

**CANBERRA FIRES – SATURDAY 18 JANUARY 2003**  
**ACTION AT HOLT**

**Due Credit**

1. First of all, I would like to state that, under the prevailing conditions, I believe that on Saturday afternoon nobody could have achieved more than that done by the fire fighters. Their efforts were quite incredible but I do not agree with the hype that the press has created into making them into heroes. By this I am not trying to down grade the wonderful effort, both the professionals and volunteers made but I am concerned with what influence this hero-worshipping will have on future recruits.

**Assistance to Pine Ridge**

2. On Saturday, the 18.01.03 at approximately 2.30pm I approached officers on the corner of William Hovell and Drake Brockman Drive, giving them my name, my credentials and where I intended going. I was heading down to the property owned by Jenny Ingersole, "Pine Ridge", with the purpose of assisting in the protection of her property. On arrival I did a quick but thorough inspection of the property and came to the conclusion that we could easily protect the house from all but a fireball with the only major concern being the pine trees beside the house (western side). I then drove to the south-western end of the property and with the help of Jenny's son (Matt) and stock part-owner (Bill), we brought the cattle out and placed them in a small bare paddock in front of the house with access to the road.

**Pine Ridge – owner's small fire unit removed by fire officers**

3. When we had made as much preparation as possible, including laying out of hoses, cleaning up, making sure that there were adequate water supplies easily available, we found that the property's personal small fire unit had been taken away by fire officers without any notification to the property owner. It was about this time that I determined, with those on the property, what area we would restrict our containment being from the cattle yards to the front of the house along the private road. Virtually all ground cover was non-existent once inside the boundary fence with the exception of livestock manure.

**Advised police of experienced fire persons staying to protect property**

4. At some later stage during the afternoon, I went to the corner of Spofforth and Drake Brockman to the police control point to inform them that I, and others were at Pine Ridge and intended to stay and protect the house. I also informed the police that I would vacate the owner and inexperienced others, leaving just those of us all whom I believed were both capable and experienced.

**Livestock check**

5. Late in the afternoon I (with Bill, Charlie, Matt and Mark) went through the Vineyard to the adjoining property owned by Graham and Brendan (surname unknown) with the view of assessing the danger to the livestock as the fire was now progressing through what they refer to as Big Hill. Our assessment was that the stock was in little danger as there was very little combustible fodder and that the fire would only travel very slowly and that the livestock would safely travel through it.

### **Adjourning property owners – threatened with arrest**

6. It was here that we met with Graham and Brendan and they told us that the police had threatened them with arrest if they did not leave their hay and leave the area. Their hay was a few feet inside their boundary and, except for the grass between the road and the boundary fence there was absolutely no fire fuel. If they had stayed, they would have been quite safe on the bare country and been in a position to extinguish the fire as it progressed up the road before the fire reached the point where it was able to ignite the hay. This assessment was later proved correct as the fire did not proceed any further than a few feet past the hay (hay was all destroyed) and as they had a small unit which included one 80 gallon (approx) fire tank plus two forty-four gallon drums of water they would have quite successfully saved the hay. The loss of hay may well have had major financial consequences to the owners as they would have little option but to sell their livestock for humane reasons at giveaway prices and since the rain will now have to replace them at grossly inflated cost.

### **Threats by police**

7. As we were leaving and going back into the vineyard, pulling up the fence temporarily so that the livestock would not move into the vineyard, we were aggressively approached by two police officers accusing us of endangering police lives. I tried to explain that at that point there was little risk as the fire was virtually not moving and what flame there was, was no higher than six inches. At that stage they threatened us with arrest. I believe that many police officers were naturally terrified, due to their inexperience under these conditions. I can assure you, that a bushfire in full flight is a terrifying experience and requires a level head and a lack of panic to fully cope with the situation. I noted at this point that a large effort was being put into trying to put out trees that were blazing uncontrollably, rather than letting the fire advance away and back onto the area of little pasture and then extinguishing with little effort and consequently leaving a natural firebreak around the burning timber.

### **Comment on deployment of fire trucks**

8. At this stage I was unable to sight any units patrolling from Coppins Crossing through to the Stockdill Drive road but there were several units standing idle along Drake Brockman Drive. If these units had been commissioned along the fire line during the evening on Saturday then they would have successively doused the fire out using very little water as there was virtually no combustible fuel between Coppins Crossing road and the road down to the Sewerage works. I was informed that these units were being held there to protect the suburb of Holt, but during the evening there was very little breeze and the only movement was in the direction parallel to and not towards Holt. Except for a small heavily grassed area between the Wood Haven Golf Course and the Strathnairn Lane North West of the golf course running north off the Stockdill Drive, Holt could have been protected by utilizing the watering system of the golf course when necessary. This would have provided a barrier of approximately three fairways wide right across the front of Holt with little effort.

### **Request to Chief Minister – for authority over a unit and earth moving equipment**

9. I rang Jon Stanhope at approximately 9.30pm Saturday evening requesting that I be given authority over a unit plus some earth moving equipment, as I believed and stated that I could close down the fire from Coppins Crossing to the river before the weather once again deteriorated later on Sunday morning. I am unaware as to what influence that I had but the graders started where I suggested and followed along the fire line and did a fantastic job. Unfortunately so much time was wasted while a decision was being confirmed and consequently any burn-back opportunities during Saturday night were lost. I was told at approximately 1.00am Sunday 19.1.03 that the fire controllers had agreed to use graders along the section as I had suggested.

### **Hall fire officer and others – work well done**

10. A young fire officer from Hall brigade (in charge of section about 2am Sunday morning) was excellent, as so many other fire officers were. I met this young man while he and his team were attempting to extinguish timber a short distance from the ranger's house that is situated on the road to the Sewerage works. I pointed out that even if they were successful they would continue to have problems as the sparks would continuously be a threat to the house. If, however they let the fire continue slowly during the night towards the house across the open grassland then they would have a natural, wide firebreak established. This he listened to then went back to his unit to discuss with others. I can only presume this was agreed to as the following day I noticed that basically my suggestion had been followed.

### **Comment on movement of fire trucks**

11. I noted that fire units were being driven through the table drains putting the vehicles under extreme stress as they approached the fire edge on Saturday night. I queried why this was necessary when there was a level crossing and gate not 100 yards further up the road plus a house entrance and crossing 100 yards on the other side of where the fence was cut. I was told that these were four-wheel drive vehicles and that they were capable of doing this. Why stress a vehicle when there is an easy alternative option? I know that a fire truck was seriously damaged near the sewerage works. I have no knowledge of the cause, but I wonder, was this vehicle being abused unnecessarily in the above manner and became trapped or did the vehicle fail for another reason and become trapped and consequently burnt. I often wonder why it is deemed necessary by both police and fire vehicles to travel at high to extreme speeds, sirens blaring and lights flashing on a closed road when there is no wind and very little potential fire movement.

### **Graders installing firebreaks**

12. As I mentioned earlier, the graders did a wonderful and effective job on Saturday night putting a barrier to which the fire burnt and went out. During the ensuing days many kilometres of breaks were graded, in and around Canberra. I can only presume that the 'powers that be' noted the effectiveness of the Saturday breaks and decided to continue. Unfortunately, if these had been tested by extreme weather during the following week they would have proven to be totally inadequate. A decent firebreak is only effective as a burn-back line and not as a fire stopper under extreme conditions. The fire breaks needed to be placed much closer to the fire line on open grassland country and then during the cool of Sunday and Monday night the grassland between the break and the fire, to be burnt.

### **Orange overalls – a licence for anyone?**

13. It appeared that so long as that you had an orange pair of coveralls you had the right to go anywhere, and although I have nothing but admiration for so many of these young men and women, there were also many that were totally inept, and as the smoke advanced suddenly realised that they had no idea of what to expect. I saw one instance where a young 15 year old boy was given an orange suit after which he was not queried as to where he was able to go.

### **Portable radios**

14. Many of the fire fighters were carrying portable radios, obviously official issue, and much of the air traffic that I heard consisted of totally inappropriate garbage that was taking up air space and if these were meant to be used as an official communication method, would have consequently been rendered useless.

### **Comment on police forcing authority possibility**

15. I still wonder what the situation would have been, had the fire advanced further towards the property "Pine Ridge", I believe that more than likely the police would have enforced their authority and moved us out and the property including the house and sheds would have all been lost. If the fire had continued its advance then it would have been extremely hot until it reached Stockdill Drive but on crossing this road there was little or no fuel and it would have been at this stage that the house etc. could have been protected.

### **Unsafe driving by police**

16. On several occasions during the night of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of January I noted that police cars would drive down the road towards the sewerage works with their sirens on, lights flashing and at excessive speeds and on one occasion I observed a Police motor bike appear out of the smoke, returning to the police blockade at the top of the road, lights flashing and at excessive speeds only to stop at the corner. As the bike came out of the smoke a fire truck was just finishing its refilling at a hydrant, I shudder to think what may have happened had that truck pulled out onto the road 30 seconds earlier especially as the speed was totally unnecessary and highly dangerous.

## Monday, two days after main fire.

### Bushfire Emergency Fire Number – inability to contact

17. After speaking to Jon Stanhope at approximately 8.00pm 20.1.03, and on his suggestion, I rang the ACT Bushfire Emergency Fire Number 6207 8609. I was answered by an answering service with the message; this office is momentarily unattended and to please leave your name and telephone number. In case of an emergency please contact 02 6207 8603. I did not contact this number immediately as I did not believe that what I wanted was an emergency situation. I wished to offer to impart the knowledge and experience that I have gained fighting and coordinating a variety of grass fires over the past 35 plus years.

After thirty minutes of frustration of ringing and receiving the same answer, I decided that the time had come to ring the number provided, 02 6207 8603. This was immediately answered by a very helpful and pleasant young man. I informed him of my name and background qualifications and then gave him the reason for my ringing.

### Grading of fire trails

18. I told him that I believed that the grading of fire trails would be a great asset but under the extreme conditions forecast for the 21st Jan. 03 would be totally inadequate unless used as back burning lines during the evening of the 20.1.03. Although, making no comment concerning this he suggested that I should immediately contact the Rural Fire Services Coordinator on 6207 8400. This I did only to have the phone dial out until it automatically crossed over to 6207 8609 and I was then back into the original message and loop. I continued this procedure of ringing 6207 8400 (The Fire Coordinator) and being diverted back to 6207 8609 until approximately 10.30pm always with the same result.

### Why was office unattended at still critical time?

19. My query is why was this office apparently unattended, for such a period of time, when we officially were being told that we were still under high emergency conditions and what's more the Fire Services Coordinator's mobile was also not answering but linked back to the unattended emergency number.

### Threats to arrest

20. My other major query is, why was it necessary for those who were advising people to evacuate, to threaten them with arrest if they did not comply with the order. As was proven in many cases, by people staying with the homes and being sensible, many homes were saved. During Saturday evening and Sunday the major risk was from ash falling and starting spot fires and if premises were unattended these would not have been noticed until well alight and therefore potential building losses would have been far greater. I believe much of the problem was caused by inexperience, a sense of ill directed authority and fear. I realise that lives were lost in the Weston Creek area during the Saturday afternoon but conditions and fire fuel were very different in the Belconnen area.

### **Nature Corridors**

21. If observed carefully, following the fire, it was noticeable that the highest intensity was obviously the pine forests, although this was followed closely by the nature corridors along the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo rivers providing an area of high density, flammable fuel that enabled the fires to transfer and interconnect from one area to another all leading into Canberra. I am not presuming to make any recommendations in relation to these corridors but find it intriguing to note the obvious intensity points of destruction.

Graham Hicks