



FORMAT: TEXT, LOCATION: NSW, STORIES

Two Months On The Edge

January 20, 2020: So, what's it been like, living on the edge for more than two months, especially since the backburn on the Gaspers Mountain fire to the north of us went belly-up in mid-December and began rampaging through Bilpin, Mt Tomah, Mt Wilson?

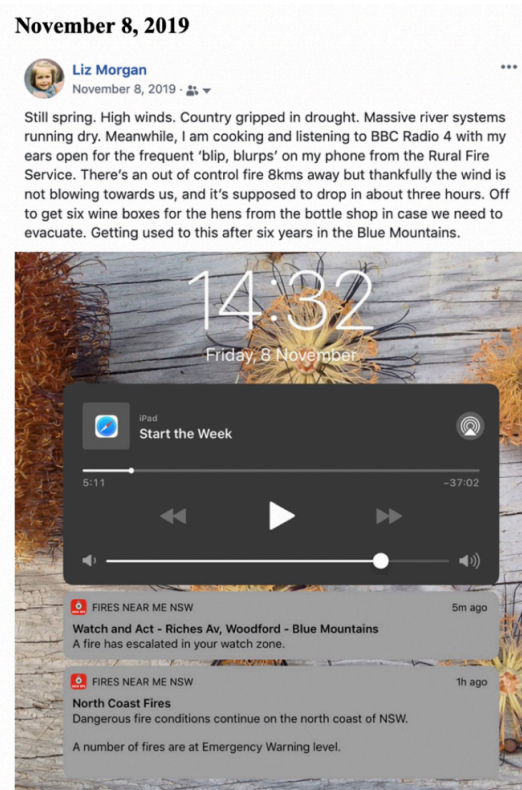
The Ruined Castle inferno, south of Katoomba and nine kilometres from our home in Wentworth Falls, jumped containment lines on November 30 before joining forces with the Green Wattle Creek fire. In no time we were sandwiched between two mega-fires, to the north and south, each one uncomfortably within the 20-kilometre radius I set on the Fires Near Me app on my phone.

I have acquired a whole new lexicon: backburning and hazard reduction – and the difference between the two practices; containment lines; mopping up and blacking out; ember attack; fire front; defensible space. My phone is loaded with apps that give me the latest information on the size and movement of the fires (NSW Rural Fire Service's Fires Near Me; ArcGIS, which shows the hotspots: many people say it is more up-to-date and accurate than the RFS's app). Facebook's Blue Mountains Firewatch and Rescue page is terrific: the wonderful moderators keep the posts on message and they work 24/7 on the really hairy days. Another website, FlightRadar24.com, shows all the aircraft flying in local airspace. What kind of aircraft (fixed-wing pink retardant bomber? A water bombing helicopter – is it the big one, Elvis, or has that been relocated to Victoria where it's needed more? Please say no). Where it's flying to and from (Richmond RAAF base, mostly) and I can see the squiggly fluorescent green lines on the map where it is doing circles over the epicentre of the latest fire outbreak.

I discover that a weather forecasting app in Norway, YR, (for goodness sake) is a hell of a lot more accurate than Australia's Bureau of Meteorology, which turns out to be a very reassuring thing on January 10, when an overnight southerly threatens to blow the Erskine Creek containment lines south of Leura, Wentworth Falls, Bullaburra and further east, and bring raging fire with it.

I am afraid to *leave* home in case embers set the place alight. I am afraid to *be* at home in case the flames catch the eaves and I burn to death. We can't open the windows because of the smoke. We sit and watch the plants crisp, wither and die. Lots of our food plants have been killed outright, others will take time to recover. Food insecurity is no longer an abstraction, a theoretical framework for the PhD I am writing. It's happening here, in our garden. Food prices are expected to rise by 50 per cent because of the drought; if we produce less we buy more.

I had forgotten the inferno began as far back as November 8 with a fire in Woodford, that flared up badly a couple of times about two months later. The daughter of local friends, who lives in Woodford with her partner, is heavily pregnant with their first child. They evacuate for a few days to her parents. By December 29 there's still no sign of the baby, now more than two weeks late. A baby girl is safely born on January 2, the first baby of 2020 at Katoomba Hospital. I am told that all the babies due for delivery at Katoomba about now are late, and this is attributed to the stress the mothers and unborn babies are under because of the high alert about the fires. The hospital has already evacuated its in-patients as a precaution, as has Springwood Hospital. Maternity and emergency wards are still open, for now.



November 12: The NSW government declares the first state of emergency. Meanwhile, the deputy prime minister and the man in charge of the country, Michael McCormack, castigates “raving inner-city lunatics” for linking climate change to the bushfires. The prime minister, Scott Morrison, is in Hawaii on a family holiday while the country burns.

November 15: A crucial backburn along Bells Line of Road to put in containment lines to halt/slow the rampaging Gospers Mountain fire gets out of control. The RFS alert is raised to emergency level. Things rapidly spiral out of control.

November 20: Scared by the scale, ferocity and speed of the Gosper's Mountain fire to the north – it is said to be moving south at about 12 kilometres a day – and the Ruined Castle/Green Wattle to the south, we start clearing a huge fire break between the end of our garden and the steep slope down to the Charles Darwin walk and the river. We are not in flame zone for nothing. The firebreak is about 15 metres wide by about 5-plus metres long. It is

backbreaking work in this heat. Everything has to be busted up on the spot, bagged and wheelbarrowed to the top end of the block for firewood (ha!) or for taking to the council tip in Katoomba.

December 1: There's a 400-hectare fire nine kilometres to the south-west of us that has just been downgraded from "watch and act" to "advice". Strong westerly winds forecast for tomorrow, which is not good news. I am working in Sydney and leaving my partner at home. I am sick of feeling sick and anxious, and constantly packing and unpacking.

December 2: The fire has almost doubled in size since last night and is back to "watch and act" status. We pack the car – for a second time – with as many of our precious possessions that will fit, and I drop them off for safekeeping with friends in Sydney before my shift. It's a long, long day. A Sikorsky S-64 Air Crane is working overtime to douse the Ruined Castle fire, 9kms from our house. A friend from the local camera club, Alan Daniel, captures the scale of the fire and the tiny helicopter in comparison. The Air Crane is the biggest chopper in the pack. We are perpetually on standby to leave.



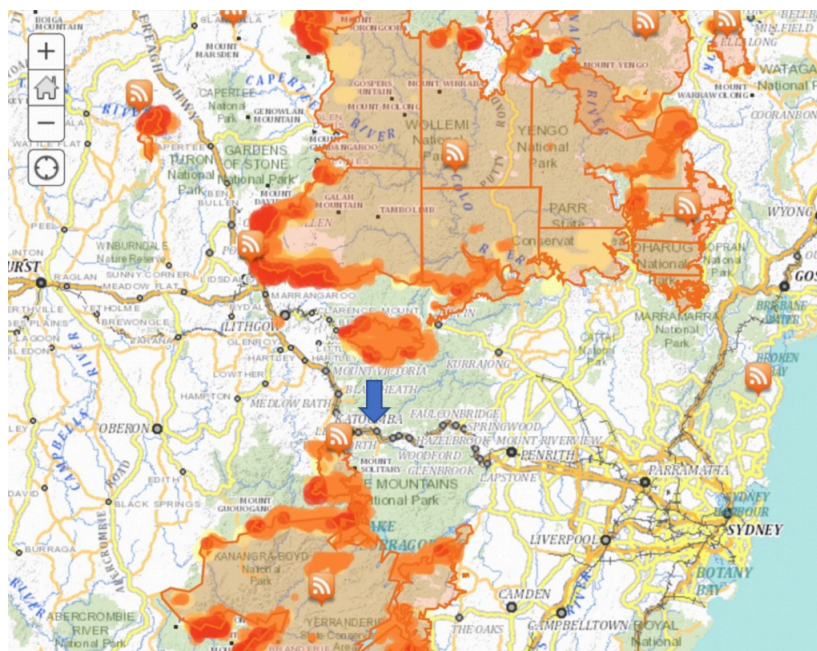
A Sikorsky S-64 Sky Crane helicopter tackles the fire near Katoomba.
Photograph: Alan Daniel.

December 4: We cancel an appointment in Sydney for tomorrow because strong winds threaten to drive the Ruined Castle fire up the Megalong Valley towards us: the worst combination for fire our way – a southerly with fire in the Megalong. We feel it's too risky for both of us to be away from the house for five-plus hours, which is the time it takes to drive there and back.



Gosper's Mountain fire at Glen Davis, December 22.
Photograph: Logan Spice Photography.

December 16: The fires, north and south, are closing in. The darker orange spots on the ArcGIS map (below) show the higher intensity fire front. Wentworth Falls is shown by the blue arrow. This is a fire shit sandwich.



December 18: There is a lot of anxiety in the Upper Mountains about the Gaspers fire, which is slowly heading for the Grosse Valley. It could reach there, and Blackheath, between Christmas and New Year. Our anxiety comes and

goes. It's the ghastly feeling of hanging around waiting for something awful to happen without being able to settle to anything of substance. At my very worst, I threaten to get the huge can of petrol from the shed, douse the house and set it on fire myself to spare us the waiting game. We are staying for now, and will review the risk for coming week(s).

December 19: A friend and her dog come from Blackheath for dinner and to stay the night. Things aren't too bad in Blackheath yet but most of her neighbours have left town and she doesn't want to be there alone. She leaves the next day for Sydney and doesn't return until the New Year.

December 21: Bilpin, Mt Tomah, Mt Wilson, Mt Irvine and smaller places nearby get whacked by fire. The iris farm where a few of us from the camera club took some shots on December 3 (to help the owner with promotional material) is clobbered. His iris fields are mostly OK, so is the house but all his beautiful old sheds are gone. I wonder, too, about his gorgeous Japanese rooster and his harem of ladies.



Bilpin iris farm.
Photographs: Elizabeth Morgan.

Friends who are longstanding volunteers with the Mt Wilson RFS are on duty: John* is doing night shifts on the trucks, Jane* is at the station doing communications/community liaison – as in 2013, when John was trapped in a house with the female owner and another firefighter, calling base to say “We’re surrounded, send help” and Jane telling her husband of 40 years, “I can’t send any help.” We hope things don’t get this serious again, but worry about John’s shifts. He won’t stop until Jane’s turn comes for an overnight shift and one of them has to stay at home to potentially defend their property in Leura. Turns out, she can’t even get to Mt Wilson for that shift. Police aren’t letting anyone, not even accredited RFS volunteers, through to the village.

Over tea later that week, Jane tells us the story of a fellow Mt Wilson brigade volunteer, who’s running the kitchen at the community centre, feeding the firies and those who’ve lost their houses. This amazing woman is a barrister and is due in the Family Court in Sydney on Friday to represent a client in a particularly nasty divorce hearing. There is no way she can get out of Mt Wilson. None whatsoever. She rings the judge, explains her situation, and asks if she can represent her client by mobile phone. The power is down. The NBN is down. Water’s being tanked in. But she cannot risk her client going to the back of the Family Court list by missing her hearing; it could be

dangerous for the woman and her children. The judge agrees, and the barrister represents her client by mobile phone, while stirring pots of food in a makeshift bush kitchen in the middle of a raging inferno.

December 21: This is the catastrophically hot day everyone is warning of. At 5pm, I send a text message to our friends in Sydney saying, “We might leave home. OK to land on you if we do?” Three hours later, I reply: “Things have eased somewhat and we are staying home unless we get a red alert in the middle of the night. My anxiety levels just hit the roof about two hours ago with the threat of Katoomba being next to evacuate and a massive mushroom cloud of smoke from Bells Line of Road fires. We’ll keep you posted, but not in the middle of the night!”

Those anxiety levels hit the crescendo of my breaking down into shaking tears while we were packing up more belongings (in addition to those already in Sydney), crying that I couldn’t stand this packing-unpacking anxiety any longer. That I don’t want to die with my partner in our bathroom covered in a wetted, red woollen blanket. The car stays packed overnight and we unpack in the morning.

December 23: Send text to Sydney friends: “I think we should move some stuff to Sydney before the weekend and are wondering if you have some space? I just want to have our most precious things safe in case we have to leave by the weekend. Maybe an overreaction but I think it’s a sensible precaution, while the weather’s cool and the roads passable ... My therapist reckons I suffered PTSD from my work in journalism in Ireland – the relentless news diet of bombings and shootings. I haven’t felt this stressed since my break-up of a nine-year relationship, suddenly and badly, just before I met my present partner. Soon after that was the Omagh bombing, Northern Ireland’s biggest civilian atrocity, and the last straw for me staying in Ireland. It feels like both these events, rolled into one, and lasting way too long. Meditation centres I go to up here are both on blocked off roads! Breathe!”

December 24: Take a carload of belongings AGAIN to Sydney. A friend who was coming for Christmas lunch has cancelled because she is packing to take her things to her daughter’s in Randwick tomorrow. A barista in Katoomba tells me the RFS volunteers are talking about managing the Gospers Mountain fire as “babysitting” – watching what it’s doing with a close eye and making sure it behaves. This is as much as they can do with a fire this size and ferocity. We are far from out of the woods yet.

Christmas Day: Just the two of us. Nice lunch. While we try to relax, the RFS crews are out on the containment lines north of us. I know people on the trucks. They are having sandwiches and apples and dust, heat and smoke for Christmas – and will do so on Boxing Day and every day through to New Year’s Eve and beyond. In early January I catch up with RFS volunteer Jack* at the pool. He’s got a horrid cough. He’s super-chuffed that his grandson refused to open any of his Christmas presents until ‘Pops’ came off duty on Christmas Day. This was at 8.30pm.



December 26: A massive backburning operation from Blackheath to Wentworth Falls begins, to put in essential containment lines to stop Gospers Mountain fire reaching the northern side of the villages along the highway. Fires are starting to get out of control in suburban Blackheath and getting very close to Leura on Mt Hay Road. There are plumes of smoke everywhere. We wonder if John and Jane will stay and defend their property in north Leura. They have fire hoses and a generator. The evacuation plan if the property is hit is to shelter under the concrete bridge over the two creeks on their land, which is mostly hanging swamp. It is only later, when I talk to my RFS volunteer friend Jack at the pool that I hear the sobering information that hanging swamps are exceedingly dangerous places in a bushfire. They give off carbon monoxide in huge quantities. This is why the mopping up of a backburn in early January on Tableland Road was left to NSW Fire Rescue, the professionals, because they have the appropriate face masks, filters, and breathing apparatus that the RFS volunteers don't. I am learning a lot about firefighting. I presume John and Jane know this?



December 31: Friends overseas are getting increasingly concerned for our safety.

We go for New Year's Eve dinner at friends' in Leura, where the talk is focused on the fires. A 'normal' conversation about what each set of three couples (one in their mid-80s) would do if their house burned down. Would we rebuild where we are? What else could we do? It's hard to be bright about 2020 when the news is pouring in of the catastrophic fires on the South Coast.

New Year's Day: I got talking to an old fella at the supermarket this morning, who was buying just one item – a jar of Vegemite. As the conversation turned to the bushfires (people in the Blue Mountains chat about little else these days), he floored me by saying he'd lost his home in the Bega Valley fires (in which four people died and 448 homes were lost) and everything in it. In his other hand he had a plastic bag containing a pair of shoes (\$19) he'd just bought in Rivers clothing store, with the \$1000 disaster relief payment he'd received. I have no idea if his story is true or not but it shook me to the core, still groggy after a sleepless night watching the fires close to us but still with a home today, after sleeping in my own bed. Thankful.

January 2: Go for a much-needed swim in thick smoke at Lawson pool. While we were chatting poolside, a fellow swimmer gets a text message from her physiotherapist in Wentworth Falls cancelling an appointment later in the week because he is stuck on Mallacoota beach (where the armed forces later evacuated people and animals) with his pregnant wife and he has no idea when they will get out.

January 6: A crucial backburn begins between Wentworth Falls and Woodford. There are some particularly worrying weak points in the containment lines at Wentworth Falls, close to Ruined Castle and especially near the escarpments behind Tableland Road. There is always the risk and fear, since the Gosper's Mountain tragedy, that the backburn will go pear-shaped and push the fire towards the towns.



One firefighter in my Facebook post looks young enough to still be at school. Maybe he is? Some look like members of the same family, which is very common in the RFS, but should they be on the same trucks at the same

time? I worry about this, even though I don't know/recognise any of them.

I learned at the packed community meeting tonight (January 6) about the Erskine Creek fire that were it not for the massive backburn on Mt Solitary in May 2018, the Ruined Castle fire that started about a month ago would probably have taken out a lot of properties in Wentworth Falls in the past few weeks. Possibly our house, given where we are.

The Mt Solitary burn was controversial (for being so big and for filling Sydney with smoke). It took a long time for the weather conditions to be just right to do the burn and these gaps are narrowing all the time. Will the tourism chiefs of Sydney and NSW prevail in their need to keep the city smoke-free and prevents backburns? It's a distinct likelihood.



Mt Solitary backburn, May 2018.
Photograph: Michael Peck.

In these hot and dangerous days, a trip to the washing line means confronting yet another pyrocumulus cloud, some seemingly incredibly close. These are the clouds formed by monstrous fires; that create their own weather systems that can shoot balls of fire to distances of about 30 kilometres. We could come under fire attack from the sky as well as land. Dry lightning is a high risk, too. How well-cleared is our firebreak? What about those piles of raked-up leaves we didn't get around to removing?

I've been hosing down the chook run regularly, with the shocking endless days of high temperatures. Three, four times to keep the chooks from heat stress.

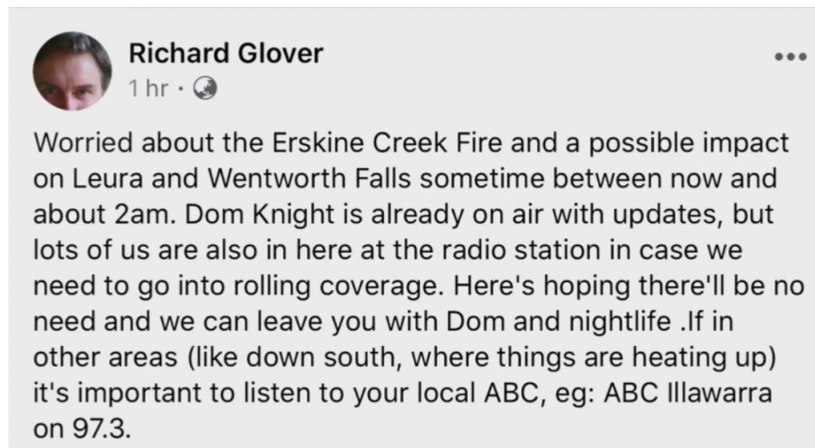
The rainwater tanks are almost empty and we have to make hard decisions: do we save the food plants and trees, or the ornamental ones? Or do we keep our water for firefighting? How much to 'waste' to keep the hens alive?

Finally, approaching the second week of January we say "f**k the Level 2 water restrictions" and start filling the rainwater tanks with mains water, especially if the Erskine Creek fire breaks containment lines in the middle of the night and takes a run up the Megalong and Jamieson valleys, and gets into the Charles Darwin and up the

steep slope at the end of the garden. We have tied five hoses using electrical ties to the bigger fruit trees, positioned on the fire break we've created (about a quarter of an acre). If we or the fires need them, they just need turned on at the taps. Important in the dark and smoke.

January 8: lunch at friends' right on the escarpment in Leura, where we have a birds' eye view of the smoke from the Green Wattle and Ruined Castle fires. Our Blackheath friend tells us of her son and his new bride's lucky escape from Murrumbidgee on the NSW South Coast. They were given a window to leave but their car tyres burst and exploded on the burning hot tarmac. Someone towed them out of trouble.

January 10: Text to Sydney friends: "Packing AGAIN! The southerly might actually threaten Wentie and Leura overnight. The new fire is a right worry. You might have to hold on to our stuff for a bit longer if that's OK? Sick and tired. Worn out."



The car is packed. What else do we want to fit in, in the space we have left? In the dark, the chooks can easily be taken off the roost and put in the six wine boxes we've got ready. My partner says: "I'd rather take the CD collection." That's fine. These are the kinds of decisions you make on the run in such circumstances. My partner's not been sleeping well for some time and goes to bed about 11pm. I stay up, fixated on ABC Radio Sydney, Fires Near Me, and other apps until the predicted southerly doesn't arrive, and my weary companions on Facebook's Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery page start calling it a night and turning in about 3.30am.

January 12: Text to Sydney friends: "We are in Sydney on Tuesday and Thursday. Like to leave our stuff with you until we see what's happening with Erskine Creek fire backburn (on our back doorstep, in a fashion). Been watching loads of tennis. I feel completely wrecked a lot of the time. Yes, we've had a wet and cool day. Heavy mist, or is it smoke? Or both? Not good for strengthening containment lines, though. Or dousing fires. Most of the more bushy roads in Blackheath look like nuclear bomb sites."

Former neighbours from Sydney come for brunch after celebrating an old schoolfriend's 70th birthday in Wentworth Falls the previous night. Jen* is telling a funny story about Germaine Greer teaching herself and her friend of 50-plus years at Marrickville Girls' High in Sydney in the early 1960s "where we moved to after my father died when I was fifteen". It's then I remember Jen telling me years ago that her father died defending their home from fire. Jen, her mother and her siblings survived. Just being up here must surely spark some old, old grief?

A friend at the pool tells me that his daughter-in-law in Springwood moved her beehives to a friend's place down the south coast between Christmas and New Year, when we all expected the Blue Mountains' fires to be massively destructive. They were all destroyed in the South Coast infernos. With fire, there is no "right" way to plan or protect anything. None.

January 13: The worst is over, for now. The RFS declare themselves happy with the new containment lines they've established in the past week and how they are knitting together with the older ones throughout the year. As the month slips by slowly all the fires around us are declared under control. Responsibility is handed back, in some cases, to National Parks. People's anxiety lessens and the focus is on recovery. Tourism. Villages badly burned. Homes lost. Children going back to school. Animal rescue groups joined. There is no return to normal, for me, for countless people all over Australia. Life has been suspended in a state of surreal anxiety for almost two months. Everything has been challenged, tested and questioned. Every emotion has been felt to the maximum: anger, pain, sorrow, despair, and joy (albeit small ones).



Elizabeth Morgan

Elizabeth Morgan is a freelance journalist, PhD researcher on food security, a zoologist and an alleged retiree. She has lived in the UNESCO World Heritage-Listed Blue Mountains in NSW since 2013.

3,800 words

Location: *Blue Mountains, NSW*

Summary: *What's it like being the meat in a fire sandwich? I spent two months on the edge in the 2019-2020 summer as two megafires in the Blue Mountains – Gospers Mountains to the north, Green Wattle Creek to the south – raced towards each other, the firefront sometimes gaining 12 kilometres a day.*

Featured image: *Gospers's Mountain fire at Glen Davis, December 22. Logan Spice Photography.*

NOVEMBER 20, 2020

#FEATURED-3

NEXT

Black Tuesday, Tasmania, 1967



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