

REMEMBERING THE FEBRUARY 7 FIRESTORM

As a matter of interest, I have attached a survivor's account of the Kinglake fire in 2009, made a month after the fire and posted on 'past Numurkah students Facebook page'. Hope you enjoy the read but never have to share the experience!... Lou Cook.

From Daryl Taylor – Year 1978 past Numurkah (Victoria) students' Facebook page:
This is a lengthy read, but a great one, so make yourself a cup of tea or coffee, and settle back. Daryl Taylor recounts:

We first moved up to Kinglake from St. Andrews, on September 8 nearly 8 years ago, 3 days before 9/11. It is etched in my memory. We were still shifting in, and I'd just hooked up the T.V. I'd had a broken night's sleep and in a stupor flicked on the box at 4:00am. I watched, incredulous, as CNN replayed the vision of the first tower being hit.

20 years ago I travelled around the states with my mate Mick and spent time in New York City. Mick, an actor, moved there to work off Broadway and make movies. I've come to realise there are interesting parallels between the Feb 7 Firestorms and the Sept 11 Terrorist attacks.

New York is a tough town; at least it was in 1990. No one ever looked you in the eye. Everyone was intent on getting where they were going in the shortest time and with a minimum of hassles. One did not feel a whole lotta love in the city. The incredible outpouring of emotion after their disaster, and the wonderful displays of courage, caring and conspicuous humanity were at odds with New Yorkers' pre-9/11 experiences.

When people ask me what it was like in the fires, the thing that recurs is the profound experience of community in the aftermath. Out of the charred rubble arose raw human emotion and an unprecedented willingness to help each other out. The fire melted away entrenched differences and old rivalries. We embraced each other as one community. I have never had so many hugs.

Our area has a history of among the highest rainfall in the state (though there was no evidence of this in the weeks and months leading up to Feb 7). We bought a small mud brick cottage about 500 metres from the centre of town on the south side of the ridge. Our home was surrounded by tall Mountain Ash, Stringy Bark, Manna and Peppermint Gums. Under the canopy, grew luscious temperate rainforest tree ferns.

We regularly traversed the short distance to the Kinglake National Park. Every day we encountered possums, wombats, wallabies, kangaroos and lyrebirds. Occasionally we'd see a phascogale or an echidna or hear the bellow of a koala far below. The treetops and early mornings resounded with bird song.

Three years ago we had our initial experience of fire. Bushfires were raging in the state forests and national parks to the north. The Bureau of Meteorology had forecast a hot dry day with wind gusts expected to exceed 120km/hr. We battened the hatches.

The state government and the CFA acted quickly. There were 67 fire trucks parked in the open space between the Kinglake Bakery and the CFA Fire Station. 'Elvis' and his companion fire dousing helicopter hovered overhead.

My father, Ian, brought us a back-up mobile water tank and pump from the Strathmerton Lions Club. My partner Lucy took our daughter Maggie to the house of a close friend in Hurstbridge. Ian and I waited, well-hydrated and well-prepared, but still anxious, while the

fires lapped at the northern edge of town.

Circumstances conspired to save us and our town in 2006. A strong southerly change blew in after three long days and nights of hyper-vigilance. The predicted hot northerly didn't eventuate. Instead a strong southerly brought rain ... relief ... and some long overdue sleep.

We'd all heard the unprecedented dire warnings early in the preceding week ... first from the Bureau of Meteorology ... on Thursday from the CFA, and then on Friday from the Premier ... 46 degrees and very strong hot northerly winds. After nearly two weeks of 40 plus temperatures, and ten years of extended El Nino drought, the stage was set for the worst fire conditions in living memory.

We learned subsequently that Victoria's Fire Risk Warning System kicks in with Total Fire Bans at 50 points. The conditions we endured on Black Saturday, were nudging 250 on the same scale. Until now, no thought had been given to a warning system for Catastrophic Fire Risk.

The same late southerly that brought rain and spared Kinglake in 2006, was to obliterate our community in 2009.

We were fairly well organised. We spent Saturday making final preparations. Raking leaves away from our house, watering the garden, plugging up and filling all the gutters, filling buckets, wetting towels and mop-heads, sealing doorways and windows, checking the pumps, listening intently to the 774 ABC Radio updates. Our concrete water tank was two-thirds full. We agreed we had enough water. Earlier in the week, my wise father had travelled up from Strathy to check and fix our main fire pump. About 2:30 Les, a close neighbour and fellow community fire-guard member, dropped over to ensure we knew it was time to activate our fire plan.

We'd all heard there were fires around Kilmore. All our CFA trucks and volunteer fire fighters had left the mountain to help protect Wallan, which is 55 km below us to the south-west on flatland. A hot northerly was blowing. We hadn't fathomed we might be at risk.

Not once had the radio mentioned Kinglake. Any fire would have to cross the Hume Highway. Below us to the south-west was a lot of open space and grazing farmland and many sparse cleared new urban-fringe residential estates.

Around 5:00pm the southern skyline began to fill with great plumes of smoke. We looked at each other. Was the wind changing? We paused and listened ... there were more cars than usual out on Main Road. People were evacuating!

At fireguard meetings, we'd all agreed that the prospect of a fire from the south was frightening beyond imagination. But there had never been a major fire from the south. We are only about 20 miles from the edge of the city. Beyond our forest lie the suburbs. Given enough warning we all agreed we would evacuate.

The Kinglake Ranges escarpment sits above Strathewen and St Andrews. The 15km former goat track up from St. Andrews has 187 bends and is a favourite among mountain cyclists and hell-for-leather motor bike riders. It was the training route of choice among Commonwealth Games cycling teams in the lead up to the Melbourne Games in 2006. We are at the beginning ... or the end ... of the Great Dividing Range. Our ridge, we call it "the mountain" rises up 70 degrees in places, and some 1600 feet, from the verdant river valleys below.

The sky was orange. Lucy's car was still at Jodie and Duncan's place after dinner and a few too many drinks the night before. We picked up Lucy's car. She started loading it with precious possessions and clothing. I got up on the roof to get a better view of what was

unfolding. There was no fire below, but the sky looked ominous. We argued about what we should do. We were ready to protect the house and each other, but a fire roaring up from the mountain from the south was an unprecedented risk. We were in completely new territory.

A good friend, Anna, phoned Lucy. She lived less than a kilometre away. She was pregnant and at home with her partner Will and two year old toddler Ollie. She asked us what we were going to do. Lucy wanted to go over to Anna and Will's place, rationalising there was safety in numbers. I followed Lucy in my car. I didn't have much petrol so I went via the service station to fill up, just in case. I was fourth in line when the power went out. Smoke had descended on Kinglake.

Headlights on high beam, I drove my car home and then joined Lucy at Will and Anna's to quickly nut out a revised plan of action. I stepped inside their front door and was handed a wet towel. "Seal all the doorways" Anna ordered, "We've still got a hell of a lot of work to do." And then it started, embers began pummeling the roof and the south-facing house front. The firestorm had begun.

Lucy and I looked at each other. We knew we weren't going to get back to our place. I looked at my mate Will. He was distracted and obviously very scared. We all were! "Get the kids and Anna into the back room." "Grab the carpet rugs and make a shelter." "Wet yourselves down." "Put on long pants and jumpers ... now!" "Maggie, please look after Ollie" "Keep him down low ... just like they told you at school." "Is there water in the bath?" "Where's your pump?" "Where are the hoses?" "Have you got any mops or hessian bags?" "Seal all the windows quickly ... and the doors!" There was a hail of anxious questions, instructions and embers.

The sky had turned black. It was midnight in the middle of the afternoon. I looked out the front window to the south and was momentarily transfixed by the beauty of the circling bright red glowing embers, ubiquitous and incessantly searching for a vulnerable place to infiltrate the house's defences and satisfy their increasing desire for fuel. It was as if we were inside the nucleus of an atom looking out at electrons dancing around us.

I shut the heavy curtains and ran to help Will with the pump. The noise was intense, much louder than standing on the tarmac in front of a jet engine. The little shack next door was ablaze and fire had entered the east side of the house through the laundry window. The rafters were alight and there was a wall of fire between us and the pump. Try as might we couldn't even get out to the pump to pull the cord to set it in motion. Not that it would have made much difference anyway. Anna and Will's three plastic water tanks, which I'd helped them install six months earlier, had all melted.

There was now no water other than the six inches or so left in the bottom of the bath. We re-soaked every available towel and filled every vessel at hand as the fire took over the laundry and the bathroom and entered the roof cavity. Lucy saw a wall of flames outside Ollie's bedroom and hastily escorted Maggie and Ollie from Ollie's back bedroom through the hallway into the open lounge area, where they re-constructed their makeshift protective structure – a couch on its side acting as a barrier, covered by saturated heavy woven floor rugs.

None of us have any conception of how much time passed while we were defending the house. We acted in concert and in flow. There was no time for thoughts or conversation. The most urgent tasks just got done. Co-operation and responsiveness to simple non-verbal cues and constantly changing conditions was profound. With the hall door shut between us and the fire, we were now in the last remaining refuge.

Fire lapped the clerestory windows to the north. Then the kitchen window. Will and I battled to keep them at bay. To put this fire out we would have to venture outside. The laser-light verandah was on fire too. We looked at each other in our ill-fitting wet tea towel masks and headed for the back door. The melting laser-light dripped on top of us as we hacked at the fire with our bathroom towels. It was too hot and too dangerous to keep this up for very long. We retreated to the house.

It dawned on us that we had survived outside. We weren't going to be able to shelter in what was left of Anna and Will's house for much longer. I looked out to the south through the front window. Lucy's 1983 Laser 'Tink' was miraculously still intact. Deciduous trees on the left of the driveway had buffered her from the worst of the fire. The next-door neighbour's collection of vintage Saabs had all perished. It was obvious it was much safer on the south side of the house, or in the car, than out the back or inside. I looked to Anna and Will. For the first time they both realised they were going to lose their house. When I suggested it was time to evacuate, they looked at each other for a moment, then down to Ollie and Maggie under the couch. Will lifted Ollie to his chest. I grabbed Mag. We were off.

Lucy's car started first go. Will and Anna's car although badly damaged had been sheltered by their carport. Miraculously it started too. I reversed out so fast I nearly drove backwards over the embankment six feet above the road below. I heard my father's voice reciting one of his oft repeated mantras 'Less haste, more pace.'

A poorly executed 5-point turn saw us out of the access road and on to Main Road. There were burnout cars and burning buildings everywhere. "Let's head for the open space beside the pub in front of the CFA," Lucy suggested. We did! Will, Anna and Ollie followed. We rounded the corner into Main Street. The General store and Service Station were already gone. Cappa Rossi's Italian Restaurant was gutted. We were all running on adrenaline and in shock as we watched our town burning around us.

We looked to the end of the street. It is a rare occasion indeed when I can't get a park in front of the Pub. The street was strewn with burnt out and crashed cars. Beyond the chaos, people were assembling in front of the CFA. The Sharps land, a large open allotment next door to the Mountain Monthly publishing offices was already filled with cars. A curious mix of those who had tried to ride out the firestorm in their cars and those, who like us, had escaped their burning houses in the nick of time.

The air was full of smoke, so it was only in their cars where people could draw some fresh air. A man in a fluoro vest was directing traffic. There had been more than enough accidents, understandable given that panic had been the predominant emotion. We were escorted to one of the few remaining spaces. We quickly jumped out and our eyes darted around to see if other close friends had survived. "Have you seen Sue?" "What about Simon and Tracy?" "Has heard anything about Duncan?"

Never had we been so glad to see people who we hardly knew. We embraced mere acquaintances, sinking into their arms and feeling the life and love reverberating from much relieved hearts. Our bonds were now life-long, having survived what was to later to become known as the worst natural disaster in our nation's history.

I kissed Lucy and hugged Maggie, saying "I'll be back in a few minutes." Lucy knew where I was going. I had to see how our house had fared. I didn't realise when I left her that it would take another 20 hours before the last of the flames that had entered our ceiling, after a smouldering ember sat too long on the mud brick window ledge above our shower and

adjacent to a red gum weight bearing post, would finally be extinguished.

Yesterday I had lunch with Christine Nixon and members of the Victorian Bushfire Recovery and Reconstruction Authority she chairs. I was elected last week at an Australian Electoral Commission endorsed Community Ballot to be part of the Kinglake Ranges Representative Group that will facilitate community engagement and community communications and consultation with the various local, state, federal and non-government bodies involved in rebuilding our community.

I hope when our work is finally complete, we are able to state with confidence that we have made the best of a terrible situation. I hope the spirit of co-operation engendered in the immediate period after the fires will carry on into our communities' negotiations with Council, Government, Business and 'Not for Profit' peak bodies.

Today we head down to Diamond Creek for the last of the Kinglake Memorial Services. This one is for Mac and Neve Buchanan, a friend of my eight-year old daughter Maggie. Thank you to everyone in Moira Shire who has inquired about our welfare through Ian, Nancy and Heather. Your kind thoughts and generous gifts have been a great consolation to Lucy, Maggie and I throughout this most trying of times.