



Mt Wilson/Mt Irvine Rural Fire Service December 2006

Brigade Newsletter

DECEMBER 2006

FROM THE PRESIDENT

A Huge Thank You!

During the recent fire in the Grose Valley, our community responded very generously and committed an enormous amount of time and energy.

Particular thanks are due to Peter Raines (Captain) and Doug Wood (Senior Deputy Captain) for their untiring work and leadership during this period.

Assisting Peter and Doug were the other crew leaders – Stuart Donaldson, Alan Gunn, Stewart Gunn, Alan Heap, Richard Knight-Brown and Beth Raines – who all led crews on the trucks. In addition to the crew leaders, a total of 39 fire fighters manned - and womanned - the trucks over the 19 days of the Section 44 Emergency. In total, 48 fire fighters spent over 1,400 man-hours actively fighting the fires. That is an average of over 30 hours per person!

Grateful thanks are also due to Milba Mewburn and Julie Townend who put in long hours at the station and those members of the community who helped both in the station and patrolling fire trails and throughout the villages.

Those mentioned above could not have contributed so much time without the support of their families and employers. I am sure that we will never know the full extent of the contributions made by individuals in meeting their fire fighting commitments. Many of our fire fighters are self-employed and lost income to fight the fire.

The community thanks all of you for your contribution.

David Howell, President

CAPTAIN'S REPORT

The 2006 / 2007 fire season has had a busy start, with the well-publicised Lawson's Long Alley Fire crossing into the top of the Grose Valley. There was a huge commitment by our brigade with almost fifty members going out on the trucks over a three week period and many others assisting at the station in a wide variety of ways. I would like to thank everyone who helped and spared some of their time to assist with the fire fighting effort. It was a very successful campaign -the fire was kept to the south side of Bell's Line of Road, no property was lost, the crews working in the mountains sustained very few injuries and our equipment performed well.

Our crews learnt a lot on the fire ground and performed very well - for some, it was their first major fire. Activities on the fire ground can vary widely, with some shifts being a very slow waiting game, others being over-resourced and with not a great deal happening, others involving back burning and blacking out, with yet others being very busy shifts with numerous spot fires and rapid advances of the fire front.

The background to, and progress of, the Grose Valley Fire

On Monday 13th November, at about 11am, a dry thunder storm started a fire at Burramoko hill to the north-west of Blackheath. It is also suspected that this storm also started a fire at the bottom of Lawson's Long Alley to the west of the Darling Causeway.

On the following day, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) staff started working on the Burramoko fire with helicopters and remote area crews. One of these helicopters soon spotted the smoke from the Lawson's Long Alley fire and work also started on this fire. Blue Mountains RFS crews were on standby on the Darling Causeway that afternoon. After sunset, and with the helicopters grounded, the fire started to take a run up the ridge pushed by strong winds.

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The Brigade paggers were set off at 8.42pm Tuesday night. By the time we arrived, a back burn was under way along the Darling Causeway. The main fire ran up the ridge and into the back burn. As it came up the ridge, it started spotting over the road and railway line. The crews that were there that night managed to put out some 17 spot fires over the railway line. There was one they could reach and this grew rapidly. By morning, the fire had a good hold on the eastern side of the Causeway and later joined up with the Burrumoko fire.

In the early part of the fire, a major effort was put into stopping the fire extending north along the west side of the Causeway towards Bell, and to securing a back burn around Mt Victoria. As the fire moved down the Grose Valley, the efforts moved to Blackheath, the Great Western Highway and Bell's Line of Road. It was hoped to hold the fire to the top of the valley using the Pierces Pass walking track and Perry Lookdown track. Much effort went into preparing these lines and hoses were run down Pierces Pass. Some 40 lengths of hose, extending over a distance of 1.2 kilometres, were laid out.

Much of the burn along the track had been completed when the fire spotted over near the bottom. From there, it took a run up the gully and ridge to the east of Pierces Pass, It looked set to cross to the northern and eastern sides of Bell's Line of Road. Under difficult conditions, a back burn was commenced which succeeded in keeping the fire to the south of the road. The fire crossed the Mt Banks fire trail later that night.

Many people expected the fire to then burn out the rest of the Grose Valley.

The back burn was extended to Mt Tomah over the next couple of days and was completed on Thursday 23rd November. That night, a southerly came with light mist; at the same time, the head of the fire ran into light fuel loads on the Mt Hay Range (this area was burnt in 2002). The combination of the southerly and the light fuel loads caused much of the fire edge to go out. The remote area crews and the helicopters took care of any of the hot spots left. The Section 44 Emergency was lifted on Sunday 3rd December.

As you may have seen in the media, there has been some criticism about the amount of back burning undertaken. There are a couple of things to remember:

- What would have the fire done if left alone when it first started? Crossed the Causeway? It did. Burnt out the top of the Grose Valley? It did. Crossed Bell's Line of Road and got into the Wollemi National Park? We stopped this by back burning of Bell's Line of Road. Taken a run up into Blackheath? We stopped this by back burning around Blackheath.
- Much of the top of the Grose Valley, in particular the ridges running up onto the Bell's Line of Road, have been burnt by the back burn which is a lower intensity fire. Much of it was burnt at night time, with the fire going down hill against the wind, which reduces the fire intensity and therefore the impact on the environment. This is a much better alternative than the wild fire coming out of the valley, up the slope with the wind behind it.
- All decisions made about a Section 44 fire are made by the appointed Incident Management Team. This team is comprised of people from a number of agencies and land managers, including the RFS, NPWS, NSW Fire Brigade, Blue Mountains City Council, State Forests and the Water Board.
- The Australian environment has evolved with fire and indeed requires it to regenerate. The top of the Grose Valley was last burnt in 1994.

In addition to the major Grose Valley fire, our Brigade has also been involved in a number of other campaigns during the start of this fire season:

Barkers Creek Fire

The Cat 7 with a crew of four assisted in the Wollondilly area where a fire was in the water catchment area to the south of the dam. Additionally, one member attend as part of a RAFT ("Remote Area Fire Team")

Zig Zag Fire

We had two crews - Cat 1 Alpha and Cat 7 - over two shifts working on this fire.

Hawkesbury Area

Two members attended as part of a RAFT

Diesel Spill – Bell's Line of Road, Mt Bell

Cat 1 Alpha and Cat 9 attended a diesel spill at Mt Bell after a bulk fuel drum came off the back of a ute.

Peter Raines, Captain

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