

The Defence of Nerriga Schoolhouse

A Personal Account from the 2019-20 Fire Season

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Most firefighters will have many stories to tell of the 19/20 fire season; things they saw or did, things they are proud of, things they wish had (or hadn't) happened.

So many people affected, directly and indirectly. So many animals injured or killed. Lives, relationships, families, businesses, history, projects, dreams – all thrown up in the air. So much land burned, although at least that will recover – we forget how resilient and accustomed to fire the Australian landscape really is.

For myself, I was enormously proud to lead our Brigade through this long, drawn out campaign. Between 27 November and 7 February, Carwoola Brigade worked pretty much constantly, contributing over 95 crews (plus 12 more sent north before our local fires started).

Usually on a big fire there are maybe a couple of intense days where there is a mad, chaotic scramble to protect properties or fight the fire. Then it is followed by weeks of dull and dirty hack work as we go around blacking out the edges of the burnt area and try and keep it “inside the box”. This fire season had far more of the mad scrambles - and this was one of the worst...

A Catastrophic Day. Probably the most memorable shift for myself was our part in the defence of Nerriga village on the 21st of December, a day of ‘Catastrophic’ fire danger.

We were already tired, having spent months sending crews up north to Queensland and Northern NSW. Then in the previous weeks we had been solidly working the *North Black Range* fire between Bungendore & Braidwood. Now we were shifted onto the *Currowan/Charleys Forest* fire.

My crew, Zoe, Mark and Debbie, started the day of the 21st some 10 km south of Nerriga, escorting a grader as it worked to put in fire breaks before the expected, dangerous southerly wind change later in the day.



Heavy plant building a fire break south of Nerriga

Escorting heavy plant is usually dull work and some crews aren't keen it as it is often not very interesting. Definitely not at the “glamorous” end of the fire-fighting business.

Nevertheless, it is important work as the plant operator has no real view of the wider picture of the fire and no ability to protect themselves if things turn to custard, as they did on this occasion.

We worked for several hours on these firebreaks under bright, clear blue skies in forest south of the Corang River, all the time with an eye on the building smoke columns (we could see several) and alert for any shift in wind direction that could indicate the arrival of the “big change”.

There was a real sense of futility in pushing in and widening these containment lines. It *is* worth the attempt; it *might* work. But on a day like today it probably won't work – and it didn't.

Mid-afternoon I called my mostly inexperienced crew out of the truck to point out the developing pyro-cumulus cloud that appeared over a smoke column. Then another.



Zoe & Mark & a Queanbeyan crew at Craggs Rd. watching pyro-cumulus clouds build up over the smoke columns.

These are rare and very bad signs, indicating that the fires are building up a huge amount of energy; convection is punching superheated air kilometres up through the unstable atmosphere, and taking embers

with it, ready to be flung far ahead of the front. It is now drawing in air so strongly it is creating its own weather.

It was time to withdraw the grader and the bulldozer to safety from their exposed positions deep inside the forest back as they take ages to move.

The First Impact. While the bulldozer slowly clanked its way back to its float, the grader could move a bit quicker so we took it to another location to do a bit more work in a less remote location. We never made it. As we arrived at Craggs Road, so did the southerly change. A sudden burst of dust, smoke and ash and we couldn't see a thing.

A quick radio call to the grader driver to get out. I've never seen a grader turn quite as quick as Doon did in his big machine and he hoofed it out to safety. We turned and retreated also. We're done here.

We met up with a number of other trucks and the council bulk water carrier in a cul-de-sac off the Nerriga Road about 15 minutes later. Still blue skies in this spot, but not for long. The smoke column shifted over our heads and everyone could sense the fire approaching, and soon we could hear it too. I was very glad we weren't still up in the forest.

This spot will be our safety refuge; the trees are far enough back from our stop here that we should be safe if we stay where we are and let it go around us.

In a hasty conversation, Nick Hornbuckle (the Divisional Commander) and I agree that no one should be caught on the heavily forested road north, given what is about to happen. There is a short window left open for any vehicles to escape to the south and some of the lighter vehicles take off quickly. But we expect we will soon be needed north up in Nerriga village, so we stay. We'll have to force a way through after the fire front has passed.

Within minutes that safe window for escape to the south has closed and suddenly it is upon us. A roaring inferno howls out of the trees and we are immediately surrounded by fire.



The first fire front impacts 10km south of Nerriga

Fire everywhere, ferocious heat, smoke, embers blown into faces, down necks, into ears. Thank goodness for the goggles and smoke masks. The crew need no encouragement to pile into the truck. The driver of the bulk water carrier abandons his truck and climbs in as well and we wait it out.

Bushes, trees, grass – everything that can burn is burning. Being *outside* the truck in our little refuge is extremely unpleasant, but it is 'safe'. Being *inside* the air-conditioned truck is much more comfortable. The spectacle is both genuinely awesome and intimidating. There's nothing we can do except get out of the way of nature.

After the front passes, the whole landscape has been transformed. We get moving and immediately start heading down driveways to find homes that need protecting and this work absorbs us for the next few hours.



Zoe & Mark dousing embers in the roofspace of a home near Corang River

Defence of Nerriga. Around 5:30pm we are ordered north to concentrate in Nerriga village. The fire front isn't there yet, but it soon will be. We race north, around many fallen trees on the road and stopping along the way at more properties to do what we can.

As we drive into Nerriga, the sky is the darkest I've ever seen it since the Canberra fires in 2003. Many villagers had been evacuated into town and were collected in the pub with a cordon of fire trucks around them.

I realise there are enough trucks to defend the centre of the village. But just 500m behind us was the gorgeous old Nerriga Schoolhouse which had been turned into the local museum and much of their history was collected there.

I'd always had a soft spot for that little area. I'd driven through many times in years previous, but I'd never had the chance to stop and explore. I couldn't bear it if we didn't at least make the attempt to save it.

Trouble is, unlike the village, the historical precinct is surrounded very closely by thick forest. There is, however, I thought, just enough cleared area there to make a defence *possible*. So, I radio Nick with a

proposal. He agrees and, bless him, offers me another heavy tanker. I was very grateful for that extra crew later.

When Molonglo 11C from the ACT RFS pulls up a couple of minutes later, the Crew Leader, Brett Vey, looks doubtfully at the task. "We'll be trapped here," he says, "There's no escape route." I agree but tell him that provided we stayed where we are and let it go around us, we'll be ok. Once it was all over, we'd be able to get out. But the task was worth attempting, worth the risk. I know you can't replace a life, but you can't replace history either.

We don't have much time. It is so dark under that smoke cloud we have to use torches to see, even though it is only 6pm.

We pull up a couple of the fence posts, get the tankers into the cleared area between the buildings and set up quickly. Hoses are laid out, ready around the assets to be protected.

Our crews are nervous; it's not every day the fire is this intense. Time to see how good the training is.

The darkness in the afternoon is really eerie and heightens the sense of impending danger. Something is definitely coming.

Soon the blackened leaves begin falling around us. A few lazy embers started to appear, drifting down. Occasional small spot fires start and are easily squirted out. The sound of the fire coming is clear and unmistakable. More embers. More spot fires. Harder to put out. Then more.

Plenty of reassurance is required to the crews that we're safe where we are. They need to know that although it is about to become unpleasant, the job is achievable and survivable. Mark is particularly nervous – he had been burned in a fire overrun at his first big fire in 2017 and this was looking like being just as confronting.

The Fire Front Arrives. And then, even worse than a few hours earlier, the fire appears, surging, rushing & crackling through the trees like an enormous wave, crowning and towering up into the treetops. Once again, the fire is suddenly just everywhere, and we are busy.

It's not often the word 'frenzy' really works, but for some time this is a frenzy of activity and sensory overload.

Drifts of embers collect in the historical artefacts dotted around the clearing and they keep catching fire. Flames keep sweeping across the leaf-littered ground towards the schoolhouse. Time and again, Mark and Zoe have to drag the heavy hoses back and forth to put them out.



Bindi Brook ablaze near the old Schoolhouse

Everything is just so dry it really wants to burn. The heat is ferocious, the smoke makes breathing unpleasant, the work doesn't stop, the hoses seem to get heavier. It takes no time at all to feel completely stuffed and there's no chance to rest.

A wall of fire is all around us. A swirl of fire flows through the gully and the old timber footbridge, in the gully less than 50m away is consumed but there is just nothing anyone can do about it. The radiant heat just there is just too intense, and we don't have enough water. We have to focus only on the things that are able to be defended. Everything else will just have to take its chances.

The smoke, the noise, the heat, the fire, the hoses, the clatter of pumps, yelled instructions & gas bottles exploding nearby; everything is just constant and there's no time for anything else.

The crews are fantastically busy and it's my job to keep moving between them all to reassure, make sure they're ok, that they know what to do and have what they need. This also gives me a few moments to snatch a few pictures in the middle of it all. In the back of my mind, it occurs to me that, if we are successful, the Nerriga townfolk might want some record of what happened here.



The old footbridge is destroyed

I am also there to keep an eye on the big picture – it's too easy to get tunnel vision if you are on the end of a hose, too focused on the fire right in front of you.

Someone needs to be watching their back and controlling the fight.

Debbie is busy at the back of the truck running the pumps. In the middle of it all, as the water level in our tank begin to get low, we set up a portable pump to pull water out of a small water tank next to the schoolhouse. We had to drag one of the heavy picnic tables over next to the water tank and put the pump on it so the suction hoses could reach through the top and down to the low water level. I'm not sure we would have succeeded without that extra water.

There's no real sense of the passage of time; no one is sure how long we've been working. When I checked the timestamps on my pictures a few days later, it turned out to be a bit over an hour before the sky began to clear again and the fire had moved on.

Aftermath. There are still things burning everywhere that won't go out now for hours, sometimes even days, but eventually one has to make a decision to move on and see what else can be saved if you can reach it in time.

Later we discover that more than a dozen homes have been destroyed in the area around Nerriga, many down roads that were simply not safe to go down at that time. The centre of the village and the pub (and everyone in it) are ok. After a short break and a shake of their hands, Molonglo 11C's crew take off for another task elsewhere.

Our crew is also exhausted. Zoe, Mark, Debbie and I take a few minutes to sit down at last, have a drink, cool down and breathe some clear air before we get back to work elsewhere. Zoe produces a box of Lemon Curd tarts she had somehow kept intact in her bag and we scoff most of them. They are incredibly good.



A few moments to rest at the Schoolhouse – then back to work

When one finally moves on from protecting a property, you are always looking back, hoping that what you had risked so much to protect, expended so much energy on, stays ok and doesn't burn down sometime later. There are a few homes that do exactly that hours or days later which is really upsetting. There is an almost emotional attachment to these places you'd never been to before.

I was relieved a week later to drive back into Nerriga to see the old schoolhouse and its surrounding buildings still standing, although the boys' dunny down the back did burn down later. It had caught fire when we were there, but we thought we'd put enough water on it.

A lighter note. In amongst the loss, fear, exhaustion and tragedy, there are always a few lighter things that happen. Back in August, Mark took on an *au pair* for his kids. Jule was a 19 year old girl who turned out to be a volunteer firefighter back home in Germany. She was keen to see what firefighting in Australia was like and so Mark asked if we would be prepared to take her on just for six months. Sure, why not?

So we trained her up in the things that were different and did a formal assessment to qualify her.

Guess which day was her very first experience of an Australian bushfire? She was on the other Carwoola crew that day just a few hundred metres up the road in Nerriga village, protecting the pub that was filled with evacuees. Welcome to Australia Jule!

She was great and stood up to it very well and later that night, back at our station, the crews laughed that of all days, *this* was her introduction to Australian bushfires! We did however have to reassure her that it wasn't always like this. She's definitely part of the Carwoola family now.



Jule on her return to Carwoola station

Perspective. As is always the case with major events, the response has been a huge team effort. Much of the attention has, rightly, been on the volunteer firefighters, but of course there are so many other groups that have played a part: Fire & Rescue, SES, local Council, Police, Ambulance, ADF, NPWS, State Forests, community

groups, charities, neighbours and so on. And we mustn't forget all the "Mosquito units" (farmers & landowners etc. with their own utes with a water tank/pump/hose set up on the back) who helped so much.

So many people are just so kind and just want to help out. Often there is no real way for them to do so and they feel tremendously impotent, even guilty that they weren't able to do something more. We've been fortunate that we were in a position to directly lend a hand.



Just after the fire had moved on from the Schoolhouse

But it's not until you look at your contribution on the map, and then zoom out a bit. Suddenly you realise how miniscule your bit is, how puny your efforts have been, that you've spent days working on a tiny corner of a very large fire which itself is just one of many. You hope that it made a difference.