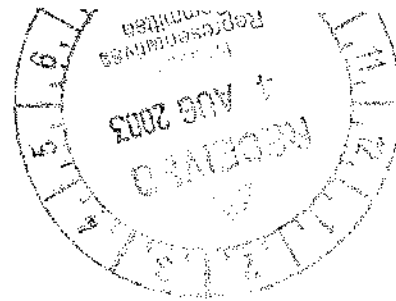


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Submission No.459

Robert and Samantha Stoney



My husband Robert and I are the owners of Wulgulmerang Station. On the 30th of January 2003 we spent several hours fighting to save our house, farming sheds/yards/hay/machinery and lives. For the week preceding this horrific day we had been waiting for what we hoped would not come. Preparation of our environment was undertaken in order to minimize fuel. Robert ploughed the roadside frontage-he had wanted to backburn it but was warned that lighting a fire was an offence. We purchased non-melt hoses and industrial sprinklers which ensured our house and yard were saturated. We also moved all of our stock into a ploughed paddock that contained no grass. Portable battery operated radios were purchased so we could continue communicating with the emergency services if power was lost at the house. Robert and I also attended meetings held at Gelantipy CFA where we received information regarding the movements of the impending fire and strategies to implement in order to protect our assets and lives.

Mid morning on the 30th of January Robert and I drove along the Suggan Buggan road towards Gelantipy. About 1.5 km along we saw two CFA cars and stopped to talk. The sky was already becoming a menacing shade of brownish grey. The official report was that there was a fire in the Buchan Valley out behind the Wire paddock. (The Wire Paddock is across the road from Wulgulmerang Station.) It was reassuring to see the CFA out and about. They explained that they were volunteers from Queensland and we introduced ourselves and described where our house was. I clearly recall one of the men putting his arm on my husband's shoulder and reassuring him that we were not in it alone and there were over 20 trucks and men who would help to protect us and our assets. We returned to our house still on high alert but a little more at ease. It was approximately 1230 hours and we were sitting down to lunch. Present at this lunch were Robert, myself, Neil Stoney, Elizabeth Stoney and Hedley Clemm. Hedley Clemm being the former owner of Wulgulmerang Station. Hedley knows the property and area extremely well having spent the majority of his life there. Hedley was confident that the fire would be on us by the afternoon and not in three days as officials were reporting. At approximately 1300 hours we noted that the fire trucks (numbering about 12) that we had been told would be staying in the Wulgulmerang-Black Mountain district in order to familiarize themselves with the area, were heading back down towards their base camp at Gelantipy. Hedley was so concerned by this that he leapt up from the table and chased them to Karoondah Park where he tried to explain that they needed to return immediately. I am told that two trucks attempted to return but it was too late. Hot black leaves were landing on the ground. The day turned to a pitch-black night and the roar commenced. The sky to the West was aglow. And the wind was blowing everything upright to a right angle. I struggled to open a flimsy wire door against the force. The embers started landing. Elizabeth and I did all we could to keep spot fires from starting around the house. The phone was still

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working and we were receiving calls from a neighbour Helen Bowman reporting the location of the fire. I recall telling her that we needed help. I also rang the emergency number that we had been given and asked for help. We also asked for help via the radio. One of our other neighbours informed me over the radio that it looked like we were in it alone. I looked out the window and there I saw a massive fire ripping up the tree-lined hill in the middle of the property. I rang Helen Bowman to alert her as this fire was heading straight to their home/property. Robert and his father Neil were out in the utility extinguishing fires, which threatened our assets. Then two sets of headlights came down our driveway. I prayed that it was fire trucks but it was our neighbour Ian Minchin and his brothers. Ian's house across the road was on fire and he was seeking refuge. Those three men instantly went into battle for our property.

After the main front had passed the house Robert and his father, Neil, ventured over to investigate the situation on the other side of our property. Our eastern boundary runs along the McKillop's Bridge Road. They discovered that there were many grass fires and our fences were either burning or about to burn. Whilst attempting to extinguish the fires with their own portable water tank on the ute, several fire trucks drove past. Robert asked for them to give him a hand so that the fences could be saved but they declined. He was too shocked to ask why not.

How long did we fight for? It is hard to say... maybe 3 hours. When the danger was passed we were left in a dark, wet and sooty house. No power, no running water and no phone. Ian had lost everything and we feared for the lives of neighbours. Our hay shed was ablaze and so were many trees and fences. Dead and half dead cattle were littered everywhere, their cries of pain disturbing. The house was safe and we went inside all thinking that soon the trucks would come to see if we were all okay. But no one came. Only David Woodburn arrived, he too having lost his house. At 2300 hours Robert decided that we would venture down to Karoonda to report in and make phone calls to family in Melbourne. The drive was difficult. Trees were alight and the road was littered with fallen trees. However we made it in a Landcruiser without having to move any trees. When we arrived at Karoonda Park the hall went quiet. There were men standing around drinking beer. The Queensland guy who had reassured us in the morning approached me saying, "I remember you..." I recall cutting him off abruptly by crying that no one came to help us. I then reported into a lady at a desk who wasn't quite sure where Wulgulmerang was. I was astounded.

We slept that night coved in ash and woke the next morning to the harsh light of day. The first CFA truck was to arrive no earlier than 11am!!! The driver informed me that they were coming up to perform a body count as our area had clearly been badly hit. I found this comment appalling. They asked if there was anything they could do to help. Robert pointed to the hay shed (still ablaze) and asked if they would extinguish the fire. They replied that they were sorry but that their truck is a city truck and had no water on it. Instead they offered to inspect the area and notify us if there were any hazards. Robert instructed them to leave immediately.

A CFA Captain attended our property after the fire and apologised for the debacle on January the 30th. Embarrassed, he had resigned as Captain of his brigade and felt compelled to tell us face to face that the CFA volunteers wanted to join us in the fire fight but were forced to follow the orders from the top. Over the coming days and

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weeks many volunteers approached us expressing feelings of frustration and absolute disappointment that they were unable to assist our community on this terrible day. We soon felt sorry for these volunteers and the guilt they were carrying not due to their own fault but the faults of those in management.

The following questions we feel need to be answered.

Why were we not provided with reliable information on the approaching fire?

Why were we given definite assurances of help that we were never to receive?

Why were non-locals, unfamiliar with the district, placed in charge of communications, equipment and fire tankers during this emergency?

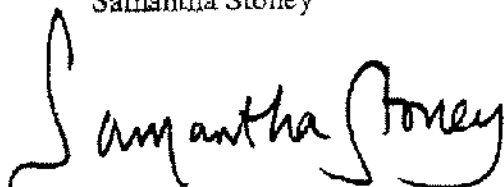
Why was the CFA operating on a different radio frequency to that used by the locals?

Why did the trucks leave Wulgulmerang when the fire was imminent?

Why didn't any help arrive even once the fire front had passed?

Why in twenty days prior to and after the fire did we not see one drop of water out the end of a CFA fire truck hose?

Samantha Stoney



Robert Stoney

