



FORMAT: TEXT, LOCATION: NSW, STORIES

Duty Tells

(Names have been changed and I am no longer a member of the RFS)

On Tuesday 17th December 2019 Jane and I were on duty at the Rural Fire Services' Incident Management Headquarters in Katoomba handling communications which entailed managing all radio communications with trucks and crews on the field. The crews were not just from the Blue Mountains but from all over the State as well as Fire Rescue crews.

At this point of time the Katoomba Incident Management Team (IMT) were handling the Green Wattle Fire coming at us from the Southwest and all members of the IMT were totally focused on this fire.

The Gospers Mountain Fire was being managed by a different IMT based in Hornsby.

In a quiet moment Jane and I were looking at a mapping app on our phone called ArcGIS which was showing hot spots and spread of fire. We were focused on Gospers Mountain Fire.

Jane lives in Bell, and I live in Mount Victoria. We were looking at ArcGIS and were getting concerned at the approach of the Gospers Mountain Fire and the current wind direction was moving the fire closer to our areas.

Alan, one of the senior members of the IMT, came over to us and asked, "what's got your chooks feather all ruffled up?" We responded by showing him the ArcGIS map and he commented "Oh!" and walked away.

The next thing we know a senior officer of the RFS was being sent over to Mount Wilson and our IMT were on the phone to the Hornsby IMT asking what was going on with the Gospers Mountain Fire. Hornsby IMT replied saying "we have our fire under control, but have you got yours?"

Jane and I finished our shift and went our own ways home.

On the 19th December, 2019 my husband, son and I took off to visit family out of state. We were lucky to be away during the period over Christmas when the Gospers Mountain fire hit Mount Victoria. No homes were lost but gardens and railway infrastructure were destroyed.

Unlike Jane in Bell, where many homes were lost.

We arrived home on the 29th December, 2019 and found our beautiful bush gully had been ravaged by fire and we had lost half of our large back garden.

First night home my husband and I went to bed when my son came in asking what he should do if the backyard was on fire. We thought he was joking till we said call 000. His response was “I’ve done that”. That response made us jump out of bed throwing on long sleeve cotton clothing and heavy boots ready to go out and fight the fire with our pump, fire hose and water tank.

The poor Fire Rescue fighters responding to the 000-call had to fight their way across the gully and over the creek to get to the flames and we were hosing down into the gully from the top of a 20-metre sandstone cliff. We finally got the fire out, or so we thought.

The joke was on us because this happened three more times over the next week when the wind would hit the smouldering logs in just the right way to spark the fire up again.

The Gospers Mountain fire was Australia’s largest ever forest fire lasting over three months and burning 512,626 hectares.

As I have said we were lucky and only lost bushland and garden, so many lost so much more.

I resigned from the RFS after the 2019/2020 fires because I felt that the RFS didn’t handle the situation well. I feel that there was a lack of communications between the different IMTs when fires spread into areas near other IMTs.

I understand that all RFS staff and volunteers were exhausted because they had been fighting fires since early August 2019 up the North Coast of New South Wales and went on fighting until the rains came in February 2020.

Even this minor loss has left us with emotional scars and we both still flinch when we hear sirens. I am also a keen bush walker and still struggle to walk through areas that still display the scars of the fire. Some areas will never recover, and other areas have been changed for ever. This experience changed our lives forever.

Anonymous

722 words

Location: *Katoomba IMT and Mount Victoria, NSW*

Summary: *Story of the reaction of the Rural Fire Services’ Incident Management Teams (IMTs) to the Gospers Mountain Fire in 2019.*

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