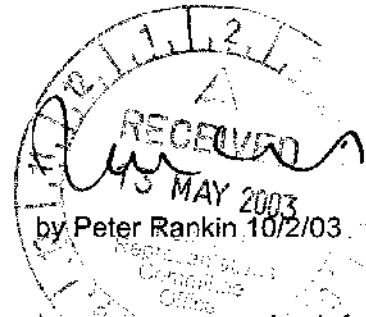
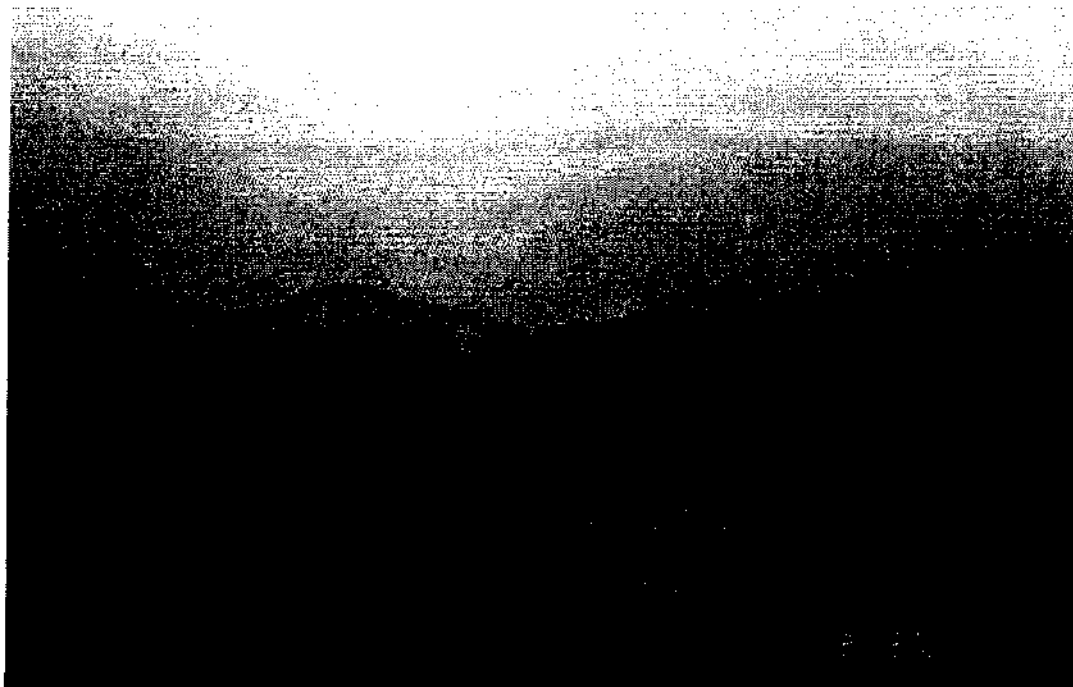


An account of the Fire at Jindabyne in January 2003



Jenny, the two boys and I (Lachlan 4-years, Patrick 3-years) were on our way back from a trip to Adelaide after visiting Jenny's parents. We travelled via John and Sue (Jenny's brother and sister in-law) who have a small farm south of Melbourne near Colac. The initial intention was to travel back to Jindabyne via Corryong and Khancoban but all roads had been closed from the West by fires. We decided to come home via the South Coast, with an overnight at Sale. There were a lot of phone calls to Jindabyne to determine the fire situation. Mum and dad both said there was no reason to cut our holiday short, but I could tell by mum's voice that she was worried and dad kept saying that he did not know exactly what was going on with the fires. My sister Donna and her daughter Katrina had stayed as long as they could but had to leave to get back to work in Sydney. Donna said they were holding the fort for the time being but the smoke hazard was getting to them. They all had to get passes to come and go along the Alpine Way.

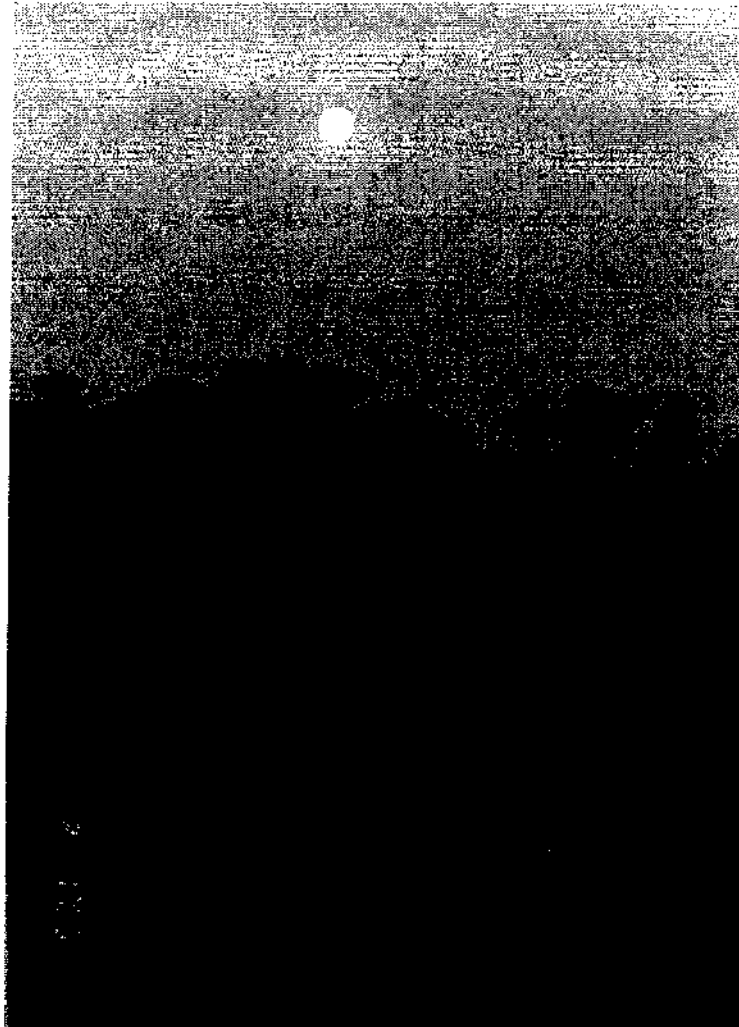


The Crackenback Range and Mt Grandely above Lake Jindabyne

Day ONE (Wed Jan 29):

After dropping Jenny and the two boys off in Queanbeyan on Tues night, I made my way up to Jindabyne early next morning Wed 29th and arrived approx 6:00am. The Alpine Way was closed and I knew I had to get a pass. I searched all places to get a pass. After walking through all the offices in the National Park building and asking for an access pass with no success I then tried the local police station. All doors were locked and there was no answer upon knocking. I then found out that the Snowy River Shire office, which had a notice that they were not open until 8:00am, gave out passes. I then thought 'enough was enough' and I was going up the road anyway. Once I arrived at the

roadblock I told the person I had done all I could to get a pass and that I was going on without one. He was a little upset with me, but I told him I could not wait any longer, at least not until 8:00am and I proceeded with some frustration from the roadblock personnel.

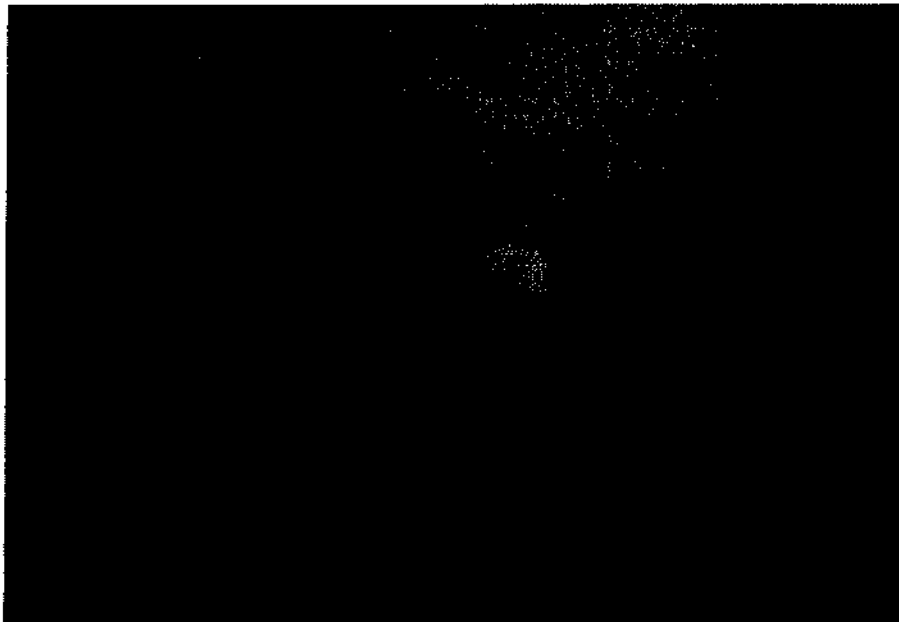


The eerie light of day!

The place was so smoke filled that you could only make out a few hundred yards in front of you on approach. What I could make out was that a fire was well alight behind Crackenback Peak, and there was a fire still burning over in our neighbour's property (Rex Weston's) above the 'Bull' paddock in what is known as the 'Wren's Nest'. I found dad and mum worried about where the fires were, and having very little information about what was going on. I had a cup of tea and dad and I went for a drive up Marshall's road and around to Rex's to see what was going on. A fire had already been through the Tiger's paddocks a couple of days ago and burnt large areas. The fire from Tiger's also had done a run, being pushed by high winds a few days ago down past Rex's, taking out a shed and it's contents from a house on the Tiger's flat (which included two alpacas and a couple of hundred thousand dollars of ski equipment in storage). Rex, Mac (Rex's son in-law) and I assume one of Mac's boys and another grandson were getting organised to

patch fences along the road, which were burnt in the fire. Rex informed us that the National Park had dropped aerial incendiaries along the back of the Crackenback Range two days ago. Nobody seemed to be aware of the intention of the Park at this time. Rex was up at Tiger's when the fire took out the shed at Tiger's flat, - "bloody nearly took the house" he said, "we had some fire crews with us but at the critical time they were called to Jindabyne and had to go – the report was that Jindabyne was being threatened – which was a lot of bullshit, a young police officer at the site asked the crews to stay but they left anyway under instruction from command". Mac informed us that he was drawing up an inventory of all the fencing material and taking this cost to the Park for damages. We compared notes on the current situation and left.

Dad and I proceeded back over Marshall's road and made our way onto the Alpine way to the Wollendibby fire shed. We met up with a few crews there including Owen Weston who seemed to be running the show. Owen said he was aware that the Park had bombed the back of the 'Peak' (Crackenback Peak), but nobody had informed him or any of the fire crews. We asked what the plan was for the day, he informed us that the priority was to put out all the fire between Rex and us (he seemed to be very vague about what the situation was on this fire or how to get to it). We supported the idea of getting this fire out... and offered what support we could, I said I would have look around on my bike and show them how to get in to the Wren's Nest onto the fire. I gave Owen my mobile number to make contact, and said I would call back shortly.



Sun smoke and trees.

We proceeded home and came across Ray (one of the fire fighters from Wollendibby fire station) at the bottom gate to the homestead in his small truck (fast response unit) coming back from taking a small response team to the fire in the Wren's Nest. Dad had shown Ray the way the night before (Ray was impressed that dad could show him the way in the dark even though dad could not see the front of the truck due to his eye sight impairment ... he just described the terrain). Ray said he felt confident he could show a

couple of crews how to get in there during daylight. The team he dropped off had called him as we were talking to him by radio and said they had staked a tyre and were in the process of changing it. Ray said he would round up some more teams and get in there, I said I would meet up with the crews once they returned and show them the way with the bike if needed.

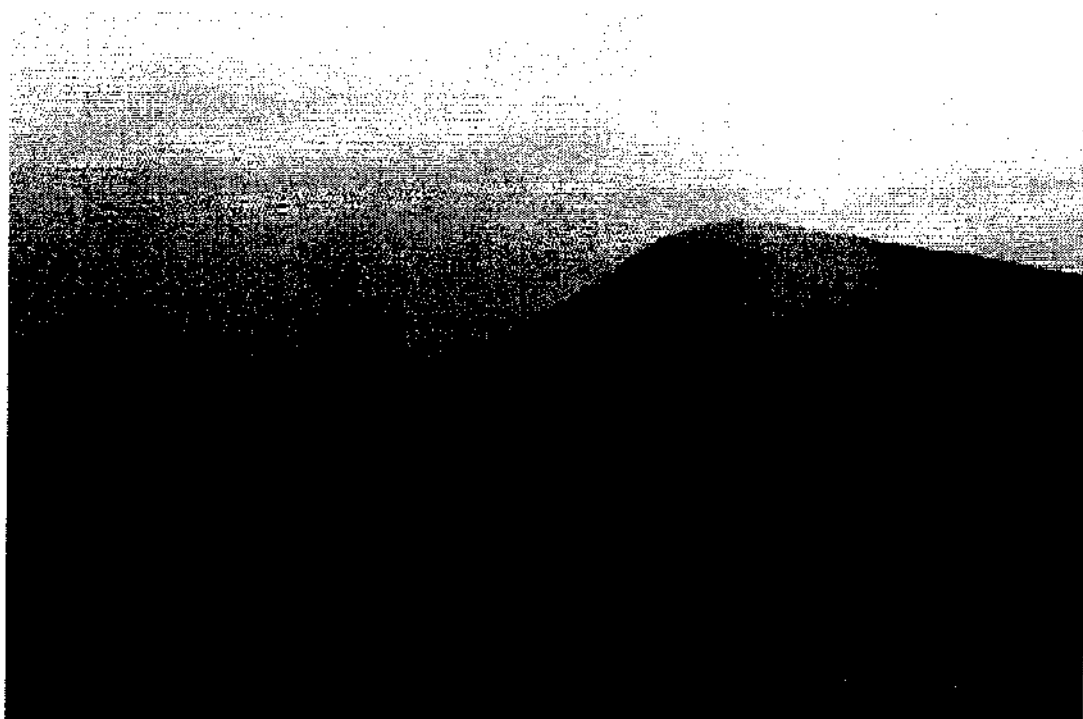
The crews turned up and I met them on my bike and proceeded over to the fire. After getting through the paddocks we went up the power line as far as we could with three crews, one being a large tanker and the other two small response units. These crews were from Wellington NSW. Ray was also with the crews that came in; he picked up the staked tyre and made his way out again. I told the teams to get on the areas that were still burning and put them out. I asked if I could borrow a rake so that I could make my way up the hill to rake the fire in onto itself. A few of the guys said they would come with me. We worked on the fire for some time, however I seemed to lose most of the assistance except for one young guy that stayed with me. We went and worked the front of the fire up into the hill much as we could. The raking was working fine, there were a few logs still burning and would take some time to burn out without getting water onto them. We made our way back to the trucks to find the radios calling the crews to be relocated. I had borrowed my rake from Ray's truck and was able to keep it with me. After the crews left I did a bit more raking on my own and then went home for lunch. *This seemed to be a critical time for this fire to be contained, if we could get it out, the threat on Gunnadoo would be reduced, but I guess there were more places up the valley with problems. The bad thing was the weather forecast did not look good for tomorrow – Thursday, 'gale force winds from the North-West'.*

After lunch I returned to the fire and worked it higher up the hill. Dad and Mum arrived mid afternoon with some garden rakes, a knapsack, water containers and some drinking water. We raked the fire in on itself and watered hot spots where we could until late.

We made our way back to the house to find Richard (the fire captain from Wollendibby) and an off-sider coming in to review the fire at the 'Wren's Nest' I went back to the fire with them. I told them that we had not made any containment gain on the fire up in the higher timber and that we desperately needed a fire break put in as soon as possible. I told them that there was nothing to stop this fire running to Jindabyne if high wind conditions come upon us. Richard said he would look into getting a dozer on site by 7:00am in the morning. We made our way back to the house to find our neighbour Rex talking with mum and dad. I told Richard we needed to get Rex involved in the dozer planning because the fire was currently in his country. We discussed this with Rex, he suggested getting helicopters to water bomb the fire higher up in hill, Richard said the report was there was too much smoke for flying but he would see what they could do in the morning. The tentative plan was to unload the dozer at Rex's at 7:00am.

After dinner I jumped on my bike and did a run around the hill to review the situation higher up the hill. I ran across a national park fire crew sitting in their truck on Marshall's road and I introduced myself. Their job, I was told, was property protection of the houses on top of the hill. They said that they were monitoring the fire down below them; the plan from the National Parks perspective was for the Wren's Nest fire to burn itself out up against Marshall's road. I was not sure how this was going to work with the light wind pushing from the North West !! Anyway, I carried on up to the top of Tiger's for a view over the back. There were a couple of good fires burning up the gully from Tony Lucas' place. There was also had a good front coming over the top of Mt Grandly and the

Crackenback Peak was well alight at the back and pushing over the front. A lot of heat seemed to be in the fire on the saddle between the Peak and Grandly. These fires were running from the West, the wind was moving these along well, there appeared to be no crews on these fires (I can only assume, as these were possibly started by incendiaries, they were considered as backburning). If the wind came up I would expect these would meet up with the Wrens Nest fire with no problems at all. I made my way back home coming on dark with the glow of fires approaching from directions on our West and North West. There was a significant amount of timber falling.



Crackenback Range

Although Richard and the crew from the Wollendibby shed said they would be keeping an eye on things during the night, we found it hard to get any sleep. Mum, Dad and I were on edge, we drove to the top gate and had a look at the fire fronts approaching. The night-light seemed to bring the glow of confrontation closer to Gunnadoo. We tried to get some sleep upon returning home. The sound of falling timber in the hill kept me awake and I could see the fire front on Grandly from my bed. I could not stop pacing around and thinking about where we could get a containment line in. At last it came to me! We were stupid to be unloading the dozer off at Rex's, this would be approaching the front from behind and also it would take 40min at least to get from Rex's to where we needed it. My thought was to bring the dozer to the top of the Olive farmer's half way up Marshall's road and unload there, go through the fence at that point and drop down into the bottom paddock and run the tree line under the hill over to the fire into the Wren's Nest. This could be the only solution that would work (if the wind stayed as it was), trapping the fire between this containment line and Marshall's road. The fire coming of Grandly would be held up with Marshall's road. Dad agreed with this plan so we drove to the fire shed at 2:00am. Richard said it was a good idea and would press for this for the morning. I told him to give me a call when they were approaching and I would take the dozer in and show them where we wanted the break. I had no sleep that night.



Sunrise 30/1/03

Day TWO:

I was keen to get out and review the situation first thing. We had a call from Rex and I informed him of the revised plan. I also told him that we had not had any conformation about the availability of the dozer. Rex said he would wait until he heard from Richard. I jumped on my bike and did a review of the situation. Not long after, I had a call from Richard to say that he could not get a dozer, the only available dozer was to be used up at the Ski-Tube or the Range further up the valley, and we did not have any equipment available for the Wrens Nest fire. There were various comments from the crews that Owen Weston was pushing the equipment out onto the Range (Weston's country). Depressed and deflated Dad and I proceeded to the fire with rakes and knapsack and worked what we could (dad was getting bugged in the process, dad was suffering with eyesight loss from Diabetes and poor blood circulation in his feet – his feet were playing up badly, I was getting worried he would become crook!). I had a call from Ray to say he

was on the way to assist where he could (his own truck and a fast response tank on back). I meet up with Ray and directed him to the timberline where he could get in, and Dad and I would meet up with him shortly working from the eastern end. The plan from my perspective (it seemed all we could do) was to keep the fire up the hill in the timber as high as possible and if the wind came up northerly it would stay up high on the hill and not approach the lower country of Gunnadoo (however the forecast was for a strong North Westerly). I had a bad feeling that if we could not get a containment line in soon the wind would get the best of us. When we meet up with Ray he had used all his water and needed to refill, so I went with him to show him where to refill from the creek. During filling some National Park guys turned up. I left Ray to fill up and get back to Dad and I went with the Park guys to get them across the situation (Dave Roley was one I think, the other was Bruce from the house at the top of the hill and Tigers). Dave was a bit alarmed that we could not get a dozer on site and he said he would go away and see what he could get from the National Parks (I thought we might as well try all angles and any crew that was willing to offer help!). They left and I went back to the fire with Ray and Dad. Ray said he had a call that there were some extra teams coming in from Rex's direction (we were a bit concerned that they would not get in from that end.. anyway our hands were busy). Not long after I had another call from Dave Roley. He said they had a four-wheel drive tractor and was almost with us, and asked if I could come and meet them and tell the driver what to do. I met them and told the driver to work a break around the timberline to keep the fire up in the hill if possible. The tractor was not as effective as we wanted and it took ages to break the surface of the ground, the driver explained that it had skids on the blade (a National Park protection device to stop ripping up the ground).

At this stage Dad and Ray were off to get another refill of water. The wind started to pick up and the hills were starting to roar from the winds coming up the back of the range (I guess the forecast was right... why could they not be wrong as they have been so many times before ?). I jumped on my bike and did a run up to the head of the fire in the hill to see what movements were underway. Spot fires were evident all over the place and my attempts to rake them out were fruitless, it was like chasing a snake as they darted



about your feet pushed by the wind. Wind gusts were getting higher and the ash was flying horizontal (it was time to get out of there...), I jumped back on the bike and made my way back down the hill as quickly as I could. I had a call from Richard and he said he had arrived at the site of the tractor with a large tanker unit, I indicated that I will be with him in two seconds. I meet up with Ray and Dad on their way back and I told them they

were better to round up some of the spot fires now in Gunnadoo and do what they could. I went back to Richard and his tanker and the tractor and said we need to get back to the house and shearing shed before the spot fires got there. We all made our back into the 'bottom paddock'. I knew Mum was at the house on her own and we would possibly have some new litters of kittens with us by now!! The wind was picking up even more to a gale-force (of at least 80kms/hr). By the time we reached the shearing shed the hill up the back of the shed was well alight and raging well out of control, any approach in such wind would be very unhealthy. Spot fires were well away in the lower bottom paddock and running towards the creek. This direction was a true North- Westerly as predicted - the fire front was going straight towards the house. We arrived back at the house with mum in a worried state hosing what she could with the small garden hose. We positioned Richard's tanker near the back Gate, Ray was to keep an eye about the shed, and Richard said he had another tanker on the way. I moved all the cars over into Rex's paddock and opened the front gate to let the horses out. I also backed the tractor out of the shed into the clearing. I then made an attempt to run the horses out with the motorbike with no luck! I made a check on Ray and Dad they were up at the shearing shed still attempting to put out spot fires. I said we were probably better off back at the house (Richard was also concerned that Ray was losing contact with the other fire-fighters).

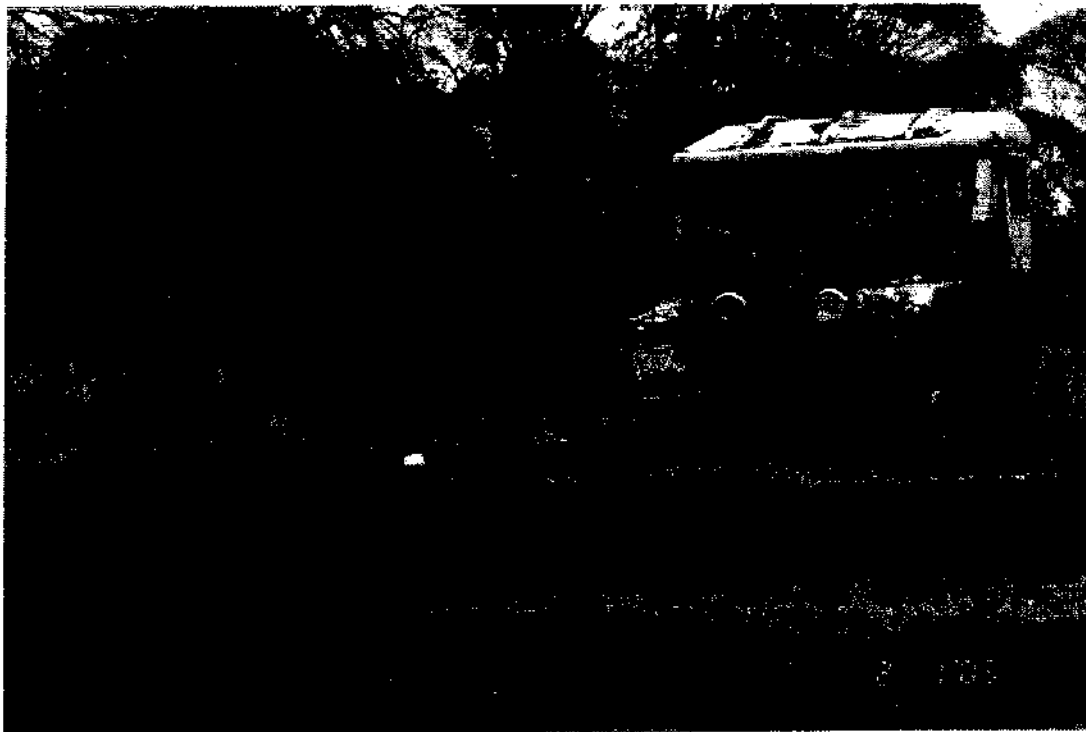


Fire approaching the farmhouse

Mum was still doing what she could dampening down all the yard etc. I went to the pump on the creek and started it and dampened down all the house, including the caravan and hedge along the side of the house and the roof of the house. The other tanker arrived and positioned at the front gate of the house. The fire was approaching from the North West at a good pace by now and very high gale force winds. The old tanker that had just arrived could not get their pump going and one of the men while fiddling with the carburettor managed to get fuel all over himself. The pump eventually started just as the first of a few fire laden wind gusts hit us, these gusts were of an intensity to light up any combustible material in the area, this meant material that was not damp instantly ignited and the smoke and ash was straight in your face. We had all hoses going in the direction of the wind to keep the heat off the house and ourselves. At times there was not any breathable air, we just has to stand our ground and hope that we could catch breath in a while. I had lost contact with other people around I know that some of the firemen took cover under their trucks. Mum said she stuck her head between the side of the house and the tank stand. I was relatively lucky as I had a 20mm water hose to squirt at myself from time to time. I was also keeping in mind that we would possibly need to hose the fuel-ridden guy from the old tanker if needed! I think we were lucky that the pine trees to

the North West did not ignite when the front hit us (they crackled like bacon frying), if they had ignited I do not think we would have been able to save the house, I think the latent heat from the trees and the wind gusts pushing it onto the house would have ignited the house without too much trouble. The trees may have been the saving grace of the house taking the most of the heat out the gusts. There was a spiral of flames that went up the creek, this consumed all the tussock in it's path and set all trees alight instantly, this was over a few seconds (I guess this bit of the fire run could be called a firestorm... it seems to consume all in it's path very quickly and spiralled flames higher than the trees between the house and the creek). We sent one of the fire fighters down to the pump on the creek to keep some water on it. The rush of wind and fire up the creek was a bit of a worry, as we could not see the cars, and there was a lot of noise and debris running in the direction of the cars. Later it cleared and we saw that the cars were all fine.

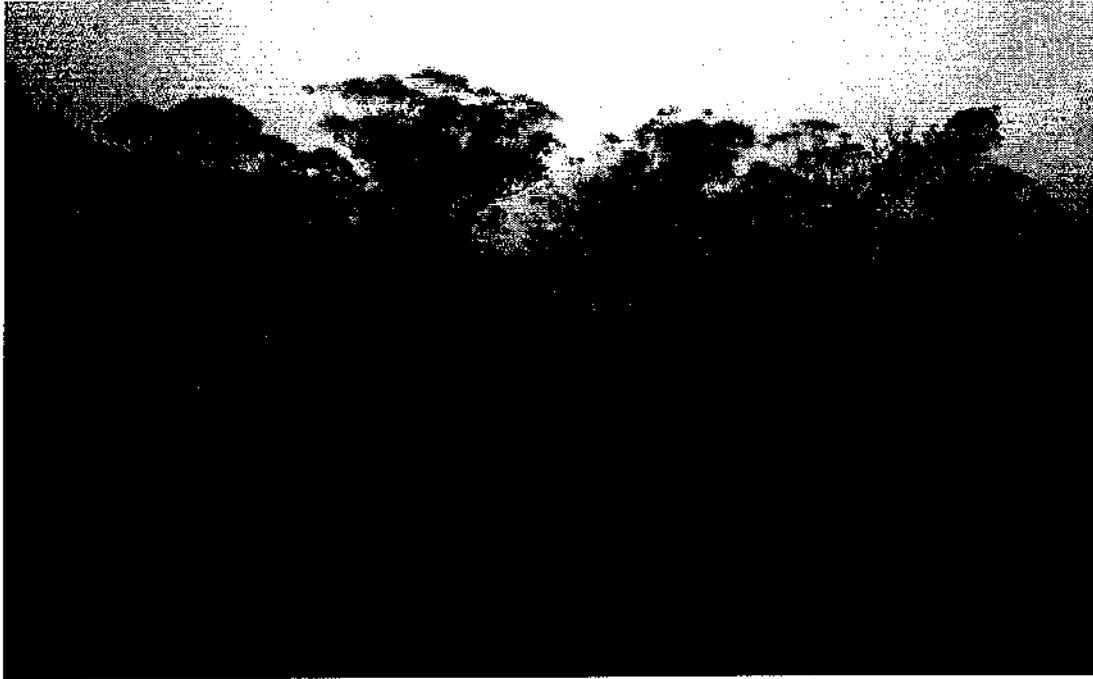
The process, now the main front had passed, was to get the trees dampened down around the house and put out the small fires around the place. Trees soon started to fall in places where the dry timber was burning. Richard had received some burns on his arms. I noticed one of the dog kennels alight, one of the fire fighters called out "not the A frame", this was the most luxurious kennel of the three. We tried to put it out but it was too far-gone. The poor old dog just sat looked despondent that evening, not being able to get into his small hut.



Sheep dogs a bit concerned!

I jumped on my bike and did a run up to the shearing shed, the sheep yards were well alight, the shearing shed was not touched except for the yards around being alight in a few places. I quickly grabbed what buckets of water were left on the loading stand and put out what I could. I then made a dash back down to the house to get one of the

tankers back to see if they could put some water on the old yards and loading ramp. I then threw some more buckets around the yards again from the 44-gallon drum at the back of the shed.



Day after

The fire crews were refilling from the pump on the creek and mopping up trees about the house paddock. Back at the house mum and dad looked so dejected and stuffed, all about us seemed to be a part of another story and possibly a dream that never happened – but it was all too true. We were all black from head to foot and wet. I think my face looked like a smacked bum, with hair sticking out and on end from smoke and from riding around all over the place on my bike. It was about this time that a white official 4WD arrived with some pristine dressed police inside (very neat and tidy, with radio blazing etc). With an air of assumed authority, the rather short police officer jumped out and said 'you all have to be evacuated'! Mum and I stood at the gate in amazement of where his rhyme or reason was coming from and wondered what this guy had been smoking. Mum was trying to be polite, I had it in mind to jump the fence and knock the little bastard ass over head. We said we were not going! there was a lot to do in mopping up the remains, and we had stock all over the place and some possibly burnt that we needed to check. The Police group said they were not very happy with us and tried to press their view. They soon realised that we were not moving. I said to him that we had fought this fire this far we were not going to walk away now. The little Police man jumped back into his vehicle and slammed it into reverse and with a cloud and dust and ash he went off back down the road. I think he was most upset that nobody seemed to be taking any notice of him, and it did not look good with the group he had in the vehicle. In most situations when coming into contact with the Police they were very supportive. This was a very out of ordinary event. It was not that we were not respectful it was the attitude and approach that was out of touch with what was going on around them.



At this stage I decided to go and look for Jenny's horses. I could not find them in the remains of the house paddock, which was a good sign (at least they had the sense to move away from the fire). .. I found them up in Rex's at a safe distance from the fire; they look at me rather smugly -after finding the open gate I suspect! I made my way back to the shearing shed to see what we could do with the yards etc. The tanker had run out of water and while re-filling the loading ramp and the shelter shed had gone.

There was timber still falling well into the night and we also had some light rain that evening. There were many trees still burning all night and into the next day. I did a run around all paddocks to see where the sheep were that evening and a lot of the older sheep were over into Rex's Bull paddock. Some were scattered about in the few places where the fire had not touched, but they looked OK. The next day I found there were a number of sheep scorched and some with burnt noses and sore feet. Fences were down all over the place. The heat of the fire high up in the timber was very hot, places looked like a lunar landscape, with big holes in the ground where tree stumps used to be. Most of the fences had been burnt. The areas which had iron posts survived. Old strainer posts that had collections of bark around the bottoms were generally burnt-off. In some places, all you would find of a strainer post was a hole in the ground and a stack of wire rings that used to go around the post.



Mum, dad and I did manage to get a little sleep that night, however there were still many trees burning and lots of falling timber. The plan was to get some iron posts and start work on the peripheral fences as soon as we could. Dad and I went up to the fence between Gunnadoo and the Olive farmer's the next morning. Nick (the owner of the olive farm) had arrived to assess the fire damage to his trees that morning. He approached us and said not to worry about the fence between him and us because it was covered by insurance and any stock that ventured onto his block could not go anywhere. Dad seemed to be pleased with Nick's response. We turned our attention to the high fence along the top of the bottom paddock. The remnants of this fence were wires lying on the ground. A friend from Canberra (John Milne and his brother) gave us a couple of days fencing; we completed the top fence and partially down the side of the Wren's Nest paddock over the weekend. Dad's brother, Dom Rankin, has been helping dad for some time and I have been travelling between Canberra and Jindabyne between work, with loads of lucerne hay on our trailer that Jenny had found at \$15 a bale (they should be about \$5 but the drought and fires have bought many middle men profiteering). We will be fencing for some months to come.

Dad decided to sell at least 90 of the sheep and keep the worst of the burnt ones plus the ewes and lambs. We mustered all the sheep and arranged a loading place.

Interesting points in Conclusion:

- How is the National Park allowed to incendiary bomb areas of private land outside the Park boundaries, especially when not notifying the local landowners, or at least fire-fighting groups in the area?

- The National Park needs to think carefully about their lockup policy on park country. The local farmers have been concerned about the fuel build up in the Park for some time and predicted this situation.
- The National Park crews were in property protection mode outside the park, there seemed to be little co-operation or co-ordination with the local volunteer crews. National Park crews operated on a different comms channel to the regular bush fire teams.
- The Police seemed to be out of touch with the real situation, -being on the scene after the event and being arrogant in the communication process did not help.
- Roadblocks inhibited local assistance with knowledge and skills to assist families in trouble. It appeared as though the local community were not allowed to provide assistance in fighting the fires. Never underestimate the rural communities' willingness to help their fellow man, especially in assisting with stock handling and fighting fires (some have fought many fires in the past).
- The non-local fire crews crew sent into areas had no idea of how to get onto areas and had little information.
- The overall work plan in addressing the fires was sketchy; crews were here and there without any consistency in fire planning (at least this was evident from my perspective). Direction from one day to the next changed with the change in crew leadership.
- The non-local teams were reluctant to take on the hard yakka of raking a fire, there was a comfort zone around their trucks and within hose length that was difficult to get them away from (I guess this could be the new school of thought and part of their training – it appeared that if you could not drive to it you could not fight it!).
- In a rural area it is good idea to have a communications set-up with the fire crews so that the local landowners can tune into and communicate if needed. UHF CB is good, and then at least people involved in the fire who have local knowledge in the area can direct and assist where needed (we found that mobile phone was critical).

Fighting fires in a mountainous country where you cannot get vehicles is a labour intensive process. The rake is used to rake the fire back on itself.. if it is too hot then you need to rake the fuel away from the fire until it cools. This can be over a very large area. In large fire fronts containment lines need to be identified and put in, if there are no fire trails or roads to work to, if conditions are right 'black-out' from the containment lines back to the fire (burn off or back burn). If the wind is up and raking is not possible then work on holding containment lines (jump on spots over the containment line). In gale force wind situations property protection is possibly the only course, prepare all threatened properties in the line of the fire run, if necessary cut fences and open gates where possible to let animals move away.

During times of low fire danger fuel reduction needs to be done to help to reduce the heat involved in fires if they occur. Burn-offs should be planned and carried out. The fight against fire does not stop when it is not the fire season; the cooler months are good for planning, training and mapping out the areas of access water supply and trail conditions. Local crews need to get to know the local landowners and their access. Work with the property owners and understand the names of places and trails, also sort out communications (phone numbers, CB channels etc) and possible fire plans.

The National park should in my view maintain a well-defined plan of fire trails and access and have a fuel reduction work plan for the cooler months. There are very large tracts of land within the National Park that have no access. Open up the Park where possible and maintain access to possible containment lots, also good water sources. Dependent upon fuel levels, burn-offs need to be carried out.

The environment will gain from the lower fuel (cooler) fires and the public can once again get access to 'their' natural areas of flora and fauna. You cannot remove fire from the natural course of events however the risks and impact can be reduced.

In closing I would like to say that the local fire brigade crews that did assist us did a great job, in particular Ray (he gave us 110%), even using his own vehicle to carry the small response tanker and sticking by us (especially with Dad). Thanks to Richard the fire captain in charge of the Wollendibby crews, for being so supportive and supplying what he could to our cause, and bringing the larger tankers in when we needed them. The other people who were on site as part of the crews worked their butts off, even when some had their own properties under threat further up the valley. We have a bit of catching up to do to thank all involved -- maybe a cool beer in the middle of winter!!



Up around the shearing shed