

A 'gentleman' fire



Mongarlowe Captain Paul Bott hopes maybe this time the message will get through

ON THE 16TH OCTOBER, a lightning strike hit behind Currock-billy Mountain and it started the fire burning in the Wirritin area of the range and became known as the Wirritin fire. Shoalhaven fire control were in charge of it because it was on their side of the shire boundary. They were on it for a couple of days before Palerang became involved, and therefore Lake George fire control. The first bit of work we did was putting in what became the western control lines. It was mainly all dozer work, because the fire had not yet

crossed the ridge, so we had no fire on our patch, but we were to be the western containment line. We started work there with one dozer, a couple of us from the brigade, myself and Murray McCracken. Murray's a deputy and it was really good to have him on board, because he knows the country and where they wanted us to put in these control lines. The purpose of a control line is to stop the fire going beyond that line. So, whether you wait for the fire to come down to it, or you back burn from it to create a broader control line, that helps to control the fire. Once we have

a perimeter right round a fire, it's described as being in control. If there are no distinct boundaries, currently they call that an out-of-control fire. It doesn't necessarily mean it's running amok and doing damage where it shouldn't, but basically a control line is there to contain it. With this particular fire, because it started in the national park, National Parks and Wildlife Service became the primary controllers in the first stage. When it reached a certain size, beyond the capability of the equipment NPWS have, they get the RFS involved, and when that happens we take control.

The RFS then becomes the primary controller and that way they call the shots. In this case it was Shoalhaven Fire Control.

We commenced with control lines, running from south to north over the given fire area and its potential spread area to the south and north.

Lightning strikes again

Then we had a lightning strike to the south of the proposed containment line to the south, and that was the one that hit No Name, or the ridge of Budawang — No Name Mountain. So



LEARNING ABOUT BURNING

Fire Com then had to incorporate two fires into the one fire. In their eyes it was spreading and they knew why it was spreading, but they had to then work on two fires, halving their resources, or they had to double up, bring in twice as much. It was reasonably benign weather though, as fire weather goes; not excessively strong winds and not excessively hot days, so we nicknamed it the "gentleman's fire". It was just meandering along the garden path like an old gent — it would find a side path, go down, come back, go across.

But anyway, as it turned out, it got quite a bit bigger and so more resources were needed. A lot of the locals around here [Mongarlowe] thought it was a good thing. It was a couple of thousand hectares by then — it ended up being over 8,600 hectares burnt.

But because of the gentleman-like manner of the fire, it was a perfect hazard reduction, which National Parks had been planning for this very area. So National Parks were quite happy with the fact it was just going along and they were supportive of control lines.

NPWS policy is that you don't introduce fire unless you absolutely have to. So it's a question then of waiting for the fire to come to the containment lines. I'm speaking for the Western Division, but it was pretty much the same as what they were doing on the Eastern Division.

Servicing the crews

Crews came to help from many brigades to the west of us. Some trucks were here for three days. We look after them and provide for them. The lunches were generally always, sent out because they're on the fire ground and you don't pull people off the fire ground just to feed them, you take the food out. Then in the evening they came to get some tucker before they hit the sack.

THE OUTGOING DAY SHIFT LINES UP FOR ANOTHER SCRUMPTIOUS BREAKFAST WHIPPED UP BY HARRY CASSILLES AND JIM WARMAN.



KEITH BOYDON UPDATES THE BRIEFING BOARD IN THE MONGARLOWE SHED.

We had day and night shifts working there for a good fortnight, and probably longer, so you need that support there and we got that through Harry and Jim with their Tallaganda emergency support caravan.

A Portaroo had to be organised, we had to organise emergency fuel for the trucks because often they were coming off the fire ground after the local service station had closed.

We had numerous resources brought in, we had the ambos on site, the NSW Ambulance Service providing safety on fire ground before and after. We were also making sure all their welfares got looked after, even the retardant delivery system people.

So although we might have only had twenty to thirty fire fighters out we were often supplying fifty meals on any given day to take care of everybody on our Western Division.

So Mongarlowe took it on board, the fire was completely in our zone, so it all fell on Mongarlowe.

Our Shed Manager, Flavia, with the support from various other women and people in the community helped keep the tea and coffees going — and all those little niceties that can make these long, drawn-out events a bit more comfortable.

