

THE IRE IN FIRE

We've also got to keep our community happy and we had an open shed for quite a few days, weeks even, where the locals, who weren't involved at all, except for being bathed in smoke, could come and get an update on the fire. They could have a bickie and a cup of tea, and it's all about that. This is a really strong point with a rural volunteer fire brigade — that it is community based. It's run by members of the community, supported by members of the community and financially supported by other members of the community. We need to remember this all the time.

Lessons being (slowly) learnt

We might actually be in for a busy fire season in 2013-14. It's certainly shaping up that way. We have a cool respite now, which is normal. This is very typical November weather for Mongarlowe at this time of the year, but we must remember the lessons of history.

We keep having these Royal Commissions and they talk about exactly the same things. The last big Commission was Black Friday in Victoria. Forty-nine recommendations, all good, all worthy — I've read the entire transcript from that Commission. It's identical to the 1939 fire in essence, what needs to be done and what we have to do.

But between 1939 and 2009 we have 15 million more people in the way of these sort of fires. Here we are talking about the Wirritin fire. Eight thousand six hundred hectares burnt and fortunately no assets lost.

[There was one life lost, the pilot of a plane that crashed.]

But the problems are still there. Why that is, you'd have to speculate. People get a good idea, put it to the powers that be, the powers that be think it's a great idea, but it's never followed through.

For instance, on the Wirritin fire we had to put in a repeater, because our radio system failed. It wouldn't do the job. Mobile phones had to be used and we have very poor coverage in this area. I'm not even issued with a mobile phone as a brigade captain, none of them are.

We needed support from Lake George Control to get us a mobile phone. It wasn't forthcoming. I could borrow just about anybody's phone and make a phone call. If I didn't get reception, I'd just have to drive.

Truly mobile. I'd take a phone and take it for a drive to get reception. The phone calls you make when you can't get through on the radio are of importance.

I'm not ringing up to find out how somebody is, we're doing fire fighting strategy. Important exchanges of information when you're fighting a fire. As a brigade we've agreed to buy mobile phones.

We should have bought them 12 months ago, but I couldn't get enough support for it at a brigade level. Everyone sees the value of them now. We're aware of the shortcomings at a higher level and we just work around it. As a brigade we're fine, as a community we'll be fine, as much as



'EL CAPITANO' PAUL BOTT.

the fire will let us be. So we just have to remember the past, that's the best teacher, and we have to be up with the past and we'll be right.

Mongarlowe burnt down

It happened in 1919, 1929, and the 1939s fire flanked it. And then in the late 50s I'd say, Mongarlowe was saved again by seventy blokes with beaters. We are a very fire-prone area, as is the rest of south-eastern Australia — it's part of nature.

It's so easy to find fire scars in the bush here. But you know, four years, five years, ten years of no real fire threat and complacency sets in. Newcomers find a beautiful block of land at the real estate office, it's green, it's lovely, and this is where the Council and the real estate agents have to be more proactive.

They must say to people, "do you know you live in the most fire-prone area on earth?" And we are — that's no lie.

We're putting more and more people here. There should be more proactive information about living in a bush fire prone area — and that's from Brisbane to Adelaide. It's really important.

Then people know what they're getting in for. It doesn't mean everyone has to join a volunteer brigade. But make a fire plan. So many people don't worry, and that's why they say planning to make a plan is not a plan. It's not.

It's not doom and gloom and all that sort of stuff, this living in the bush. It's fantastic living in the bush. You just have to be fully aware that it **will** happen to you — we just can't tell you what year it will be.

Come and ask us

We can do a pre-incident plan, we can

have a look around a new block or even if you've been here for some time. It tends to be the new people who ask us but not always. We can advise anybody what to do — and they can take heed of it, or not. But at least they're aware of it and it's up to them. Living in the bush is where you practice the art of compromise. You can take every piece of vegetation out you like within a certain distance if you want to. But not everyone wants to live on a golf course green, because living in the bush is beautiful.

But do compromise, take a bit of the bush out, have a fire system in place and have a real fire plan. If it's to evacuate, that's it, you evacuate. But you have to be able to evacuate and you must know where you're trying to get to.

You can't just drive out your front gate and not know which way you're supposed to turn. If time's on your side it's not a problem, but on the bad days we get fire-wise, time is really short. And then people die — that's why they died in Victoria. It came too quickly. They knew it was coming, they were warned 48 hours out by the Premier of their state to evacuate.

"No, shut the curtains, we'll be right." That's the bad attitude. This is an issue the Council and the real estate agents should really be addressing.



TORCHING THE BUSH TO MAKE A BACKBURN.

She'll be right (not)

Don't be complacent, do something about it. You're about to purchase, a 100, 500-thousand, even million dollar property. It doesn't matter, they all burn. Just be aware of it.

It makes the community a lot safer and it makes it easier for the fire brigade if every member of the community has a fire plan and understands the threat of fire. Weigh up the risks, if you still

want to live here, then live here — it's beautiful.

The lesson that comes after every big fire is that nothing happens. There's no advertising campaign by the real estate association and the shire's quite happy to give you a DA.

We'll be going through another 1939 — without a doubt. No question about it — the fire will come. It's just that now we have far more people in front of it.









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