

Submission No.448

FAY NEIL

This submission will tell the events that happened in Jarman Place Kambah, on 18 January 2003, and what followed the following week.

I was at Bunnings Hardware in Tuggeranong, buying two fans and a new length of garden hose at around 2.45pm. As I came out of there I was aware the sky was getting dark and a red glow was appearing behind the hills to the north and the west. I got in my car and raced home. In the car on the way home I tried to find a station that was talking fires and got onto ABC "666" I heard alerts for Holder, Chapman and Duffy - Kambah was not mentioned.

My daughters were both at home, my husband had gone down the coast that morning. After my arrival at home, we raced around and got clothing for ourselves to put on (trousers boots etc), pulled curtains back from the windows, closed windows and doors, pulled the garage door down (with the car inside), and then got the hoses laid out. The next half an hour we spent hosing down the pergolas and the roof, and filled the water containers and buckets we had with water.

We had the radio on ABC "666" inside and there was no warning for Kambah up until we went outside to prepare hoses about half an hour before we were hit. Somewhere around 4.00pm to 4.05 pm we saw the flames crest up over the top of Mt Arawang (we were expecting flames to come from Mt Taylor). Mt Arawang is over 1km- 1.5km away. My daughter was on our roof, the man from down the front was on his roof, and the man next door was on his roof.

We are at the top of Kambah, just underneath Sulwood Drive and I saw the winds at the base of Mt Arawang begin to circle and a very loud noise (like jet fighters) began (I have lived in the USA, in Illinois, and I knew what was coming). I yelled to my daughter who skidded down of the roof, and the other daughter who was filling buckets to get inside.

We flew inside, shut the door and raced upstairs to the bathroom (where the 2 cats and 1 dog were). The noise was deafening. Within 10 seconds the noise was gone and we flew out and started fighting fires. The side and front gardens were burning. On Mt Taylor and the sound bank between us and Sulwood Drive was the remains of the fire, embers and burning roots.

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We put out the fires and looked around. Fences on the lower half of my block were destroyed, two 30 foot high conifers had been uprooted and tipped into next doors pool (head first) the garden around the trees was destroyed. At the side of my house trees were burnt and singed, and my Manchurian Pear had been broken off leaving a four foot high stump. The rest of it was lying in the garden, along with garden furniture, ladders, pot plants and tipped over garden arch etc etc.

I looked down Jarman Place and saw trees down, and in nearly every house people had holes in their roof. My neighbour in front had no roof on her house, and her car was damaged underneath her destroyed garage. The electrical wires that ran down between our houses, had been reefed off the poles and wrapped around a large tree, meters clear of the pole. The telephone wires had been reefed off also.

When I looked back I had holes in my gable roof, and the blind over my window was shredded. Our house is double brick but on the front gable (where the shredded blind was) the top of the wall had moved inwards. The builder has said it was not double brick above the ceiling, but from the top of the window it has had to be rebuilt.

Out the front of my house there were upended trees, the roof off my neighbours house, the remains of pergolas etc. The heat baffles from my neighbours house were everywhere, including up trees and under bushes.

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We saw all this by about 6pm. We had no lights so we had to get camping gear out etc. The neighbours all got together and for the next few days that was all that we had. Later that evening a single police officer came to see if anyone was in the house with no roof, we said that we had her inside, so he left. About 10pm we were sitting out in our drive and five fire trucks drove into our street. They had just arrived from Sydney and were looking for a cook from the motel, they found her and off they went. We did not see anyone until we saw some one on Mt Taylor the next day.

My neighbours house was open to the elements (and everyone else), so we stayed up and watched it. ACTEW AGL came, and left, and we really had nothing done until Tuesday (insurance) and Wednesday/Thursday for getting trees out of

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pool. It was Saturday before they brought in a crane to get the wires off a tree and tied them back onto a pole.

It was probably Thursday that a group of people in Navy Blue boiler suits (11 or 12 of them) came and looked at what the wind had done. A senior NSW fire officer said that the wind had been about 280 kmph with the fire at a lesser speed, but still fast.

There are several things that came from this:

1. NO-ONE could have stopped this, NO-ONE. Once this fire got to Canberra, with the weather the way it was, it was unstoppable.
2. The ACT needs to become aware that fire can bring its own weather conditions with it i.e. tornado type winds, which can cause excessive damage.
3. Warnings need to be much earlier, and to cover areas that may need it.
4. Would have been nice to have some-one come and say, "OK we know you are here, we will get back as soon as we can".
5. We still have the roofs and junk out the front of our houses, it is seven weeks since the fire. Do not forget things.