



Canberra Firestorm

A Personal Account by a Rivers Unit Member



THE DAY BEFORE - BULL'S HEAD PASS EVACUATION

Friday, 17th January 2003

On Wednesday, 8th January 2003 four lightning strikes sparked bushfires in the Brindabella Mountains, the hulking great range to the ACT's west. The following Saturday (11th Jan), the ACT Emergency Service (ES) brigade, Rivers to which I belong was called out to provide helicopter support to the firefighting efforts at a place called Bull's Head Pass which is high up in the mountains. The idea was that helicopters that were water bombing the fires would be able to land at our station and refuel. We also had ground to air communications with the aircraft.

We provided this service from sun up to sun down for the next seven days. Manning the helibase was pretty boring for the most part, with the helicopters only due in every hour or so. Every now and then I wandered down to the tent in which the incident controller was working just to see what was going on. After a couple of days of observing and listening to the fire ground communications on the radio, I started to grow a little concerned. The fires just didn't seem to be going out like they were supposed to and I heard of a couple of cases when the situation had got pretty hairy for crews of bush fires. Still, this was the ACT - not the Blue Mountains, and not much ever happened in the ACT. The fires would be out soon.

For me the excitement, if it could be termed that, began at approximately 4pm on Friday, 17th January 2003, after a back burn along Mt Franklin Road, which provides the only access to the Bull's Head Pass, got out of control. There was now fire on both sides of the road. Everybody at Bull's Head was told to evacuate immediately.

It was all so sudden and unexpected that we were packed and on the road before we even knew what was happening. We had only a couple of minutes to get all of our trailers together and get the hell out of there. Realisation hit me that I had one crewmember down on Bendora Dam, which was 14kms down the hill from where we were. I reasoned that being on a dam, they were safer than the rest of us. When we reached the Staging Area Manager I asked, well actually I demanded to know, what was going to happen with the guys on Bendora Dam. They would be evacuated by vehicle I was told. A Landcruiser Troop Carrier known to ES personnel, known as a "troupie" would be despatched from Bull's Head down to Bendora and back. I immediately saw the danger in this solution. It was a 30km round trip from Bendora Dam to Bull's Head Pass. The only road out of the Dam terminated at Bull's Head Pass on Mt Franklin Road and from there they would have to go through the bushfire to get out. Should push come to shove, the troupie had no fire fighting capacity.

I really didn't want to leave without our extra team member, but we were all ordered out of there and I had three other team members on board whose welfare I needed to consider as well. Right at that moment I hated being an ES leader. As we drove out of the staging area I felt as guilty as hell for leaving without the whole team. I felt as though I had let the team and particularly that team member down. My stomach started turning somersaults and my heart was beating so fast that I thought that it was going to burst out through my chest. Listening to the urgent chatter on the radio from the team trying to

hold the fire back from the road didn't help. They were having difficulty containing it and urged everybody to get out ASAP.

The danger that I would lose a member of my team in this fire was suddenly very real. I would be the first Commander in ACTES history to have a member killed in a bushfire. God, where were they? Keenly I listened to the radio. Molonglo 60 (the radio callsign of the vehicle) had reached the flood boat crew... They were on their way up to Mt Franklin Road... The fire was getting worse.

As we passed the fires who were trying to hold the road open, the looks on their faces made me instantly realise how grave the situation was. We were urged one with an almost frantic wave of their arms. Where the hell was Molonglo 60? I was shaking like a leaf all the way down the mountain. When we reached the evacuation point I called our vehicle in as having arrived safely and anxiously awaited news on the progress of Molonglo 60, the vehicle that I prayed would bring its four occupants to safety.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity I heard them call in that they had reached Piccadilly Circus. They were past danger. Everything was going to be okay. Heart Attack averted - at least temporarily.

My tale does not end there, nay it has scarce begun, for the next day would be the day that Australians would come to know as the ACT Bushfire Disaster, and a Rivers ES crew would once again be caught right in the thick of it.

FIRESTORM SATURDAY

Saturday, 18th January 2003

Saturday, 18th January 2003 is a date that will be forever burned into the memory of many, many Canberrans. I know that I will never forget it. If anybody ever doubted the existence of God or the Devil, they certainly wouldn't have after that day. The thing that I remember the most vividly is the colour; the intense burning oranges and glowing reds that filled the atmosphere. It was so intense that the bright orange overalls of the State Emergency Service, which can usually be seen from kilometres away, were almost invisible against the sky.

For what it is worth, this is my story.

For me, the day began with a 2:30am phone call and a request to cater for 80 hungry firies as a matter of urgency.

I recall the first inkling that something was not right came as I drove down the silent Cotter Road towards 'the Shed'. The moonless night sky in the west was pulsating with an with an ethereal, incandescent red glow.

Wearily our team met and we hooked our 'whiz-bang, you-beaut', catering trailer on to the troupie and made our way in to Curtin.

After I had received a brief and instructions from Emergency Services Bureau (ESB), and a couple of false starts, we headed south towards Tharwa. As we drew closer to our destination, in the blackness of the night we could see the bright red fire slowly oozing down the mountainsides in great finger-like projections towards Canberra suburbia. It looked like a lava flow. I remarked that if any Canberrans could see what was coming they would have soiled themselves right then and there. Alarm bells started to quietly sound in the back of my mind and my skin began to prickle. Doomsday was dawning.

As we crossed the rickety, old, wooden bridge into Tharwa we saw that the fire was on the main road just up ahead. It appeared that already they were having trouble controlling the fire. Firstly we had to deliver food to the Tidbinbilla Visitors Centre, where I had been told a whole lot of hungry NSW bush firies was apparently eagerly awaiting our arrival and then we would have to cook breakfast for them. As we headed out there the smoke became increasingly thicker and ash started raining down on the car. If we had come over the rise and seen Dante's Peak spewing her guts out ahead I would not have been at all surprised. It was just like dirty snow.

When we pulled in to the car park of the visitor's centre, at the entrance of the Reserve, in amongst all of the bushfire tankers, we saw weary bushfire fighters sleeping on the tops of their vehicles. Those who were awake, were staggering around bleary-eyed and battle-worn. Strangely, everybody there was silent. There was no banter amongst the bushfiries, or any of the usual wry laughter as they poked fun at each other or themselves. Nobody seemed to notice our arrival. There was a veil of heaviness over the people and the place, so we quietly dropped out load in the corner of the centre and left the reserve to assume our post as Tharwa Primary School. I never did find out exactly when it happened, whether it had already happened when we got there, or it all happened after, but that beautiful nature reserve, and all of its precious fauna and flora, was razed to the ground.

The sun that rose that morning in Tharwa was blood red behind a wispy veil of smoke. In the bush capital, the dawn is normally filled with sounds of all sorts of birds greeting the rising sun in a noisy chorus, but today all was eerily silent. In the still of the early morning, the only sounds were those of heavy trucks as they chugged up the hill, and the crackle of the VHF radio in our vehicle.

It was probably about 10:30am when I noticed that smoke was starting to fill the sky overhead. I watched it for a few minutes, and started to grow a little concerned for both the welfare of my team and for myself. I had already seen one fire blow of control within seconds the day before and the weather conditions were expected to be much worse today. The alarm bells were starting to ring louder now, and to be brutally honest, I started to worry that Tharwa was going to burn, despite the containment line that had been burnt around it. I thought that it was a good idea to prepare the team to leave, just in case.

As the minutes passed the smoke grew thicker and thicker and I started getting a little more worried. It was when I noticed the ominous orange glow coming out of the smoke just behind the tiny township that we decided that enough was enough. I rang the logistics coordinator from my mobile phone to tell him about our predicament and about our intention to leave. He told me that he would ring me back in two minutes, after he had consulted with the Manager of Operations. We got into the vehicle and drove on to the main street to wait our two minutes there. Two minutes came and went. Five minutes. Still no word from ESB. The smoke was starting to turn charcoal grey. We had to get out of there. The fire was getting way too close for comfort and the wind was starting to pick up. We decided that it would be safer for us to be on the Canberra side of Tharwa Bridge.

As we drew away from Tharwa, we could see how close the fire was to the little village. We could see great walls of flame racing up the hills to the west and across the grasslands to the south. We could hear the roar of the approaching fire. To us it sounded like a distant train. The fire was starting to go ballistic. We sat just off the side of the road and watched the terrifying but spectacular show, awe struck by the sheer power and ferocity of the bushfire. The wind had turned gale-force and blew smoke in to all of our eyes. All the while we listened to the radio and I waited for ESB to get back to me. The fire has reached as far south as Naas. God, how big was this fire?

After a few minutes had passed, a light unit – Southern 21 I think it was, came screaming over the bridge and pulled up beside us. A firey leapt out of the vehicle and rushed over. “Don’t let anybody through!” he told us, a little wild-eyed and breathless. “Unless they are going to protect their home. If they live down on Smith’s Road, tell them that the fire is really bad there and we strongly recommend that they don’t go!” With that, he was gone.

We stopped a few cars coming through. One woman wanted to get through to Naas. Another wanted to help his grandmother defend her Tharwa home. We even stopped the local WIN TV News crew. I radioed our Communications Centre (known as CommCen) and told them that the media wanted access to Tharwa. They came back and told me NOT to let them through. The woman in the News car asked me if it was okay if they took some footage from where we were instead. Fine. Just not from the other side of the bridge!

The news crew had only got a couple of minute's worth of footage before things started looking hairy. The sky was turning black and the blackness was advancing towards us at an alarming rate. The winds became stronger and stronger. Now the frightening orange glow was directly to the west and blowing straight towards us! We decided that we could just as easily block the road up at Banks. We sent the news crew packing and followed them back towards Canberra.

The fire seemed to be rampaging towards the historic property of Lanyon, which was directly east from the fire, across open fields. We dropped off three of our crew at the main gate of Lanyon to maintain the roadblock while one other member and I checked Lanyon. On the way in we met a car coming out. The driver of the vehicle identified himself as being a marriage celebrant and told us that there was a wedding party down there. "Don't worry," he said. "I warned them all that we might have to evacuate before I started. They are on their way out now."

Sure enough there was a procession of headlights coming towards us. Thank God for that. The thought of having to walk into the middle of a wedding ceremony, attempt to stop it and tell them all to leave was not a pleasant one, particularly when we didn't know for sure how close the fire was. We moved on down to the main car park where a couple of vehicles still lingered and urged them on. As we waited for the last of the cars to clear a big, shiny silver Ford pulled up. A young woman, dressed in a very long, very tight, silver blue satin dress hopped out of the car. She was grasping a round bouquet I noticed as she shuffled, as quickly as her dress would allow, over to us.

"The caterer won't leave!" she exclaimed urgently, then spun on her heels and shuffled quickly to the vehicle from whence she came.

There was still a caterer somewhere in there? The sky overhead was turning black. I ran down to the main garden, where indeed I found a man standing in a marquee packing crockery.

"Mate, you need to leave right now!" I told him in my most authoritative voice. I was ready to battle with him if he ignored me too, but when he saw me in my uniform and the radio hand set alive with non-stop chatter, he didn't need to be told twice. His eyes went as big as saucers, and without a word, he pulled down the back door of his van, scrambled in to the driver's seat and drove off, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake. As I started back to our vehicle I glanced into the courtyard behind the homestead to see a man watering down the beautiful old building with a hose. One man protecting homestead, I mentally noted.

I ran back to our vehicle and told my team mate that there was somebody there. He raced to the homestead to see who else was there while I drove up to the Sydney Nolan Gallery, where there were about four cars still parked out the front. They were loading paintings into a van as I got out of the troupe. I told them of the imminent danger and advised them to leave. One of the men asked me if they could have 10 minutes. I told them that I didn't know how fast the fire was coming, but it was like a freight train, and I didn't even know if it would get here, but I couldn't take any chances. They needed to leave immediately. As I watched the last of the vehicles drive away I thought, oh dear God, please don't let those paintings burn! I didn't to be responsible for the destruction of a piece of Australia's history.

With Lanyon cleared of all people, bar five who were apparently staying behind to defend Lanyon, we started to drive out. As we drove up the long, dirt drive way to exit the property, I suddenly noticed flames out to our right. There was a spot fire due east of the homestead. It had jumped Tharwa Road. We would have to get its exact location and report it back to CommCen. I got the Rivers ES crew to move up to the roundabout and help the police maintain the roadblock while we went to check out the spot fire. After a short drive we pinpointed its location. I grabbed the handset and called in my first ever 'Code White', which is a radio proword that advises our central communications area that the person calling in is advising them of a new incident – in this case it was a smoke sighting. It wouldn't be my last for they day either! There were no bushfires in the area at all. We decided then that in the lack of bush fire fighter presence, we would have to keep an eye on Tharwa Road and the hills around Banks, Gordon and Conder and call in anything that we saw.

Then we headed back to the roadblock, which was being maintained at the roundabout by both my crew and a young police officer, who had been there alone until our arrival, and stood our ground.

It was at that point I will admit that I became privately really scared, although I tried to cool about it, as though what was happening was all part of the plan. Certainly the couple of new Rivers ES members didn't seem to comprehend the danger that I believed that we were in. Actually, I was so terrified that I became exhilarated – thank you Adrenalin. There was fire everywhere and the wind was incredible. Fire seemed to be consuming everything. Live embers and ash were flying everywhere. The smoke was choking. Day had become night. The radio was going mad. Duffy. Holder. Point Hut. They were all on fire. Everywhere seemed to be on fire. Bushfire crews were calling in code Reds – life threatening emergencies.

As I listened to the 'reds' (a 'red' message is the same as a mayday call) coming through the radio from the bushfires, one after the other in rapid succession a new wave of panic started to rise up within me. We were pretty close to our bushfires where I am and they were out there somewhere, right in the thick of it. I didn't know where they were specifically and there was no way that I could find out if they were okay. My logical brain told me that they must be in real trouble if type of radio traffic was an indicator. It seemed almost inevitable that we would lose at least some of them. The whole situation was just too dire for everybody to walk away okay.

As I listened, two images flashed in to my head, both of them vivid and detailed, as though I was seeing them on TV. The first one that somewhere down deep I feared was a premonition, was of coffins being walked slowly down the aisle of St Christopher's Cathedral in Manuka. Then after that for some reason I pictured our Brigade AGM but half the seats were empty. My heart started to sink. At that point I did the only thing that I could do. I took a deep breath and walked away from the vehicle, away from the radio. There was too much to do where I was.

The only word that kept flashing in my mind was 'Armageddon'. Firebird 7, one of the water bombing helicopters informed Comms that Banks and Gordon would be on fire within 15 minutes. And we were standing right in the middle of the road between the two suburbs!

As the black world filled with an incandescent red glow, I remember looking at the hill directly behind Gordon waiting for the fire to crest. There were so many houses crammed together in this part of Canberra that I couldn't imagine what would happen if the fire came over the hill. The adrenalin was really pumping through my body now.

A crowd had gathered around us, all watching the spectacle, as though they were at the drive in or something. Sheer rage started to boil inside me at the sight of them just standing there in a group, staring at us as though we were some sort of freak show, although I managed to keep a lid on it - just. Did they not realise that they were placing themselves potentially in very real danger? I got the young AFP officer to get rid of everybody who could be got rid of. In the end there were only a handful of people left. I recall that one woman came to us scared and crying because her husband was at a cottage on the Lanyon property and wouldn't leave. I don't remember exactly what I said to her, but she relayed it to him and he left immediately.

At around the same time, two big buses pulled up. They needed to get through to Outward Bound to evacuate its occupants, of which there could have been anything up to sixty. I again attempted to radio CommCen to determine if the road was open or not, but with everything going on, I couldn't get through. I tried to ring them from my mobile phone, but I couldn't reach anybody there. All I knew was that there was flame all over the main road south of Tharwa and Smith's Road, which is just over the bridge from Outward Bound was under siege from flame. I hadn't heard anything about danger at Outward Bound or the fires who were down there talking about needing to evacuate anybody. That was a really hard decision to make. I feared that under all of the conditions, I had no choice but to hold them back.

What I remember most about that afternoon is the colour. I couldn't tell you exactly what time each event transpired and I don't remember much about what I said to people, but I remember the bright glow that filled the world around us. It was so surreal. It changed from orange to red to orange again. I remember the colour and the feeling of being more terrified than I every have been in my life.

At one point I even got the guys to take everything out of the back of the troupie and to get the blankets ready. For a minute or so I feared that we were going to be caught in a burn over and that we would have to use the troupie for protection. I kept remembering the call from Firebird 7 - 15 minutes and the fire would have reached Banks and Gordon. How long had it been? How was I going to look after my crew? I had to protect them. I couldn't risk their lives for the sake of a roadblock. A couple of NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) four-wheel drives turned up. I decided that now was a good time for us to get back to ESB. The young copper decided that it was time for him to go back to his station. If anybody tackled that road now, then it would be on his or her own head.

As we were driving up Drakeford Drive, we came across a two-car accident at the intersection of Drakeford Drive and Summerland Cct. A NSW RFS four wheel drive was on its side and a Magna was in the middle of the intersection with its front end crumpled in. Amazingly the driver of the four-wheel drive climbed out of the vehicle of his own accord and one of my team members looked after the lady who was driving the other car until the ambulance arrived. While we were waiting on the median strip a sudden gust of wind came and we were showered with live embers. I felt stinging on my neck and face, but didn't think much more of it. It was only later that night, when my

left eye nearly swelled shut and a red welt appeared under my ear that I realised that my neck had actually been burnt.

When a police car turned up, they basically ordered us away from the accident. We had more important work to do, they told us. Suburbs needed evacuating. Duffy. Holder. Go guys! A little shell-shocked, we left the intersection and made our way back to ESB. Both sides of the Parkway were on fire. As we drove past Weston, I gazed over at the smoke and flame that filled the Weston Creek valley and I vaguely wondered if I had a home left.

When we finally reached ESB I noticed two things: one - the sky was lighter here and two: there were helicopters seemingly all over the sky. One of the mighty sky cranes hovered directly overhead. Despite what the police officer told us at the car accident, we were not sent out to evacuate anybody. We were told to report to the Staging Area at North Curtin Oval. We drove the short distance to our new Staging Area and waited. My exhausted crew, which had already been active since 3am, slept in a football change room on some mattresses that had been laid out for us.

When I woke up a short time later, the room was empty and dim. I sleepily stumbled out and noticed that there were a couple of Navy Sea Hawke helicopters now sitting on the oval about thirty metres away. I swear that the oval was empty when we arrived. Had I managed to sleep through two very large helicopters landing nearby?

When I looked to the right, I saw a sight that completely lifted my heart. It was the Rivers bushfiries sitting in a group on the grass next to the change rooms. I saw their captain sitting there, slumped and weary on an old school chair, and knew that he wouldn't have come here without his crew. Smiling now, I went over to him and laid my hand on his back. He looked up, smiled back at me, sat up and put his arm around me. I can honestly say that I had never been more glad to see anybody in my life. I had been convinced that we would be facing a tragedy, in fact I was sure of it, but somehow they had all miraculously come home – for the mean time at least.

He told me that a whole lot of cars at the Shed had been destroyed. They tried to move as many as they could, but fourteen of them were no more. I told him where my car was parked and he just shook his head. When I got told I was so tired by then, and so overwhelmed by the events that I didn't even care. I was curiously anaesthetised. Evidently, a fireball had ripped through Stromlo, where the Rivers Shed is located, and consumed nearly all of the vehicles. Ironically the sheds were left in tact.

As it turned out, ESB had either forgotten, or didn't have time to consider the ACT Emergency Service capabilities in the face of the disaster, as we were never deployed to help evacuate as we had been told we would. About fifty ES volunteers, who had all arrived at the staging area believing that they would be deployed from there sat at that oval, which was only about five kilometres away from the fire, and waited – for nothing as it turned out.

The acute emergency for Rivers ES, it seemed was over.

Saturday, 18th January – what a day.

TIME LINE (A Rivers ES Perspective)

Wednesday, 8 th January	Four lightning strikes start fires in the Brindabella Mountains (Mt Gingera, Stockman's Spur, Bendora Dam, MacIntyre's Hut)
Friday, 10 th January	Rivers ES called out to cater for 100 bushfires at Bullock's Paddock Road
Saturday, 11 th January	Rivers ES sets up a helibase at Bull's Head Pass.
Sunday, 12 th January	Staging Area is set up at Bull's Head Pass.
Friday, 17 th January	Staging Area is evacuated at 4:30pm, as a back burn on Mount Franklin Road goes out of control and threatens to cut off access to Bull's Head Pass.
*Saturday, 18 th January	<p>2:15am. Rivers ES is called out at approximately to provide catering for in excess of 80 bushfires. Catering is set up at Tharwa Primary School.</p> <p>10:30am. Thick smoke begins to pour out from the hills behind Tharwa and becomes filled with an orange glow.</p> <p>11:30am. Rivers 60 retreats across to the Canberra side of Tharwa Bridge where we are asked by SOU21 to block Tharwa Road to all but local traffic.</p> <p>1:30pm. The sky begins to darken with black smoke and advance north towards Canberra. RIV60 retreats to the round about at Pockett Ave, Banks. Spot fires begin due east of Lanyon Homestead. RIV60 calls a Code White to Comms. RIV60 evacuates Lanyon Homestead and the Sidney Nolan Gallery.</p> <p>3:00pm. Fire on the Lanyon Property is reported to RIV60. Code White called to CommCen.</p> <p>3:30pm. Fire is just behind the hill behind the south part of Gordon as the glow intensifies. Winds become gale force.</p> <p>4:15pm. RIV60 heads back towards ESB. At the intersection of Drakeford Drive and Summerland Cct, RIV60 comes across a rolled NSW RFS four wheel drive (rolled three times) and a crashed Magna in the middle of the intersection. Traffic Lights go out. Code Red called to CommCen.</p> <p>5:00pm. RIV60 reaches ESB and is directed to North Curtin Oval.</p>

*These times are approximate, as the whole day seemed to pass in one big blur and it was midnight at 3pm.