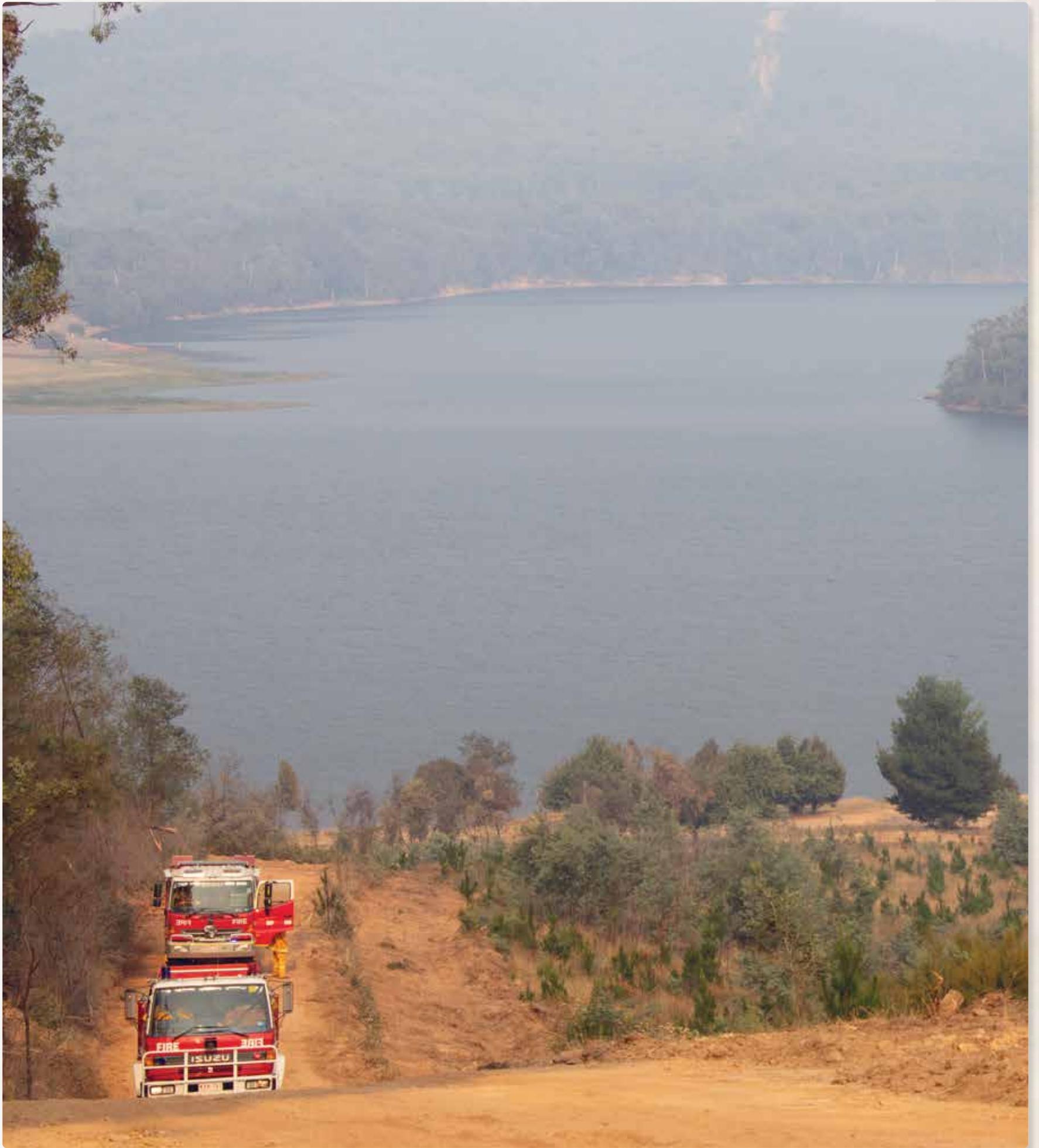


# Our Black Summer



FIRST-PERSON  
ACCOUNTS FROM  
THE FRONTLINE



# **Our Black Summer**

FIRST-PERSON  
ACCOUNTS FROM  
THE FRONTLINE



First published 2023

Text © Country Fire Authority  
Design and typography © Mono Design

The State of Victoria owns the copyright of all material produced by CFA. All material in this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 international licence with the exception of any images, photographs or branding, including CFA and government logos. In some cases a third party may hold copyright in material in this publication and their permission may be required to use the material. See [creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0). Material obtained from this publication is to be attributed as: © State of Victoria (Country Fire Authority) 2023.

Brigade stories written by Anne Crawford  
Text design and typesetting by Mono Design  
Cover design by Mono Design  
Edited by Paul Smitz

Printed in Australia by Finsbury Green.



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9780646874753

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land. We recognise their deep connection to the land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

Inside cover:  
Lake Buffalo / Rhett Chalwell

# DISTRICT 11

# Contents

- 5 Preface
- 7 About the Black Summer fires
- 8 Extent of Black Summer fires 2019–20
- 10 Black Summer fires timeline

## THE NORTH EAST

- 14 Corryong Fire Brigade  
Firefighters prevail in chaotic conditions
- 16 Tintaldra Fire Brigade  
Houses saved amid close calls
- 18 Burrowye Fire Brigade  
Fast-paced fire and hilly terrain has brigade working flat out
- 20 Berringama Fire Brigade  
Energetic brigade with many “cool heads” helps foil fire
- 22 Cudgewa Fire Brigade  
Community and brigade unite to brave firestorm
- 24 Nariel Valley Fire Brigade  
CFA, DELWP and locals unite to tackle fronts
- 26 Biggara Fire Brigade  
Small brigade packs a punch
- 28 Porepunkah Fire Brigade  
Vigilant brigade keeps valley community safe
- 30 Bright, Harrierville and Porepunkah fire brigades  
Firefighters join forces to save towns
- 32 Buffalo River Fire Brigade  
Brigade triumphs but firefighting takes its toll
- 34 Dartmouth Fire Brigade  
Good preparation key to safeguarding town

## THE SOUTH EAST

- 38 Benambra Fire Brigade  
Local knowledge key to fighting fires
- 40 Bass Coast Strike Team 0905  
Strike team brings relief to Omeo area
- 42 Bruthen Fire Brigade  
Fires bring out best in brigade
- 44 Mossi-Tambo Fire Brigade  
From “the gates of hell” to moments of joy
- 46 Mount Taylor Fire Brigade  
Young fireys shine in ferocious fires
- 48 Bairnsdale Fire Brigade  
Members support for community “second to none”
- 50 Lakes Entrance Fire Brigade  
Stalwart member’s unique role in supporting CFA families
- 52 Lakes Entrance Strike Team 1177  
Triumphs, tragedy and the joy of helping
- 54 Wairewa Fire Brigade  
Saving lives the main game for fireys
- 56 North East Task Force 1313  
Buchan fires forge bond to “last a lifetime”
- 58 Orbost Fire Brigade  
Testing times but brigade “mentally prepared”
- 60 Epping Fire Brigade  
Strike team brings relief to south east communities
- 62 Newmerella Fire Brigade  
‘Tamboon Six’ and a little tanker save a settlement
- 64 Cann Valley Fire Brigade  
Big effort from a small brigade inspires locals

- 66 Bemm River Fire Brigade  
Brigade’s proactive approach keeps fire at bay
- 68 Mallacoota Fire Brigade  
Brigade’s huge effort as mayhem strikes

## THE SOUTH WEST

- 72 Broadwater, Macarthur and Ardonachie fire brigades  
Communication “like clockwork” as firefighters contain bushfires

## CFA PEERS

- 78 CFA peers  
Committed volunteers look after fireys’ wellbeing
- 81 National Emergency Medals
- 83 Acknowledgements
- 84 Support services



# Preface

**The 2019–20 fire season, which synonymously became known nationally as ‘Black Summer’, was long and arduous for the CFA, our emergency services partners and communities right across the eastern seaboard of the Australian continent, especially in north eastern and eastern Victoria. It delivered some of the toughest firefighting conditions we’ve ever seen. By its conclusion, more than 2280 CFA volunteers and staff had been deployed interstate, while more than 8200 had contributed to the response at home in Victoria.**

The season started early, in September 2019, with continuous deployments of Victorian personnel to New South Wales and Queensland to assist our interstate colleagues in fighting fires, including relieving exhausted local crews, support and incident management teams. Before long, Victoria was drawn into a firefight of its own. On 21 November, state-wide total fire bans and Victoria’s first Code Red (now Catastrophic) fire danger rating in almost a decade were declared. On that day, three dry lightning strikes in the mountains of East Gippsland set in motion what would become one of Victoria’s worst fire seasons on record, comparable with Black Saturday of 2009 and the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.

Firefighters, incident managers and specialist crews from across Victoria were called upon, often at short notice, to protect communities. Unprecedented fire conditions saw areas of the Upper Murray and Gippsland decimated as a state of disaster was declared in multiple municipalities. With towns and roads cut off, the Australian Defence Force (ADF)

undertook the largest ever domestic maritime evacuation in Mallacoota.

The bushfires would go on to burn 1.5 million hectares. Tragically, five people lost their lives. More than 400 homes were destroyed and more than 6800 livestock and many more thousands of wild animals were killed. Despite this terrible toll, the losses would have been far greater but for the efforts and dedication of CFA members and our fellow emergency services personnel, who saved many people, homes and animals. My thanks especially to Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB; now Fire Rescue Victoria, or FRV) as our firefighting partners in this state for your ongoing support and assistance to CFA.

If you speak to anyone who was on the ground during the 2019–20 fire season, especially our experienced volunteers, they will tell you the Black Summer fires were unlike anything else they’ve ever witnessed. The fire behaviour wasn’t just unpredictable; it defied all traditional logic. The stories in this book will give you some insight into the challenges faced by volunteers in abnormal fireground conditions and their desire to respond in every way they could, as they always have done.

We know that recovery from major disasters takes a long time. The Black Summer fires took their toll on many people, physically and psychologically. This book is an important milestone in the recovery process, sharing the experiences of some of our volunteers during this time, bringing together stories and images that reflect the courage, sacrifice and hard work of our communities. It was funded by Emergency Management Victoria as part of the Wellbeing Recovery Project, which aims to assist with the mental health and wellbeing of CFA volunteers who were involved in the Black Summer fires.

We know that there are experiences outlined by our members which may be confronting. These stories include extended periods of operation by volunteers. CFA’s commitment to safe work practices includes the management of fatigue. However, we know that there are extreme circumstances in such an emergency, as outlined in this book, where this may not be reasonably practicable, particularly when our volunteers are protecting the lives of their fellow community members, in situations that without intervention would lead to certain loss.

While not all stories could be captured for this book because of the sheer number of people involved in the extended campaign, we acknowledge the exceptional work of all of our volunteers across the 2019–20 season. We also recognise the dedication of CFA staff and the hundreds of other emergency services personnel, charities, community organisations, government agencies and community members who contributed to the Black Summer campaign.

The endeavours of all these people saved lives, prevented the destruction of homes and property, and helped communities to get back on their feet in the aftermath of the fires. While those who took part don’t want to be called heroes, in the eyes of the Victorian community, they are. These are the stories of how their sacrifices kept Victorians safe.

The CFA will continue to support our current and former members and their families through our highly valued wellbeing support services via The Wellbeing Hub. Remember, it is OK to not be OK, and support is just a phone call away at 1800 959 232 or Lifeline 13 11 14. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you need this support.

**Jason Heffernan**  
Chief Officer



## About the Black Summer fires

**It would be one of the longest fire campaigns in the CFA's history.**

**The devastating Black Summer bushfires began in November 2019. Over the next three months, the fires would go on to burn 1.5 million hectares of land, from Bairnsdale to Mallacoota in Victoria's south east, across the High Country to the NSW border in the north east, and around Budj Bim National Park in the south west.**

Communities, businesses, wildlife and ecosystems were devastated. At the peak of the emergency, more than 250 fires blazed in the east of Victoria in hot and dry conditions. They destroyed more than 400 homes, killed over 6800 livestock and took the lives of five people. More than 60,000 people were evacuated; road closures made these evacuations challenging and later hampered relief efforts. Many towns lost communications.

Without the enormous efforts of the more than 8200 CFA volunteers and staff from across the state who tirelessly fought the fires, the outcome would have been far worse.

Flames leaping 10 metres high. Fire fronts travelling faster than expected. Fires burning more ferociously at night, when usually they die down in the cooler temperatures. CFA members encountered fire behaviour in the Black Summer that was unlike anything even the longest-serving veterans had seen before. Crews often had to quickly change strategies to manage these atypical, extremely fast-burning fires.

Many CFA brigades were directly impacted by the raging fires that burned in their local areas, threatening their people, properties, animals and communities. Some lost their own homes and livestock as they fought to save those of others. Those living in remote and inaccessible areas of the state at times had to make do with what they had, drawing on their local knowledge of the terrain.

Volunteers worked over weeks, even months, to the point of exhaustion. Many witnessed sights and experienced trauma that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Crews worked side by side with other emergency services, including the Victorian State Emergency Service (VICSES), Fire Rescue Victoria, FFMVic, Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria.

Behind the dramatic scenes on the fireground and the red and blue flashing lights were CFA peers: volunteer firefighters who were there to lend an ear and assist members in need. The peers worked long, hard hours at the firegrounds, base camps and local stations to ensure their fellow fighters were supported. That support continues to this day.

Crucial to CFA members' ability to fight the fires were the community members who surrounded and supported them. Locals helped the emergency services members by cooking meals, distributing donated goods from the wider Victorian community, fixing fences, delivering hay, and, in the case of one five-year-old girl, baking an enormous box of shortbreads and gingerbreads, with the note, "Thank you to all the firefighters."

The CFA volunteers involved in the Black Summer fires can look back and feel proud of what they achieved in the summer of 2019–20, of the assurances they brought to anxious communities, the lives they protected and the homes they saved.



# Extent of Black Summer fires 2019–20



# Black Summer fires timeline

## October – November 2019

Victoria deploys emergency workers to Queensland and NSW to assist with interstate fires.

## 18 December 2019

65 new fires ignite across the state.

## 20 December 2019

Another State-wide Total Fire Ban declared. 110 new fires break out. Great Alpine Road closed between Bruthen and Ensay. Authorities ask residents and visitors to leave from Bairnsdale to Cann River and up to NSW border. 60,000 people are estimated to have evacuated.

## 27 December 2019

Victoria Police and Red Cross initiate Register. Find.Reunite service. Text-message alerts advise people to leave East Gippsland.

## 30 December 2019

State-wide Total Fire Ban. Over 260 new fires across Victoria. Fire crosses into state from NSW with significant intensity and spreads approximately 65 kilometres overnight, with great loss. FFMVic contractor dies in vehicle rollover.

2019

## 21 November 2019

State-wide Total Fire Ban declared in Victoria and Code Red (Catastrophic) conditions for state's west. 150 fires start across the state, including major fires in Shepparton, East Gippsland and Mount Glasgow.

## 19 December 2019

Victoria requests ADF support for firefighting efforts.

## 23 December 2019

All Victorian personnel return from interstate.

## 29 December 2019

22 new fires ignite across state, including Upper Murray 26 (ultimately Upper Murray fires) and Snowy 9/Banana Track fires (impacts Mallee).

## 31 December 2019

Banana Track fire hits Mallee, cutting off town from highway. 4000 people gather on foreshore. 400,000 hectares of land now burned across the state. Approximately 5500 people shelter in relief centres across East Gippsland and south east NSW.

2020

**1 January 2020**

Fires in NSW and Victoria merge. Property and infrastructure losses reported in Mallacoota, Genoa, Buchan, Bruthen, Sarsfield and Gelantipy.

**3 January 2020**

Almost 2000 people evacuated from Mallacoota by HMAS *Choules* and MV *Sycamore*, and by air.

All firefighters removed from Upper Murray fireground following Red Flag Warning due to wind change. Upper Murray fires spread dramatically. FFMVic firefighter dies in vehicle collision.

**10 January 2020**

Further 28 emergency warnings issued.

**19 January 2020**

Residents returned to Mallacoota by air.

**24 January 2020**

Upper Murray fires declared contained.

**4 February 2020**

Princes Highway reopened from Orbost to NSW border. Mallacoota–Genoa Road also reopened.

**2 January 2020**

Premier declares State of Disaster for the first time for shires of East Gippsland, Mansfield, Wangaratta, Wellington, Towong and Alpine areas. US firefighters arrive. Evacuation of Mallacoota begins.

**4 January 2020**

66 emergency warnings issued.

**11 January 2020**

FFMVic firefighter killed by falling tree.

**20 January 2020**

Rain falls and conditions cool. 1.5 million hectares of land have been burned, mainly in south east and north east Victoria.

**30–31 January 2020**

Several uncontrolled fires still burning.

**27 February 2020**

All fires declared contained.



# THE NORTH EAST

DISTRICT 24

DISTRICT 23

DISTRICT 11

DISTRICT 10

13



## CORRYONG FIRE BRIGADE

### Firefighters prevail in chaotic conditions

**Brigade members involved:** 16

**Range of experience:** from 18 to 62 years

**Supporting roles:** providing meals, drinking water and fuel; communications

**Areas:** Burrowye, Jingellic, Walwa, Cudgewa North, Cudgewa, Colac Colac, Nariel, Tintalra, Towong, Corryong, Biggara, Thowgla, Berringama

**Campaign duration:** 30 December 2019 to early February 2020

**There were times during the bushfires that hit Corryong on 30 December 2019 when current Brigade Captain Colin Brown thought they had no chance, and times when Lieutenant Rod McInnes thought he was too exhausted to go on. But together with their crews, they helped save the town.**

As the fires approached, the people in Corryong grew increasingly anxious. The older ones remembered the blazes of 1939 and 1952, which had badly affected the area. Everyone was aware the town was being surrounded by fire, and the weather pattern suggested a very high risk. The town's population of 1400 had swollen to more than 2000 in the holiday period, with more people in outlying areas also potentially in need of protection.

As a District Group Officer and part of Incident Control, Colin helped organise the town's security with Victoria Police, VICSES and the council. He worked out whether to evacuate people and how to support them as he fielded calls from people in various agencies, the public and families, all ringing to ask for his thoughts. As he did this, his 18-year-old son Lachie went out on a tanker for what was his first major event.

"I'd only been to a house fire and a few controlled burns before then," says Lachie. "I didn't know what to expect." Another new member, Chris Stockdale, went too, along with experienced firefighters Mathew Pilli (Corryong Captain at the time), Ron Pynappels and the late Greg (Wally) Wilson.

The crew drove to an area near Walwa called Snake Gully, where they waited, watching the fire over the Murray River in New South Wales. At 4.30pm, it spotted 5 kilometres over their heads. The crew headed for nearby houses affected by the spot fires, intent on protecting assets.

"At one stage it got pretty bad," says Lachie. "We couldn't see anything. The driver just had to stop with us sitting up in the back of the tanker. It was getting pretty hot and embers were coming down on top of us. One of the blokes sprayed water on us to cool us down. My initial thought was that I wanted to get out of where we were at that stage."

Greg, a long-term member, reassured the two newer members, who kept cool heads, didn't panic and protected themselves appropriately. Those first few hours were the peak of the fires for Lachie, who would spend the next 17 hours straight firefighting.

Although the fire flared around Corryong



**Above:** Thowgla Valley looking east towards Mt Elliot / Lachlan Brown

**Right:** Towong Hill Road / Lachlan Brown



for weeks, Colin says that the most intense period occurred in the first 36 hours. During that time, he and other brigade members raced from place to place frantically trying to counter new outbreaks. It was also when Colin encountered the fire in full flight, driving at night in a slip-on on Briggs Gap Road, 12 kilometres out of Corryong.

"I was delivering food and water to firefighters trying to stop the fire from heading towards Cudgewa township," says Colin. "I could see the glow before I got there, but as I came over the gap it was like somebody hit you with a blowtorch. There was a mosaic of spot fires, fire trucks, slip-ons, cars and lights everywhere." At 2am it was 44 degrees Celsius with 60-kilometres-per-hour winds and 7 per cent humidity.

Colin answered a call from the owner of a caravan park 7 kilometres west of town, who he'd told to contact him if the owner felt threatened. "I ripped over there and he was standing by the creek with a hose in his hand, sobbing, 'What are we going to do?'" Colin stayed with him to defend the park, which had been evacuated, until the fire passed. Unfortunately, the fire would go on to burn a house and dairy.

As daybreak approached, the town was surrounded by fire, which was quickly moving south. "It just kept going out over the Biggara and Nariel valleys, towards Tom Groggin to Mount Gibbo," says Colin. "The whole lot all just went."

A few nights later, Colin battled a running grassfire 1.5 metres high on farmland in the Thowgla Valley. "A number of farmers had been out there day and night

and were absolutely stuffed," he says. "It was good to give them a bit of relief."

The terrain was rough, with rocks, logs and hollows fit to break an ankle. "There was only my private slip-on and two other private vehicles," says Colin. He radioed for help but was told there were no resources available. The firefighters managed to head off the fire before a NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) strike team and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP; now the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, or DEECA) arrived. "By the time they got here, I can tell you, I'd had enough!" says Colin, adding: "If we hadn't been there and pulled it up, I don't know where that fire would have ended up. It would've been well gone."

Rod McInnes, who like Colin has been a CFA member for more than 30 years, missed the start of the fires as he was in Wodonga visiting a sick mate. Knowing something was building, he left and arrived back in the early evening to see the glow of the approaching fire. He and member Owen Hewatt immediately took the pumper out and began patrolling the streets of Corryong, red-and-blues flashing through the heavy smoke.

"Several people came up and thanked us because no-one else was around and it reassured them," says Rod. At 5am they headed for the airport. "The fire came over Briggs Gap roaring like a jet," says Rod. "We could hear the winds and the fire was coming straight for us. We thought we were in for it."

Rod warned a nearby farmer about the

wall of fire that was about to bear down on his land, before continuing to protect assets as the fire hit the western end of town. "Two people in a pumper chasing grassfires. Pumpers are really not made for that!" says Rod.

Embers were getting into trees in the school arboretum on Strzelecki Way at the edge of town. "It had totally gone up," says Rod. He and Owen frantically dragged hoses around, keeping the fire away from nearby houses until a strike team turned up. "We held Strzelecki Way as a line in the sand," says Rod. "The fire would have been all over that end of town if it wasn't for that strike team arriving just at the right moment."

As Rod was helping to save the western end of town, Colin was looking after the northern end. Neither knew where the other was. In Rod's words, communications at that point were "absolutely horrendous". The town's water supply had been all but used up; the top part of town, including the hospital, had run dry.

Firefighters lost a house at the northern end, and some sheds, flats and onsite vans at the caravan park were damaged. "But as far as residences went, we pretty much looked after the entire town," says Colin. "Nobody got hurt, all the brigade and the community were safe. It was a credit to everyone. They just kept going. They did an unbelievably good job."

Lachie, too, was amazed at the brigade's stamina: "I'd been out for 17 hours and awake for the full day before and I saw Matt the Captain later that day starting to get meals ready."

## TINTALDRA FIRE BRIGADE

### Houses saved amid close calls

**Brigade members involved:** 8

**Range of experience:** all members experienced

**Supporting roles:** organising crews and meals

**Areas:** Tintaldra, Burrowye, Corryong, Towong, Guys Forest

**Campaign duration:** 29 December 2019 to 25 January 2020

**Tintaldra Fire Brigade Captain Kevin Whitehead spent 18 exhausting days straight helping to run operations out of the Corryong Incident Control Centre (ICC).**

Kevin, a Group Officer for Corryong Group and a Tintaldra member for 43 years, took up duties in the Corryong ICC, south of Tintaldra, on 30 December 2019 as fires in New South Wales headed uncontrolled towards the border. A convection column rose ominously almost 6 kilometres into the sky. Working as Deputy Incident Controller for a stint, Kevin swung into his management tasks, among them overseeing strike teams, vehicles and bulldozing; tracking the movements of aerial bombings; and liaising with other agencies.

Around lunchtime that day, Tintaldra firefighter and Brigade Training Officer Tim de Haan joined Corryong Group's strike team as designated field command vehicle (FCV) driver for Team Leader George Kucka (Burrowye) and Scribe Maisie Pilli (Corryong). The strike team gathered at the





3km south of Walwa /  
Andrew Bussey

control area on Murray River Road, west of Walwa, listening to their briefing as they looked out over the river. By late afternoon, the massive fire was roaring down the hill on the NSW side.

“Won’t be long, now,” one of them said.

“Too late,” said another. “It’s behind you.”

The fire had already spotted well into Victoria.

The tankers were assigned to asset protection and quickly dispersed to their targets. Tim was instructed to drive west towards Mount Alfred to “do a recce”. Less than 2 kilometres along the road, George said, “I’ve seen enough, turn around.”

By now, flaming branches and trees were smashing onto the road. “We couldn’t do anything about it,” says Tim. “We were then being pushed away from the strike team towards Mount Alfred.”

As Tim tried to drive back to the strike team, the fire overtook them, then raced over the top of Mount Alfred and cut them off in that direction. The front fanned out across 3 or 4 kilometres. Tim says: “We were totally and utterly cut off from our strike team. All we could do was to try to drive to Walwa on the burnt areas.”

Knowing that properties between Burrowye and Guys Forest to the south had strike teams protecting them, they continued on the Shelley–Walwa Road, stopping to talk to landowners, then going on to George’s property at Guys Forest, where there were no tankers. When they arrived, the homestead was hemmed in by fire approaching on three, then four

sides. George, his wife Fiona, their two sons – both firefighters – and the FCV crew prepared to defend it with all they had, right down to garden hoses. The rest of the farm was gone, says George.

What could have happened next “doesn’t bear thinking about”, says Tim. But just as the fire was about to impact the house, out of the smoke and the flying debris emerged two fire trucks. “It was the most wonderful sight I’ve ever seen, I can tell you,” he says.

The crews of the tankers, part of strike teams from Wodonga, quickly joined the six people at the house to push back the encroaching fire. An hour and a half later, the house was safe.

The next day, Tim and Maisie left early to return the FCV to the Corryong ICC. The 4-kilometre trip was painfully slow. Tim steered wide into paddocks, dry creek beds and through cattle yards to avoid fallen and burning trees blocking the road. “It was a very sad sight,” he says. “All the dead birds and the burnt cattle in corners, it was just terrible.”

Kevin had left the Corryong ICC on 4 January 2020 to resume firefighting when his hometown Towong was threatened. That day, the Tintaldra crew, together with DELWP members, contained a developing grassfire threatening the historic grandstand at the Towong racecourse. They were then instructed to protect a line of houses on a ridge overlooking the town.

The crew had successfully safeguarded one of the houses when the tanker alarm

sounded – they were almost out of water. As they headed towards their quick fill on the Murray River, Tim noticed a narrow, slow-moving line of fire creeping towards the rear of a property. He decided to put it out on the way down. He was taking the live hose branch out of its holder when the pin holding it got stuck. Suddenly he was engulfed in flames. Tim moved quickly to the front of the truck to escape the flames and noticed his face mask was on fire. He ripped it off and scrambled back into the tanker.

The driver called Kevin, by now on a strike team, who quickly arrived in the FCV and put out a mayday call. “When you’re in a situation like that, they fear for your internal airways,” says Tim. He was transferred to a police car in the FCV, travelled in a medivac vehicle to Corryong hospital, then was airlifted to Wangaratta hospital for observation. Fortunately he was cleared of injury bar a blistered nose.

“It’s not a nice experience to stand there and be engulfed in flames,” he says. “It certainly didn’t frighten me off though. It’s just part of the job you do.” After leaving hospital, Tim resumed firefighting with Kevin and Tintaldra brigade.

Sixteen of the 19 houses on the ridge were saved. “We lost a few houses but there were no major injuries, no deaths,” says Kevin. Three Tintaldra brigade members lost their homes in the fires.

The brigade has signed up four new members since the fires, who were eager to join the ranks of its dedicated firefighters.

## BURROWYE FIRE BRIGADE

### Fast-paced fire and hilly terrain has brigade working flat out

**Brigade members involved:** 11

**Range of experience:** from 12 to 65 years

**Supporting roles:** providing meals

**Areas:** Mount Alfred–Burrowye area, Nariel Valley, Guys Forest

**Campaign duration:** 30 December 2019 to late February 2020

**For then Burrowye Captain Neil Mitchell, fighting the Black Summer fires meant an intense burst of activity protecting Burrowye’s patch, below the Murray River north west of Corryong, and then weeks of mopping up.**

The Mount Alfred–Burrowye area was among the first places to feel the force of the fire that came across the NSW border on 30 December 2019. Neil requested a plane or helicopter from Albury to dump water on the fast-spreading fire on the NSW side but was told there was too much smoke.

The brigade’s tanker was waiting for the fire with DELWP staff and other firefighters on Murray River Road late that afternoon. “It exploded, then went over the top of our heads by 4 or 5 kilometres,” says Neil of the spread of the fire. “It was like a balloon full of water dropping on concrete, something I don’t ever want to see again. The next thing everything blew up and you could hardly see anything.”

The firefighters were able to hold the fire back from a house on a slope overlooking the river, saving the residence. “Everything seemed to be so quick,” says Neil. “We were in grass 2 feet high, and I said to the woman in the tanker with me, ‘We might as well get out of here and back on the road.’”

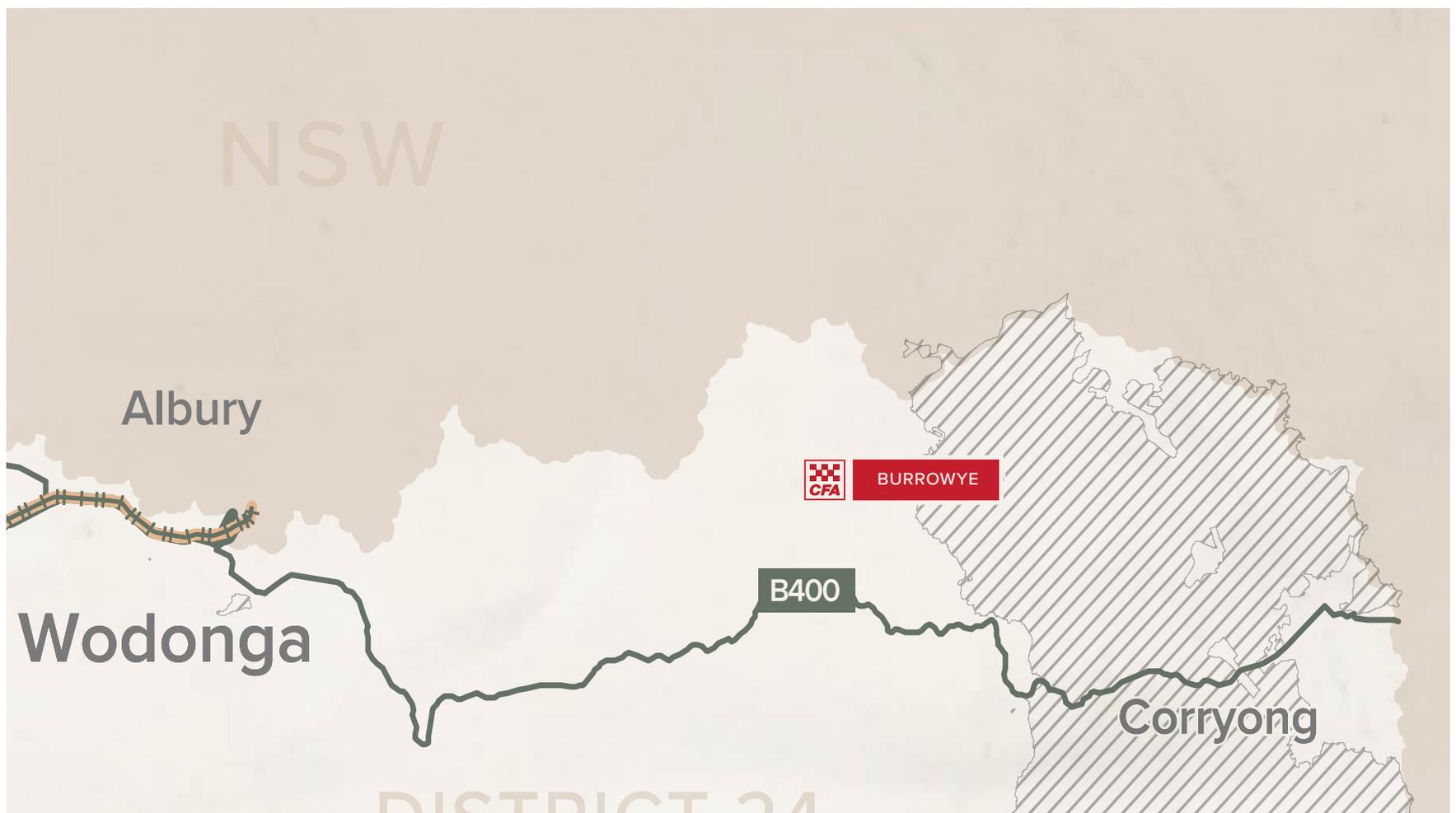
Neil continues: “It blew up the next day, I couldn’t tell you what time it was. The fire came over Bald Hill and went up to my woolshed. It was cantering up that hill as quick as you could drive.” With the help of two other tankers and Neil’s son Brad, who “whipped around with the tractor” creating an earth line, the brigade saved the woolshed and protected the cattle in a holding yard nearby.

“I’m 73 and I’ve been in the CFA since I was 14. I’ve been to a lot of fires in my life, but I’ve never had smoke in my face like in the first and second days of the fire,” says Neil. “The flames didn’t bother me but at the woolshed I couldn’t even see my hand in front of my face for the ash and smoke. There’s not a lot of houses down our end of Burrowye, but it was bloody hectic.”

The main front moved quickly beyond the Mount Alfred–Burrowye area, heading south east for the Cudgewa, Nariel and



Above (clockwise from top): Fire at Mt Alfred, 30 Dec 2019; Wodonga fire tanker at Mt Alfred; Mt Alfred, 30 Dec 2019 / Hayden Drummond



Corryong valleys. Among the properties it burnt around Mount Alfred–Burrowye was the Mitchells’ 1820-hectare farm – two-thirds of the property was lost, and more than 60 cattle perished. The house Neil was born in at Guys Forest, owned by a neighbour, burnt down the next day.

An old-school firefighter, Neil has been a volunteer with the CFA for almost 60 years. His father was brigade Captain before him, back in the days of the Austin truck, when fires were fought with wet bags and a green tree limb, and back-burning was done with a box of matches. The local area is mostly pastoral land between Mount Lawson State Park to the west and Burrowa–Pine Mountain National Park to the east. Parts of it are very hilly and some of the houses are unoccupied, making firefighting difficult.

“It’s pretty handy country but there’s a hell of a lot of hills – you can’t run around paddocks like you can in flat country,” says Neil. “We were very thin on the ground and we could only do so much, but it could’ve been a lot worse.”



Talmalmo Fire,  
30 Dec 2019 /  
Hayden Drummond

## BERRINGAMA FIRE BRIGADE

### Energetic brigade with many “cool heads” helps foil fire

**Brigade members involved:** 30

**Range of experience:** from new recruits to 5 members with 50-plus years' experience

**Supporting roles:** providing meals; bringing in supplies, hay and fuel; moving stock and machinery

**Areas:** Berringama–Lucyvale Valley

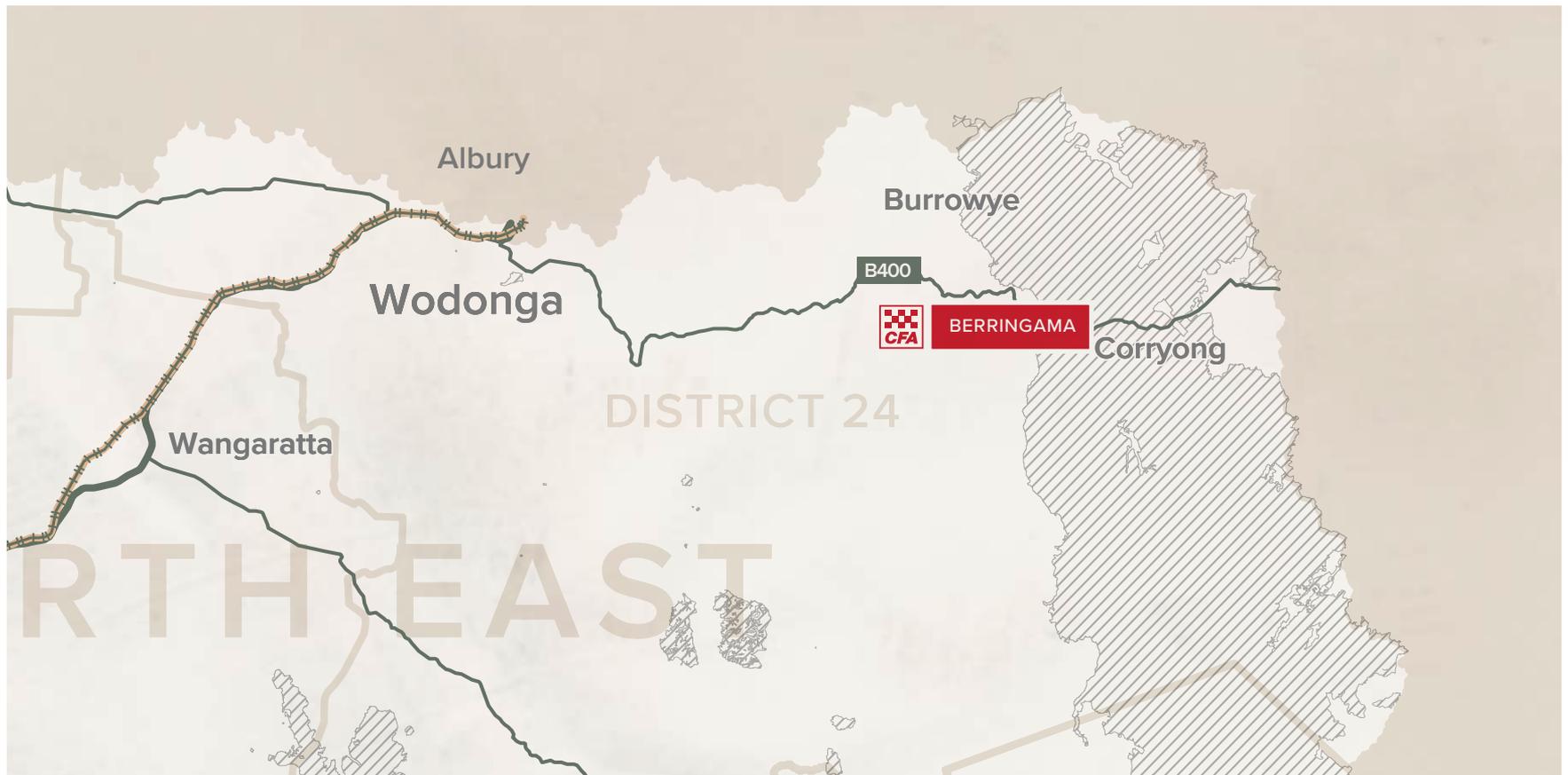
**Campaign duration:** 31 December 2019 to start of February 2020

As other Victorians settled into New Year's Eve festivities, members of the Berringama Fire Brigade in the state's north east watched and waited as a broad fire front crept through bush down the Berringama Valley towards them. “We were standing there watching it come down the valley from the north, a huge 4-to-5-kilometre fire front, and we had one tanker,” recalls Berringama Captain Ewan Carkeek.

The fireys gathered on Ewan's property on the southern edge of the Burrowa–Pine Mountain National Park, the first farm in line to be hit if the fire came out of the park. They could hear rocks exploding in the intense heat of the blaze 2 kilometres away. At 11pm, Ewan suggested that the crew get some sleep. The firefighters could then concentrate their energies on keeping the fire out of farming land the next day.

“Ewan kept a really cool head,” says Ian Whitehead, brigade member for 30 years. “We attacked it first thing the next morning.”

The crew made the most of what they had. Ian and fellow members Brad Jarvis, Nicole Martin and her husband Graham took the tanker out as Ewan graded an earth line around his house with his tractor. The crew was helped by neighbours with private vehicles.





As the fire reached the earth line and split in two, the firefighters concentrated on containing the blaze on the western side of the house, letting the eastern side go. Ian says: “We put out what we could and steered the fire back up into bush behind Ewan’s place. That stopped it coming out into open country; that’s all we could do. Letting the fire burn up to Ewan’s house and splitting it helped control it for the second wave.” The second wave of fire arrived that afternoon but hit land that was already burnt out.

Ewan’s house became a hub for meetings, briefings and meals, while the burnt parts of his property acted as a safety zone in which neighbours could park heavy machinery and stock. People slept there. Ewan’s wife Lorraine and Ian’s daughter Jilly worked overtime to provide meals for the firefighters to eat in-between putting out spot fires.

“We were run off our feet for the first day and a half,” says Ian. “I didn’t realise that I hadn’t eaten for 48 hours. I remember saying to someone, ‘It must be two o’clock [in the afternoon].’ It was 10am the next morning.” Nicole, Brigade Secretary and a member of eight years standing at the time, adds: “Adrenalin is an amazing thing. We just kept going.”

Firefighting became surreal for Nicole as she watched, amazed, as a herd of black cattle ran out of the smoke and flames followed by two fast-moving camels. “No-one would’ve believed you!” she says. Ewan had been left with the camels after a business venture.

On 2 January 2020, a third wave of fire appeared out of Shelley State Forest to the south west of Ewan’s farm and moved into a neighbouring property. Conditions quickly became extreme. “It went from a ridge in my neighbour’s place to just near my house in two minutes. That’s a kilometre,” says Ewan. Flames reached up more than 10 metres. Ian got caught in a willy-willy created by the fire that was so powerful it nearly lifted him off his feet.

Fortunately, support had arrived. “We had plenty of help by then: DELWP and a couple of strike teams and a quick fill,” says Ewan. A 12,000-litre water tanker with spray guns had also come in, having been volunteered by a local earth-moving contractor.

As the fire advanced, Berringama brigade battled to keep it away from the neighbour’s home. Within minutes of flames reaching the house, five trucks arrived with strike teams from the Violet Town/Euroa area. “God, we were pleased to see them!” says Ian.

“We all had it under control within about half an hour, a 3-kilometre front, up and over hills and through scrub. But we had enough people to do it then,” says Ewan. The fire burned back into itself at different angles. The crew then concentrated on monitoring the boundaries of farms in the area.

The fourth of January was predicted to be catastrophic. Police warned people to leave. Locals brought generators, fuel and supplies to their properties. Sons and

daughters of the firefighters started arriving from interstate to help. After 4 January passed without disaster, it was a matter of monitoring. Berringama brigade blacked out, then helped with other fires locally and continued to put out spot fires after ember attacks.

Fire returned to near Ewan’s home five times. The brigade knew it had done the best it could, but unfortunately the fire burnt out close to 80 per cent of Ewan’s property and destroyed two neighbours’ farms. Still, according to Ian: “The whole thing could have been a lot worse. There was no panicking. We dealt with it as it came, chipped away at it. The way Ewan handled the whole situation was marvellous.”

“Everyone did what they had to do, they listened,” says Ewan. “We had a fair bit of luck too.”

“That was really my first big fire in the CFA,” says Nicole. “I’m still amazed at what we did on that truck, what we managed to achieve with it. We were a team that looked after one another, listened [to] and respected the experienced ones. And we got the job done.”

Above (left to right):  
Protecting property;  
Berringama brigade  
members / Luke Humphrey

## CUDGEWA FIRE BRIGADE

### Community and brigade unite to brave firestorm

**Brigade members involved:** 15

**Range of experience:** from 2 to 40 years

**Supporting roles:** assisting with meals and distribution of food and water; setting up community safety place; handling administration for donated generators

**Areas:** Cudgewa, Corryong, Tintaldrá, Berrigama

**Campaign duration:** for 3 weeks from 30 December 2019

The 'old-timers' around Cudgewa sometimes talk about a bushfire that jumped from mountain to mountain clear across the Cudgewa Valley, a stretch of some 5 kilometres. But to their knowledge, until the Black Summer, fires had never travelled into the valley as far as the township.

Paul Carkeek, Brigade Captain and CFA member for 38 years, has always listened to those old-timers, gaining knowledge. On 30 December 2019, he also took heed of state-of-the-art computer modelling that simulates the spread of a bushfire, which suggested Cudgewa was due for a direct hit. Households were soon evacuated, and landowners bulldozed a strategic fire break to the north. As soon as the fires coming from the north west jumped that break, Paul knew they were in for a big campaign. He expected fatalities.

The fire spotted 5 kilometres ahead of itself, hitting the small town at 10pm. "We tried to hold the Cudgewa–Tintaldrá Road, a strategic break for us, but the fire jumped to Mount Mittamatite," says Paul, who is also Corryong Group's first Deputy Group Officer (DGO). "We were working within the fire because it had already jumped either side of the town. The wind was horrendous."

Branches blew out of trees. Embers pelted down. There was so much fire, the scene before the firefighters was like daylight. The fire also created its own wind, which circled the main street. A superheated convection column spun through the middle of town after the fire front came through, sucking up debris and whatever hadn't been burnt.

Firefighters fought intensively for four hours. At one stage, 14 fire trucks from two strike teams and the local group were involved. Cudgewa brigade had three crew members on the tanker, two on its slip-on, and Paul and three other members in their own vehicles. "There was no way you could pull it up," says Paul. "Asset protection, moving with the fire and saving what we could as it went along, was as much as we could do."



Clockwise from top left: Cudgewa and Nariel Valley members; tree on Paul Carkeek's property / Paul Carkeek. Cudgewa / CFA member

By 4am, the firestorm had passed. Paul says: “The strike teams that had been in the area were spent, totally exhausted. Some just laid down on the station floor. It was pretty horrific on the night to see grown adults with fear on their faces, and so exhausted they were too spent to do anything more. Everyone was screaming out on the public radio wanting trucks. Kids on the radio could be heard saying that their houses were on fire. A bloke in a dam was saying his caravan was burning down. Then the radio would go quiet and we didn’t know if they had survived.”

Fourteen homes were lost but the town’s shops, hall, churches and pub were saved. “I was so proud of the way the community got together and worked as a team,” says Paul. “There were community members who didn’t want to leave, so I gave them safe jobs like operating the standpipes. One of our brigade members, a lieu-ie, had a broken leg, but he sat in his car at the fire shed and relayed messages to the crew.”

Paul went home to his farm and had a

dip in a water trough, as the town had run out of water. The fire plan he had used for 20 years, including sprinklers, had saved his family’s home, but the farm’s pasture was gone. Twenty of his sheep and one bull had perished. Heaps of hay and a lot of fencing had burned.

“It was a pretty harrowing 48 hours,” says Paul. “We worked out we didn’t have any injuries or fatalities. If we’d had that on top of what we went through, it would’ve broken a lot of people completely.” He says that the support that flooded in the day after the main fire was “unbelievable”, although he acknowledges that “the recovery phase was harder than fighting the fire itself”.

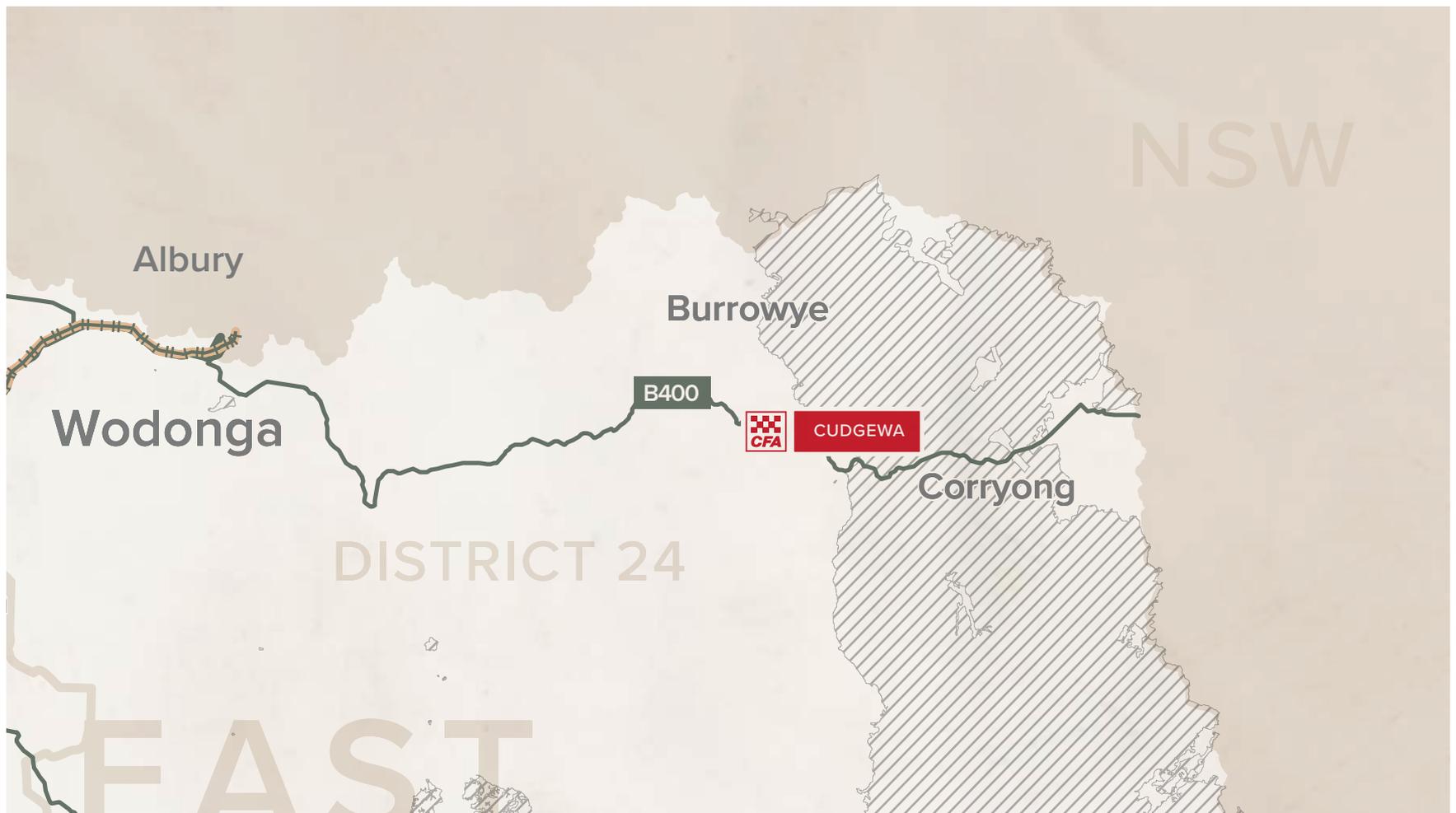
Paul adds that he was appalled by the sightseers who poured into the area in the wake of the fires: “I’ve never seen so much traffic at night. It was still an active fire zone; everything was supposed to be locked down.”

There was no power or communications in the area. But as DGO, Paul visited surrounding locales and relayed messages about what was happening to regional

command. He and the brigade acted as a community liaison to help get resources such as water to people who hadn’t evacuated. When donated generators arrived, the CFA stepped in to distribute them. There was also still mopping up and patrols to be carried out, as well as dangerous trees and closed roads to contend with.

“There were a lot of angry people who would’ve liked a red truck at their door, but you’ve got to prioritise when you’ve got a big plan and look at the big picture,” says Paul. “There was a lot of stress. I know it affected me at the time. But we were busy. There were so many things to be done. It probably took nearly 18 months to really let it go. Every brigade member was affected by the fires and had stock lost or property damaged that made it really hard to recover. There’s still a few struggling with stuff.”

But the brigade can look back and know it did the best job possible in exceptionally difficult circumstances. “We didn’t lose anybody. We saved a lot more than we lost,” says Paul.



## NARIEL VALLEY FIRE BRIGADE

### CFA, DELWP and locals unite to tackle fronts

**Brigade members involved:** 12

**Range of experience:** from new to experienced

**Areas:** Walwa, Cudgewa, Nariel Valley

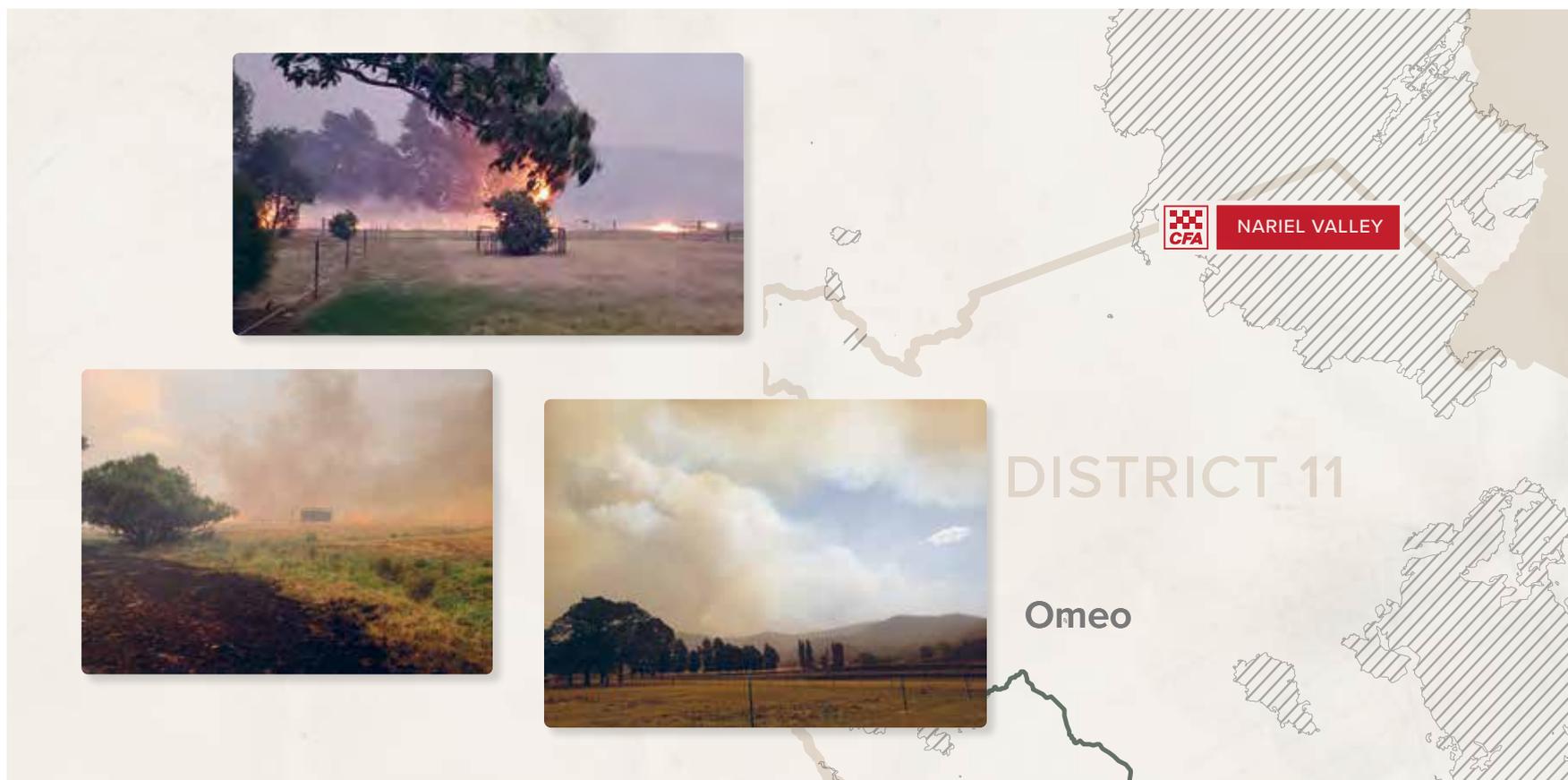
**Campaign duration:** NSW on 28 December 2019, then locally from 29 December 2019 to 25 January 2020

The Nariel Valley brigade crew didn't know what to expect when they were called out to Walwa near the NSW border on the afternoon of 30 December 2019. They knew fires from lightning strikes were burning nearby on the NSW side, but this call-out just seemed like a normal fire. They soon realised it wasn't. As they headed north down the Murray Valley and looked towards Walwa, they could see a mushroom cloud rising kilometres into the sky. "Gee, boys, I think we've got a live one here," said Nariel Captain Angus Maclean.

Over the next six days, the Nariel Valley would face three separate fire fronts.

Four members of the brigade went out on the tanker that first day as part of a strike team of trucks from Corryong, along with DELWP vehicles. The units met at Walwa, where the Nariel crew was tasked with looking after a house about 9 kilometres away. As they set up to defend it, they kept an eye on the fire over the border. It didn't take long for it to shoot across to Victoria, writhing like a big snake over the river, then roaring up the hill beside them. As it reached them, they were enveloped in smoke and ash so thick they could barely breathe. Angus thought quickly and opened a fog nozzle over the head of First Lieutenant Bruce Whitsed. "His actions probably saved my life," says Bruce. "We were running out of air."





From then on, the crew didn't stop. The fire had now spread into Burrowa–Pine Mountain National Park, which extends south west almost from the state border. "It was really hammering," says Brigade Secretary Rowan Surtees. "The fire was spotting up to 10 kilometres ahead of itself."

It quickly got away. As the crew headed towards Cudgewa, the column started to drop, spitting out embers. When they reached the small town, the firefighters quickly got to work extinguishing outbreaks at houses, and filling gutters and dousing the walls of homes and sheds, before refilling at water points and driving back. As one Cudgewa local said: "You were here, you were there. Every time I looked around you fellas were coming or going."

Locals pitched in too, Angus recalls. "On that first night, my young fella and my nephew went to a neighbour's house because they saw a light on, and just managed to get the elderly couple out. By the time they got them to the front gate the house was gone," he says.

The next day was hectic too. "We saved a lot of houses," says Rowan. The fire activity died down about 4pm, then was quiet for three or four days. It flared again on 4 January 2020 in the middle of the valley. "There was fire coming from the east, west and from Benambra to the south," continues Rowan.

The brigade told the residents fire was approaching and to prepare themselves; many had already left. By now, strike teams in the area had been recalled to Corryong, communication was reduced to UHF radios, and police had set up roadblocks after telling everyone to leave. An interagency team led by FFMVic that included five DELWP appliances, Nariel Valley firefighters in their tanker, and locals in their own utes and other farm vehicles, were left to defend what they could.

At about 2pm, the smoke lifted and the wind picked up. Fire blew out of the nearby Wabba Wilderness Park, spewing ash, embers and flaming debris. Angus was chasing spot fires on a neighbouring property when a raft of outbreaks hit his farm and "lit the whole place up". Fortunately, the interagency team and locals moved quickly, stopping the fire 10 metres short of his home.

The brigade members moved on, keeping up the pace for hours without eating, running on adrenalin. At intervals, they would nip home to check on their farms and feed livestock. Angus' wife Jenny had kept their animals close: the poddy calves in the carport, dogs in the bathroom and the ferret in the toilet.

The fire coming from the south hit the top end of the valley late that evening. Two CFA members who lived there saved what

they could, and once it was deemed safe, the other valley firefighters moved in. It was a long night.

After the main fire danger had passed, the brigade, together with the CFA strike teams, spent the next week helping DELWP to back-burn unburnt areas, chase spot fires and mop up. "Everyone chipped in and had a go," says Angus of the brigade and the valley residents. "I'm proud of that."

The four crew members on the tanker that first day revisited the area two months later. "We drove past everywhere we'd been that day," says Rowan. "All the houses were still there so we thought that was a positive." Eleven Nariel Valley houses elsewhere were lost.

Rowan adds: "We went to the Jingellic pub and had a debrief. You need a bit of closure."

Left: Regrowth 1 year later / Greg Nankervis

Above (clockwise from top): Neighbours farm, 31 Dec 2019; smoke plumes in Nariel Valley, 4 Jan 2020; Greg Nankervis' farm, 31 Dec 2019 / Greg Nankervis

## BIGGARA FIRE BRIGADE

### Small brigade packs a punch

**Brigade members involved:** 20

**Range of experience:** from less than 2 years to 50 years

**Areas:** Mount Elliot, Bunroy, Thowgla, Biggara valley

**Campaign duration:** 29 December 2019 to 15 January 2020

**For Biggara Brigade Captain Gordon Nicholas, it was the fire he'd been anticipating for 60 years.**

Gordon's connection with country firefighting extends back decades. His grandfather was one of the initiators of Biggara brigade and its first Captain, followed by his uncle, then his father. As a child, Gordon remembers watching as a stand was built for the Furphy tank so it could be moved onto a trailer whenever the brigade was called out to a fire. Old rakes, knapsacks and canvas sacks on the ends of sticks, used in times past to beat out a fire, still hang in the brigade's former shed as a reminder of those times. Countless fires dotted the area in those decades, but there was never a fire the likes of Black Summer.

Biggara, with a population of just over 120 people, is situated south east of Corryong. It has a hall, a tennis court and the brigade shed. Close to the border of New South Wales, the locality sits in a pocket of grazing land in a valley surrounded by mountains and forest. The first wave of fire came at about 2.30pm on 29 December 2019 from over the NSW border, south of Jingellic. It passed Biggara the next morning at 6am, moving through the Thowgla Valley to the west.

A brigade member living in Upper Towong, Craig Findlay, smelt smoke later that day, investigated, and found an ember fire in the Mount Elliot range to the west. He headed out in his own vehicle with firefighting equipment, and together with other brigade members in their private vehicles, contained that fire. On 31 December, the Biggara tanker, with a three-person crew, helped the Towong locals extinguish it. It was a good save – left unattended, it would have created a new fire front in the dense forest.

That day, the Biggara Valley community gathered in the local hall to receive an update on the fire situation. Corryong police had asked that the area be evacuated. The local police officer relaying the request looked at Gordon and grinned, saying, "I know what you're going to tell me."

Like Gordon, most brigade members stayed on. Some of the town's older women, as well as mothers and children, evacuated. Those who remained organised machinery and prepared themselves to





protect their patch. Brigade members got ready to defend their own properties, while a core group of firefighters were set to protect the area in general. “Our biggest problem was that we lacked numbers,” says Gordon.

On 4 January 2020 at about 3.30pm, the fire came off the range separating Thowgla and the lower part of the Bunroy Valley. It then travelled east into the top end of Biggara before turning north towards Indi in New South Wales. Eventually, the firefighters had a chance to back-burn along the driveway of a property owned by one of them. Then the crew on the Biggara tanker, with the aid of private slip-ons, put out the front on the opposite side of the road. “This stopped the fire from going any further north into the unburnt part of the Mount Elliot Range and towards Upper Towong,” says Gordon. “It was about 100 metres from bush country. I was pretty chuffed about that!”

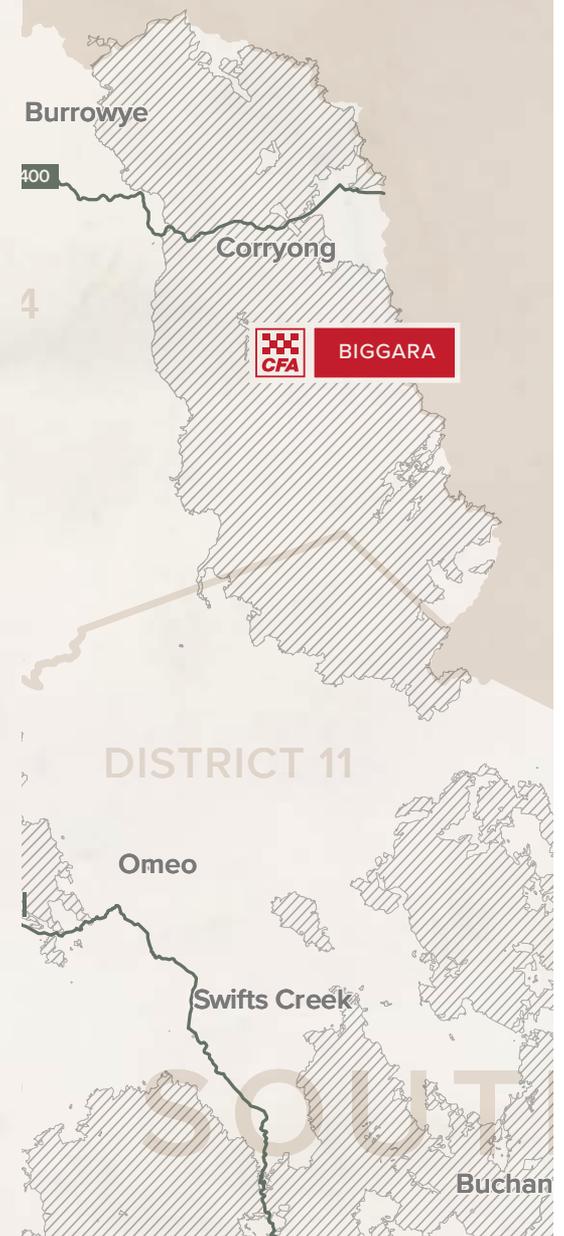
The brigade’s biggest effort took place at McCormacks Gap Track on 10 January, a volatile day. The track had offered a barrier to fire heading towards Mount Elliot. Biggara brigade had been watching over the track for several nights, supporting DELWP crews. This night, however, they became concerned that the fire had jumped the track. Brigade members investigated and found it had.

“The fire was going hard, from just perking along to a fair old crack,” says Gordon. “Fortunately, we were able to run canvas hose downhill into a gully, containing the fire’s edge as we went. We pulled it up there, then took the hose back up and

drove around the head of the gully to the other side and repeated the process so the fire was no longer a threat. The landowner below the event was very happy!”

The next day, with the right conditions, the fire could have become a serious threat, heading towards the Upper Towong. Gordon says: “If we hadn’t rounded it up, it would have burned into Mount Elliot and turned into a big front overnight. No-one would have been able to do anything with it had it gone into that range. I’m very proud of all those who stepped up, and of what our brigade and community members achieved.”

Gordon was particularly happy with the praise from Indi RFS members from over the border in New South Wales. “They were worried. They could see the fire a lot better than us because we were under a ridge. They said: ‘Those Bunroy boys did good!’”



Left: Fire approaching houses / Samara Nicholas

Above (left to right): Southerly wind change, Biggara; after the fires / Samara Nicholas

## POREPUNKAH FIRE BRIGADE

### Vigilant brigade keeps valley community safe

**Brigade members involved:** 25

**Range of experience:** from 2 to 51 years

**Supporting roles:** assisting with logistics and communications; catering; accepting donations at station

**Areas:** NSW deployments, Whorouly South, Buckland Valley, Mount Buffalo

**Campaign duration:** 31 December 2019 through January 2020

The Black Summer fires were ultimately a rewarding experience for Porepunkah brigade, which monitored the Buckland Valley at the foot of Mount Buffalo. New members who had joined in the lead-up to the fires gained valuable experience, old members who hadn't turned out for a while were reinvigorated, and better connections were forged with DELWP and FFMVic members.

Smoke spreading down the coastline from New South Wales and from the Upper Murray area alerted the brigade to approaching fires in late December. Dave Crea, a relatively new member then, remembers standing in a paddock on 31 December 2019 on what was a "stinking hot day" and hearing thunder. "It was eerie. I don't remember there being any clouds around, it was fairly clear," says Dave. Half an hour later, a series of dry lightning strikes hit the back of Mount Buffalo.

A group of firefighters on Mount Horn had seen a belt of small fires light up in Mount Buffalo National Park. Porepunkah brigade turned out to try to locate them but was unable to get through the rugged terrain, so they waited and observed. Over the following days, one finger of fire pushed to the north, eventually impacting private land round Whorouly South, to the





Left to right: Strike Team briefing Buckland; Mount Buffalo / David Crea

north west of Mount Buffalo. Porepunkah brigade members switched to defending houses and pasture. The brigade's main role throughout the fires was patrolling boundary perimeters where state forest met private property.

Conditions were calm for about a week. Smoke had been rising but the fire was spreading slowly. Then, says Captain Mick Dalbosco, "we started to get a lot more noise in terms of communications, with people being pulled in all directions". Two days were flagged as high risk, as wind pushed fire towards them from the south west.

As DELWP and Victoria Police conducted searches to get campers out of the bush, the brigade investigated properties to see whether residents had left, and to work out exits and safe areas to which firefighters could retreat. They identified one area as being particularly vulnerable. Dave explains: "When you get out past Buffalo River [the western side of Mount Buffalo], there's an area with small farmlets – long-held runs in steep, inhospitable, heavily forested terrain, full of holes."

Of the 13 houses located in the bush there, the six to the south were at most risk. So a strike team of five tankers from near Wodonga, one of Porepunkah's tankers and its ultralight, and six DELWP G-Wagons were positioned throughout the area.

By now, some of the fires from the

lightning strikes had joined to form a front. "It was an eerie feeling," says Mick. "At about 4pm the sky turned black, and it was unknown to us whether the front would come towards us or swing around enough from the south to impact us."

The wind then picked up, and ash from the fire front missed the area by 1–2 kilometres. "We were really lucky with the wind direction," says Dave. "The fire reached the edge of our area but that's as far as it got." That fire went on to become the front that was countered by the Demon Ridge back-burn.

Local property owners were thankful for the reassuring presence of the brigade. "Our message is usually, 'Don't expect a truck to come,'" says Dave, "but these residences had a tanker and a full crew each."

Fire skulked around the Buckland Valley for days, and the brigade kept patrolling property boundaries. "I was really happy with how everyone responded and how we were able to use new members," says Mick. These members were mentored by training officer Ed Rozitis, a brigade member of 51 years standing. Ed, an ex-military man, had already been on three strike teams to New South Wales before Porepunkah started turnouts in its area.

"Ed's a great asset," says Dave. "He's a good teacher and very generous with his knowledge. And Mick was an unflappable leader. He lost his whole grape crop to

smoke taint but he just got on with the job. That's what you want in a captain."

There was one "famous" night when "nice guy" Mick surprised them all by sending out an unexpectedly stern text message: "All members to the station NOW!" Dave, who's now First Lieutenant, says: "That really got me out of bed. I'd done a full days' work for the brigade and had washed my uniform. I had to scramble to get out of my pyjamas and into my wet uniform."

The brigade still has a chuckle about that text.

"I was probably out of line that night," says Mick. "But being a local here, I know some of the people in the path of that fire and I didn't want to hear that they'd been burnt out while I sat at home."

"No-one was hurt and there were no close calls," Ed says of the campaign. Mick adds that property was protected and the community was grateful for the brigade's support. "We reassured our local community but we also represented our community across the valley. Porepunkah was really visible throughout the campaign at all the small fires there. For a little brigade, we punched above our weight."

## BRIGHT, HARRIETVILLE AND POREPUNKAH FIRE BRIGADES

### Firefighters join forces to save towns

**Brigade members involved:** 18 in total: 8 from Bright, 6 from Harrietville and 4 from Porepunkah

**Range of experience:** 5-plus years

**Areas:** Demon Ridge Track, south of Bright

**Campaign duration:** 12–16 January 2020

At about 3pm on the afternoon of 31 December 2019, a small band of local firefighters gathered at Mount Buffalo's Horn Lookout, the highest point of land in the area, to survey the vast tracts of bush below. The firefighters, from the towns of Bright, Harrietville and Porepunkah, had been called out to local fires caused by multiple lightning strikes. Now they were looking at the bigger picture.

Columns of smoke rose across the Ovens Valley in eight or so locations about 2 kilometres away. "We're in trouble," said Bright Fire Brigade Captain Brett Michie.

The next day, as the fires progressed, emergency services personnel and management urged people at packed community meetings in Bright and Harrietville to leave straight away if they didn't need to be there. The following day, Bright was a ghost town. Harrietville, too, was quiet – the majority of residents had followed the advice. In Porepunkah, most of the tourists had decided to leave, as had many concerned locals.

Meanwhile, the threat grew. More emergency services, brigade meetings and briefings were called, and strike teams mobilised in the area. On 7 January



Left to right: Sheridan Gillham; Demon Ridge back-burn / Rhett Chalwell

2020, the Ovens Valley fire took a big run, fanned by north westerly winds. It travelled 20–30 kilometres at night, unheard-of fire behaviour according to the locals.

“The whole southern bushland from Mount Buffalo to Dinner Plain was on fire,” says Brett. “The worry was that it would come out from a southerly direction and impact Harrietteville, Bright and Wandiligong. That’s what the incident controllers were really scared about.”

On 8 January, the firefighters heard of the possibility of a FFMVic back-burn along the Demon Ridge Track to the south of Bright. Following the highest ridge in the area, the track snakes south of Harrietteville to the Buckland Valley. The earth road historically has been used as a containment line, most recently in the 2003 and 2006 fires. Now, FFMVic planned to back-burn from the ridge down, so the fire would meet up with the one coming up the valley from the south.

The local firefighters then did what they do best: they put their hand up for it. “We know the Forest Fire Management crews pretty well and to their credit they said they’d be happy to have us,” says Brett.

Bright, Porepunkah and Harrietteville

arranged for crews to take their slip-ons up to the ridge each day from 12 to 16 January. FFMVic workers prepared the track first, bulldozing it to create extra width. “I think the communities were happy to have us up there,” says Harrietteville Captain Jason Williams. “Knowing that we were involved gave them more confidence.”

The first shift started lighting up on the eastern side of the track, close to Albion Point, but stalled as the wind ran the wrong way and the fire threatened to jump to the wrong side of the hill and move towards Harrietteville. The firefighters patrolled in the slip-ons for three or four hours until the wind changed, as expected. “We moved quickly with our firefighters for 4 kilometres in a westerly direction,” says Brett.

“It was bizarre on that first day,” says Harrietteville’s Trevor Castricum. “We all knew the fire was at the bottom of the hill about 500 metres away, and its potential. We were working side by side with the Forest Fire Management team. It was pretty hot in there. We were struggling to move along because the wind was coming straight at us and the smoke was so thick you couldn’t see a lot. All of a sudden I said to Daniel, the guy I was with, ‘Has that wind just moved?’”

The wind had changed direction. The fire jumped the creek below and ran up the hill towards the pair. According to Trevor, Daniel “said ‘Let’s go!’ and we just ran with the drip torch for the rest of that shift”. Fortunately, the wind then changed direction again, causing the fire to burn back on itself.

Brigade members back-burned for 10 to 12 hours a day for five days, with their colleagues in FFMVic working alongside them and overseeing the operation. Together they covered 23 kilometres of track. Porepunkah Captain Mick Dalbosco says working with FFMVic was enjoyable and broke down barriers: “I was really glad to be able to work with them. For them to be able to see what CFA has as a resource and to be able to utilise us alongside their members, to me was a really positive step for us. There was very clear communication from both sides; it was a good working environment.”

The operation was successful. Wandiligong, Harrietteville and Bright were saved from the impact of the fire.



## BUFFALO RIVER FIRE BRIGADE

### Brigade triumphs but firefighting takes its toll

**Brigade members involved:** 26

**Range of experience:** from 1 to 30 years

**Supporting roles:** a member who could not fight fire came to the station most days, cleaning both vehicles and making sure they were restocked and ready to go

**Area:** Buffalo River Valley

**Campaign duration:** from 17 January into February 2020

The firefighters at Buffalo River Valley watched for days as smoke plumes rose from fires at Abbeyard to the south east. “Normally when we see smoke there we’re not overly concerned,” says Buffalo River Captain Trevor McKibbin. But when winds blew the fire towards them, in the opposite direction to the weather pattern they expected in mid-January 2020, they were shocked. “Then one night it took off,” says Trevor. An exhausting 16-day campaign followed.

At about 12.30am on 17 January, Ovens Incident Control warned Trevor that a 4.5-kilometre-high fire cloud was headed towards the valley, which lies to the west of Mount Buffalo, and asked if he could send back some local information about it. Trevor and two other brigade members set off in smoke so thick he could barely see the road. “The smoke cleared further on,” says Trevor, “and I said, ‘Boys, have a look on the left-hand side. We’re looking for a fire that’s coming this way.’” Further up, they looked to the right and gasped – all they could see was fire. “It had jumped the road and was miles away from where we expected it to be,” says Trevor. “It was a lot closer to our valley.”

By now, police were knocking on doors, asking the people living in the 50 or so houses in Buffalo River Valley to leave. A lot of the locals did so, meaning many homes were undefended.





The valley is wedged between a large pine plantation and Mount Buffalo National Park, rugged terrain full of dense forest, gullies and jagged ridges that are largely inaccessible to firefighters. The challenge was to keep the fire out of the paddocks at the edge of the forests. DELWP workers created containment lines to form a fire break between homes and any approaching fires. Three strike teams arrived, and along with a Buffalo River tanker they patrolled the area from Lake Buffalo north to the fire station, looking for outbreaks.

At one stage, the tanker's gearbox broke down. "We were scared. We needed our tanker to defend the valley," says Trevor. He rang a CFA mechanic in Wangaratta, an hour away. The mechanic arrived in a CFA maintenance vehicle, was waved through the police block, and fixed the gearbox in half an hour.

The fire, estimated to have a 550-kilometre perimeter, continued to confound local firefighters. Trevor says: "For some reason it would pick up at night. Seeing the glow of the fire at night sent a

shiver down your spine." Up close it was intense, with the wind strong, and fire activity, such as embers and rate of spread, high. "There were three nights we didn't think we stood a chance," says Trevor.

The fire kept up its march from the south, then forked into different directions, sparing the Buffalo River Valley. Thousands of hectares of forest were destroyed, and one house was lost, situated in a location too dangerous for the firefighters to save. "It's sad to lose a house, but we saved a lot of people's properties and assets," says Trevor. "I think a lot of shock set in afterwards. We were just thinking, 'How did we survive that?'"

Trevor had taken on most of the night shifts because he didn't want to ask other members to do them. "I was mentally tired and stressed. If I got any sleep in January it was a bonus," he says.

After the main fires had passed, Trevor held a brigade meeting to give members an opportunity to talk about how the fires had affected them. "I think it wrecked a lot of people mentally," he says. "My daughter,

who's pretty switched on, said, 'You really need help, Dad.' I listened to her."

Twenty-six Buffalo River brigade members were involved in the campaign. "I was pretty proud," says Trevor. "Every time our tanker went out, we had full crews on it, men and women."

Left: Blacking out / Rhett Chalwell

Above: On our way / Rhett Chalwell

## DARTMOUTH FIRE BRIGADE

### Good preparation key to safeguarding town

**Brigade members involved:** 28

**Range of experience:** mix of experienced firefighters and relatively new members

**Supporting roles:** preparing meals for crew

**Areas:** Corryong, Mitta Valley, Dartmouth Dam

**Campaign duration:** November 2019 to February 2020

**When Dartmouth Fire Brigade Captain Jono Dower heard reports on 4 January 2020 of fire burning to the north east, he had good cause for alarm. Forecasts were for that fire to move in Dartmouth's general direction at 3 kilometres per hour, with flames reaching 50 metres high and spot fires 10 kilometres ahead of the front.**

“We got a fire emergency warning in town on New Year’s Eve and everyone got an idea of how far that fire had moved, from the Murray River at Jingellic [in NSW] through to Tom Groggin station about 80 kilometres away,” says Jono. “That was a hell of a lot of ground. It was in the back of everyone’s mind that it might not take that long for this fire to come over the hill and upon us.”

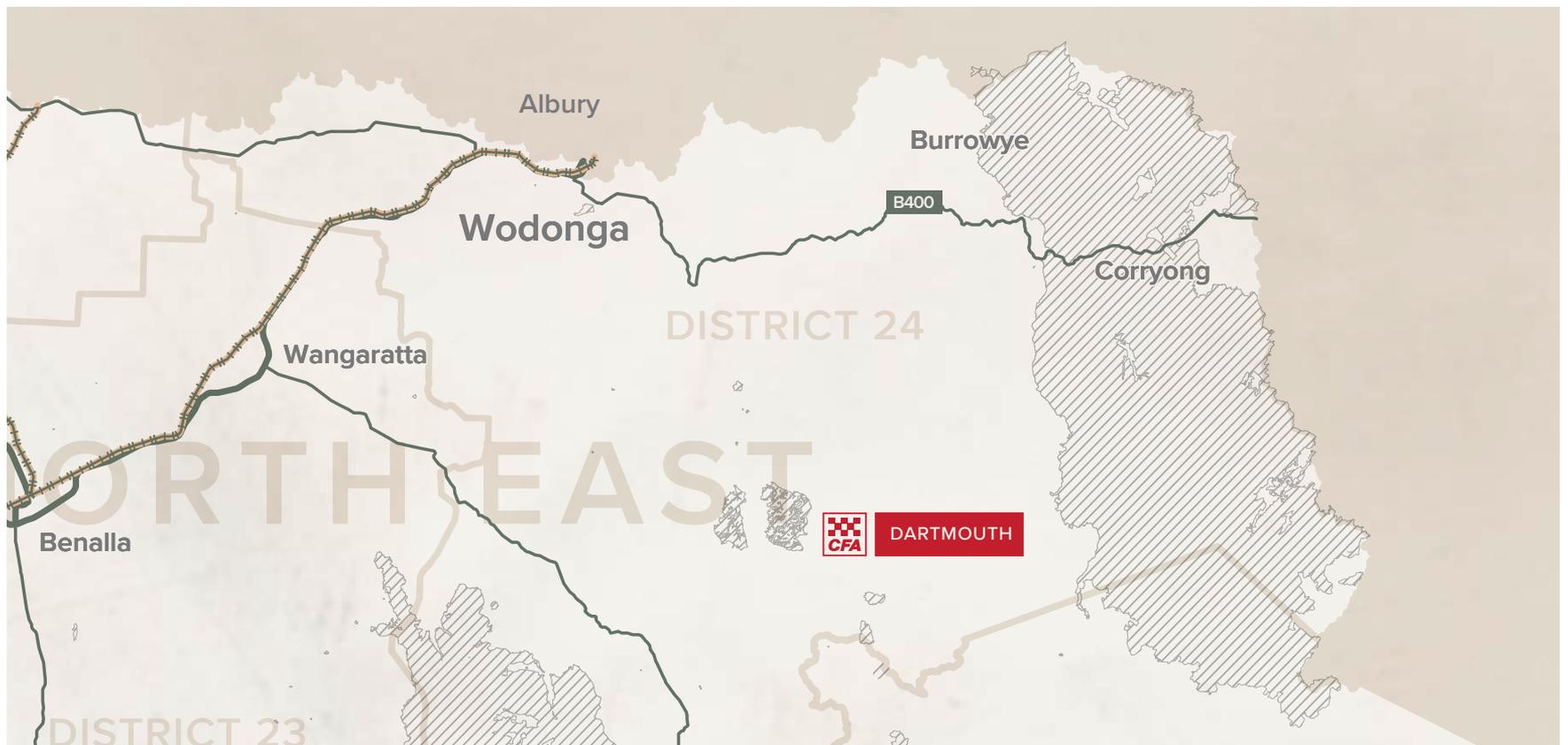
Dartmouth sits on the Dart River, north west of the famous dam. The brigade members and townsfolk remember the huge bushfires that struck north eastern Victoria in 2003 and burned right through the middle of the village, also scorching



*We wait  
The crews are gathered  
We wait  
Lines of defence are drawn in the soil  
We wait  
Water points are set  
and pumps are primed  
We wait  
Orders are given  
We wait  
Choose to leave  
or stay and defend  
We wait  
No children in our town,  
they are safe  
We wait  
The smoke lingers,  
the plume grows  
We wait  
The worry, the nerves  
We wait  
Men and women, standing strong  
within their battle lines  
We wait  
For glow to get closer  
and the embers to fall  
They wait*

by Alannah Dower

Dartmouth Dam /  
Alannah Dower



adjacent farmland. “We’re a fairly remote locale,” says Kevin Stuart, First Lieutenant during the Black Summer fires. “One road in, one road out. And, similar to 2003, you can’t always rely on assistance to get here. We were worried.”

“But we’d learned from the 2003 fires,” says Jono. “We were prepared.”

At the local level, the brigade had encouraged residents to clean up their properties, and even those of their neighbours. They also assisted elderly and vulnerable people to be ready to act. “We’d set up an education program to help people have a home fire safety plan, and there was more fire awareness within the town,” says Kevin. “It made it easier for people to make a decision about staying or going.”

The fourth of January was expected to be a peak day, and most of the women, children and vulnerable people left town as the fire approached. About 50 people stayed and they were all actively involved in fighting the fire or in meal preparation and giving other support to the brigade. A local contractor with a bulldozer and excavator created an earth line around the whole town and adjacent properties, as well as critical infrastructure such as telecommunications, domestic water, and importantly, assets associated with the operation of Dartmouth Dam. The dam holds national significance as a vital part of water supply to the Murray–Darling Basin.

In fact, the brigade had been established during construction of the dam, in the 1970s.

Many of the fire breaks were similar to those created before the 2003 fires. “Besides the fire breaks, we had support from the community and other agencies with the supply of plant, equipment back-up for power supplies, machinery and the preparation of meals for volunteers,” says Jono. “We set up water points with lighting, and personnel ready to operate those points.” Agencies such as AGL, North-East Water and Goulburn-Murray Water made their resources available. The brigade was also in radio contact with volunteers who were perched up on hilltops as fire spotters.

“We couldn’t have been any better prepared than we were,” says Kevin.

On 4 January, the Dartmouth station started to be run round the clock. Two tankers arrived from Bungaree and Axe Creek in central Victoria, to be used by the brigade along with its own tanker. Then, following a south easterly change in the early hours of 5 January, Dartmouth was shrouded in a thick blanket of smoke for a number of days from fires to the east of the township. CFA members worked with Goulburn-Murray Water to find the location of the fire beneath the smoke, as the front wasn’t showing up on aerial scans.

Cooler conditions and light rainfall stalled the fire’s approach during this time, but 10 January was expected to be another

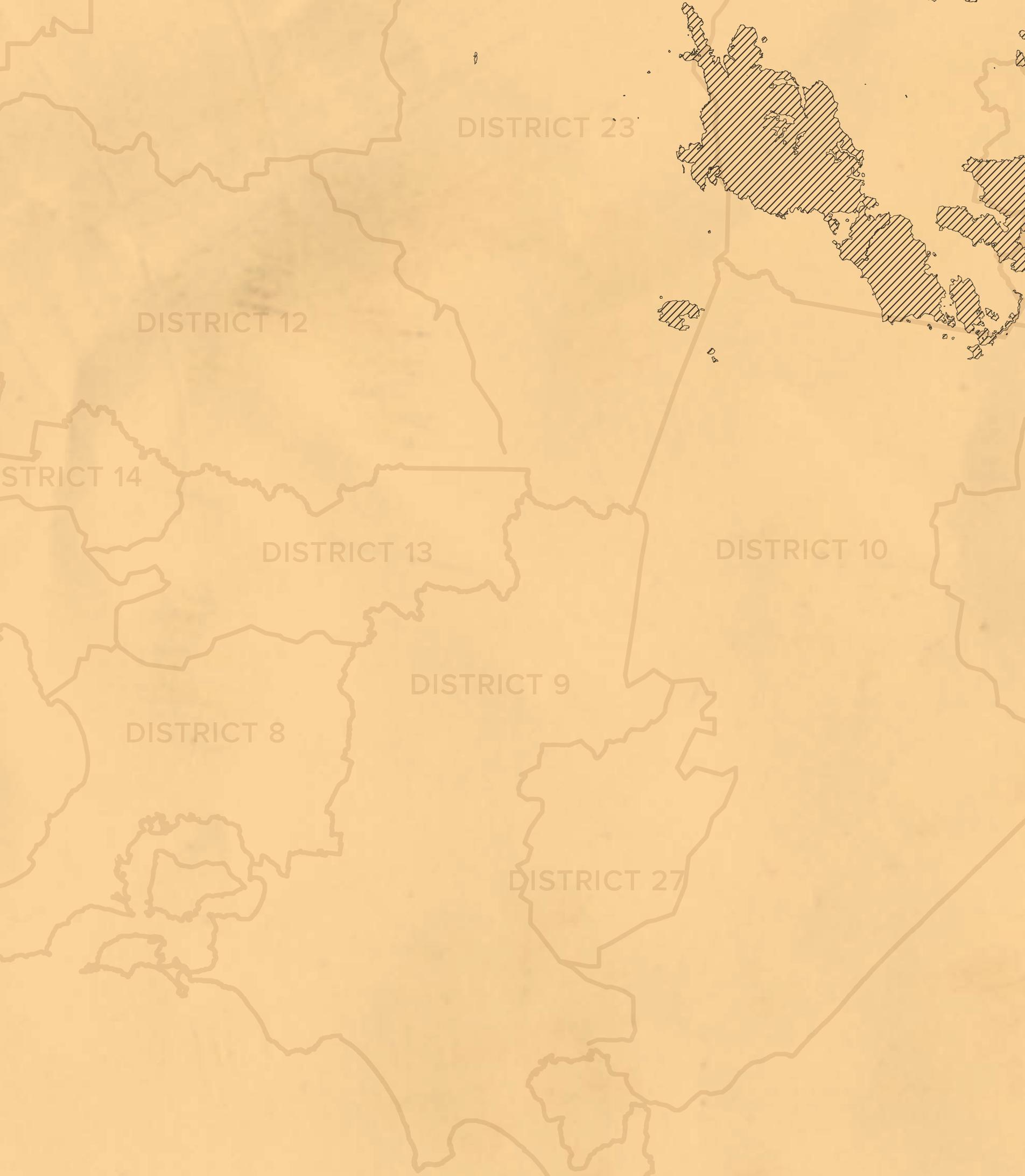
peak day. Supported by large air tankers, fire agencies implemented a strategic break from the Dart River to Lucyvale in the north. This successfully pulled up the fire on Glamour Hill, near the top of the river. The front had come to within 10–15 kilometres of Dartmouth, but the town was unscathed. All the planning and preparation had paid off.

As the main fire danger passed, brigade members monitored fire activity at sites where DELWP was conducting night-time burning operations. The main fire lingered for weeks, so rostered crews were on stand-by in case it took a run.

The joint effort between the residents and their brigade extended into the period after the fire. A determined band of people with bobcats, post drivers and tractors all pitched in to help those affected by the fires in surrounding areas such as Corryong and Cudgewa with fencing, and general relief and support. The brigade was also actively involved in rehabilitating fire breaks around the town.

“We were very proud of the way everyone conducted themselves during that period – the brigade members, the townsfolk, support staff and the other agencies,” says Kevin.

Jono says the brigade had learned much during these fires and that they would be even better prepared for the next ones. “I think we did it pretty well!” he says.



DISTRICT 23

DISTRICT 12

DISTRICT 14

DISTRICT 13

DISTRICT 10

DISTRICT 9

DISTRICT 8

DISTRICT 27

Dca

DISTRICT 11

# THE SOUTH EAST

## BENAMBRA FIRE BRIGADE

### Local knowledge key to fighting fires

**Brigade members involved:** 30

**Range of experience:** from recently joined to 60 years

**Supporting roles:** checking roads to see if blocked; checking fuel and water at the station; preparing food for members

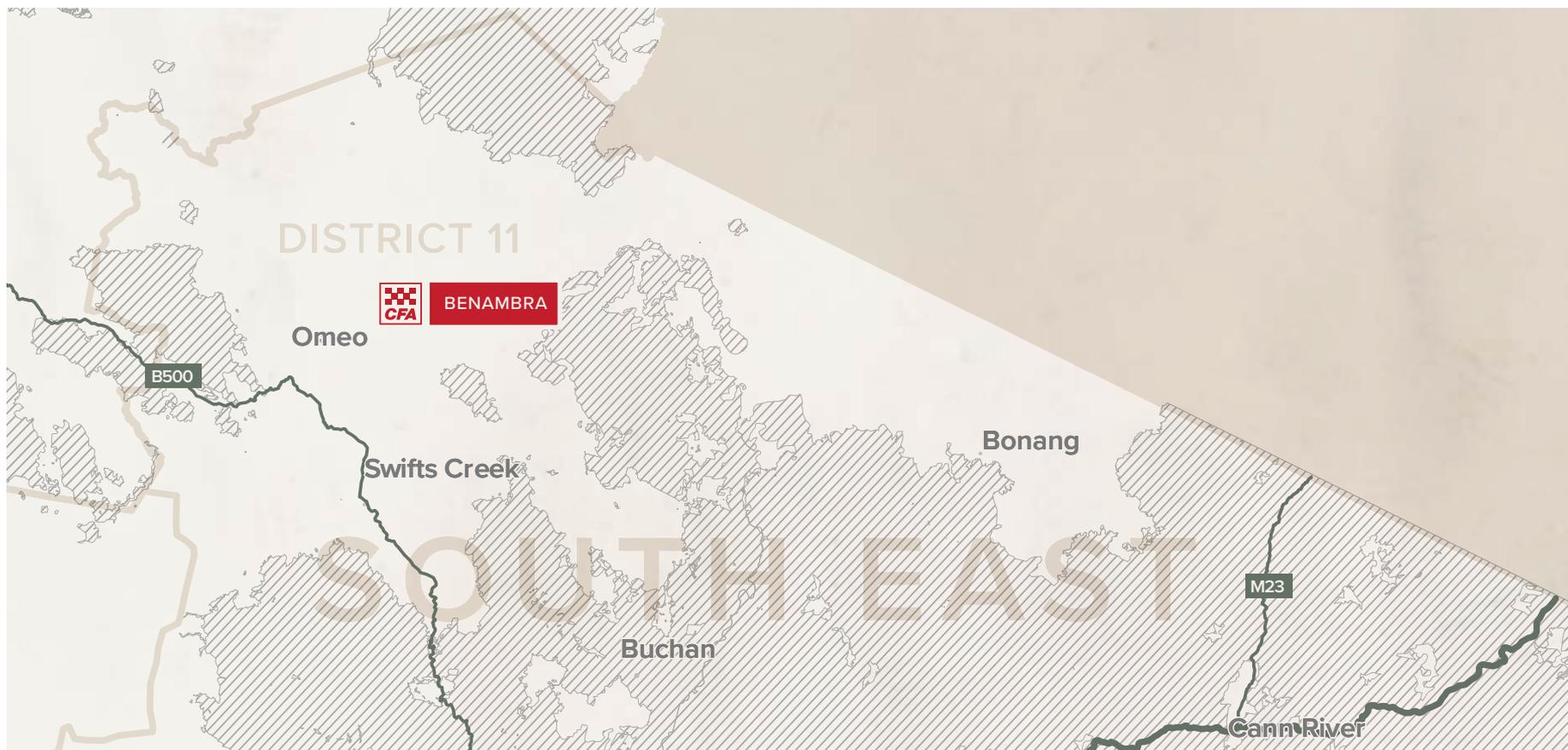
**Areas:** 60 kilometres north towards Corryong, north east towards Kosciuszko National Park, east towards Gelantipy, south to Swifts Creek and Omeo

**Campaign duration:** late December 2019 to mid-February 2020

The people of Benambra breathed a collective sigh of relief on 13 January 2020, the day a fire approaching their town from Walwa to the north changed direction, hit another fire, and put itself out. The 2003 fires had affected the area badly, and memories of this still lingered. Locals had been confronted by two enormous fireballs that decimated all that lay in their path, including hundreds of cattle, fences, sheds, hay and two homes.

Long-term Benambra brigade member John Cook OAM was in the station's control room for 60 days during those fires, helping to guide operations; he only went home for a shower. John managed the control room again in 2019–20. "If anyone in the field wanted anything, I'd get it," he says. "Quite often I'd send a spotter out to a high point and they'd radio in. I'd send meals out to them and make sure everything was alright. They're all locals and they're handy. They know which direction the wind's coming and which direction a fire's coming. They've been through it all so often, and that makes a difference."

The general store also acted as an information hub for people in the area. "They wanted to know where the fire was, where it was coming from, what was the best thing to do," says John. "I spent a lot of time down there, too."



The brigade and community were well prepared, despite difficulties in sourcing heavy machinery. "Our hands were tied a lot of the time because the road to Bairnsdale was blocked," says John. "We had a fire before the Walwa fire came through and we had to put our own machinery on it. We put a grader around every woolshed, house and all assets."

John's son Danny, at the time a Captain of 23 years, organised equipment and teams from the control room too, then he was out in the field working with other CFA members, DELWP and a group of American firefighters.

The main front, the tail end of the Walwa fire, approached from Corryong, then went south up the Nariel Valley to the top of the range just beyond Benambra. John explains: "It got pretty close, but thanks to a change of wind the main fire was pushed across onto the one that had gone through, so it came to a dead end. We gave a sigh of relief because with a strong wind behind it, we could have copped it on the plain country here within half an hour. Although it spotted out into the bush not far from open country, they were onto it quickly."

Fire that gets into the plains that surround Benambra means lost grass, lost feed and lost livelihoods. The brigade, led

by Danny and operating with a strike team, saved a large swathe of pasture around Beloka to the north, after New Year's Eve. "They did a good job," says John. "Grass is a huge asset to us."

A CFA Life Member (he joined in 1960), John has been Captain, District Group Officer, Group Officer, Secretary and Divisional Commander, and has been similarly active in VICSES. He's big on the value of local knowledge: "Local firefighters know where the best place is to put in fire breaks or the right bush tracks for a fire coming from a certain direction. Danny can put out a fire even before he gets the pager call. That's how quick the locals are."

Benambra brigade gained 10 new members after the Black Summer fires, just like it did after the 2003 fires. "I feel as though we've got a new life because of the new members coming in," says John, adding: "I'm real proud of the community round here. When they're asked to do something, there's no questions. It's, 'Right, I'll do that.'"



John Cook OAM received his life membership from Deputy Chief Officer Trevor Owen /Amanda Pendergast

## BASS COAST STRIKE TEAM 0905

### Strike team brings relief to Omeo area

**Brigade members involved:** 16, from Dalyston, Wonthaggi, Kilcunda, Kernot and Phillip Island brigades

**Range of experience:** from 30-plus years to one member in their first year of service

**Areas:** Swifts Creek, Benambra, Brookville, Omeo, Tambo 35 Marthavale–Barmouth Spur fire

**Campaign duration:** 2–5 January 2020

When the Bass Coast Strike Team 0905 arrived in the main street of Omeo on 2 January 2020, it brought a wave of relief to people in the isolated area. Fires had hovered nearby for more than a fortnight, alpine communities to the west were under threat, and residents were keenly aware of the destruction bushfires were wreaking to the east. “The fires had been going for such a long time and there weren’t enough resources to cover the whole area,” says Dalyston Fire Brigade Captain and Strike Team Leader Roger O’Brien.

Peter Dell, Deputy Strike Team Leader and Wonthaggi brigade firefighter, says: “Just to see an influx of 40-odd firefighters come to town to replace crews who were completing their shift was probably a sight that made the residents feel relieved. Plus, it gave the local firefighters a bit of a break.”

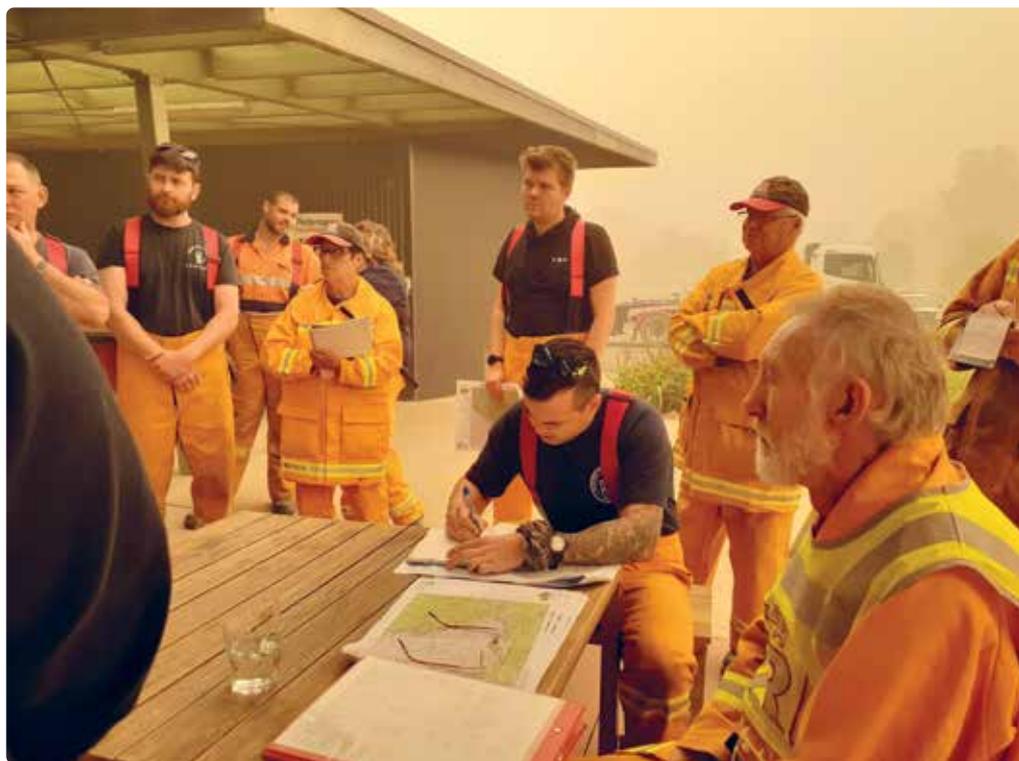
Strike Team 0905, mainly from Bass Coast and with a mix of experience, was one of two teams that arrived on 2 January. The other, Strike Team 0893, was composed mainly of crew from Westernport Group. “We were flown in, which was most unusual,” says Peter. “For fires in Victoria, we’d usually take a bus or the trucks.” However, the road to Omeo via Bairnsdale was cut off. The plane was due to arrive at Mount Hotham airport but was diverted to Wangaratta after thick smoke made landing too dangerous.

The 16-member team arrived at Omeo at 3pm. On arrival, the two crews were combined. Strike Team 0905 comprised two tankers and three ultralights, while 0893 consisted of three tankers and two ultralights. The 0905 took over the vehicles they would use for the deployment, received a briefing, and were deployed to Brookville, a settlement south west of Swifts Creek, to familiarise themselves with its terrain and assets.

“It was a good chance to have a look at the water points and houses during the day,” says Roger. “We ended up back there two days later at night. The fires were fairly benign at that stage, behind the top of the hills, but were expected to move into Brookville in the next couple of days.”

The firefighters talked to residents about what they planned to do. “They’d actually formed a little group between themselves, which made it easier for us,” says Peter.

The next morning, after a briefing at the ICC in Swifts Creek, the team was sent to an area in Ensay North, to the east of Brookville, to consult with DELWP crews, and to conduct a fuel-reduction burn along 800 metres on the edge of national park, working in what was by now thick smoke. At 5pm, they were called via Code 1 to a running grassfire at Benambra, though this





had died down by the time they got there; 0905 then returned to Omeo.

Later that evening, the team learnt that an SMS had been issued recommending that everyone leave town. Large army helicopters had already airlifted dozens of people from the recreation reserve where they had been seeking refuge. “We were just going to bed,” says Roger. “It sounded a bit ominous!”

Peter explains: “We were told if anything happened, we’d be getting a call and would have to go back out. That put a few people on edge. There were a lot of locals in the pub and they got a bit concerned, then all headed home to prepare for the worst. They were worn out by then. ‘Is it going to come out of the national park? Will it stay there?’” He adds: “Talking to them at the pub, you could tell how grateful the locals were for us being there – it was a relief for them.”

All of the firefighters were on standby; those who could, slept. But the threat to Omeo didn’t eventuate. “The potential was pretty scary, but it didn’t do what they predicted,” says Roger.

The fourth of January was predicted to be dire, and the mood at the ICC at the 8am briefing was apprehensive. “A number of local access roads were closed,” says Roger said. “The forecast was for a south westerly wind change in the early afternoon and potential for a thunderstorm. They were worried storms would push the fire towards Swifts Creek and were expecting fire to impact Swifts Creek and Ensay. Our job that day was just to protect Swifts Creek.”

That task meant safeguarding assets that included the Bush Nursing Centre, the high school, shops, houses and a large sawmill. A tanker was positioned at the telephone exchange. There was talk of two fires joining up.

Then the sky changed colour to a muted red as smoke and burnt embers drifted into town. The southerly wind change came around 2pm, followed by a Red Flag Warning 40 minutes later as strong winds hit beyond Omeo. The team was sent to Brookville for asset protection: the fire had come up over the ridge, jumped containment lines out of the bush and was reaching paddocks. Tankers protected houses and dealt with hotspots as ultralights put out new outbreaks.

One home was empty but others were being well protected by their owners. “When we turned up, it meant they could have a break, a shower and a bit of sleep,” says Roger. “It was really a taskforce by then, with a mix of tankers for asset protection and ultralights for the awkward places, a good combination of equipment. We covered a fair bit of area; they’d made sure we were familiar with it.”

At 8.30pm the strike team was relieved and they returned to the Hilltop Hotel in Omeo, where they were staying for their last night. Roger and Peter both recall eating dinner on tables outside the hotel using plastic knives so sharp they cut through the foil containers on their laps, leaving a few fireys with their dinner on their turnout gear!

By the following morning, roads had reopened and the strike team left by bus, headed towards Bairnsdale. They passed kilometre after kilometre of burnt bush on the Great Alpine Road and the rubble of burned houses, particularly in and around Sarsfield. “It was pretty confronting,” says Peter. “You could tell how quickly the fire had moved, the sheer speed of it.”

“That utter destruction and the impact it has on people really brings it home,” says Roger. “That’s why it’s good to help. We did everything we were asked. They changed tasks for us fairly frequently and we responded to whatever the need was. The crew was good: whatever we asked them to do, they did, and we’d never met some of them before.”

Peter agrees: “I was pretty proud of the way the crews worked together and with the other agencies.”

By the time Peter returned home, Wonthaggi brigade was already part of a relief effort to send food and other goods to fire-affected areas. “It was rumoured that people were going to be waiting for the bus and giving us a heroes’ welcome home,” he says. “I thought, ‘Nup, we’re not heroes. We just want to go home and have a shower and a rest.’”

Left: Incident Control Centre briefing Swifts Creek / Anne Crawford

## BRUTHEN FIRE BRIGADE

### Fires bring out best in brigade

**Brigade members involved:** 22

**Range of experience:** from new recruits in their late teens to long-term members

**Supporting roles:** providing meals, filling point for CFA, DELWP and private firefighting vehicles, meeting point for strike teams

**Areas:** Bruthen, Sarsfield, Mossiface, Wiseleigh, Buchan, Gelantipy, W Tree, Omeo

**Campaign duration:** 21 November 2019 to 20 January 2020

**As the area surrounding Bruthen burned, good preparation and good luck meant the town itself escaped the full force of the 2019–20 bushfires – three times. The fires brought out the teamwork of the urban brigade, leaving it stronger, closer, and ultimately much bigger than it had been.**

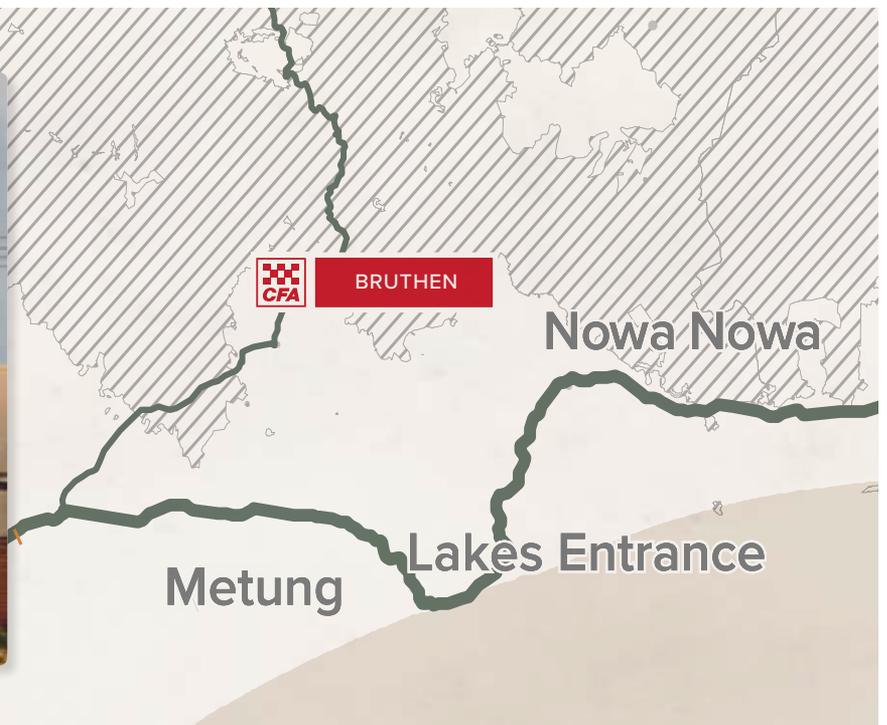
The brigade's campaign began in earnest on 21 November 2019 with a dry lightning strike about 3 kilometres north east of Bruthen. Its members were assembled at the station soon afterwards, watching the strikes on radar, when fire hit just north of Bruthen. The crew was out the door of the station within 90 seconds and on the scene about two minutes later. By that time, fire was pulsing through the treetops at canopy level, with the flames then dropping to the ground.

Twenty or so fires quickly spread throughout the area. "It was very hard to extinguish the fires because of the dryness," says First Lieutenant Mike McStephen. "Anything that landed on the ground would start burning."



**Right:** Great Alpine Road, Mossiface / Jody Haberfield

**Far right:** Church Street, Bruthen / Jody Haberfield



On 21 December, long-term brigade member and Deputy Group Officer Jody Haberfield, who was leading a local strike team, was warned that a fire was heading their way. “It was moving scarily fast,” he says. The team managed to contain that blaze, but elsewhere it was spreading.

Back home that night, Mike looked at his pager as it sounded at 10pm and thought someone was just smelling smoke, that the fire was miles away. He turned his car out of the driveway, heading for the station, and looked north. “The whole sky was glowing orange,” he says. “It had really got away.”

The Barmouth Spur fire ran 25 kilometres across the top of Bruthen overnight. The next morning, at first light, the firefighters began door-knocking houses to the north to warn residents about the approaching fire, as FFMVic worked hard to contain its edges.

Were it not for the fuel reduction DELWP had previously carried out, and which stopped the fire to the north, 30 December could have been apocalyptic for Bruthen. Strong west-to-north-westerly winds had linked the Barmouth Spur fire to fires north of Bairnsdale and coming from Buchan South. By 4pm the fire was heading straight at the town again, this time from Wiseleigh to the west. A wind change then pushed it towards Sarsfield. While Bruthen escaped the brunt of the fires, Sarsfield and Wiseleigh were heavily impacted.

“The fire behaviour was insane. It defied the rules of physics,” says Jody. Fire burnt underneath the retardant meant

to extinguish it. On one occasion he was stunned to see a brilliant white fireball tear across the road in front of him. He saw fire propelled back into wind.

With the pump on Bruthen’s ultralight broken, Mike was without an appliance. Unable to get to his home for a rest because it was cut off by fire, he went to brigade Captain James Nicholas’ house opposite the station for a shower, which consisted of pouring four bottles of water over himself (the power was out). He then tried to get some sleep. By the time he went back to the fire station, word had filtered through that his house was gone.

“I was standing half-dazed in front of the station,” says Mike. “James’ wife Tammy gave me a massive bear hug and then grabbed me by the arm and said, ‘You’re moving into our rental property.’ It was just awesome.” Mike was also touched by the amount of food and clothes and letters people sent to fireys afterwards, to thank them for what they had done. “We’re not looking for praise or anything like that,” he says. “We just do what we have to do.”

On the evening of 2 January, the day before a predicted spike day, Mike told a community meeting of about 300 people that he’d lost his house, but that thankfully no-one was there at the time – his wife and children were safe. “Make your plan early and stick to it,” he urged his audience.

Meanwhile, a strike team that had arrived that day had to leave for Bairnsdale, where fire was threatening to impact, leaving Bruthen with one ultralight tanker and the brigade’s tanker. There was no

power, communications were patchy, and water pressure in the town was down to a trickle – although a local landscaper would step in with the offer of a 10,000-litre water-carting truck. James issued social media messages warning that the brigade was unable to defend the perimeter of the town with its remaining assets, and that only buildings in the middle of town could be protected. He told people they should leave immediately.

“Then, we got lucky again,” says Mike. An inversion layer muted the fires, so a predicted run from the north didn’t eventuate. Fire maps showed Bruthen unscathed within a horseshoe of burned ground.

“It’s amazing what we were able to save in such a significant amount of fire,” says Jody. “Everybody just got on and did it, and did it so well. They were exemplary. And I’m proud of the way we all worked together.”

The brigade went on constant call-outs in the following fortnight to fight reignitions of fire on property boundaries. Members also contributed to an Omeo deployment, before gradually settling into recovery mode. Recovery was a struggle for many.

Bruthen brigade has grown threefold since the Black Summer fires, its new members no doubt inspired to join by the achievements of those who fought so hard to keep them safe.

## MOSSI-TAMBO FIRE BRIGADE

### From “the gates of hell” to moments of joy

**Brigade members involved:** 11

**Range of experience:** mostly more than 5 years

**Supporting roles:** delivering food to crews at the station; completing fuel runs; ensuring trucks had the right equipment

**Areas:** Marthavale–Barmouth Spur, Six Mile, Ensay and W Tree fires, which merged to become Tambo Complex

**Campaign duration:** 21 November 2019 to end February 2020

**For Mossi-Tambo brigade’s Christine Bittner and Kathryn Williams, the 2019–20 fires were filled with times of drama, astonishing fire behaviour, sadness, unexpected moments of joy, and ultimately pride in their exhausted brigade.**

Christine, the brigade’s Captain and Treasurer, and Kathryn, its First Lieutenant and Secretary, prepared their community for the season in October 2019, including by holding public meetings about fire readiness. Then, as for many brigades across Victoria, their campaign started in earnest with dry lightning strikes on 21 November. Kathryn says the fire “was crowning instantly and spotting pretty much everywhere. There wasn’t a lot we could do”.

Five days later, Kathryn was part of a local strike team called out to a fire at Dead Horse Track, east of Bruthen. The team worked with the many DELWP operators who were back-burning, helping with blacking out. “By afternoon the fire took off,” says Kathryn. “There was a Red Flag Warning. There was a massive pyrocumulus smoke column and we were directly under it.”



The strike team was sent to the Kurnai Park settlement, a nature reserve run by the Gunaikurnai people, to protect its administrative buildings. They waited for fire to come out of the bush as fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters dumped retardants and water. It didn't, and the team was eventually sent home. They found out the next morning that the settlement had burnt down during the night.

"The biggest thing we learnt out of the fires was that the normal behaviour of a bushfire didn't matter," says Kathryn. "You expect fire to slow down at night with rising humidity and decreasing temperature, but in a lot of instances it didn't."

Kathryn was stunned at what she saw travelling with a strike team on 21 December. The pager went off at 2.30am for the team to go to Tambo Crossing, north of Bruthen, following another team that had left earlier in the day. Kathryn says the bright red glow looking north was "phenomenal". She continues: "As we went up the Great Alpine Road, you had the Six Mile fire on your right and the Barmouth fire on your left, going in the other direction. No-one believed us! As we were driving, you could see ridge after ridge on fire, crowning fires, fires in gullies. It was like



driving through the gates of hell."

Kathryn adds: "You knew as you were driving into it that it was closing behind you. At no point was our safety in danger, but time was of the essence. We made it through with 15 minutes to spare."

The firefighting at Tambo Crossing was intense. "We didn't get home until sometime the next night," says Kathryn.

By 28 December, the strike teams in the area had increased to six, including MFB pumpers from Melbourne – the next couple of days were predicted to be dangerous. Kathryn relates what happened next: "On 30 December it took out everything: Sarsfield, Clifton Creek and the back of Bruthen, 90 per cent of our response area. That's our backyard. It was the day from hell. We fought all day then were sent home at 4am the next day. We were pretty much gibberish by then. It was non-stop firefighting."

"It was mind-blowing," adds Christine. "We go to other towns and support them but this was my patch. We know who's on what property. I'm still thanking people today for coming to support us."

Christine had to make the heartbreaking decision to leave her farm as fire approached. She took photos of its rooms, expecting the house not to be there the next morning, and arrived at Swan Reach base camp in tears. "We were right in the firing line. We prepared everything as best we could but I was expecting to come home and have to dispatch animals," she says. On returning the next day, she saw "the shearing shed, then the front fence, my grandfather's flat and my house, all intact. And the cows were fine!"

Sadly, another brigade member lost his house. But uplifting moments shone through the bad news.

Christine was assisting at Divisional Command at Johnsonville when she answered a call from an MFB member, Colin, who liaised with the Australian Islamic Centre in Melbourne. Colin told her that a couple of trucks were arriving the next day with some donated goods. The following morning, five small trucks full of goods arrived, along with families from the Islamic Centre who brought and cooked breakfast for the fireys.

"It was very emotional and the food was amazing," says Christine. "When you're in the middle of it, firefighting feels very insular. You're so focused on what's happening directly in front of you. To have someone say, 'Here, let me help you,' and to see all those families was lovely."

The Islamic community also hosted breakfasts for firefighters in Lakes Entrance,

forging lasting connections there as well.

Another friendship was formed after Operation Angel volunteers dropped off supply packs with handwritten notes, together with pictures drawn by children. "You are so selfless and brave. We can't thank you enough for your important work. Stay safe and look after each other," read one note.

Kathryn was on a strike team when Bruthen Captain James Nicholas appeared with a cardboard box that had been drawn all over, and with a note reading: "Thank you to all the firefighters." It was full of homemade shortbreads and gingerbreads baked by a local girl – she was five years old. The seemingly bottomless box went everywhere. Biscuits were eaten when a crew had a cuppa and were offered to landowners being escorted to their properties by the firefighters. "One little girl made everyone's day special," says Kathryn.

Christine fondly remembers how a Peer Support volunteer arrived at the station with a psychologist on 20 January 2020. "We were washing the truck and hoses when he arrived. He helped us. It then started to rain after months of drought. Kathryn and I did a rain dance in a puddle and they recorded it," she says.

Mossi-Tambo turned out for nearly two months solid. The brigade normally attends 30 call-outs a year; they attended close to 80 from November 2019 to February 2020. "I was really proud of the team," says Kathryn. Christine echoes the sentiment: "Every time I asked for a crew, there was a crew. Hours and hours of endless work, in extraordinary conditions."

A few members haven't turned out since. "I don't judge anyone who doesn't want to fight a fire after that," says Kathryn. "I think we all came out of it with our own scars."

"We had no lives lost. Every single person in our area is still alive," adds Christine.

Left: Putting out a stump fire, Sarsfield / Kathryn Williams

## MOUNT TAYLOR FIRE BRIGADE

### Young fireys shine in ferocious fires

**Brigade members involved:** 40

**Range of experience:** from 2 to 25 years

**Supporting roles:** non-operational members helped at station, preparing food, among other things

**Areas:** NSW, Ensay/Omeo, Clifton Creek, Mount Taylor, Sarsfield

**Campaign duration:** 11 November 2019 into February 2020

**For Mount Taylor Fire Brigade Captain Geoff Crane, one of the most memorable aspects of the 2019–20 campaign was the way the brigade’s younger members stepped up in what were exceptionally difficult conditions.**

In December 2019, Mount Taylor brigade worked with FFMVic for a couple of weeks to prepare for potential fires, mostly creating fire breaks around Mount Taylor, and Clifton Creek to the north. Traditionally, the approach had worked well, as fires usually came from this direction, but on 30 December a fire jumped the break “by kilometres” and spotted into unburnt bush. “We could have had 100 fire breaks and that might have had a result that was a little bit different, but fire is unpredictable and it was the luck of the draw as to where it was going to come out and take off,” says Geoff. “It was spotting all around us at times and was very daunting for a lot of our new members, who’d never seen this before.”

The brigade used three tankers of its own, Geoff’s utility, and an ultralight tanker loaned by Lang Lang Fire Brigade to chase the outbreaks, with more than 20 members at hand. “We went to everything we could,” says Geoff.



**Clockwise from top:** Mount Taylor brigade; public meeting at fire station; looking north / Geoff Crane

Geoff explains that the conditions on 30 December were wild: “I’ve been to a few bushfires before, but the fire being so close to home brought some reality to what we were trying to achieve.” At one point, the Mount Taylor tankers had to retreat with two other vehicles into a burnt area – “one foot in the black” – as the fire began spotting all around them.

Mount Taylor brigade was among multiple teams of CFA firefighters and many FFMVic vehicles that turned out to the devastating blazes at Sarsfield that night. Geoff says he is proud that the group included seven young people, most of whom were facing their first real fire. One young man had just turned 17. “You must have your parent’s consent at 17 to get on a fire truck,” says Geoff. “Those parents had faith in us to keep their child safe.”

Geoff’s three daughters all contributed too. His eldest, Casey, then 25, helped protect the family home with her mother, Katrina, also a CFA member, while daughters Emily (19) and Jessie (23) were on the fireground. “There certainly were some proud father–daughter moments,” Geoff admits.

It was a shock to the younger members to find out that night that there were houses they couldn’t save. “The look on their faces and their demeanour, their slumped shoulders, when they couldn’t save those houses was heartbreaking,” says Geoff. “I told them that as much as we’d love to save everything, sometimes we can’t. It was devastating to see so many properties [were] lost that night. And in our backyard.”

Geoff, worried about their morale, considered taking the younger members out of the fray. But he’s glad he didn’t: “We got to a street in Sarsfield at some stage during that night and there were seven or eight houses in a row that were under severe threat and we managed to save them. Then, with their chests finally puffed out again, they were looking for more!”

Lucas Rowley, 17 at the time, had been a member of a metropolitan brigade at Hastings since he was 12 and in a junior program. He’d responded to 70 call-outs in a variety of scenarios as an active firefighter there, including the occasional bushfire, before becoming a member at Mount Taylor only two months before the fires. “I expected it to be bad but it was more intense than I’d thought,” says Lucas. “Most of the time we were sent on strike teams going to the surrounding areas putting out fires, doing some evacuations and protecting property where we could. It got scary a couple of times with the bad



weather, when wind picked up and the fire would suddenly go the other way or start flaring up again, but we had a good team and all went well.”

Watching houses in Sarsfield burn down was upsetting, though. Lucas says: “We did save some, which made us happy. There was relief that we could do that.”

The Sarsfield fires were also an eye-opener for Emily Crane, who’d been in the brigade since she was 14 and had been on a strike team burning off in Dargo earlier that year. But she hadn’t seen a bushfire at close range before. “I’d never seen anything so extreme, the fact that it was so close to home and I was driving through the town of Sarsfield seeing the houses of people I knew burn down, and watching your dad go in a burning building when you have to stay on the truck,” she says. But she adds: “As much as it was heartbreaking watching people’s houses burn, the amount we saved made me feel so much better. Knowing some people came home to a house we’d saved was a pretty proud achievement.”

The firefighters returned to the station just after 6am the following day, after nearly 24 hours on the fireground. They had a debrief, went home to bed, and were woken up an hour later by pager. Every one of those younger members turned up. They worked eight hours straight again, and turned up the day after as well. “I take my hat off to them,” says Geoff. “They listened and did what they were told and obviously had a bit of faith in us. I’m certainly proud of my whole crew. They all went above and beyond what we expected anyone to go through.”

All up, more than 40 Mount Taylor members volunteered throughout the 2019–20 season, with 18 of them working more than 30 consecutive days attending call-outs. Some members, including Geoff, had already been to New South Wales in November as part of strike teams.

Emily turned out for almost 30 days over the fire season, together with the other younger members. “We all worked together, we all helped each other, we’re one big family now,” she says. “My father was out for more than 50 days, though. He was barely home when I was there, always at the station or taking phone calls. I have big boots to fill!”

Says Lucas: “I was proud of just being a new member to the brigade and how well everyone shared their experience. They were training us younger members and gave us a go at most things. I learned heaps. It brought us all together much more as a brigade, which I really enjoyed.”

The crew had a debrief after the fires, and Geoff also phoned as many members as possible to “have a yack” and see how they were faring. He said they managed “pretty well” with their mental health: “We’re a close brigade. Generally, you can tell by the way someone talks to you how they’re going.”

Geoff explains that, traditionally, “you do get a loss of members after a big fire, who realise it’s not for them”. But everyone who took part in fighting the Black Summer fires has stayed with brigade. Geoff says the younger members became reasonably experienced firefighters pretty quickly, and three of them are now on the brigade’s management team.

## BAIRNSDALE FIRE BRIGADE

### Members support for community “second to none”

**Brigade members involved:** 30-plus

**Range of experience:** from 5 to 50 years

**Supporting roles:** Ladies' Auxiliary and partners helped with brigade updates, supporting members and being on duty at station during hot day response

**Areas:** NSW, and from Bairnsdale to Omeo to Mallacoota

**Campaign duration:** early September 2019 to late February 2020

For Bairnsdale brigade Captain Aaron Lee, being a strike team leader in East Gippsland during the Black Summer fires was a matter of doing the best with what you had. It meant drawing on local knowledge, being adaptable, attending meetings, and partaking in some dark humour when things didn't go as expected. Most of all, it was about keeping his firefighters safe.

Aaron, a brigade member for 25 years and Captain for eight, was tasked in early December 2019 with leading strike teams to tackle the Six Mile fire at the back of Bruthen. “Having two strike teams under my wings was absolute chaos, with so many vehicles to balance, before getting another strike team leader to help out,” he says. “But nothing was ever done loosely or in an ad-hoc way.”

Aaron then spent four weeks “organising bits and pieces”, such as arranging local strike team crews, attending meetings, and turning out when fire took a run at Tambo Crossing, before a big outbreak at Sarsfield on New Year's Eve. “I had a local tanker strike team and a metro strike team of pumpers, tankers and ultra-heavy vehicles, 25 fire trucks, and [I] thought this is great, we're going to do really well!” he says.





The units tracked the fire as it moved along the Great Alpine Road from the back of Sarsfield to Wiseleigh and then Bruthen. As Aaron explains: “It quickly became clear that it wasn’t going to work because Sarsfield was getting smashed and so was Bruthen. I was cut off from my sector commanders; we were on our own. Some of the tankers were doing really good work in the community of Wiseleigh just above Dirty Hollow.”

Then, continues Aaron, “Around Eleven Mile we really started to see the bulk of the fire.” But he couldn’t hear the roar he expected and knew worse was to come: “I knew it would get aggressive at Eleven Mile because there’s a lot of dirty bush there. It did exactly that.”

The fire was ferocious. Aaron made a tactical retreat to Windsor Drive, a street on the outskirts of Sarsfield. There, firefighters protected houses as the fire swung wildly in a couple of directions. “It was good to have that vantage point, but we couldn’t get to some parts of the community with only the four trucks we had in that area,” says Aaron.

The firefighters drove back into the township, where house after house was on fire. Extra support from a neighbouring district was called in. “They turned up to this absolute firestorm in the dark,” says Aaron.

After the main front had passed, Aaron asked the crew to put out fires at the houses that were saveable. But he had to watch as a Sarsfield member’s house burned down, knowing nothing would save it: “I know him personally, through a family connection. I really feel for him.”

On another occasion, Aaron got a message asking him to check a house belonging to a Bairnsdale member who had left his home to support the brigade. “He’d lost a little shed but the fire had burned around his house,” says Aaron. “I took a photo from his front door and sent it to him. That made his day!”

A wind change calmed the fire activity and the trucks were able to safely get access to homes that hadn’t yet been affected, with 10 minutes allocated to each place to wet garden beds and any burning stumps. Tanker crews were fatigued, so

Aaron began releasing a few to go home. He climbed into bed himself at 5am, nearly 24 hours after setting out.

Bairnsdale brigade’s involvement in the summer campaign continued for several weeks after the peak of the Sarsfield fires. “Our members were there for our community when they needed it and the support they gave was second to none,” says Aaron. “I couldn’t have been prouder of a group of people in the district that I don’t usually have a lot to do with. To be able to lead that group and be reasonably successful and get every member home to their families at the end of the day, was my biggest highlight.”

Above: Great Alpine Road / Aaron Lee

## LAKES ENTRANCE FIRE BRIGADE

### Stalwart member's unique role in supporting CFA families

**Brigade members involved:** 18

**Range of experience:** from 20 to 76 years

**Supporting roles:** running meals to the fireground; ferrying critical/specialist equipment; supply runs to Buchan immediately after the fire; members assisting with liaison/property inspection after impact, including searching for unaccounted people, and assisting at Divisional Command in Johnsonville

**Areas:** Sarsfield, Bruthen, Nowa Nowa, Mallacoota, Orbost, Wairewa, beyond Gelantipy; supported NSW teams

**Campaign duration:** October 2019 to March 2020

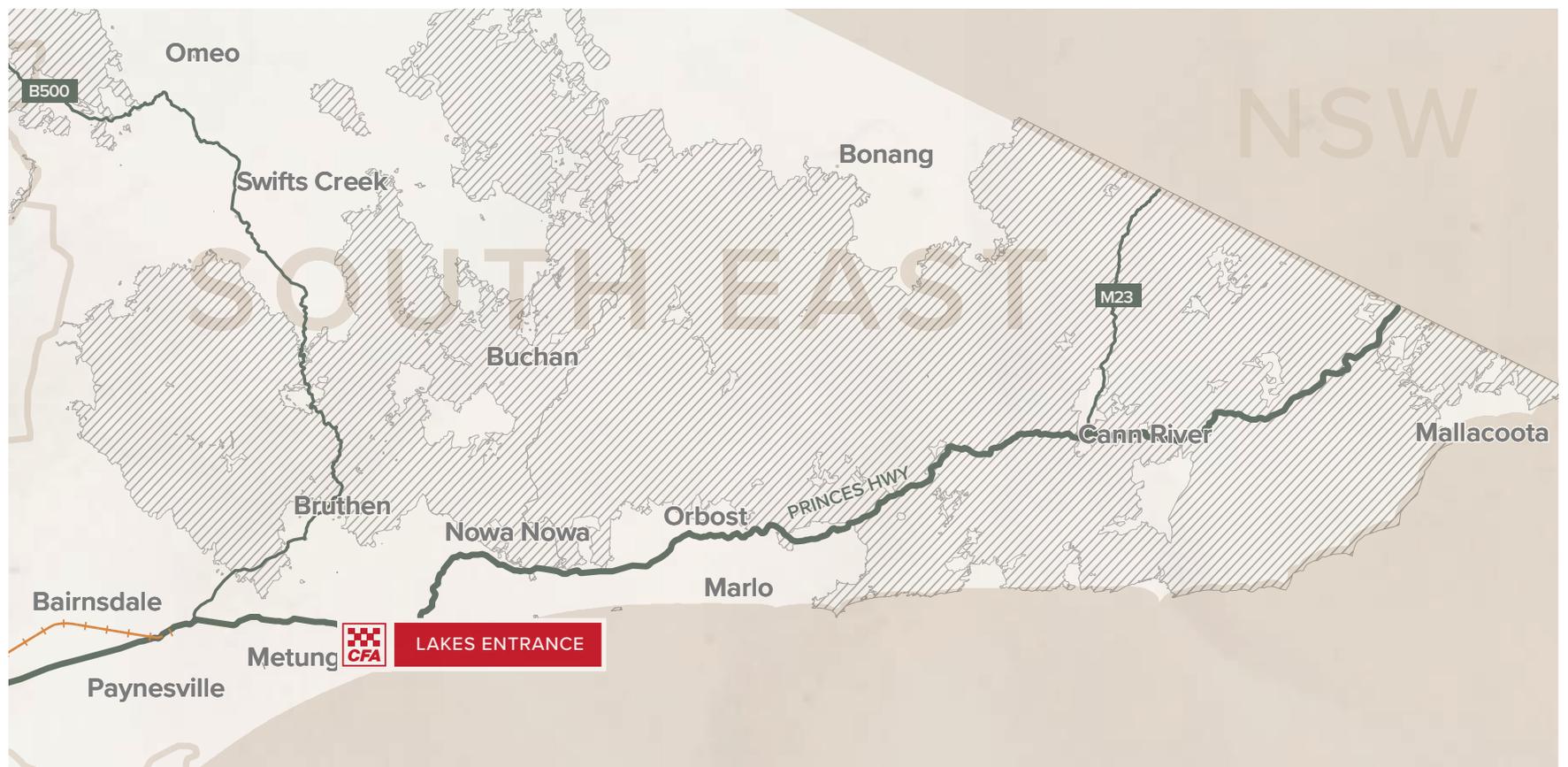
**Lakes Entrance Fire Brigade is a multiskilled urban brigade that responds to a vast range of incidents, from high-angle rescue with VICSES and marine response with Coast Guard, to road crash rescue and hazmat response. And when it comes to major events like the Black Summer fires, the brigade has another aspect that makes it stand out from other brigades.**

Brigade stalwart and former Captain Bob Richardson has for many years played an important support role for the large brigade, coordinating members deployed at extended fire events from the station's radio room, handling logistics, and looking after members and their families. Bob arranges crews so they are appropriately balanced in roles and experience, rests them, and arranges meals and the right gear for them.

"I keep tabs on where everyone is and keep their families up to date throughout the day. It's amazing how much effort it takes to do that," says Bob. "Members who go out in the morning and who are expected back at 6pm might end up coming home the next day. Their families wonder what's happened to them and hear all sorts of tales and stories."

Nance Weidemann, whose husband Steve is in the brigade, says: "A phone call from Bob has always been reassuring and informative. You know what's going on."





Bob, a volunteer firefighter for 56 years, created this support role when he joined 'Lakes' more than 40 years ago. Captain for over 20 years, he has always ensured that somebody else did the job if he was on the fireground. (He is still operational for turnouts but at 80 years of age no longer fights bushfires.) "Bob is unique," says current brigade Captain Phil Loukes. "We made him brigade Chairperson, he's held in such high regard."

During the Black Summer fires, the station quickly became a focal point in Lakes Entrance, with crews coming in and out, catching up on meals and getting gear, as well as members of the public visiting to get updates. Some community members brought gifts to show their appreciation for the firefighters' efforts. Local children made a lolly board, while a café owner sent in scones and coffees. After the fires, donated funds poured in, enough to buy a specialised high-angle rescue support vehicle. "The public support was terrific," says Bob.

During the fires, Bob was joined in his support role by 20-year-old firefighter Ryan Fordham, who provided logistical support during the busier times. Ryan initially responded to the fires in an operational

capacity, joining Lakes Entrance brigade on their first call-out on 21 November 2019, when lightning strikes started fires across the region.

"That first night was when the fire took its first major run and jumped the Great Alpine Road," explains Ryan. "A lot of the fire behaviour didn't make sense. That major run was in the middle of the night, which is almost unheard of. That's when the temperature is typically down, the humidity up and the winds are not usually strong. But it was 38 degrees and the winds were gale-force. The fuel load was so high. There was a point where it didn't matter where the wind was coming from or the speed it was going – the fire was uncontrollable." Ryan adds: "It was unreal. For me that was the real stand-out for those fires."

Bob agrees: "It was quite frightening because it wasn't just a little fire. The whole horizon had a bright orange glow. That affected the public a lot too."

Ryan joined a local strike team deployed to assist DELWP with containment operations, before turning out to Tambo Crossing and Ensay. Unfortunately, he became ill just after New Year's Eve and had to return to non-operational duties. It was then that he took on a support role for the brigade working with Bob, delivering gear to members, for example, and acting as a community liaison.

"During the worst part, after Mallacoota," says Ryan, "a lot of holidaymakers asked, 'What should we do?' There's one road in, one road out. There were fires to the north west and to the north east. The message to them was the official warning: 'If you don't live here or don't need to be here, leave now because there's a potential impact to Lakes Entrance.'"

Fire edged to within 5–10 kilometres of the coastal town. "The peak day happened when all the fires merged into one a couple of days before New Year," says Ryan. "It spotted into Colquhoun State Forest, which sits north of the whole township of Lakes Entrance. Thankfully, the aircraft were able to knock it on its head."

Ryan also took on a support role in helping other brigades directly affected by the fires. He pitched in with Johnsonville brigade when their crew needed a break. Lakes Entrance also sent a crew to the badly affected township of Wairewa to help with fencing. "It was good to see some of the younger, inexperienced members step up to the plate when the experienced ones were out," says Ryan.

Ryan was voted in as Fifth Lieutenant at Lakes Entrance after the fires, with a new role created for him covering emergency equipment for the brigade.

Left: Evening glow of the distant fire / Phil Loukes

## LAKES ENTRANCE STRIKE TEAM 1177

### Triumphs, tragedy and the joy of helping

**Strike team members involved:** 36 people, brigade members from Tambo and Mitchell groups

**Range of experience:** from first-time strike team members to those who'd attended large fires back in the 1970s

**Supporting roles:** protecting life and property; communication back to Local Command Facility on fireground and fire behaviour; supporting other strike teams

**Areas:** Sarsfield, Mossiface, Bruthen, Tambo Upper

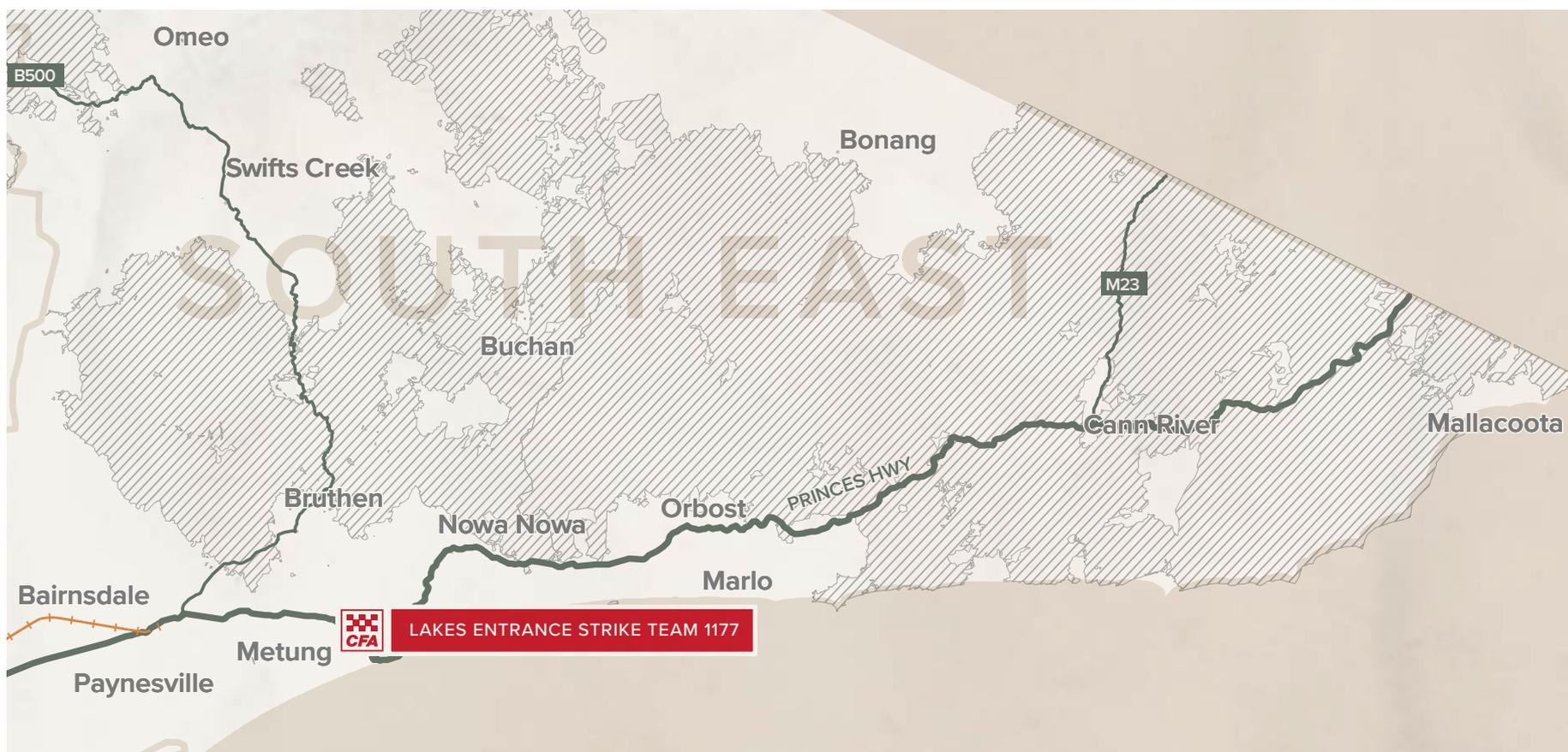
**Campaign duration:** several weeks

For Lakes Entrance brigade members, the 2019–20 campaign spanned almost six months. Knowing how dry the surrounding bush was, Captain and Strike Team Leader Phil Loukes and First Lieutenant and First District Group Officer Geof Bassett started preparing for the season as early as August 2019. By November, Geof was organising deployments to New South Wales, before bringing crew and appliances back later that month after the first lightning strikes and outbreaks of fire north east of Bruthen.

From then on, the brigade and supporting strike teams fought numerous fires across East Gippsland. The days blurred as the firefighters snatched sleep at their homes in-between call-outs. But some memories stand out for Phil and Geof.

The fire behaviour was like none the veteran fireys had ever witnessed. They scrambled crews at midnight as fire flared up in relatively benign conditions. An outbreak near Tambo Crossing burned 30 kilometres overnight. A dust storm formed in front of their eyes, came out of grasslands and headed into bush, picking up and spitting out a huge stump as it did so.

One incident proved particularly distressing, with Geof recalling operating out of Divisional Command in Johnsonville: "We ended up looking after fires in the division from Bairnsdale to Wairewa and up to Gelantipy, north of Buchan. We had



to take Triple Zero calls for that area. I was given a note to ring someone about a person trapped in fire near Buchan. When I rang them, I could hear water in the background. They were in a river surrounded by fire.” The voice on the other end of the line said, “We don’t know where our friend is. He’s disappeared.” Geof urged the group to keep safe and stay where they were, but said he couldn’t get resources there right away. A day later, local CFA and DELWP members were able to get to the area, but the missing man had unfortunately perished.

“It was very emotional,” says Geof.

Phil’s youngest daughter Bethany was part of a strike team in the area at the time and had talked to the same person. It was Bethany’s first big campaign, and feeling anxious, she rang her father from Buchan. Phil reassured her that she was with good, experienced firefighters and suggested she talk to them. “We lost communication after midnight that night. It was terrible,” says Phil, who didn’t hear from his daughter for 72 hours. “Naturally I was anxious, but knowing my daughter I knew she would be okay.”

A Red Flag Warning was issued that night. “I had one of the new pagers and there were so many calls I wore out the button on it,” says Geof. “There was stuff going on everywhere.”

A highlight was helping to save properties at Sarsfield on that same night. As Phil recounts: “It was late afternoon and we could see the major fires were all joining up. We got to the back of Sarsfield when night had fallen and although the fire had gone through, there were a lot of pockets of fire on the eastern side. We saved about 20 properties. The team did an amazing job.”

However, Phil is most proud of the team’s efforts during an incident after the Red Flag Warning. “We were called back and although I didn’t want to go, I sent all the trucks back to Bruthen,” he says. “We were returning at about 2am when I spotted some fire in a paddock where it shouldn’t have been; two vehicles owned by farmers were there. If we didn’t stop it, the fire was going to get into the Colquhoun Forest and would have headed for Lakes Entrance.” Though worn out, the firefighters rose to the occasion.

“It was a very difficult spot,” continues Phil. “The two farmers had done an amazing job in the dust, dirt and smoke. Our appliances got down there and crews pulled up the fire within a few metres of the bush. With local knowledge, we knew what was possible and what was safe and what wasn’t.”

At 3.30am, Phil gathered together the extended strike team and told them what

an incredible job they had done. Before sending them home, he urged them to look after themselves and offered to have a chat with anyone who needed it – Phil is also a CFA peer. One of the crew members approached and asked if Phil could take him home to his flower farm. “He knew that the fire had been through the area and he didn’t want to face it alone. I knew in my heart it wasn’t going to be there,” says Phil. Around 4am, two vehicles took the firefighter the safest way they could to his property. The member had lost everything: two houses, all his plant-growing equipment, all the plants in his fields and hothouses.

“We felt quite helpless and will never forget seeing and feeling his raw loss,” says Phil. “All we could do was arrange transport to where his wife had evacuated, so he could break the devastating news.” Conversely, says Phil, some people felt guilty because their properties were untouched.

On 2 January 2020, ahead of the next spike day, Phil arranged for all the local emergency services and Indigenous groups to gather at the Lakes Entrance station for a public meeting. He was armed with the latest weather prediction and had consulted with the ICC. It was time to urge people to leave the area. “I felt the weight of having to deliver this difficult message to the thousands of people on holiday, including local residents and businesses,” says Phil.

By lunchtime the next day, in the wake of an evacuation order for East Gippsland issued by Victorian authorities, the town’s population had decreased from an estimated 45,000 people to about 2000. Its 2-kilometre-long main street empty of people, and with only three parked cars, came as a strange sight.

But there were uplifting moments, too. Phil helped escort a convoy of semitrailers carrying donated hay to remote Black Mountain, north of Buchan, to be distributed to grateful and relieved farmers – a task he was only too happy to do.



Early morning goodbye before being deployed on different strike teams / Phil Loukes

## WAIREWA FIRE BRIGADE

# Saving lives the main game for fireys

**Brigade members involved:** 10

**Range of experience:** from 19-year-olds to members with 30-plus years' experience

**Supporting roles:** clearing lines on properties with bulldozer; 10 more brigade members locked out by Red Zone came after the fire with food and water, and to help with clean-up

**Areas:** Wairewa, Nowa Nowa, Tostaree

**Campaign duration:** 30 December 2019 to 10 January 2020

**On 30 December 2019, as the East Gippsland fires bore down on Wairewa, north west of Lakes Entrance, the news from CFA headquarters was about as bad as it could get. A wind change meant the fire front, previously headed for Nowa Nowa, would now directly impact the small settlement. "It was made clear by CFA that the protection of lives was the main priority," says Brigade Captain Julian Davies.**

A strike team soon arrived at the community hall – the provisional refuge – with four fully crewed tankers and a support vehicle. "Julian, we are here all night and we're not leaving until the fire front has passed through," said the Strike Team Leader.

As the fire got closer, Julian did all he could. Together with his 19-year-old son Brenton, he drove around to door-knock Wairewa's 24 houses. Some people had already evacuated to Lakes Entrance, while a few had insisted on staying to defend their properties. "We said, 'We want you out, we want you to leave,'" says Julian, who urged anyone who'd decided to stay to quickly seek shelter at the Wairewa Public Hall, the town's only public building apart from the fire station. Around 25 people and their dogs sought safety in the hall; six horses were parked on the tennis courts.

One of Wairewa's two tankers, connected to the concrete tank at the station, was deployed by the strike team. The brigade's other tanker was at its satellite station at Nowa Nowa. However, the area stretching east of Nowa Nowa towards Wairewa was declared a Red Zone, meaning that no-one was allowed in, so the tanker was used by another strike team. Members later used it to patrol nearby areas, including Tostaree.

On the night of the fire, Julian and his wife Leanne watched from their home on the top of a hill as the first spots arrived, around 11pm. "It was something we'll never forget," Julian says of the main front. "I've never seen fire come *down* a hill like that. It was like a monster." One of his neighbours took one look at it and headed for the hall. "They only just made it," says Julian.

What Leanne described as a "tornado of embers" emerged from bush about 2 kilometres away, and the fire then raged around she and her husband for nearly an hour and a half. "You could hardly breathe, it took all the oxygen," says Julian, adding: "I'll never forget the wind and the noise. It was like a freight train coming through your front door. After the fire left Wairewa, I remember hearing it heading in the direction of Orbost for half an hour."





The next day, Julian and the strike team members drove around to check on the local houses. Eleven of them had been razed. Leanne admits: “We really thought there were going to be dead people. It was pretty traumatic.”

“It was hard to see the houses lying on the ground,” says Julian. “But you got a lot of satisfaction knowing that no lives were lost that night. The strike team did that job 100 per cent. To protect all those people was amazing. I heard it was so hot there that the windows were about to explode.”

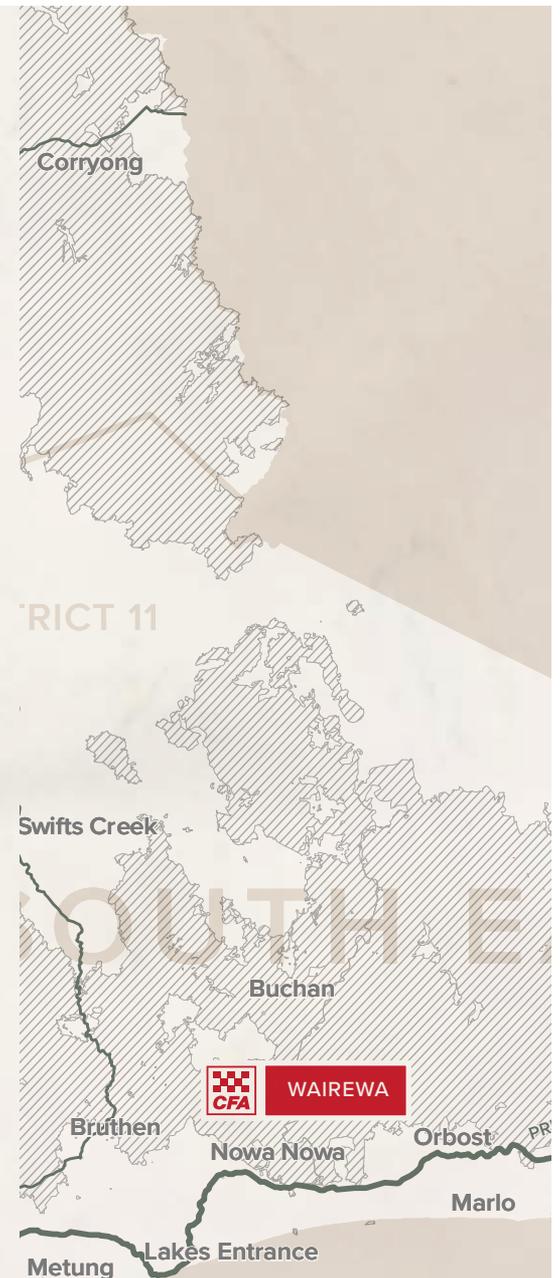
Julian’s leadership was commended soon afterwards when then CFA Chief Officer Steve Warrington AFSM and others visited the devastated community. “I’ll never forget that day,” remembers Julian. “He gave me a hug to let me know it was going to be all right.”

Ten members locked out of Wairewa by the Red Zone arrived in the following days to help, including assisting with extinguishing fire on the historic local trestle bridge. Two of the members on the strike team that defended Wairewa, from

Westbury Fire Brigade, reported back to their own members about the settlement’s plight. Westbury members agreed to ‘adopt’ Wairewa and support efforts by its people to rebuild the community. Westbury began a tool drive, which saw truckloads of fencing materials worth \$10,000 donated to Wairewa’s residents to immediately help their recovery – a recovery that is ongoing.

**Left:** Steve Warrington AFSM meeting brigade members / Sophie Jennings

**Above:** Wairewa Trestle Bridge aftermath / Keith Pakenham AFSM



## NORTH EAST TASK FORCE 1313

### Buchan fires forge bond to “last a lifetime”

**Brigade members involved:** 21, from Belgrave South, Upper Ferntree Gully, Maroondah Group, Macclesfield, The Basin, Healesville, Narre Warren East, Yarra Junction and Hoddles Creek brigades

**Range of experience:** 6 months to 35 years

**Supporting roles:** addressing immediate needs of the community post fire front, such as supplying generators, food relief, drinking water, communications equipment and stock feed

**Areas:** Buchan, Gelantipy, W Tree, East Gippsland

**Campaign duration:** 28 December 2019 to 3 January 2020

**They arrived at the staging area at Swan Reach east of Bairnsdale on 28 December 2019, 21 firefighters from nine different brigades who were mostly strangers. They left a close-knit team that had experienced conditions that shocked even the veteran fireys among them, having saved most of the main street of the isolated town of Buchan. Their leader, Mitch Emmett, says the bond that formed in those six intense days will last a lifetime. This is the little-known story of the strike team that call themselves ‘The Buchaneers’.**

Task Force 1313 was made up of 20 men and one woman of varying experience. Their brief: to defend the communities of Buchan, W Tree and Gelantipy near Snowy River National Park, north of Orbost. To begin with, Mitch, a firefighter of 32 years’ experience from Belgrave South brigade, and a Deputy Group Officer, met Buchan Captain Peter White and DELWP senior officer Scott Cummins at Buchan to devise a plan and conduct a reccy of the area. They would work with Strike Team 0803 for two days until that team was deployed to Mallacoota.

At a briefing the next morning, the firefighters were told by CFA Assistant Chief Fire Officer David Renkin to expect fire like they’d never seen before, and that he couldn’t send in more crews. Mitch then told his team, “I don’t want 100 per cent from you. I need 110 per cent.”

According to the plan, Gelantipy and its main assets – a holiday camp, bush nursing centre and fire station – were the first stop before the crews focused on Buchan, the main town in the Buchan Valley. The first fire arrived at Gelantipy from the south west after noon the following day. Air support helped knock down early spot fires in the bush that were out of the firefighters’ reach, but the team’s stay was short-lived, with their escape route rapidly being shut down by fire. “Unfortunately, we had to leave Gelantipy,” says Mitch. “It was heart-wrenching.”

A huge pyrocumulus cloud hanging over Buchan Caves to the south began to spot around 4pm as the firefighters scrambled to extinguish the outbreaks. By now, locals were congregating on the Buchan footy ground, while tankers patrolled the main street. “With the assets we had, we were only going to be able to save the main street, if that,” says Mitch. Spotter planes then reported to Divisional Command in Johnsonville that the pyrocumulus column was close to collapse. In the space of five minutes, daylight turned to dark as the cloud and its volatile load caved in.

“We were completely surrounded by fire,” says Yarra Junction brigade’s Mathew Curson, who was patrolling in an ultralight.



Clockwise from above:  
Buchan / State of Victoria,  
DEECA, Buchan main street;  
Task Force 1313 /  
Mitchell Emmett



“It didn’t matter which direction you looked, it was on fire.”

The Basin brigade’s Kirk Stone, on his first strike team, was charged with operating radios at the oval. “Every time we saw a fire, the locals would tell us where it was, at so-and-so’s place,” he says. The Buchan brigade Captain would then explain where that was.”

Mitch understood from the radio traffic that some crew members were starting to panic. “My highest priority is obviously the crew,” he says. He reassured them that everything taking place was as expected and they were in a safe position now.

Mathew watched house after house burn in the surrounding streets. “It was hard. We’d only been there an hour before telling people they needed to pack up and go, and that we’d do our best to look after their house,” he says.

Mitch was then faced with an incredibly tough decision. “We were asked to assist a person in dire straits,” he explains. “I assessed the area and access. If we’d gone in, it would’ve killed the crew. I had to make a very difficult decision.”

Mitch adds: “It’s important to realise that the people that attended these fires have all been changed, some for the rest of their lives. I know I have.” Upper Ferntree Gully brigade’s Chris Lind agrees: “We saw things

happen I never thought possible. It was just mind-blowing to witness.”

Conditions were about as bad as they could get, Mitch recalls. At one point he measured the temperature at 53 degrees Celsius with winds of 100 kilometres per hour and zero relative humidity. Birds were dropping out of the sky. Town water was running out. All communications were gone – anticipating this earlier, team members had had quiet words with their partners. The crew were also hungry, having fought fires since breakfast without eating. As the blaze hovered outside, the publicans at the Buchan Caves Hotel made the fireys a meal.

The team fought fires throughout the night and by 7am the next morning, fire activity had quietened, allowing them to sleep for an hour or two on rotation. Then came the thankless task of counting the houses that had been destroyed: 24 were gone, along with sheds razed; countless stock had perished. “We lost two structures on the main street and managed to save everything else,” says Mitch.

When it came time to leave the next day, the Buchan Captain asked Mitch if Task Force 1313 could stay on. Mitch asked the team if they wanted to help for another day – they all did. “It was very humbling to me as a leader to hear them say that, even after all they’d been through,” he says.

“They were a very close team all working for each other and for the community. I was incredibly proud of what we did and incredibly proud of the people working under me. They did whatever was asked of them with a smile on their face in the most challenging of circumstances.”

When the team did leave Buchan on 2 January 2020, the locals came out of the footy clubrooms to farewell them, cheering as the tanker moved off. And a photo of Task Force 1313 was proudly hung on a wall of the Buchan Caves Hotel. Some of the members have been back to visit, to be welcomed with open arms.

At Lakes Entrance, people in the main street cheered and clapped the returning firefighters. “I still get goosebumps thinking of that,” says Chris. “I’ll never forget it.”

“I’ve been on dozens of strike teams but this is the only one I remember,” says Mathew. “I’d follow Mitch into hell if he asked, without an issue.” Kirk adds: “I’m pretty sure that would be echoed by the whole strike team.”

“I think we’ll forever be that team of 21 members,” says Chris.

## ORBOST FIRE BRIGADE

### Testing times but brigade “mentally prepared”

**Brigade members involved:** 17

**Range of experience:** from 3 to 45 years

**Supporting roles:** non-operational members note-taking during operations and cooking meals

**Areas:** Simpsons Creek, Cape Conran, Marlo, Buchan area, Cann River, Bemm River, Wairewa, NSW

**Campaign duration:** 25 November 2019 to late January 2020

**For Laura Tidey, the most memorable moment of the Black Summer fires came on 29 January 2020 at Cape Conran in Victoria’s far east. The mother of three young children, Laura was on Orbost brigade’s tanker in a clearing at the Jungle Beach Caravan Park, completely surrounded by fire. The crew, which also had an FCV, was protecting cabins and sheds at the park, which was inland of the coast and enclosed by woodland.**

Laura had expected to be home that night and had left her youngest, eight-month-old Olivia, with her partner; Olivia was barely on solid food. “I knew she was in good hands, but it was hard to be away from her,” says Laura. “My partner and I had no way of contacting each other. With normal call-outs you know you’re going to be home. I didn’t expect to be trapped that night. And when the Captain said it might be a burn-over situation, that was worrying because I’ve never been in one before.”

But Laura, the brigade’s Fourth Lieutenant at the time, had faith in Dick Johnstone, Orbost Captain. “Dick always had a plan,” she says.

The brigade was split up into small groups that monitored each side of the caravan park, doused buildings with water and knocked down the fire every time it came in towards them. “We had crew really well prepared,” says Dick. “I spoke to most of them before. I think they were mentally right.”

At one point, Dick answered an emergency call about a man trying to protect the rental accommodation at the park and went to check on him. “He was adamant he was going to stay and protect,” he says. The fire was swirling around in different directions and shooting through the canopy, and Dick says it got “pretty close” at times during the night.

Three hours in, the wind picked up speed from 30 to 80 kilometres per hour, then abruptly changed direction. “Just as it nearly went over the top of the caravan park, the wind turned it away,” says Laura.

By 9am the next day, the fire had settled. It burnt back on itself in one direction and stopped at the coast in another. The firefighters drove slowly back to the Princes Highway, on alert for dropping debris and tree limbs.

The Cape Conran fire came towards the end of Orbost brigade’s campaign in the 2019–20 fires – the main fire affecting the town itself had hit a month earlier. It arrived in the early hours of 30 December 2019, coming from Buchan to the north west. The brigade was well-prepared for the approaching fire, but when the ember



attack ahead of the front hit the town and the wind changed, it came closer than they expected.

"It got to within 200 metres of the town and lit up areas at the northern end where there are about 60 houses," says Dick. "If we hadn't got in there, it had the potential to wipe out the top end of Orbost." Laura was surprised that the fire got within the housing estate she lives in.

The firefighters hit the blaze hard from six trucks, while flames shot out 40 metres. "I ran a team of dozers and trucks," says Dick. "It burnt a lot of farmland but I don't think we lost any houses at that stage. A few houses and sheds were lost on the outskirts of town though."

The Orbost firefighters, together with DELWP members, protected important infrastructure such as the hospital, school, water supply and communications tower, and hosted people who evacuated their homes late at the fire station. Fighting the fire at the recycling depot was especially difficult. "The smoke was so thick we couldn't see what we were doing and the wind kept changing direction," says Laura.

By 4am the next day, the main danger to Orbost had passed as the fire moved into the Cann River and Bemm River areas. Dick and other members of the brigade

then performed a number of other roles, including helping police escort people out of Cann River when fire hit there. "It was pretty full-on," he says, adding: "I was proud of the achievements of our crew. I believe our preparedness before the fires probably saved us."

This readiness included helping residents prepare their properties, meetings with DELWP, and community meetings held at the cricket and footy clubs. The efforts of farmers with water carts putting out spot fires also helped greatly to stop the spread of fire, says Dick.

"I think the crew all worked really well and had the same focus on protecting people first and properties," says Laura. "I learnt a lot, probably more than I would in a year."

Dick was also happy with how the Orbost community came together during the campaign. "They really got behind and supported us," he says. "Any time something big happens, the whole community's really good at working together."

To acknowledge the incredible efforts of Orbost brigade and the other local emergency services in fighting the Black Summer fires, a mural was commissioned on the side of the Orbost Club Hotel depicting representatives of each of the services.



Left: Just after 6pm, looking eerie / Laura Tidey

Above: Driveway of caravan park / Laura Tidey



## EPHING FIRE BRIGADE

### Strike team brings relief to south east communities

**Brigade members involved:** 4 members of Epping brigade involved in Strike Team 1421

**Range of experience:** various

**Supporting roles:** checking on residents; assisting evacuation convoy; blacking out; among other roles

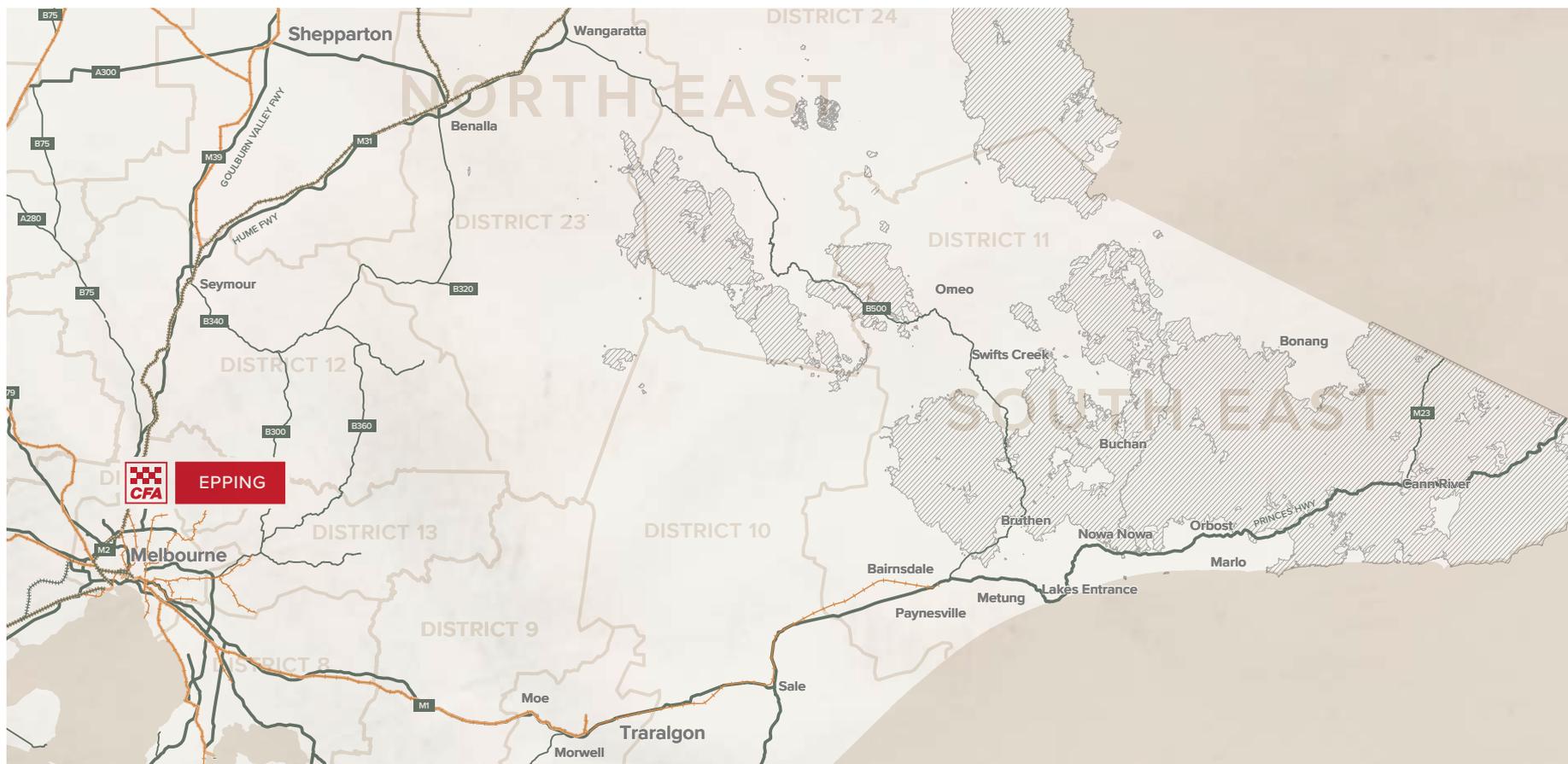
**Areas:** Wairewa, Mallacoota, Orbost

**Campaign duration:** 31 December 2019 to 4 January 2020

For Epping brigade member **Deb Azzopardi, Black Summer was so packed with action that it became a blur of experiences. Deb volunteered for four 'tours of duty' almost back to back, undertaking both operational and support roles. She served in New South Wales as a firefighter in November 2019 and as a CFA peer there in December. Back in Victoria, she was a crew leader in East Gippsland into the new year, and then worked in her capacity as a peer in north eastern Victoria. But one fireground stood out for the veteran firefighter.**

When the pumper she was crewing arrived at the devastated town of Wairewa on 1 January 2020 to help with blacking out, Deb was shocked. "I thought I was prepared but I don't think I was," she says. "I've fought in massive fires but this was different. To arrive after a fire and only be able to put out a little bit here or there, smoking stumps or fence posts, was heartbreaking. It was all very grey, very sobering."

Deb has been a volunteer firefighter since she donned the yellow uniform for the first time 19 years ago. "I was the proudest Australian," she recalls. She fought in the Anakie fires in 2006, the 2009 Black Saturday fires and the 2016 bushfires in Tasmania, among other events, putting her hand up for two strike teams a year. A road crash rescue operator, trainer and assessor, she has turned out to more than 2300



incidents. Before Wairewa, she thought she'd seen everything.

The town, about 30 kilometres from Orbost, had found itself in the path of an unstoppable firestorm late on 30 December 2019. Smouldering piles of rubble, ash and twisted metal lay everywhere, and smoke was still hanging in the air. Almost half of the 25 houses in the community had been destroyed. "You wonder where all the wildlife's gone, the stock, horses, cows and sheep. You hope they got away," says Deb. "You couldn't help but think, if only we'd been here earlier. But that fire did what it wanted; it had no mercy."

Deb and her team of experienced Epping members – Neil Craig, Trevor Anderson and Terry Major – were part of Strike Team 1421, which had been sent to East Gippsland. The brigade is based on Melbourne's growing northern fringe and has only a small area of rural land in its catchment. Members predominantly respond to structure fires and motor vehicle accidents, but they also support other local brigades with larger bushfire incidents.

"As firefighters we're very passionate," says Deb. "We train hard, we put in a lot of time, and all the time you're away from your family. With strike teams, you just

want to get up there and do what you've been trained to do."

The team's five-day deployment started in earnest on 31 December. At about 4.30pm, they arrived at the staging area at Swan Reach, east of Bairnsdale, where they were allocated a pumper. The next day at Wairewa, their main task was to patrol, mop up, black out, and transfer water to the tankers in other teams if necessary. Some people had left notes on their front doors to say they'd evacuated to private addresses elsewhere; others had sheltered at the community hall. "They were waiting for news about whether their property was impacted or if they could access roads, and were getting a bit upset waiting," says Deb. "One of the biggest problems was not knowing. We did a lot of driving around town offering reassurance."

That night, Strike Team 1421 stayed at the Snowy River Lodge Motel, where the power had been cut off. "They went room to room with a generator so we'd have hot water for a shower!" says Deb. On the third day, the team moved to Mallacoota, which had also been hard-hit. "There weren't a lot of flames, only on the bigger trees and stumps, but everything around us was burnt. You never forget seeing it," says Deb.

The crew was based at the local secondary school in Mallacoota, where they stayed overnight before being sent back to Orbost to patrol the next day. "I was proud to be able to give the town some reassurance," says Deb. "They see the pumper and feel protected. The community was extremely grateful. It was very humbling."

The Epping crew joined a long convoy of police and other emergency service vehicles, cars and a bus evacuating people, on the back road from Cann River to Orbost. Deb remembers: "The highway was blocked. Fire was burning on both sides of the road. We're used to it, but it was a bit traumatic to some of the people in the convoy."

A day after returning to Epping, Deb went back to the north east in her capacity as a CFA peer. She is always ready to put up her hand for the next assignment, like her fellow members.



Wairewa Trestle Bridge /  
Deborah Azzopardi

## NEWMERELLA FIRE BRIGADE

### ‘Tamboon Six’ and a little tanker save a settlement

**Brigade members involved:** 10

**Range of experience:** from newly trained to 45 years

**Supporting roles:** non-operational members checking weather, updating members

**Areas:** Newmerella, Bemm River, Cape Conran, Tamboon, Orbost

**Campaign duration:** 27 December 2019 to early February 2020

The small township of Newmerella, 5 kilometres from Orbost, escaped the East Gippsland fires because of good preparation, the vigilance of its brigade, and a lucky wind change. When the immediate danger had passed, Captain Jason Griebenow and his team turned their attention to helping others in neighbouring areas, to great effect.

The brigade’s tanker initially patrolled areas along and off the Princes Highway, until fire came out of the bush and into farmland from two different directions late on 30 December 2019. Newmerella’s and two out-of-town tankers were directed west to Waygara, to help farmers try to put out a blaze that had quickly covered an 8-hectare paddock. They brought that fire under control, then blacked out the next day.

In the following two weeks, the brigade conducted a successful 5-kilometre back-burn to safeguard local farms at Waygara, and another burn at Partellis Crossing after a call-out there. But its biggest contribution was made a fortnight later at Tamboon.

Jason explains: “One of our members, Dean Herbert, has a house at Tamboon and was concerned because fire was approaching on every side and the





community only had a 1000-litre unit on a trailer owned by someone there. He asked if he could approach Steve Dorman [MFB Commander] to take a tanker there. I said that could happen, but he'd have to run it past the MFB at Orbost." Dean was subsequently given clearance, and Jason arranged to send in supplies and radios. "They were fairly aware that they'd be trapped there," he says.

Tamboon, a settlement of 15 houses, is enclosed by bush, with only Tamboon Inlet providing a way out when the road is cut off. Jason heard from Dean later that night. "The fire's coming," said Dean. "We've got permission to light a back-burn and it's going to happen soon. It's totally surrounding us." Dean was with brothers Glen, also from Newmerella, and Frank, from the Cann Valley brigade, and residents Adolino Marchi, Joe Di Luca and Ernest Vale. It was a small outfit with a small tanker and a few private vehicles.

Jason, a relatively new Captain at the time, had faith in the firefighters' abilities,

but when he got a call at home that night, he was worried. A senior officer from FFMVic who was involved in the operation radioed to say that he'd given Dean a "wellbeing call" and Dean hadn't answered. Jason tried to ring him but couldn't raise him either, so he left a message asking Dean to call back and let him know the crew was safe. Jason then turned in but couldn't get to sleep.

At 3.30am, Dean finally called: "All good. Just been under the pump keeping water round the houses, on woodheaps, putting out spot fires, etc."

"That's all that matters," replied Jason, "that you're OK."

"Dean said later it had been a textbook burn, pulling the controlled fire into the bushfire coming towards them," says Jason. "It had worked perfectly."

All the national park back to Cann River to the south east had burned, as well as west from Bemm River. But the fire, burning to the crowns of the large trees, had stopped on the edge of the buffer created

by the firefighters. "I was so proud of the way it all worked," says Jason. "It saved a small community. They managed to save all those houses."

Newmerella brigade continued to help out others, lending its shiny new big-fill to Bemm River brigade, then to DELWP, deploying a tanker and crew to Marlo to assist there, and supporting Wairewa Captain Julian Davies.

Jason visited Tamboon a year later for a community reunion. By then, Ernest, Adolino and Joe had joined the CFA. "I looked around and was stunned at what they did," says Jason. The people of Tamboon presented him with a large canvas photo of what are now known as the 'Tamboon Six' with the Newmerella tanker and the trailer. Jason says he was told that "without that little tanker, we couldn't have done it".

Left: The Tamboon Six / Ernie Vare

## CANN VALLEY FIRE BRIGADE

### Big effort from a small brigade inspires locals

**Brigade members involved:** 4 at Cann River fire, 3 at Tamboon

**Range of experience:** from 5 to 20 years

**Supporting roles:** assisting evacuation; helping community morale post-fire clean-up

**Areas:** Cann River, Tamboon

**Campaign duration:** mid-December 2019 to February 2020

**Before the Black Summer bushfires, Cann Valley Fire Brigade was a team of just four active members. Now it has three times that number, with more interested in joining – people inspired by the actions of the small band of firefighters who fought hard to protect them. “The locals said, ‘Hang on, these people actually stood up for us and did something, and looked after us,’” says firefighter Ernest Vare.**

The brigade, alongside Newmerella members, fought the same fire in two different locations two weeks apart, safeguarding the town of Cann River and then the settlement of Tamboon. Max Kalz, a long-term firefighter and now Cann Valley’s Community Liaison Officer, was part of the first big effort.

The brigade, other emergency services members and locals had prepared the Cann River Primary School and recreational area as an evacuation centre two days before the fire struck, on 31 December 2019. Dozens of cars were parked on the oval. Four brigade members were ready with one tanker. On the day of the fire, the 35 people who had chosen not to evacuate the town waited apprehensively, looking out the windows of the school, a sight that has stayed with Max.

Max recalls it being a windless day. He watched as the sky suddenly turned from clear blue to an impenetrable black and later blood-red, as the front approached from the south east. He remembers the winds that came before the front picking up the hefty VICSES marquees and dumping them like rag dolls 100 metres away. Then came a firestorm that shot ash and debris into the sky.

“I was waiting for an inferno,” says Max. “The cars on the oval, the houses, were all covered in this sticky glue after the eucalyptus leaves bubbled and turned into gas before the fire came. But when the embers fell they were cold. The tornado fire system took the embers so high that when they fell to the ground they were not burning.”

The fire went around Cann River. The evacuees were safe but anxious. “Why can’t you take a truck out and save my house?” many asked, as the firefighters explained that the roads were cut by fallen trees and had melted in many places.

The next day, Max swapped hats and came in as a Victorian Council of Churches counsellor/chaplain to spend time with people who were in shock and agitated because they weren’t allowed to check their homes, farms and animals. “We were stuck for three weeks. There were 35





people sleeping in the school and hall, with their animals, goats and sheep – it stank,” says Max. He adds: “Everybody worked their guts out. One caravan was lost at Cann River, but no houses.”

Ernest was one of the Tamboon Six who saved that settlement when fire surrounded it on 13 January 2020. Ernest, who lives in Tamboon, had decided to stay and defend his family home. He wasn’t a member of the CFA then, but his brother-in-law Frank Herbert was. Frank, now Cann Valley brigade’s Secretary, had converted an old trailer owned by Ernest into a private firefighting vehicle by attaching a 1000-litre tank to it. “It was the best thing that ever happened. We sprayed the equivalent of 60,000 litres of water with it,” says Ernest.

Most of the residents of the 15 houses in Tamboon, which sits on a coastal lagoon, left in late December, either ferried by barge to the naval ship HMAS *Choules*, which was on its way south west from Mallacoota, or taken by police escort via back roads to Marlo. Eleven people remained, including Frank and two members of Newmerella brigade: brothers Dean and Glenn Herbert.

“Prior to the fire arriving we sprayed every tree, every house and blocked every gutter,” says Ernest. “We cleaned up logs and branches and set up pumps at peoples’ houses. We knew we weren’t going to be able to get help from anyone else, so we decided to do whatever we had to do to protect Tamboon.”

Ernest stocked his powerboat with food, water and blankets, and left it moored at a jetty in Tamboon Inlet with the key in the engine in case anyone needed to evacuate. The six firefighters, including residents Adolino Marchi and Joe Di Luca, followed CFA’s Local Response Plan and the local council’s emergency protocol LEAP (Local Emergency Action Plan). “Basically that saved us,” says Ernest. “All we had to do then was run around and put out embers and spot fires. After the fire hit, we spent the next 36 hours defending the properties, then fell in a heap.”

A wall of flames 40–50 metres high and burning at 1400 degrees Celsius came up to the boundaries of the area the group had back-burned as a buffer around Tamboon, leaving a kilometre-square green patch but burning everything outside it to a crisp. Two sections of fence and two woodheaps were destroyed, but Tamboon was otherwise spared. However, the residents were then trapped there for more than two months.

Food was dropped by helicopter, including dog food and carrots for the animals that had moved into the small green oasis. “It was a completely different world,” says Ernest, adding: “It became very sanctuary-like: birds, goannas, wallabies, deer, bats and other wildlife all competing for water and food. It was raucous in the mornings!”

Ernest continues: “Once the people who evacuated to the beach returned to us,

the group stuck there [in Tamboon] grew to 11. We all ate together every day, talked, hugged, did whatever was needed to keep morale up. It’s never really settled down.”

Keeping up morale was something the Cann Valley brigade has done ever since. “I’ve been an ear to Max and he’s been an ear to me when I’ve gone off the rails,” says Ernest, who joined CFA along with the other two firefighting residents right after the fires. Max adds: “The trauma of the whole thing is still evident. We’ll go through it for the rest of our lives.”

Ernest says: “One of the big things I’ve found with CFA now is you spend a lot of time being a support to people. You open the door of the station and it’s full of people. CFA is progressing in leaps and bounds. People have started to look at it and its members as actually being there as their back-up support. They’re more accepting, they’re more appreciative and they know we’re here for them.”

Left: Army Chinook delivering food / Ernie Vare

Above: Cann River Mural commissioned to acknowledge emergency service workers’ efforts during Black Summer / Ashley Clinch

## BEMM RIVER FIRE BRIGADE

### Brigade's proactive approach keeps fire at bay

**Brigade members involved:** 19

**Range of experience:** from 1 newly trained member to members with between 3 and 48 years' experience

**Supporting roles:** providing meals

**Areas:** Bemm River

**Campaign duration:** 28 December 2019 to 9 February 2020

**Bemm River is a tiny, remote township south east of Orbost that's surrounded by coastal and national parks. There is one road in and one road out. Potentially inaccessible in an emergency, its fire brigade has long known that it would most likely be on its own if a big fire hit. "We have to look after ourselves," says Captain Russell Pardew AFSM. "Communities like us must plan."**

The brigade has taken a number of initiatives over the years to safeguard the townsfolk. Local businesses, for example, carry information on what to do when the CFA siren wails "continuously" in emergencies. The brigade has also created aluminium home/away signs that residents put on their mailboxes to tell the brigade if they have evacuated or stayed. "All emergency agencies fully support this initiative," says Russell.

The Brigade Management Team deals with the needs of the people they are helping as they arise, in all types of emergencies, including things like food, prescriptions and fuel. Everybody has a job.



Communications Officer Christine Pardew, Russell's wife, conducted logistics during the fire. "When an emergency happens in Bemm River, we are the 'everything'. We work hard and we work united," says Christine.

In 2011, the brigade asked DELWP to create a clear 50-metre fire break along the town's western flank, as well as mulch a further 50 metres of understorey to lower the fire risk. "Mulching can be done 365 days of the year, whereas fuel reduction burning requires favourable conditions," says Russell.

Bemm River brigade's progressive approach to fire control came to the fore during the Black Summer fires as the Snowy River Complex fire headed through bush towards the town. The brigade had started planning for the bushfire season as early as October 2019. "The country was dry and predictions were dire," says Russell. "We felt something might happen given Queensland and parts of New South Wales were experiencing an early fire season."

In mid-December, Russell's son James, who was working as a DELWP Deputy Incident Controller in Orbost ICC, instigated daily teleconferences to disseminate information and provide briefings. All brigades in Orbost and Mount Delegate Group participated, and later, other emergency agencies also joined. Nineteen volunteers making up the Bemm

CFA Emergency Management Team attended the briefings. Brigade members then cooked breakfast and debriefed and planned the day. The teleconferences were scheduled from 23 December to 9 February, when the ICC closed in Orbost, with the station occupied continuously over that time. "It gave our team a sense of knowledge, support, belonging and inclusion," says Russell.

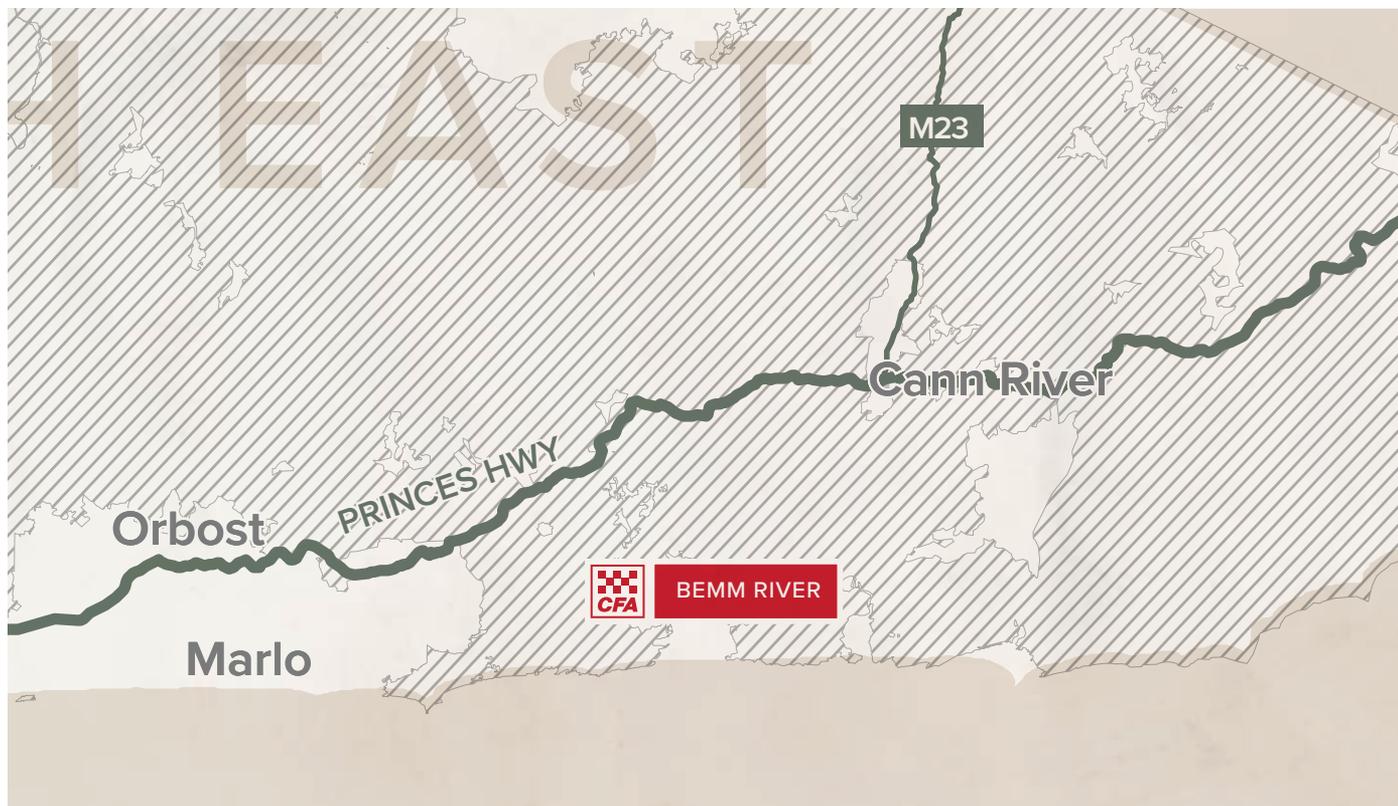
By New Year's Eve, the threat to Bemm River had intensified, with fronts to the north and the west. Fire Behaviour Analyst Greg McCarthy from DELWP East Gippsland updated Russell whenever needed. "He kept telling us we were going to cop it, that there was no way to avoid it," says Russell.

Late on 31 December, Bemm pagers sounded. Russell and First Lieutenant Dale Hodges turned out to Orbost in a slip-on when that town was threatened. When the danger had passed, Russell and Dale were asked to assess the fire moving towards Club Terrace, but they were stopped by walls of flames at the Princes Highway turn-off. Not long afterwards, much of Club Terrace, a scattering of houses 50 kilometres north east of Orbost, was severely impacted. In the early hours of 1 January 2020, the rest of the brigade gathered in the station, listening to radio traffic and watching the ominously red sky in the east towards Swan Lake, which was 12 kilometres away.

On 1, 2 and 3 January, the Orbost ICC initiated daily evacuations of residents. Any visitors who had not left as advised were attached to convoys to Cann River under CFA escort. They travelled on a DELWP strategic road which had been cleared and upgraded in 2019 – the road was used until the Princes Highway reopened almost four weeks later.

It was a bold initiative from the Captain that ultimately saved Bemm River. Russell spoke to Greg McCarthy during the 8am teleconference on 2 January about conducting a back-burn to the west of town to meet the Snowy Complex fire. DELWP ICC at Orbost gave the clearance for this to occur and provided a regional CFA strike team of 24 and a crew of four from Marlo. A back-burn of 8 kilometres was then conducted north of Pearl Point Road, which runs parallel to the coast, a stretch previously prepared by DELWP in late 2018. It was carried out at dusk as the air cooled, fanned by a sea breeze.

On 4 January the expected change came through, blowing so hard that members in tankers facing west towards the fire felt the vehicles shake. Ultimately, the back-burn ran into the fuel-reduced bush. The strategy had worked. "That took the threat away and basically saved the town's bacon," says Russell.



Left: East Gippsland / Australian Maritime Safety Authority Challenger Rescue aircraft, Captain Sheldon Caldwell

## MALLACOOTA FIRE BRIGADE

### Brigade's huge effort as mayhem strikes

**Brigade members involved:** 24

**Range of experience:** from 2 to 50 years

**Supporting roles:** sending messages to organisations; 24-hour communications; cleaning the station and vehicles; distributing donated fuels throughout town to keep generators running

**Areas:** Mallacoota, Gipsy Point, Genoa, Wallagaraugh, Wangarabell, Wingan

**Campaign duration:** 30 December 2019 to 8 February 2020

**Scenes of the fires that hit Mallacoota on 31 December 2019 stunned people across the world: the pyrocumulus cloud of smoke towering 16 kilometres high, the blackened then blood-red sky, blazing bush, rows of houses on fire, and thousands of people huddling on the shore as they waited to be evacuated by HMAS Choules. "The photos even knocked Donald Trump off the front page of *The New York Times*," quips Rod Lewis, Mallacoota Captain at the time.**

As a firefighter of 36 years, Deputy Group Officer for 24 and Captain for 18, Rod was prepared for the fire. His planning accurately predicted how it would track and his crew had readied the community. But nothing could ready him for the magnitude of the fire itself or its effect on so many people.

While Rod, the brigade and other firefighters defended the town's centre, including the fire shed and the crucial communications tower next to it, long-term brigade member Lyn Harwood was in the station's radio room running communications – sending and taking messages for 75 firefighters on 17 trucks. "I stayed awake all that night keeping in touch with the strike teams," she says. "There was a bit of a scare around midnight because the pyrocumulus cloud, filled with superheated air, had bent over Mallacoota."



**Clockwise from above:** Mallacoota and Cann Valley members at the Cann to Coota Cup / Rachel Mounsey, Bastion Point Road; strike teams preparing for evacuation / Dean Shaw



As the front approached, a couple of younger members, keen as mustard and with adrenalin pumping, asked what they could do. Rod briefed them: “It’s going to come out of the bush and it’s going to be absolutely massive. You’ll probably never see anything like it in your lives.” The young men beamed. “Set up a heap of hoses and pump water on the houses, police station, everywhere, wet everything,” Rod told them.

Today, thinking back to that time, Rod says: “They didn’t stop for hours.”

Preparation aside, and with a small window of opportunity before the fire hit, Rod took a kip on the station meeting room floor with a couple of toilet paper rolls as a pillow.

The fire arrived at different locations around 8am. “That’s when the gates of hell opened on top of us,” says Rod. “It was enormous – 50- or 60-metre-high trees on the other side of the road had raw flames reaching a third higher again. When the winds hit, it sounded like a jumbo plane.”

The fire was overhead, the heat 800–1000 degrees Celsius, the 90–100-kilometre-per-hour wind showering everything in flaming embers. Rod hauled around two lengths of 38-millimetre hose, dousing the station and communications tower. He was almost on his knees with

exhaustion when three policemen emerged out of the smoke and offered to help.

Lyn says: “My job was to get tankers for strike teams to the houses that had just started to burn. Some houses were fully involved and there wasn’t anything we could do for them.” She adds: “I was surprised at how calm and efficient I was. You’ve got a job to do. I just did my best to calm people down, explain what roads to take, where the last call was from and how they could get there.”

The fire destroyed 123 houses, including five owned by CFA members, and 65 sheds. “After all the devastation, probably the biggest thing that got to me was the wildlife,” says Rod. “Animals and birds died by the thousands.”

He continues: “The crew did a great job protecting the place. And some of the locals who stayed and defended in the face of the fire deserve a medal. It was a huge community effort to defend. It was the scariest, most devastating thing I’d ever seen. I’ve been to a huge amount of fires. To those untrained people, it would have been terrifying.”

The fire lingered for weeks. “It just kept pottering around,” says Lyn, who returned to the tanker as others took over

the communications role. “One day it would come from the south, a week later the east, then the north.” She says that on a hot, windy day, it would flare up enough to destroy houses again.

“It was a pretty smooth operation,” says Lyn. “To have no lives lost, you can’t have better than that! I really think a lot had to do with the preparation our CFA and the police had put in for years.”

Recovery has been slow. “There’s still a certain amount of shock, people have been struggling mentally,” continues Rod. “There’s been a huge effort to get people back in the right space, help everyone out and get people back to houses. The peer support we’ve received from CFA was magnificent.”

As a Captain, Rod was saddened by the loss of people’s houses, but heartened by the way the various agencies and the community worked together both during and after the fires. He was touched by the flood of letters sent to the brigade, well over 1000, from schoolchildren all over Victoria: “They sent letters saying, ‘Thank you for all you’ve done,’ and all sorts of paintings. We answered every one of them. That was probably the number-one highlight in terms of pride. It made you feel good.”



DISTRICT 5

DISTRICT 4

SO



# THE SOUTH WEST

DISTRICT 16

DISTRICT 2

DISTRICT 15

DISTRICT 7

DISTRICT 6

## BROADWATER, MACARTHUR AND ARDONACHIE FIRE BRIGADES

### Communication “like clockwork” as firefighters contain bushfires

**Brigade members involved:** 120

**Range of experience:** from just qualified to over 60 years

**Supporting roles:** partners offering support and debriefing at home or station; members unloading food and water at staging areas, and helping at stations

**Areas:** south west Victoria, including Budj Bim National Park, Lake Condah Mission, Bessiebelle, Mount Deception, Dartmoor, Hotspur, Strathdownie, Digby

**Campaign duration:** early December 2019 to late January 2020

While fires in the state’s east received much attention in the media over the Black Summer, those in Victoria’s south west were all but overlooked – largely because they were controlled by firefighters before they could cause much structural damage. Broadwater brigade Captain and First Deputy Group Officer Hugh McFarlane, Group Officer and Macarthur brigade member Owen Dyson, and Ardonachie brigade Captain Knox Paton all played key roles in their containment.

Owen’s involvement began after lightning strikes sparked fires either side of Heywood, north east of Portland, on 20 December 2019. The strike team he assembled was first asked to go to Lake Condah Mission on the western edge of Budj Bim National Park, but it was redirected further west to Mount Deception for fuel reduction. “There were a few local trucks and Forest Fire Management Victoria members at Condah, but there was nothing they could really do because the fire was in the middle of a stony barrier and was pretty much inaccessible,” says Owen.

Firefighting comes with its own challenges in the area’s forests, where a jagged floor of stony lava flow is obscured by tall, matted bracken, leaf litter and fern debris. It’s impossible to move around many parts of Budj Bim. Firefighters also need to observe heritage overlays designed to protect the UNESCO



World Heritage-listed national park. Special tactics are sometimes needed – firefighters at Lake Condah Mission later ran hoses for over 1.4 kilometres with sprinklers to create a break, bringing in pumps and a trailer-load of hose lines across Lake Condah by boat.

At this stage, the Lake Condah Mission fire was expected to become too dangerous to handle due to predictions of extremely strong winds and heat, so the strike teams and DELWP concentrated on creating breaks along the southern edge of Budj Bim National Park to prevent fire moving into farming land. Dozers and graders churned around everywhere. Then, on 30 December, more lightning strikes started new fires in the area.

On New Year's Eve, Hugh and Owen were in a FCV overseeing the containment of a fire near Bessiebelle to the south, with air support; Knox was firefighting on the Ardonachie tanker. No sooner had they contained that fire than a lightning storm hit the middle of Budj Bim. Hugh and Owen immediately headed to the park, together with Byaduk and Bessiebelle ultralights, but although the firefighters could smell the fire, they couldn't find it. It was a matter of waiting until the fire came out of the bush.

Hugh and Owen's teams were stationed that night at Knox's farm, which runs along

the edge of the park and was predicted to be in the direct path of the approaching fire. When he wasn't on a truck creating fire breaks along the property's boundary, Knox and his wife hosted almost 70 visitors.

"We pretty much lived in each other's pockets for the next five days," says Hugh, who was acting as Sector Commander and at one stage oversaw five strike teams comprising 20 tankers and four FCVs. Trucks from the Macarthur Group came and went from the farm, as did strike teams from Colac, Geelong, Warrnambool, Terang, Camperdown and the Horsham area.

The fire came out after 7am on New Year's Day. "A lot of smoke, a lot of flames and a lot of CFA lights!" Knox recalls. Tankers patrolled a 7-kilometre stretch, putting out segments of flame as they reached the boundary. Fencing was cut and graders created a bare earth break. That day and the next, the firefighters watched as "the whole park lit up". "Everything from Lake Condah to Mount Eccles [Budj Bim], close to 16,000 acres," Knox says. This was either national park or land owned by the Gunditjmarra people.

Within a few days, fire had flared at Lake Surprise, a volcanic crater at the north eastern tip of Budj Bim. Firefighters scaled the crater's side to stop the blaze spreading. "You blokes are like mountain

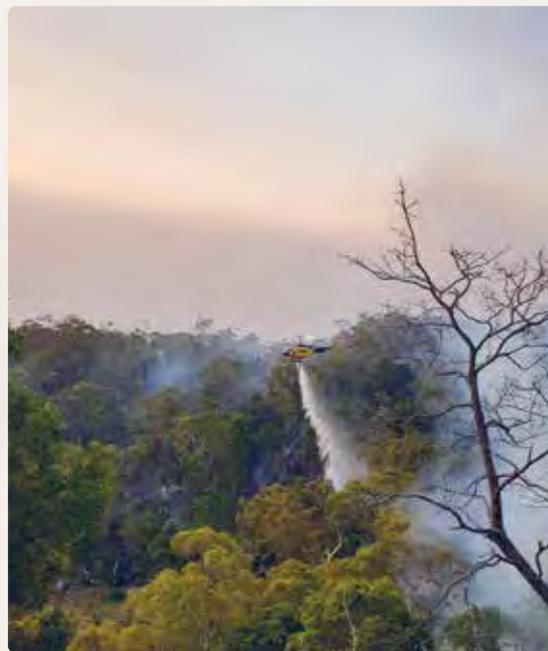
goats. You know this country like the back of your hand," remarked a FFMVic worker.

"We knew where we were going, we knew what to do," says Hugh. "We didn't take any risks. People who don't know the area are amazed we get through it. We take the stones and ferns for granted."

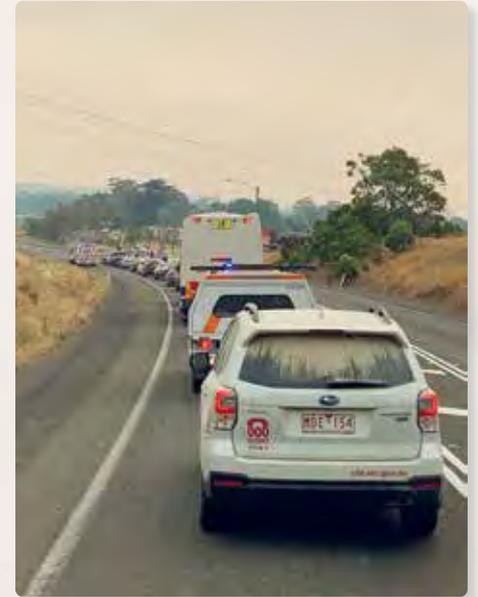
Properties on the southern side of Budj Bim were left largely unscathed after the main fire danger had passed – Knox's farm had acted as the barrier it was intended to be. "No-one got hurt and we contained it in the bush. I'm proud of the way we all worked together," says Knox. The fire burnt back on itself, and by 4 January 2020 it was a matter of mopping up, he adds. Ultimately, almost 7000 hectares of bush in the area were impacted.

"It was great to see the agencies work so well together and our volunteers flocking to help. The young ones were lining up to hop on the trucks," says Hugh. He continues: "We all knew each other and were on the phone the whole time. The right-hand side always knew what the left-hand side was doing. Even at the end, everyone could pick up the phone and have a chat. The mateship really came out."

Owen says, "I don't think you could improve on the liaison between DELWP, Forest Fire Management Victoria and us local CFA ones. It went like clockwork."



Left to right:  
Helicopter filling up from  
Lake Surprise; bombing  
inaccessible bush in the  
crater / Hughie McFarlane





**Opposite page**

**Top (left to right):** Paynesville FCV / Aaron Lee. Hanson Street, Corryong / Lachlan Brown. Fire building before reaching Sarsfield / Phil Loukes. **Middle (left to right):** Orbost tanker and strike teams waiting for instructions / Laura Tidey. Escorting hay to farmers and animals / Phil Loukes. Convoy from Cann River / Deborah Azzopardi. **Bottom:** Bruthen–Nowa Nowa Rd / Kathryn Williams

**This page**

**Top (left to right):** Rhett Chalwell / Sheridan Gillham. Smoke column over Dead Horse Creek Track / Jody Haberfield. **Bottom (clockwise from above):** Getting ready / Rhett Chalwell. Deptford back-burning / Jody Haberfield. Fires behind the FCV / Laura Tidey



# CFA PEERS



## CFA PEERS

# Committed volunteers look after fireys' wellbeing

**Peers involved:** over 100

**Range of experience:**  
over 30 years

**Areas:** Omeo, Buchan, Swan Reach, Orbost, Mallacoota, Tallangatta, Corryong, New South Wales

**Campaign duration:**  
2 January to 4 February 2020

**As CFA firefighters were doing their best to protect the communities hit by the Black Summer bushfires, a group of dedicated volunteers was in turn looking after them.**

Often operational firefighters themselves, CFA peers work behind the scenes to support members and their families, promoting their physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. Rather than being professional counsellors, they are volunteers who have trained extensively in listening to and providing psychological first aid to firefighters. “You’re a big set of ears,” as one peer puts it. Peers think on their feet, problem-solve, feed the right information to the person involved, and refer them to professional help or support agencies if appropriate.

Working on their own and across other districts, peers provide year-round support for members facing challenges in their lives. Whether members are experiencing bereavement, family tragedy, divorce, a serious medical condition, or distress after responding to a serious motor vehicle accident or traumatic fire, peers are there to help.

Over 100 peers were actively involved during the 2019–20 fires, with 42 deployed out in the field, while many more worked to support their local districts. The peers talked to members on the fireground, at stations or in transit, with the chats taking place on the back of a ute, in a pub, sitting on a brick wall in the sun – anywhere the firey or local felt comfortable.

The peers might have started their chat by asking how the person was travelling, to be told that the fences had been fixed and the person had hay, clothes and lots of donations. But then they’ll start opening up, talking about how they’re not sleeping or eating properly, before asking, “Can you find some professional help for me?” The peer would say, “Let’s get that sorted for you.”

It’s a demanding yet rewarding role. “People see the big flames, it’s hot and there are the lights and sirens,” says Dawn Whittall, a peer for 15 years and a firefighter for 17 with Gisborne brigade. “The peers are the invisible people behind the scenes.”

Dawn went on five deployments as a peer during the 2019–20 season: the first two in New South Wales, the others all over East Gippsland. She said the peers were on duty 24/7, anywhere they were needed,



**Previous spread:**  
Swan Reach base camp /  
David Miller

**Above:** Deployed peers –  
Gloria Turner, Trent Egan,  
Lesley Read AFSM /  
Tim Rogers

which might mean talking to someone in a toilet block while brushing your teeth at night. “I think if I got anything from three hours’ sleep a night, I was lucky,” she says.

Dawn’s tasks included arranging a hospital visit for a firefighter bitten by bull ants, buying 17 pairs of size-10 thongs for firefighters who had forgotten to bring them and didn’t want to get tinea in the public showers, holding a blanket up for women who wanted privacy on the fireground, and organising people to sing ‘Happy birthday’ to a fellow firefighter. “Sometimes it’s the little things you do that have the biggest impact,” she says.

There are also the challenging times. For example, Dawn was called on to calm a firefighter whose PTSD was triggered during the fires.

In Orbost, she came across two Aboriginal women who were upset that they hadn’t been informed about fire trucks going into women’s country. They were also distressed at how children who’d been evacuated may have been separated from their parents, which evoked the trauma of the stolen generations. Dawn had a long conversation with the women and took the matters back to the ICC, where an Indigenous liaison role was organised.

Dawn was also called on to visit a family who had been cut off by fires for weeks, and who had lost their mother/grandmother to cancer elsewhere. “A psychologist and I were taken to them in a Defence Force vehicle that was mine-proof; it wouldn’t have been safe in a fire truck. They’d stop to cut down trees on the way,” says Dawn. “When we arrived, there were two little boys. The Defence Force personnel let them clamber all over the vehicle. They were brilliant.”

For Colin Glassock, a peer for 17 years based in District 11, which covers an area stretching from Bairnsdale to Mallacoota to Omeo, the season also began with the NSW fires. Colin and peer buddy Byron talked to local firefighters and those from interstate and New Zealand at the staging post at Port Macquarie University and other locations.

“The acceptance of peers by the overseas fireys was great,” says Colin. “It could be a situation where you sit down and

talk about the weather or something else, and that gives them the opportunity to have a chat about being away from their families.”

Colin returned from New South Wales to become operational at Bruthen as a Paynesville brigade member, then swapped hats as fires in the area became severe. He talked to a firefighter who had lost his house and business, driving him to meet his wife to break the bad news. “We were concerned about him driving himself because it wouldn’t be safe or good for him,” says Colin. “It gave him the opportunity to talk if he wanted to without being questioned, an opportunity to unload.”

At Swan Reach base camp in East Gippsland, Colin was asked by someone in a DELWP team to talk to the group, which had just come back from the terrible fires in Mallacoota.

Penny Perfrement, Barnawartha brigade member and a peer in District 24, which stretches from the NSW border down to the alpine district and across to Whorouly in the west, had a “surreal experience” as she switched roles from firefighting to peer support in the Upper Murray. She explains: “Working as a peer, I had cause to organise for a farmer to be transported to a Melbourne hospital. I realised that only days before, I’d been on a truck in my volunteer role trying desperately to save a house and sheds on his property. I remember battling to save the shearing shed and losing sight of him in the smoke and not knowing where he went.” She has kept a grateful text message the farmer sent her.

For Driffield brigade firefighter Donna Lawless, a peer in District 27 (a region covering Moe to Traralgon, and Toongabbie to Boolarra South), an incident at Omeo in January 2020 stands out. On the way to the staging area at Swan Reach, the peer team was redirected to Omeo to support members following the death of a FFMVic firefighter. A DELWP support team talked to the man’s colleagues while Donna talked to CFA members at the local pub after their formal debrief.

“The mood was very sombre when they were heading out the next day,” says

Donna. “You have to keep an eye on them. Some people will put on a brave face. There’s that feeling of closeness among firefighters because you’re all doing the same job, all working in the same area. It’s that familiarity that he was there doing what they were also doing.”

Penny adds: “It’s important to get people to make contact with their families in those times to reassure them. They might not have touched base with home for 24 hours.”

The peers working in Victoria witnessed the enormous amount of work local brigades were doing to support their communities. “It was lovely to be able to go around to the stations and acknowledge and support the people who operate behind the scenes,” says Penny. “They’re the ones who go to the local bakery to get food for when the trucks come back or get the toilet rolls. They’re the backbone of activities at the station. To say to them, ‘Why don’t you sit down and I’ll make you a cup of tea,’ and see the relief on their face, is lovely.”

Similarly rewarding was helping local brigade members to deliver donated goods to properties around Corryong. “Members from Corryong brigade knew who had babies that needed nappies, who had dogs that needed food, who liked chocolate and who had a birthday so they could bring them cake,” says Penny.

A highlight for Dawn was being transported in an enormous Globemaster plane between locations in New South Wales. “We were in the cargo hold, all these fireys with an all-women flight crew,” says Dawn. “I felt so proud to be an Australian, proud of the firefighters and to be part of it.”

The peers worked long and hard, volunteering for up to 18 hours a day on occasions. Donna says: “Meeting with firefighters at the end of a shift, talking to them at the staging area and helping them with things they might need, was really rewarding. I’d do it again tomorrow.”



# National Emergency Medals

**The National Emergency Medal was instituted by a Letters Patent granted by Queen Elizabeth the Second in October 2011. It is an operational service medal which recognises significant or sustained service to others in a nationally significant emergency.**

The purpose of the National Emergency Medal is to honour those who rendered sustained service during specified dates in specified places in response to nationally significant emergencies within Australia; or to other persons who rendered significant service in response to such emergencies.

The Black Summer Fires in 2019–20 have been declared a nationally significant emergency.

The decoration consists of a circular bronze medal with a stylised representation of Australia's national floral emblem, the wattle, in the centre. The ring around the central image is of flowering wattle, representing the accomplishments and sacrifices made by Australians in the service of others in times of crisis. The back of the medal repeats the ring of flowering wattle and details the award and recipient.

The National Emergency Medal ribbon colours match the colours of the Humanitarian Overseas Service Medal ribbon. The colours of the ribbon are gold and eucalyptus green. Gold symbolises the Australian sun, optimism and hope. Eucalyptus green complements the symbolism of the medal design. The seven gold-coloured bands represent Australia's six states, with the seventh representing the territories.

At time of publication, 5854 CFA members had been nominated to receive the National Emergency Medal for their contributions during the 2019–20 fires.



**Left:** Incident Control  
Centre Swifts Creek /  
Anne Crawford

**Right:** National  
Emergency Medal /  
Keith Pakenham AFSM,  
CFA Digital Media  
Co-ordinator

We can't fly you in an  plane

to  or the 

but we really appreciate what you 

are doing for us this  so we can

enjoy  s and  with our  and

families. Please don't 

at our attempt to make you  with 

You are all  because you go

the  mile. Your  (magnificent and marvellous)

efforts and bravery make us  with pride!

We hope this card gives you

Now, have a break - have a

  
  
! Thank you!  
from Perry, Geoff,  
Tilly + Harley Young

# Acknowledgements

## CFA volunteers

Thank you to all the volunteers who generously shared their time and stories to be included in this book.

Thank you also to all the volunteers and staff who provided photos for the stories.

## Writer – Anne Crawford

A big thank you to Anne Crawford for her time and extraordinary efforts in capturing all the stories from the many volunteers she interviewed.

Anne Crawford was a feature writer and sub-editor with *The Age* for 17 years, among other journalistic roles. She is also the author/co-author of seven non-fiction books, including *Forged with Flames*, a memoir about a brave woman's journey of recovery after the Ash Wednesday bushfires.

Anne is a long-term member of Kilcunda CFA, a small brigade that punches above its weight in South Gippsland, and has volunteered for several campaign fires, including the Black Summer bushfires. Anne also put together a publication for the 75th anniversary of the Kilcunda brigade on her own initiative, enlisting assistance from other members and publishing it locally.

## Production team

Thanks to Paul Smitz for his editing work and expert advice on book production. And we appreciate the skills of Matt Clare from Mono Design for bringing the stories to life on the page.

Thanks also to Teena Speirs, Tom Sanderson and Harry Smiles in CFA Information and Technology for providing the relevant maps.

Many thanks to Shaunnagh O'Loughlin, Duncan Russell and colleagues in the CFA Communications and Engagement team for supporting, advising on and reviewing all parts of this book. Their time and expertise was instrumental. A special thank you to Keith Pakenham AFSM for shooting, gathering and reviewing so many photos from across this campaign.

## Project management

We wish to acknowledge Jodie Patten, a member of the CFA Organisational Wellbeing Team, who coordinated the various moving parts of producing this book over many months. Thanks also to Suzanne Leckie, Organisational Wellbeing Manager, and the Organisational Wellbeing Team for their input and invaluable support.

## Funding

This publication was produced with funding provided by the jointly funded Commonwealth-State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements through the Support for Emergency Services Initiative. This funding was provided to CFA and VICSES to support volunteers and their families with mental health and recovery from the Black Summer fires in eastern Victoria in 2019–20.



Please note that the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is now the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA).



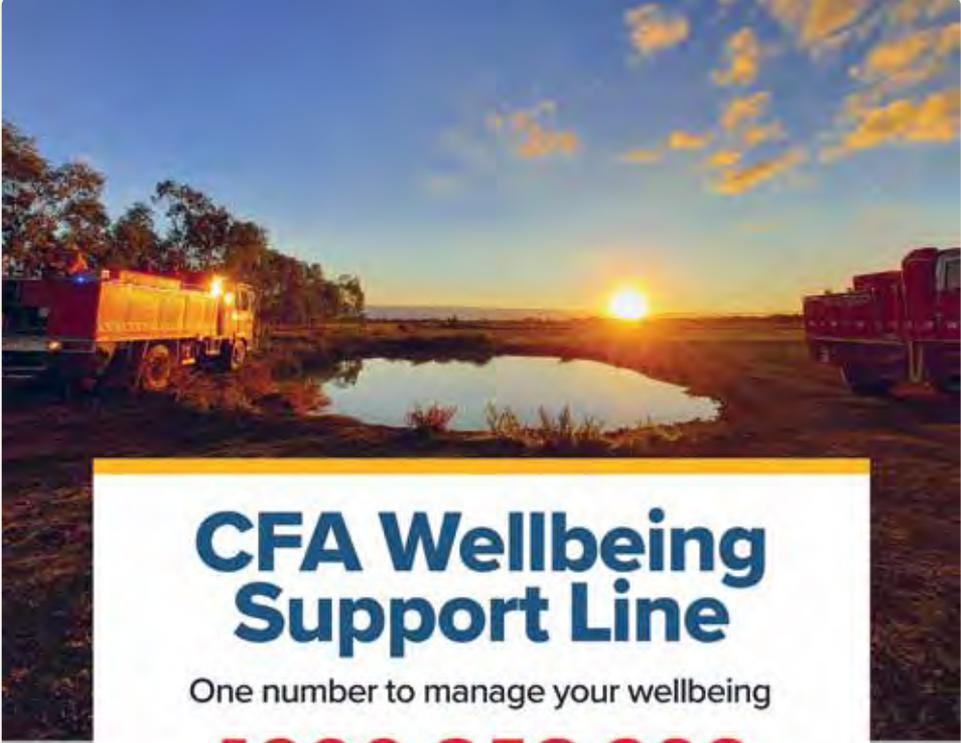
Left: Thank you card / Phil Loukes

Above: Emergency Services Mural on Orbost Hotel / Jodie Patten

# Support services

Reading stories like these can trigger a strong emotional reaction.

Support services are available to CFA members via the Wellbeing Support Line. These services have been accessible for many years and help to offset the impact of the extraordinary work undertaken.



**CFA Wellbeing Support Line**

One number to manage your wellbeing

**1800 959 232**

Providing CFA members and their families access to free and confidential wellbeing support

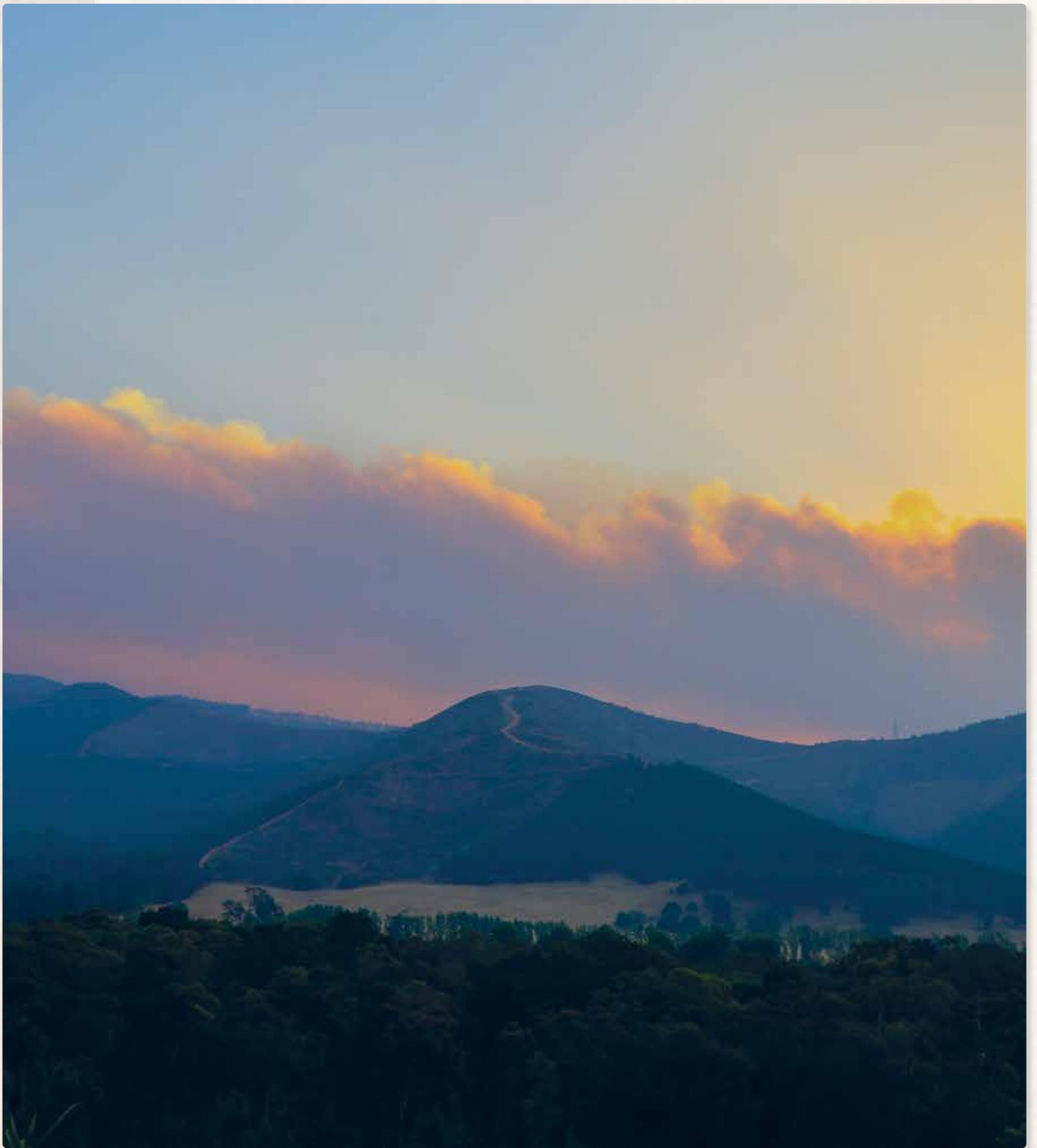
<b>MEMBER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM</b> <small>(COUNSELLING)</small>	<b>PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM</b>	<b>CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM</b>	<b>ORGANISATIONAL WELLBEING TEAM</b>
OPTION 1	OPTION 2	OPTION 3	OPTION 4

OUR COMMUNITY • OUR CFA



[cfa.vic.gov.au](http://cfa.vic.gov.au)

Right: Mt Buffalo / Rhett Chalwell





Above: East Gippsland /  
State of Victoria, DEECA  
Cover: Fuel reduction burn,  
Ensay North / Anne Crawford