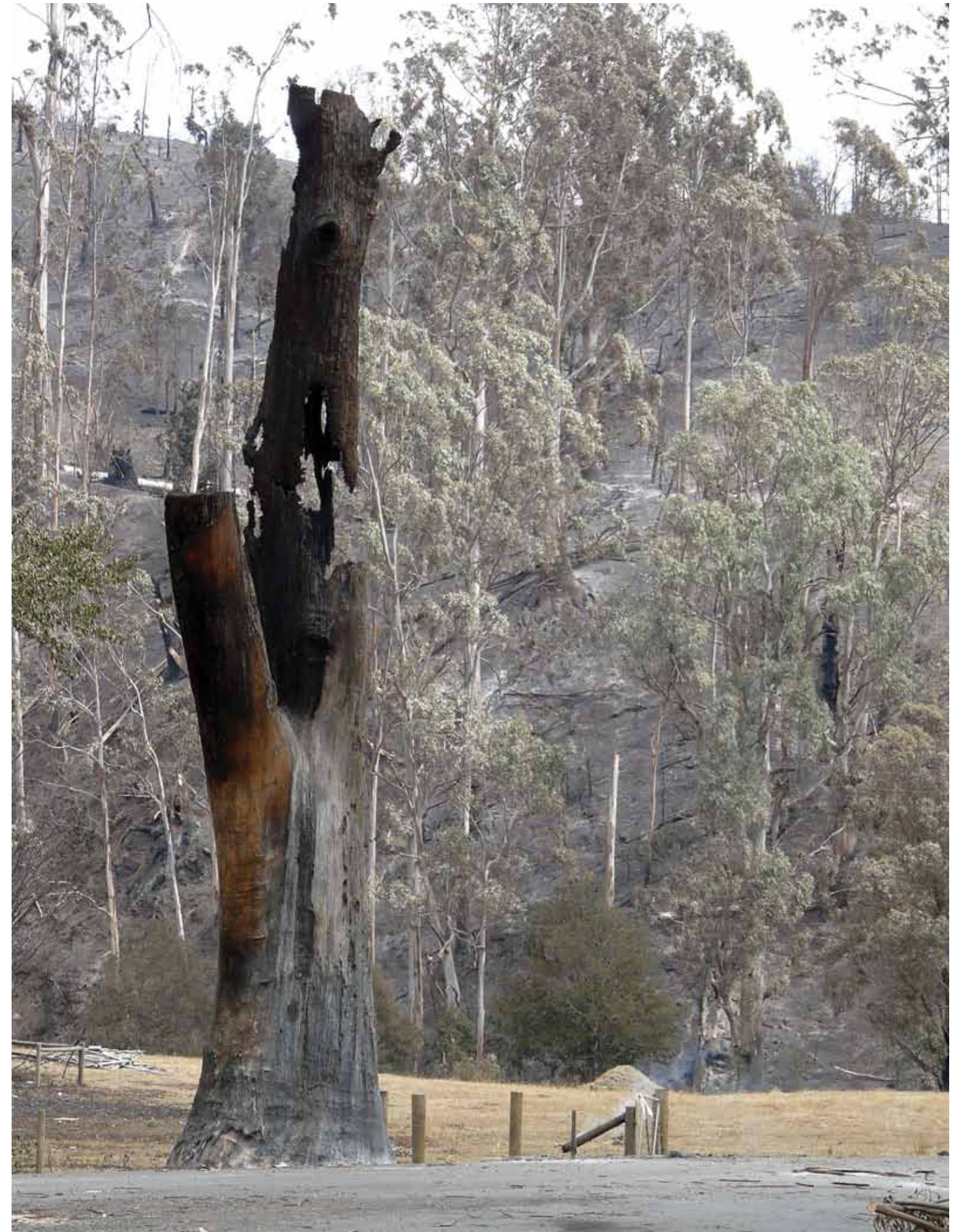
It was pretty confronting when Lindsay was finally allowed back. He had to drive through 10 kilometres of burnt bush – logs and coals were still alight.

'It doesn't just hit you straight away. I was sort of detached from the whole thing. We were both very quiet driving up. The garage was still upright and for a moment, I thought the bikes would be alright.'

It was not to be – the Swifts lost eight bikes including a vintage Kawasaki, vintage bikes and bikes for the kids. Lindsay replaced one bike with a Honda Firestorm and sees an irony in that!

Barely an item was salvageable. Mandy's parents both died of cancer, and all they managed to find intact was a birdbath that was her mother's. They also found some melted jewellery. Despite issues with insurance, Lindsay considers them lucky.

Right: A former giant no more.





Gerry and Jenny **Tappe**

Losing everything they owned in the fire was just one trauma for Gerry and Jenny Tappe. In a year they would rather forget, one of their granddaughters was killed in a car accident and Jenny's father died in December.

Black Saturday was just the start of the ordeals the couple have had to face. 'It just came one after another.'

Months after the fires, Gerry and Jenny were feeling very lost. They couldn't help but question what it was they might have done that was so bad for such terrible things to happen to them.

They are grateful to be alive and say they have no doubt that a stern warning from neighbour and policeman, Peter 'Ollie' Olorenshaw, saved their lives.

While they were aware of the fires and were preparing to fight them, it wasn't until Ollie arrived and told them to 'get the hell out' that they reluctantly took heed and fled. They are certain that's the reason they are here today.

Jenny said Black Saturday began like a normal Saturday. She went shopping but it was too hot, so she went home and stayed inside. She opened the door to let the cat in from the decking at

about 1-1.30 pm. 'It was really hot and the wind was blowing. It felt different. All you could see was a big plume of smoke', she said.

As the afternoon went on, Gerry didn't like what he could see at the top of Red Hill Road. He thought, 'Gee, this doesn't look too good'.

He could see flames metres above the trees – triple the trees' height. Their plan was to stay. They had prepared themselves, going through the procedures of clearing gutters, preparing the pump and making sure everything was in order around 3 pm.

Gerry asked Jenny to get a few personal items and photos – pictures of their kids and grandkids, a big photo album of antiques, pictures of the house, insurance papers and personal papers – all 'just in case'.

They also got the cat basket from the shed, but they still weren't going anywhere because the fire wasn't coming anywhere near them at that stage – they didn't expect to see it before the next day.

Their daughter Lindy called to check up on them. Their son-in-law Shane came to see if he could help. He could smell the smoke so he thought they might have been hit by fire – he said to get out.

Gerry still wasn't convinced and he and Jenny continued hosing.

Then they went over the road and could see fire roaring in the gully and lightning coming off the ground.

Shortly after that, around 5.30, Ollie 'came flying in and said, "Gerry, get the hell out of here"'.

He advised them that the CFA had said the winds had changed. Gerry looked at the house, looked at Jenny and told her they were going.

'We were very reluctant when we left, but if it hadn't been for Ollie, we wouldn't be here today.'

The Tappes left at 5.40 pm – not a moment too soon. Neighbours think it was about 20 minutes later when their house went up in flames – believed to be one of the first to go.

They remember making their escape, driving down Balook Road hoping no trees were in their path. It was getting hotter and hotter. Jenny kept looking up to spot any trees that might fall on them. 'That was a nightmare in itself.'

When they were told they couldn't return to their property, they were just devastated. 'We didn't know what to do or where to go. We only had the clothes on our backs.'

'We were in denial. We thought that if we went to sleep we would wake up thinking it was a dream.'

When they finally called all their friends and family, people 'thought we were okay' because they kept getting the engaged signal.

Losing their home and all their possessions hit the couple hard. They loved spending time at their house so much that they would holiday at home or cut short vacations to return.

Jenny said it was their domain. 'What gives someone the right to take that away from you?'

Gerry said it was a really pretty place, particularly their gardens – all of which were lost.

When they left they couldn't do anything for their horse, Matt Prince. It was really hard for them to leave him. He'd been a good horse for them – won races. To turn their backs on him was hard. They expected him to be gone, but he survived.

After the bushfires came one tragedy after another. One granddaughter died in a car accident and then Jenny's father died in December.

After having so much thrown at them, they decided the best thing for them to do was talk about it.

They say these tragedies have taught them to appreciate people and to not take things for granted.

They are getting better and can only look one way. 'If you get up and have a go, you've got a show of getting yourself back on your feet.'

Gerry, 62, drives a school bus. The bus survived but got scorched on the sides. He was really worried about all of his kids and they were worried about him. Every stop on his run was buried under debris and ash.

When he started bus runs again, only five of the 46 kids he normally collected got on the bus – the rest had relocated to Traralgon since the fires. 'Boy that knocked me down.'

Jenny, 59, who works in aged care, said life had changed. It had been tough, with little highlights along the way. One came unexpectedly when a demolisher raking the dirt 'found something shiny that was a funny shape'. It was a tiny lump of gold – they think it might be a melted bracelet.

Gerry took it to the jewellers and had the unique piece made into a necklace for Jenny.

Another came with a surprise visit from Hawthorn Football Club coach Alistair Clarkson and some of the players. He visited them again a couple of weeks later to have another chat.

They couldn't praise highly enough the work of extraordinary local volunteers at the Traralgon South Relief Centre. 'They've given their own time so that people can keep on going.'

They've enjoyed joining other community members for shared meals and also had high praise for the 'phenomenal' work of charity support groups and their caseworker.

If fires were to threaten again, they would have no hesitation in leaving, only this time they would go earlier and take more. They don't want to think of the heartbreak they would have caused their children if they hadn't left on Black Saturday.



Werner and Ursula **Theinert**

Werner and Ursula Theinert may have saved their home, but they nearly lost their lives three times in the process.

Their home was engulfed in flames and the couple believe it was 'a miracle' they survived. As they fought to save their lives and their home, they came close to giving up two or three times.

Werner, 55, who worked at TRUenergy, Yallourn, in operational training, had been monitoring Bureau of Meteorology and CFA sites and knew it was going to be bad.

With training as a CFA volunteer and industrial fire officer in Loy Yang, Werner felt reasonably confident.

He and Ursula, 53, had a fire plan and knew a conventional bushfire didn't have much of a show of getting to the property. They had cleared all the trees near their house, cut grass, raked, and the guttering was clean and full of water. They had filled mop buckets and the bath.

Friend Nick Strachan called to warn them of the fire. When he phoned again, less than an hour later, they were 'in real trouble'.

Above: Fire just started, 3.52 pm.

Previous page: Destroyed plantation – one of the economic losses experienced.

Radio reports on channel 774 told them the CFA was going to defend Mt Tassie and they knew transmissions could soon end. Watching the weather site in their office, they knew they were 'in big, big trouble'.

Werner had faced fire before, but Ursula was worried about her ability to deal with the situation.

'She ended up being a hero', Werner said. 'It was nice to not have the additional stress of someone not coping.'

They put torches in their pockets, wrapped their faces in tea towels and quickly moved into action, putting hoses around the back of the sheds and starting the pump. It was very quiet and the tense couple didn't really speak to each other.

Radio reports had warned they would hear a wind change when it came, and when it did, 'it sounded like a 747 plane coming into land in reverse thrust' just above their heads.

Lights started going on and off inside the house. They still hadn't seen the fire yet and were forever 'dropping the bloody torches'.

The couple saw the front coming towards them from the south-west. They could just see a little bit of flame from over the top of the ridge.

The red sun and huge white clouds quickly turned dark. The heat was scorching, upwards of 60 degrees.

In total darkness, flames were visible on the distant ridge. A few embers started coming down, and the noise built to a crescendo.

Then the sky suddenly became light – it was a firestorm from the sky. Luckily they made it to the back door and managed to get inside, closing the door, with difficulty, against the firestorm.

Ursula said they had incredible luck, which continued throughout the day. 'I can't explain so much luck. If we had been by the shed then we wouldn't have made it inside.'

The house was engulfed in flames blasting past the front and back of the house at 60–70 kilometres per hour (some say 100 kilometres per hour). The flames ripped past the windows, cracking panes in their wake. A later count revealed 24 cracked windows and another three windows smashed in their bungalow.

The house filled with a bright light and the radiant heat was incredible. They were too busy to be scared for their lives. Werner was in the office and yelled, 'Fire in the roof'. Ursula was getting a little bit panicky at this point – they couldn't stop it.

Ursula used a wet towel, in vain, to battle the embers coming around the office door. She then noticed that the corner of the office ceiling was alight. 'We bucketed water into the corner with no effect.' Finally being driven out of the office by the flames and smoke, they closed the door to the office in an attempt to contain the flames and smoke to that room. However, the smoke and flames came through the old plastic fan vent, which melted – filling the house with fumes and making it unbearable to be inside. Flames were licking the roof and they thought the house was gone.

Werner said they stood totally dejected looking at the corner of the office. They opened the door to the office again, but quickly pulled back out again.

They watched a neighbour's house explode and become engulfed in flames within seconds. They could see their art studios and shed taking a lot of force. Fire funnelled through a gap between their concrete water tanks and bungalow.

They gave each other another frightened look and dashed outside to the sheltered entrance of the house to wait it out, knowing it was too early for them to resume fire fighting. They were told that they were lucky the house didn't explode when they opened the door.

They had Laserlite roofing at the entrance that had buckled and 'melted like honey'.

Plant pots were blasted all over by the wind. They were shocked and stunned watching the shed and tractor go up in flames. Frightened, they looked at each other, saying nothing.

Huddled together, they tried to dodge things flying at them. Scared and choking, they sat talking to each other for about ten minutes.

'We were giving each other a look of "it's been nice knowing you" but couldn't verbalise it to each other.' The Theinerts have been together for 35 years. They didn't want to upset one another and were trying to be strong. They decided they could scream and cry later.

That said, Werner knew things were serious when Ursula used the 'f-word'.

When they thought they were safe again they resumed their defence. They used buckets to get water from the spa. After some 20 buckets, a sloppy throw left another window smashed allowing smoke to fill the house.

They were determined to save the office and recall throwing hundreds of buckets of water on the room in their bid to put it out. When they stopped at 3 am it was pitch black and they could hear a Canadian accent – they realised someone else was alive.

It was neighbours, checking to make sure they had survived. They hugged each other and cried. They had survived and were overwhelmed – the adrenaline was ridiculous.

All they remember is how 'bloody hot' it was and they were both so exhausted.

Coughing continuously, they drank copious amounts of green cordial followed by half a dozen stubbies, stopping in order to keep their wits about them.

Around them, their property was in flames. They'd saved the house, but their sheds were alight and remained that way until the next day. Their beloved garden was all gone.

Suddenly they didn't have the strength to throw even one more bucket of water. Fire trucks went past but didn't stop.

With their eyes 'killing them' they took it in turns to lie down, swapping after an hour. Despite changing out of wet clothes, Ursula felt cold from exhaustion and shock, waiting for first light.

Their phones wouldn't stop ringing, but the keyboard on the mobile had frozen from the water. When they finally were able to retrieve messages and make calls it was only to tell very worried friends and family that they were 'kind of busy at the moment'.

Despite desperate pleas from Ursula's brother for them to leave, the Theinerts stubbornly refused to give in to the blaze. It was a relief for her family, including son, James, 25, an intensive-care nurse in Cairns, when she called to let them know they were okay.

The emotional upheaval continued as they spent the next few days surveying the damage. Inside their home, their floors were covered with ash and dirt and remained that way for some while, despite continual washing. They'd lost two sheds and workshops as well as their office and cars.

A devastating consequence was the loss of years of art, craft and photography. Pottery crafted by both of them had turned to chalk. Paintings, sketches, art materials and brushes were incinerated, as were Werner's photographs. Pictures of some of their artwork were saved on computer files and posted on a website.

A friend, and artist, John Biram contributed by making them sculptures from some of their remains.

Werner's plans of retirement one month after the fire were put on hold as they began the task of rebuilding their lives. They entertained thoughts of moving to Warragul, but within a few days decided they wanted to stay.

Dealing with the experience and losses was an emotional process leading to a roller coaster of emotions including 'some pretty teary moments'. While stress has taken its toll, they say the fire also brought them closer together.

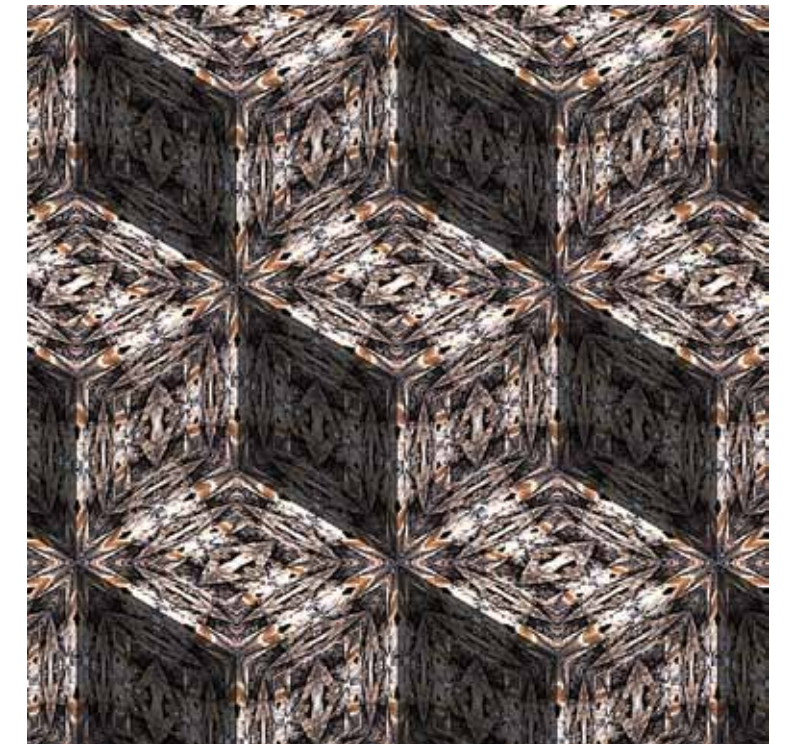
When they knew they had survived and were holding each other's hands, Ursula made them agree to a pact that they had to remember that feeling. No matter what they had lost, they still had their lives and that was the most important thing.



Above: Ursula Theinert - 'Ashes to Ashes' 2009

Acrylic on Canvas 120 x 150cm

'Ashes to Ashes' was the first painting Ursula made about three months after Black Saturday. It was based on the view she saw along Balook Road, about two kilometres away. The work was painted on a brand new aisle built by her father.



Above: Werner Theinert - 'Mower Metal Burnt Boxes' 2009

Digital Inkjet Print 120 x 120cm

Werner's work was taken in the dawn of Black Saturday. It is based on the remains of the garage with the mowers, all in a twisted mess.



Bill Thomas

Four-year-old German Shepherd Rex is credited with saving the life of 77-year-old Bill Thomas.

Bill was having a 'Grandpa nap' when Rex woke him with uncharacteristically agitated behaviour. While his dog would normally settle in the laundry, on this day he was in the bedroom making a nuisance of himself.

Rex went to the back door and started scratching and whining, but not barking. It was definitely out of character and Bill figured it warranted a look – 'and we all know what happened after that'.

The day had begun well. The skies were clear, the gardens lovely and birds were twittering, but it all became a bit of a blur. A neighbour Val phoned to warn of smoke and then Bill's cousin Berrie appeared in the driveway insisting Bill leave immediately.

Bill ran into his lounge, grabbed his satellite receiver and a few photos of his kids. He grabbed the two top drawers from his room, which contained personal items including more photos. He threw the drawers in the front of the car and Rex in the back. 'I could see the glow. I could see it was coming.'

Above: Hundreds of kilometres of fencing have been reduced to charcoal.

He took off out of the driveway, heading for the Traralgon South township. At the top of the hill he was temporarily stopped in his tracks while a neighbour moved sheep from one paddock to another. Cinders and rubbish were flying through the air – 'it was a nightmare'.

As he drove down Sunday Road, he recalls thinking, 'What a fool – you're driving into the fire!'

He got to the township's hall and as he surveyed the fireball of swirling flames going up into the sky, with tree limbs and stumps mixed into it, he turned to Rex and said, 'It's just gone'.

'In front of the fire front was all this steam – boiling sap out of the undergrowth.'

Bill had been living on the mountain for 11 years before the fires – eight years in the home that he lost.

A former organist, Bill is lamenting his beloved \$15,000 Wurlitzer going up in smoke. Bill's life is his music and he lost it all in the fires – sheet music, albums, cassettes and VHS tapes.

He began piano lessons as a 9-year-old with a former Viennese concert pianist. He went on to learn the theatre organ – with time spent playing at Melbourne's Capitol Theatre a highlight of his career. The organ has since moved to the Dendy in Brighton, and while he's been meaning to go back, Bill has not yet had the opportunity to play it in its new location.

He loves the organ. 'I could really make it talk. It was magic.'

At home, he loved playing his own Wurlitzer – particularly on a cold night when it was windy outside – Tchaikovsky, Beethoven and Bach were all favourites.

And we're talking a big instrument – it took four men to lift it.

Friday nights were his main night for making music. 'When you played it, the windows rattled.'

'I miss it. My poor old fingers are starting to stiffen – I have to practise.'

But right now that seems like a pipe dream for Bill. He's lost everything, including all his sheet music from his beloved musicals – with the exception of a cassette tape of him playing on the theatre organ at the Capitol that was in his car.

He's had an offer to visit the large collection of instruments owned by Albert Fox, but right now he's busy trying to get his life back in order.

He knows he will never be able to replace his albums – especially the likes of his full Beatles and Elvis Presley

collections, nor the 'hundreds' of tapes. He's managed to get an all in one VHS, CD and DVD player but there's not really a lot for him to play on it.

That's a big cross to bear for a man who says that music is his life. His other big passion was gardening and for eight years he'd poured his soul into the large grounds on the property where he'd been living. There's nothing left of that either.

Nearly three months after the fires Bill was still coughing, his lungs still affected by the smoke he inhaled. He can't get over how the inferno melted everything in his home – his windows became big molten lumps, his car was gutted and all that remained of his motorbike was its steel frame. Everything was damaged – burned or broken.

Bill's tired. He's got insurance money and says people have been marvellous, but the task of 'starting again at my age' is a daunting one. He can't bear the thought of going back to live in 'one of those little boxes'.

He needs his space to be able to play his music – a new organ as soon as he can find an appropriate one. It needs to be a large instrument with all the bells and whistles – he doesn't really see the point of the small ones!

There's an urgency to get him out of the caravan and into a house before winter hits. As uncomfortable and small as it is, he'd sooner stay there – even though he is constantly tripping over Rex – than live in a crowded neighbourhood.

While his facilities are limited (he has to travel to use the toilet and shower), he says it's not too bad under the circumstances and reminds him of the thirties and forties when his family's toilet was halfway down their back yard. In those days there were no torches – they lit their way with matches and a candle.

Bill doesn't want to leave Callignee and the views he's looked at 100,000 times – the place where he's called by his first name in the stores. The thought of leaving makes him feel incredibly sad. If he won TattsLotto now, there's a piece of land close by where he would put a nice house. But he hasn't and there's nothing in the area.

An intensely private person, he would just like everything to settle down. 'I'm tired, just like a lot of people are.' He misses his movies – he's a big fan of Titanic and The Sound of Music (he jokes that he's showing his age) – and his Andre Rieu collection.

Bill misses walking in his garden, getting on his ride on mower – his lawn looked like a bowling green, 'beautiful' he says proudly – and misses cutting a trailer-load of firewood.

Bill has no mementos from his life now – only his memories.



Heather Van der Werff

If there is one positive that the Van der Werffs can take from Black Saturday, it's that they no longer have to work on their 'renovator's delight'. Instead, the couple's efforts have gone into building a new house.

Although life is much more difficult now, they say you've got to look for 'the good stuff' and that's what keeps them going.

Heather was home with her husband, John, and daughter, Lauren, 26. Callignee residents for around 25 years, they had been checking the weather all day, the first warning of a fire came from their son Daniel, 30, who called from Traralgon South at 1.30 and asked if they had looked outside.

They'd seen smoke in the distance before, but 'nothing up close'.

John had been out a couple of minutes previously but had not seen anything. Daniel said he had heard the fire siren and told them to go and have a look. He could see smoke and was worried. John went outside, 'said a couple of quiet expletives' and asked where 'that' had come from. He hadn't seen it ten minutes earlier.

Above: John and a friend sifting through the property for any remaining possessions.

Their fire plan for such an extreme day had always been to leave unless it looked like a smaller, average fire.

They kept an eye on it for about an hour. Given their place was 'open and old' – two houses they had almost joined together in the seven years they'd lived on the property – they thought they'd 'better start thinking about doing something'.

Heather organised a change of clothes for each of them in case they had to stay overnight somewhere. The plan was to go to Daniel's home, 12 kilometres away. She grabbed her teledex of phone numbers, thinking she might need it – people might be worried about them – but didn't take much more.

They watched the fire spread and travel sideways. They knew when the predicted south-west change came that the front would be too much to fight. When the flames covered a 90 degree span of the horizon, they decided it was time to leave.

Heather grabbed a couple of boxes of Royal Doulton from her mother's crystal cabinet. John grabbed the computer hard drive. Their photos were already at their son's place.

Lauren, a musician, who teaches instrumental music, took her grandmother's jewellery box and her Olympic driza-bone coat

she'd received when she played saxophone in the marching band at the Sydney Olympics. She also made sure her prized possession – the family dog – was safely tucked under her arm as they left.

They drove out via the top of the hill. There they saw some close friends who advised them to leave, as they'd heard that once the wind changed, there was no stopping this fire.

Heather looked up and saw flames jumping from one hilltop to another. She thought then that they wouldn't be coming back to their house the next day. She didn't know if it would be gone, but didn't think they would be able to get back.

They stopped at Daniel's and told him to finish packing and that they were all evacuating together. He had a friend staying and they all headed to Traralgon. They registered with the Red Cross and then went to park in the underground car park of the local shopping centre, as they had their dog with them and couldn't go in.

They didn't know the fate of either home until the Sunday when they heard that the Traralgon South township hadn't been hit. They knew Daniel's house was okay, but had a fair idea that theirs wasn't. On Wednesday a fire fighter confirmed their suspicions.

While it was expected, it was still so unreal. Heather said they were very lucky to be able to move into their son's home while a lot of people had to move out of the community, making it much more of a displacement.

After the fires they put their efforts into building a new energy-efficient house and John joked about no longer having to renovate. He and Heather have learned new skills in the process.

Daughter, Lauren, did it tough. Not only did she lose her childhood home and belongings, she'd been home with her parents undergoing treatment for chronic fatigue, and an autoimmune disease. Already struggling with her health, she didn't feel she belonged anywhere.

Heather and John also had a sense of disorientation following the fires. Finding their way home in the dark was a challenge – all the familiar landmarks had gone.

They managed to salvage a few sculptures from their garden and a couple of ornaments from inside. The rest was devastation. Pictures are all that remain of their three cars, that and thick clumps of molten alloy.

However, they say the generosity of people was amazing and is helping them through, as have community activities such as Stitch and Chat, where Heather said she's done a lot of chat and a lot less stitch!



Above: The Ward's treasured cars.

Brian and Merrilyn **Ward**

For Brian and Merrilyn Ward, Black Saturday was the first serious test of a fire plan that they'd spent 20 years preparing. With the help of some very brave friends, they not only saved their house, but also witnessed a spectacular sight that very few people experience close-up – and survive.

Brian and Merrilyn were on edge for a few days prior to Black Saturday. With each day, the forecast seemed to be increasingly dire. They assumed that a bushfire could affect them and started to implement their fire plan – prepare, stay and defend. With 20 years of preparation behind them, this would be the first serious test of their fire plan. Their initial concerns were based on the Boolarra fire escaping control lines and heading their way with the forecasted south-westerly wind change.

Early on Saturday afternoon, they could see the smoke from the Bunyip fire in the distance to their west. At about 1.30 pm, they spotted a much closer column of smoke to their south-west. Local ABC radio confirmed that a fire had started near Churchill, about 15 kilometres away, and was heading towards Mt Tassie and Balook under the influence of the north-westerly. They realised that this fire was a real threat and would come their way with the south-west wind change.

They implemented the next phase of their fire plan by blocking the downpipes, filling the spouting with water, starting the fire pumps, soaking the gardens closest to the house, removing everything from the verandahs and decking, and turning on the sprinklers. They dressed in their fire gear and boots and made sure their smoke masks, goggles, hats and gloves were at hand. They rang neighbours to check that they were aware of the impending fire danger and to determine their plans. The temperature was in the mid forties, but they continued working outside to complete the final preparations.

Around 4 pm, the smoke column started to swing in their direction with the wind change. The fire was now heading their way. At 4.30 pm, Jenny and Steve Tulloch, two friends from Traralgon, arrived to help them through the fire. 'What a gutsy decision for them to make.'

Steve and Brian worked around the sheds and the Peugeot cars that were under restoration, soaking things down in the hope that they could save everything. They heard the fire coming for 30–40 minutes before it arrived – a roaring sound like continuous, rolling thunder. Then the sky went dark with smoke, so they retreated back to the house to complete their final preparations.

Merrilyn and Jenny planned to stay inside to keep watch through the doors and put out any spot fires on the verandahs and decking with mops, wet towels and buckets of water. Steve and Brian decided to stay outside with fire hoses – Steve up one end of the house, behind the main garage and Brian at the other end of the house to protect the water tank and fernery area. They were confident that staying close to the buildings would provide the necessary protection from radiant heat. Their house was their primary refuge. Phone calls from family indicated that the wind change had reached Melbourne at about 5pm. They assumed it would take an hour-and-a-half to two hours to reach Callignee.

But just after 6 pm, the sky turned an eerie, orange colour, caused by the reflection of the distant flames on the smoke overhead, and they literally experienced the 'calm before the storm' as the main fire sucked in the oxygen from around them. Fiery embers floated overhead and started spot fires in the bush, grassland and the garden on the lee side of the house, opposite to where the fire

was coming from. They could see the glow of one particularly large spot fire that started in the gully and headed uphill towards them. The lights inside the house flickered several times and then they lost power and the home phone service. They knew that the main fire front was not far away.

'Then it was absolute mayhem.' They were hit with intense wind-driven flames licking all around them. The noise was incredible. The fine ember shower was like a swirling red incandescent snowstorm. The fire crowned through the trees on the roadside with a deafening roar and a convection force so great that it lifted sizeable sticks and broken branches, dropping them around the house and onto the roof. Brian glanced momentarily at the crown fire – the radiant heat too intense to allow him anymore than a glance. It was a continuous sheet of angry red flame from the ground up and through the treetops. The wind curled it over the top of the house. It was about 80 metres – twice the height of the trees. The huge licking flames disappeared into thick, black, oily looking smoke overhead. Brian sheltered behind a corner of the house, about 50 metres away from the base of the fire – witness to a spectacular sight that few people have the opportunity to witness close up – and survive. Before him was 'the unimaginable destructive force of the fire front, the fury of wind, heat and noise, the swirling embers, angry flames and boiling smoke.'

During the main fire front Steve sheltered behind the garage with the fire hose spray protecting him from embers and radiant heat. The most intense part of the fire lasted 5–10 minutes, but secondary fires were running around them for 20–30 minutes and they were kept busy putting out residual fires for the next few hours. A smouldering ember flared up inside the garage three hours after the fire front.

They were fortunate to have the native trees and vegetation along the roadside, because they forced the worst of the wind and flames up and over the house. At one stage during the fire, Brian was surprised to see two cars go by on the road, silhouetted by the flames. Smoke was not a serious issue to them during the main front because of the convection and ground level wind currents. They were not conscious of terror or fright. Adrenaline seemed to mask the emotions as they got on with the job. Despite wearing goggles and face masks, Steve and Brian suffered sore eyes and throats.

Merrilyn and Jenny were kept busy putting out spot fires on the verandahs and the garden close to the house. With the fantastic assistance from Steve and Jenny, Brian and Merrilyn managed to save the house and the main garage and cars. Embers damaged the roofing on the house and garage; some plastic roof plumbing melted from the radiant heat; shade cloth screens shrunk and melted; and the decking was damaged. The shade cloth effectively screened exposed windows from radiant heat and flying embers. The fruit trees were also effective screens because they did not burst into flames like the native shrubs and trees.

They lost everything else on their property, including gardens, fruit trees, sheds, mowers, garden tools, fences and the cars under restoration.

At about 10 pm, Brian and Steve decided to check on Hans and Riecky, friends who lived about 2 kilometres away. They were unable to drive all the way due to fallen trees blocking the road. Hans and Riecky, with their daughters, Jo and Steph, had saved their house, but lost everything else, including their sheds, cars and water tanks. The house had suffered some damage and Hans had received burns to his face and neck. Brian and Merrilyn were relieved to find them otherwise safe. Their neighbours, Jane and Stewart, had also saved their house, but lost their shed and a car.

Ken and Sonia appeared out of the gloom from across the road during the evening, when they heard Merrilyn 'cooeing' for Brian, after he had gone to check the pump at the dam. They related their story of survival after their house caught fire when a window broke allowing entry of embers. They had sat in a nearby burnt out paddock, watching the house burn and were wondering what to do next when they heard Merrilyn's cooee. They were evacuated to Traralgon in a fire truck later in the evening.

Jenny and Steve attempted to go home shortly after, but the roads

were blocked by fallen trees and burnt cars.

The foursome worked through the night and Sunday morning dawned like the set of a 'nuclear holocaust film'. The landscape was grey and white with blue drift smoke misting through the blackened trees. It was serenely quiet with no wind, bird life, people or traffic noise.

A helicopter emerged from the mist, checking each house and the roads. It took Brian and Merrilyn some time to come to grips with what had just happened – the devastation, the fact that neighbours had died, 75 per cent of the houses in their area were gone – and that they survived and saved their house, whereas others around them had lost everything. They were shocked to hear on the car radio the scale of destruction in other parts of the state. During the day they were greeted by wide-eyed fire fighters and police crews assessing the damage.

Jenny and Steve returned home to Traralgon during the morning, after the roads were cleared. Brian and Merrilyn wandered around their property, marvelling at how the landscape had been totally rearranged. There were wallaby and possum carcasses scattered around and eight cows killed after they stampeded from a neighbour's property. Local farmer Lindsay Pump did a great job clearing roads and burying dead stock well before the authorities were able to.

During the night and Sunday morning Brian and Merrilyn's mobile phones ran red-hot with calls from concerned family and friends. The first 'outsider' they saw on Sunday morning was Tania Brooker, a Department of Sustainability and Environment colleague of Brian's. Tania and Jean-Marc Porigneaux, and later, Ian Hastings, also DSE colleagues, provided significant assistance by bringing generators, fuel, food, newspapers, supplies and emotional support.

The next few days were very isolating for those who saved their houses and decided to stay. The roadblocks would allow people out of the fire area but, initially, residents couldn't return. Those who lost their houses were being well cared for at recovery centres in Traralgon and Traralgon South. During the first week they were surprised to see three separate crews moving through the fire area checking for injured stock and wildlife.

The Callignee landscape and community has changed forever and almost two years on they are all still adapting to the 'new normal' in their own ways.

Brian and Merrilyn are forever indebted to Jenny and Steve who helped them out on Black Saturday. Without them the outcome may have been very different. 'They are true heroes.'

Top left: Smoke of the approaching fire at 4.18 pm.

Top right: Burning shed and cars at 6.26 pm.

Bottom left: Petrified fruit tree.

Bottom right: Melted metal from one of Brian's Peugeot's.

