

Go Ahead Sassy Tanker

By John Schauble

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THE first lungful of superheated air comes as such a shock that it hardly registers. It is when you suck in the second that you taste the smoke and start to cough and splutter as your lungs search for oxygen that isn't there any more. Your eyes fill with tears as the smoke begins to burn.

In the background, the roar of fire makes it difficult to hear. And you know from years of listening to people talk about it, training and lesser fires that the time has come to get out. In part, it is fear that keeps you alive during a wildfire. Any firefighter who says he or she is not afraid is a liar or a fool. Or dead.

Last week I saw things happen to our community that I hoped would never happen. I remember looking down one street and thinking, "If anyone is down there they are going to die". I had to leave a house on fire, full knowing there probably would be nothing left when I returned. I looked at the trust in the eyes of one woman we convinced to leave as I told her we would look after her house.

A big wildfire is a mean, capricious thing. You see it in front and then it is behind you as well - spotfires started by burning debris spew from the main fire. In a street of houses, one will burn while next door remains standing.

In one street you could see a house destroyed, its garden blackened, but the washing hangs untouched on the clothesline.

A handful of people I know, and many I don't, lost homes and all their possessions. Three people died. Good friends saw things that no one should see. I am numbed by what occurred in Ferny Creek and the Dandenongs this past week.

I can't find the words to describe some of the things I've seen or the choices I was forced to make. For hours one day I functioned on a mixture of adrenaline and instinct - and fear.

People keep saying we firefighters are heroes. I wish they would stop. I don't feel like a hero. Instead, I am possessed by unutterable sorrow.

THE temperature had hardly dropped to the mid-20s overnight before it started to climb again. Tuesday morning's forecast put the maximum for Melbourne at 41, with low humidity and northerly winds gusting to 60 kilometres an hour ahead of a late change. The fire weather conditions were reported as extreme. It was the second day of total fire ban.

In the hills, 600 metres above the city and suburbs, it was only a few degrees cooler. In the morning I took an updated weather forecast to the fire station and rang the office to say I wouldn't be coming in. Other brigade members had decided to take a day off too.

The wind was picking up, but I went home to do some work. It was cooler there. My wife, Jenny, had decided to work at home too. We went outside to where we had a portable pump and some fire hose set up by a tank near the house and ran through the drill.

Like many CFA families, we have a scanner that lets us tune into fire traffic on the radio. By late morning, the scanner picked up a steady stream of messages as Knox group sent tankers to grass fires in The Basin. Our brigade hadn't been turned out, but I knew

it would not be long. Jenny and I said our goodbyes, little aware how much living each would do in the days ahead.

At the fire station, I breathed a little easier when I saw that the crew sent to Mount Martha, where a fire had started late the previous afternoon, had already returned. Several other volunteers had come to the station when news of The Basin fires came in.

Pulling on my yellow overalls, I slipped a scanner and a mobile phone into the top pockets. Minutes later, the station siren started to scream.

Sassafras Tanker One is the latest version of the CFA's standard bushfire fighting vehicle. In commission less than nine months, the four-wheel-drive truck carries 2000 litres of water, diesel pump, hose, fittings, knapsacks, tools and two multi-channel two-way radios. It can carry three crew in the front, and three on the back sitting under a rollover protection canopy.

While the authority provides the basic truck and fittings, the local brigade must find the money for any extra equipment. The only key addition we had made was a chainsaw.

Alan Potts, another lieutenant, and I conferred briefly on the make-up of the crew for the truck. I would go as officer-in-charge, Brian Stevens would drive. The rest of the crew were women: Helen Millar, Roanne Dewar and Bronwen Emanuel. A few years ago one woman would have been rare, three on one truck unheard of.

Brian is in his early 40s. He drives trucks for a living and is accredited by the CFA as a driving instructor. He is also an ex-captain of our brigade. Neither of us would pretend to be great mates, but on the fireground I trust his judgment absolutely. I was glad he was driving.

Helen Millar joined the brigade after the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, along with her husband, Brian. Unlike many who joined up and drifted away, they have stayed. She looks much too young to be a grandmother. Helen is the brigade's secretary and was the first woman to become president of a CFA brigade.

Roanne Dewar, 19, and Bronwen Emanuel, 18, joined the brigade as junior members when they were in their early teens. They were well trained, but this would be their first real taste of wildfire.

My family moved to the hills nearly 40 years ago. As a boy I had been evacuated during the big fires of the 1960s. I first joined the fire brigade more than 20 years ago as a teenager. I left the hills for the bright lights of the city for a few years. When I moved back in the mid-1980s, it was only a couple of weeks before I had joined again. It was as if I had never left.

A pager message directed us to send a truck to Olinda fire station to join a strike team - a group of trucks that travels in formation to a fire outside their own area. We never actually found out where we were meant to go. By the time we reached Olinda, reports of a fire at Kalorama came over the radio. The strike team was abandoned and individual trucks raced off to the mountain village about five kilometres away.

The fire was called in as being in Inverness Road. We could see the smoke, but the fire was elusive in the early minutes of confusion. A control point was quickly established at the local oval, our truck was redeployed and sent into Jasper Road, and finally into a narrow road called Erith Lane. We stood in front of some houses, while the flames pushed through the scrub and homes below. It was the first of many waiting games we would play that day.

In some parts of the hills, the terrain demands that firefighters wait for the fire to come to them rather than chase it. As we waited, we helped an elderly woman hose down her home. She would be safe, even though her gutters overflowed with leaves. The fire was heading away from her place.

Sassafras Tanker Two had joined the Kalorama fire. The captain was on board. Richard Cromb is a plumber by trade, but his life is the fire brigade. Although he is only 42, he has been a volunteer for 25 years. His involvement stretches deep into the CFA as an instructor and trainer. He is known and well liked throughout the organisation. He has also trained in incident control, meaning he is capable of playing a command role during a major incident.

Richard called us down to refill a water tank that was supplying rucks below. Before we had a chance to determine where he wanted us, a chilling message came across the radio. A fire was reported burning near Mountain Highway somewhere below Ferny Creek. Our patch.

Brian Stevens edged Tanker One back on to the Mount Dandenong Tourist Road. Somewhere behind us other units were being redirected towards Sassafras and Ferny Creek.

As the trucks sped back to Sassafras we could hear the Upwey captain, Peter Marke, on the radio reporting from down the Mountain Highway. The fire he was describing sounded like it was in the One Tree Hill area. Peter has been captain at Upwey for 25 years. He knows these hills and how the fire runs through them. If I could talk to him, his information would define what we did next. The radio frequency we were working was becoming jammed with increasingly frantic traffic.

I tried anyway: "Upwey Captain, Sassafras Tanker One." "Go ahead, Sassy Tanker." "Peter, is this fire heading towards the top of One Tree Hill?" "Roger on that, Sassy Tanker."

It was all I needed to know. The decision was made. We tore through the main street of Sassafras. People were standing in front of shops and outside houses watching the smoke rising to the south. As we reached Ferny Creek and looked across towards One Tree Hill, it was clear from the extent of the smoke column that this was a major fire. Helen had joined us in the front cabin. No one said much as we turned into One Tree Hill Road.

There were a few cars making their way towards us, but no sign of any other fire trucks. Not only were we heading into a big fire, it looked as if we would be the first truck near its head. By now the radio traffic was so intense that the transmissions were scarcely intelligible. Whatever decisions we made would be unaided from outside.

Brian suggested we go to the picnic area at the top of One Tree Hill to get a view of where the fire was going. I thought we might get a better idea in Mount Erin Road and Janesdell Avenue, where the park ended and the houses began. We drove down past the end of Seabreeze Avenue to the intersection of Mount View Road.

And there it was. The fire was into the trees at the bottom of Mount Erin, the flames running up the trunks. We were looking at what must have been the head of the fire. It could have taken this fire only a few minutes to race up from where it had first been seen.

"Let's go down and have a look," I said. Brian pulled the truck into Mount View Road and we reversed the 50 or so metres to the corner of Janesdell. It was a precaution - if we had to leave quickly, we would be pointing in the right direction. It was safe enough

still to nudge the truck around into Janesdell, but I could see that the house on the corner was starting to catch fire.

The garage of the house next door was already completely engulfed by flames. I hoped to God there was no petrol stored there. The home behind it was surrounded by trees already ablaze. Between the smoke and the flames, you could see no further down that street.

It was time for me to make a decision. I told the others in the cabin I thought we could still save the corner house. Brian and I left the cabin, Helen stayed, trying to make some sense of the radio traffic.

I banged on the crew cab, telling the two on the back to get off. Bronwen and I ran out hose to the house. Roanne took care of the pump. Brian went to the next house to see if anything could be done. There were flames in the gutters of the house and some decking at the door had caught alight. We played water on these areas and seemed to be getting on top of the fire.

Brian was now behind us, between the house and the truck. I don't recall what he said exactly, but there was no mistaking what he meant. It was time to go. What had been a safe position a few minutes ago would no longer be so in a few minutes. I only wanted a minute or two longer to finish the job, but there were no minutes to give. The house was still on fire.

Brian Stevens had been through the Ash Wednesday fires. I had not. I wasn't going to argue if he thought it was time to get out. If Bronwen or Roanne or Helen had said they wanted out, I wouldn't have argued with them either. We pulled the hose back towards the truck. The heat and smoke was becoming intense.

Another decision. "Leave the hose. Get on the truck." The disconnected hose was dropped by the roadside. I made sure Roanne and Bronwen were on the back. Brian made a dash for the driver's door and I jumped into the passenger seat. We arrived simultaneously. A gust of smoke and hot air chased us into the cab. The truck lurched forward and we were gone from there.

Even as we drove off, the wind was pushing fire through the trees dotted between the homes in the tail end of Mount Erin Road. The fire was now deep into the streets ahead. We pulled up again at the corner of Mount View Road. A Channel 10 television crew was parked on the side of the road. Brian yelled at them to leave. A few doors up the street, I saw Helen's husband and a couple of other brigade members.

They had come up into the fire area from the station in Brian's car with hose and fittings, and hooked into a hydrant. A woman was stuffing pets into her car. I told her that if she was going, she had better go right away. She insisted on collecting her neighbor's pets. "There's no time for this," I thought. Brian Stevens went to help her get the animals.

I spoke to Brian Millar and told him I thought he and his crew should leave. He said they would stay for a while. At moments like this you can do no more than trust your colleague's judgment. We left him a radio. I turned back to the truck. I can only imagine what Helen was thinking.

The television crew was still there. Again they were told to leave. They said they would look after themselves. I don't think they realised just how much danger they were in. I knew they had a job to do, but I marvelled at their idiocy.

For us there were other priorities. It was clear that there should be no fire crews any closer than One Tree Hill Road until the front had passed and they could move in to try

to save the properties that remained. Brian swung the truck into the bottom of Seabreeze Avenue and headed for Corner Avenue. Halfway along we met a police car and told the young officer to get anyone he could out and then to leave himself.

At Corner Avenue, a fire truck from Upwey was set up. I told their officer they should pull back to One Tree Hill Road until the danger passed.

Beyond Corner Avenue, Seabreeze was just flames and smoke. After what we had seen down at Janesdell Avenue, I knew there were houses along Seabreeze that could not be saved. As we pulled out into One Tree Hill Road, I told Brian to head up to Merimbula Road.

We saw a couple of trucks setting up as we sped back towards Dunn's Hill. On One Tree Hill Road, we found Richard and the other Sassafras Tanker. We gave him a quick account of what was going on in the streets behind.

In Merimbula Road, Brian and I began going house to house. Where we found people we told them that their home was directly in the path of the fire. Neither the police nor the fire brigade can order people to leave their homes. All you can do is tell them the fire is on its way. What they choose to do next is their decision.

At one house I found a bloke who used to be in our fire brigade. He said he and his brother would stay, but agreed that his grandmother and sister should get out. At the time I didn't think much of his chances, given the state of the yard, but if anyone was going to survive, I knew he would.

Other trucks had started to arrive at the end of Merimbula Road by now. The fire was closing in and spotting in front and behind us. Below us came a series of dull crumps, like artillery fire. This was most probably the sound of gas bottles exploding or perhaps fuel containers. To me it signalled the end of someone's home and spoke of the intensity of the fire. I knew then that not entering those streets had been the right choice.

We must have stayed along Merimbula Road for an hour or so. A strike team from the Dandenong area arrived and set up in a paddock to our left. A tanker from Maryknoll decided to make a stand at one house. We said we'd watch their backs. In front, tongues of flame licked up from Alpine Road below. Some shot up 20 metres into the air. We doused spot fires as they hit the paddock and piles of rubbish in people's yards.

I grabbed a knapsack and went back down the road, knocking out small spots. Other crews were working their way down from behind us. We were playing another waiting game.

I HAD spoken to Jenny a couple of times on the mobile phone. Our home was quite safe from the fire at One Tree Hill. A friend had brought his children to our house, so I knew she was not alone, but I was unnerved by news that another fire in the national park had entered streets in Tremont and Upwey. The thought of my wife at home with someone else's children and the prospect of fires spotting towards our place could have been still monitoring the radio. I told her to ring Jenny and tell her it was time to leave.

The fire ripped into the end of Merimbula Road and spotted over us into the area around the telecommunication towers on Dunns Hill. The main front was passing through Highview Road towards the 40 Acre Paddock. Roanne had copped a couple of eyefuls of ash and muck and was suffering. We were out of drinking water. The crew had been on the go for more than four hours in oppressive heat and frightening conditions.

Here was an easy decision. It was time for a spell.

It was a kilometre or so back to the fire station. Sassafras Tanker Two had pulled in to change crew also.

Roanne was packed off to have her eyes washed out. Helen and Brian said they'd had enough. Bronwen was prepared to come back out. It was a relief to see Brian Millar. I asked if he would drive for us and he said OK. In the distance I saw Richard. He looked drawn. I only had a truck to worry about. This bloke was in command of a whole fire.

There were a few other crew available. Gary Hill was there. I didn't know what to say. His wife, Sylvia, had died of cancer two days earlier and he was standing there waiting to go out and fight a bushfire. He just got on the truck. I needed at least one more. Simon Neill junior was standing in front of me. So was his father, Simon Neill senior, who was trying to find crew for his truck too. I looked at his father. "Go on," he said. "You take him."

The 40 Acre once belonged to the Nicholas Aspro family. It reverted to the Crown some years ago and is mainly used to agist horses. It also forms a strategic break between the bottom end of the national park and Sherbrooke Forest.

Between where the fire had been and the paddock stood only one more house, a large home belonging to the Koeppen family, owners of the Cuckoo Restaurant in Olinda. As we weaved through the cluttered intersection at Sherbrooke Road on the way back in, I had seen Karin Koeppen standing in the middle of the street talking to a policeman.

We had taken Tanker One back up into the Dunns Hill area when a radio message from the fire controllers called us on to a house fire at the township end of One Tree Hill Road. It wasn't until we were hailed by another crew at the end of the driveway that it became clear it was the Koeppen house they meant.

Our families had long ago been friendly, but I had not been to the house since I was a boy. It stands at the end of a long driveway, beside which stands a large chestnut grove. Brian backed the truck in. At the end we found an Olinda tanker almost out of water. The house wasn't on fire, but the bush below was well and truly ablaze. I lost count of the number of trips we went back and forth shuttling water.

At one point I ended up on a hose line with a young firefighter from Olinda I had helped train as a recruit only months before. In a surreal scene, we fought back flames on the tennis court as the Australian Open was being played out at Melbourne Park.

Across the top of the 40 Acre was a line of a dozen or so trucks from West Gippsland. As the fire licked into the paddock, they would knock it back. When spot fires started, they would chase them down. They fought with hoses and knapsacks and just plain guts. Above us, small planes and helicopters shot in only metres above the treetops to bomb the approaching flames.

I had seen the worst of this fire. The rest of the day passed in almost a blur. We found a communications hut on fire at One Tree Hill, borrowed a door-breaking tool from an MFB crew, and chopped our way in. It was one small save for the day.

By late afternoon, I was simply running out of fight. The wind had dropped ahead of a cool southerly change, which would throw much of the the fire back on itself. We headed back to the station where I relinquished control of the vehicle. I'd lost track of what was happening on the other fire front closer to my place. I found Richard and asked if it was OK to go and see if my own house was still standing. He could hardly say no.

I grabbed another firefighter, Theo, and jumped in my own car. The closer I came to home, the clearer it was that it would be there still. Theo and I started the pump and poured a few thousand litres of water around it.

We then went to check his property on One Tree Hill and those of a couple of friends. I rang Jenny and told her the news. I could almost feel the relief in her voice. The police had evacuated other people from our street not long after I suggested she leave.

Back at the station, I walked to the incident control area and was immediately appointed to liaise with the media. Journalists and photographers who got through the roadblocks had besieged the incident controllers. Talking to them and guiding them to safe parts of the fireground would be my lot for the rest of the night.

On dusk I returned with an ABC reporter and an 'Age' photographer to Janesdell Avenue, the street we had fled. Not a single house was standing. Down from where we had stopped, what had been homes were piles of ash and sheets of iron. The desolation was absolute. So was the quiet. A wind change had shifted the breeze to the south. By then it was almost still. Gone were the flames and smoke.

It was oddly peaceful. A kookaburra was searching for titbits in the ashes.

The house we had tried to save was on the ground. I didn't know it at the time, but the other Sassafras tanker had gone back there after the fire front had passed, found it alight and tried to save it again. But it was too far gone.

The reporter asked if I felt guilty that I had left houses to burn. I told him the alternative was for the five of us to be burned to death. Another young reporter asked me if these fires were worse than Ash Wednesday and seemed disappointed when I said there was simply no comparison to be made between the two.

Up until then, the best estimate was that we had lost 20 houses. When we got back to the station, one of the command team pulled me aside and said "something" had happened up in Seabreeze Avenue. It became clear within a few minutes that at least two people, possibly more, had perished in one of the houses there.

After 13 hours on the fireground and all that we had been through, the news just swept aside all sense of achievement.

For the first time in the history of our community, people had been killed in a wildfire. Even though we always knew it could happen, it was a difficult thing to grasp. I felt an overwhelming sense of failure. I felt tears welling in my eyes and walked away.

IT WAS after midnight when I found that Jenny had made her way back from an evacuation centre at Belgrave to some friends' home a kilometre or so away. I rang and said it was safe to come to the station and that I'd been cleared to go home for a few hours.

At home the power had failed. The house reeked of smoke. We talked for a while about what had happened to each of us that day. I took a shower and crawled into bed. I wanted sleep, but it wouldn't come. The night was punctuated by the sirens and the sound of fire trucks grinding up the main road.

I wondered if I had failed my crew, if I had led them somewhere we should not have gone. I wondered if we had been brave enough, if I had let houses go when we could have saved them. I wondered if there was more I might have done. These questions haunt me still.

SHORTLY after 7am on Wednesday I went back to the station. Richard was conducting a briefing around the bonnet of his Landcruiser. No one had slept. The main priorities

would be blacking out affected areas and we could expect fire calls throughout the day. Most would be false alarms. The first one came a few minutes later.

During a large fire like this, the CFA can rapidly muster vehicles and men from across the state. I saw trucks from south and west Gippsland, from central and northern Victoria. There were vehicles from places I had never heard of, places probably where the only public building was the CFA shed.

I spent part of the morning guiding a strike team from northern Victoria into the fire area to black out any hot spots. There really wasn't much for them to do, but they had come from half a state away to help.

By lunchtime it was raining. It was almost exactly 24 hours since the fires had started. As the rain streamed down, most of the strike teams from further afield were released to leave. The only thanks they wanted was the knowledge that we would do the same for them. A steady parade of trucks passed by the front of our station. A group of us standing at the doors waved our thanks and again I found myself fighting back tears, this time of thanks.

Days after the fire, I still have trouble sleeping. I become uncomfortable unless I have a mobile phone with me when I leave the house. The smoke has left a persistent cough that will take a day or two more to clear. I find myself replaying parts of the fire over and over in my mind.

Did we do enough? Did we stay too long? Not long enough? Could we have saved this house, that street? I have to be content with the belief that the decisions you make in retrospect might be wiser, but the ones you make at the time are the right ones.

Our community is probably a long way from coming to terms with its collective loss. The final count of property losses on Friday was 34 homes destroyed, plus assorted outbuildings. And we must grieve for the three people who died.

The forecast is for more hot weather today and tomorrow. People are understandably nervous. On Friday night, three trucks turned out to smoke coming from the rear of a house in Upwey. They found a family enjoying a barbecue.

(This article won the Melbourne Press Club Quill Award for Best News/Feature in 1997. John Schauble won the 1997 Gold Quill Award. The article was later reproduced in Wildfire magazine in the US under the title Hellfire in the Hills.)