

1965 GIPPSLAND BUSHFIRES

A reconstruction of events from February to March 1965

Cover illustration.

Bushfire in Gippsland by H. Dearing circa 1935.

Heide Museum of Modern Art.

About the Author



Peter McHugh graduated with a diploma from the Victorian School of Forestry at the end of 1977 and his first postings with the Forests Commission Victoria (FCV) were to Mirboo North and then later to Kallista/Gembrook.

Peter was awarded two years of full-time study leave to attend Melbourne University to complete a Bachelor of Forest Science in 1979 and 1980.

Upon graduation, Peter headed a team to examine the recovery of sawn timber from logs produced on State forests.

After another short two-year tour-of-duty with the Forest Research Branch based at Sherbrook Peter found himself caught up in the prolonged restructure process that accompanied the formation of the Department of Conservation Forest and Lands (CFL) from mid-1983.

Surviving the turmoil, Peter finally secured a role in the newly formed Dandenong Region of CFL, first as Resource Assessment Officer where he was instrumental in the introduction of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for the Department, then

later at Woori Yallock and Powelltown as Senior Forester for the Yarra Valley preparing a major Forest Management Plan.

It was here that Peter developed a strong interest in community forestry and was later able to study in Indonesia, Canada, Sweden and the UK.

In another departmental restructure during late 1993 Peter moved to Gippsland as Senior Forester and then held a number of varied senior roles including Regional Forest Manager and State Roding Manager over the subsequent decades.

Peter rose through various firefighting roles from crew member on the back of the Olinda tanker during Ash Wednesday in 1983, crew leader, sector boss and Air Attack Supervisor to eventually become a Level 3 Planning Officer and Incident Controller and finally the role of Agency Commander.

Like most staff, Peter was heavily committed to all the large campaign fires across Gippsland including the alpine fires in 2002/03, 2006/07, Aberfeldy/Seaton in 2013, Boolarra and Black Saturday in 2009 as well as the Hazelwood Coalmine fire in 2014.

His work developing the Cobaw Staff ride won him the prestigious State Fire Award in 2012 and he was invited by the US Forest Service and US Marines as a participant/instructor in their senior fire leadership course which examined the lessons learned from the Battle of Gettysburg.

Peter retired from the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP) in 2016 after nearly 39 years of service and now finds time to volunteer in his local community as well as write about some of Victoria's rich forests and bushfire history.

Copyright © Peter McHugh, 2020.

All rights reserved.

Acknowledgments

This document would not have been possible without the generosity of those folk who were actually involved in the 1965 Gippsland bushfires and who offered to stretch their memories, to tell their stories, to share their recollections, as well as hunt down old newspaper clippings and personal photos tucked away in shoeboxes.

Maurie Killeen deserves a special mention for his enduring enthusiasm and support.

Don Thomson from the FCV for sowing the seed decades ago by telling me endlessly about the 1965 bushfires during our trips out into the bush together.

Local staff from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) provided invaluable assistance with proofreading, GIS mapping and printing.

The Valencia Creek CFA, and in particular David and Helen Montague, for all their help.

Linda Barraclough for her support and editorial advice.

I should also gratefully acknowledge Joanne Eastman from DELWP who began compiling a map in late 2014.

The Forests Commission Retired Personnel Association (FCRPA) kindly shared their records and photo collection.

Thanks to those that provided comments and corrections on various drafts of the manuscript as the complex puzzle slowly unfolded.

Then there are all those supporters who provided sustained encouragement to get the job done in time for the 55th anniversary in 2020.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the late FCV Chief Fire Officer Athol Hodgson who was my main inspiration to begin writing about Victoria's magnificent forest and bushfire history before it becomes lost.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Forests Commission Victoria firefighting arrangements	3
Post-1939 bushfire modernisation	3
District Structure	3
Fire Towers	4
Radios	5
Bulldozers	6
Roads and tracks.....	6
Tankers and Vehicles	7
Pumps	8
Aircraft	9
Country Fire Authority (CFA)	11
Gippsland bushfire behaviour	12
The Gippsland Zig-Zag.....	13
Wet winter and spring with a dry summer.....	14
Lightning storms (16 February).....	14
The first run of fire (21 February)	16
Period of uneasiness (22 February – 2 March)	18
Spike Day (3 March).....	21
The Lull (4 March).....	23
State of Emergency (5 March)	23
Moomba Weekend (6 – 8 March)	27
Blacking Out (9 – 15 March)	31
Maps.....	33
Aftermath and Repercussions	34
Community outrage.....	35
Fire control arrangements	36
CFA changes.....	36
Fuel Reduction Burning (FRB)	36
Helicopter on a permanent contract	37
Fire Research	38
So in closing	39
The Fires of 1965	40
Information Sources	43
A young person’s perspective.....	44
Weather records from the Forests Commission office in Nowa Nowa.	44
Overview Map - 1965	45

Introduction

The story of the 1965 Gippsland bushfires is etched in local folklore but is not well known outside the region.

For many weeks between 16 February and late March 1965, major bushfires burnt across a wide landscape, from Lake Glenmaggie in the west to well beyond Bruthen and Tambo Crossing in the east.

Nearly one million acres of State forest and pasture were burnt.

And together, the Forests Commission Victoria (FCV) and Country Fire Authority (CFA) faced their gravest bushfire threat since Black Friday in 1939.

While there were many other bushfires across the state that summer, the ones in Gippsland reached disastrous proportions, culminating in the declaration of a State of Emergency on 5 March when the Army and Air Force were called in to assist.

Sadly, there is no consolidated account of what happened. Maybe because there were no fatalities there was no official inquiry either, and people just picked up the pieces and got back to their lives.

But the memory lingers.

Shining a light on the story of the 1965 Gippsland bushfires has involved a considerable amount of forensic detective work, searching through old newspapers at the state and local libraries, interrogating BOM weather records, uncovering dusty Forests Commission fire reports and maps at the Public Records Office, scouring for official annual reports, reading a handful of written personal recollections, as well as interviewing some people who were actually there.

This document is best read in conjunction with an interactive [Googlemap](#).

I'm conscious that I have given strong emphasis to the Forests Commission's role in these 1965 bushfires. This is partly because I worked for the Commission and have listened to many stories from my colleagues over the years, and partly because most of the written records came from the FCV.

But this emphasis is not intended to diminish the significant and important role played by the CFA and other volunteer organisations like the Red Cross and St Johns Ambulance, but very little written information was available.

As with all bushfires, there was a lot of confusion as the fire swept quickly across the landscape.

These bushfires were 55 years ago, so inevitably piecing the history together is like trying to finish a jigsaw puzzle when half the pieces are missing and without the benefit of the picture on the cover of the box.

Also, some of the dates and times in the records simply don't match up.

So this account of the momentous events of the summer of 1965 will probably always remain work in progress and any additional information is welcome.

But I hope this manuscript goes some way at least to putting the 1965 Gippsland bushfires on the record...

Peter McHugh

Forests Commission Victoria firefighting arrangements

Post-1939 bushfire modernisation

In the wake of the disastrous 1939 Black Friday bushfires and Judge Stretton's scathing Royal Commission report, the Forests Commission's Chairman A. V. Galbraith acted decisively and appointed Alfred (Alf) Oscar Lawrence as the new Fire Chief.

Alf immediately confronted the overwhelming challenge of rebuilding a highly organised, well equipped and motivated fire fighting force while lifting shattered staff morale.

The Forests Commission was allocated additional government funding and assumed responsibility for fire protection on all public lands including State forests, unoccupied Crown Lands, Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) catchments and National Parks, plus a buffer extending one mile beyond their boundaries onto private land. Its responsibilities grew overnight in a giant threefold leap from 2.4 to 6.5 million hectares or nearly one-third of the state.

A major element of Alf Lawrence's strategy was investing heavily in modern vehicles and equipment such as powered pumps, tankers, crawler tractors, expanding the forest road and track network, sinking fire dams, more fire spotting patrols with the RAAF, development of aerial firebombing, as well as a new statewide radio communications network - VL3AA.

By the time of the 1965 Gippsland bushfires, Alf Lawrence had been elevated to Chairman of the Forests Commission and many elements of his original plan were in place.

District Structure

Earlier in 1956, the field management of the Forests Commission was reorganised into semi-autonomous Divisions and Districts. Resources across a Division could be allocated where needed and resources from other parts of the state including from Head Office could be coordinated through the State Control Centre in Melbourne.

The key staff at the time of the 1965 bushfires were:

Melbourne

- Alf Lawrence – Chairman of the FCV.
- Ted Gill - Chief Fire Officer.
- Conrad Wood – Assistant Fire Officer.
- Athol Hodgson – Fire Research.
- Geoff Weste – Communications Officer.

Southern Division – Traralgon

- Jack H. Cosstick – Divisional Forester.
- Stan Butler – Assistant.

Heyfield / Macalister District

- Jeff Brisbane – District Forester.
- Gregor Wallace – Assistant.
- Ted Stuckey – Assistant Licola.

Briarolong / Maffra District

- Col Almond – District Forester.
- Bob Fulton – Forester.
- Mike Gardiner – Forester (on honeymoon until 22 Feb).
- Frank Whitelaw – Forest Overseer.
- Noel Bennett – Trainee Overseer.

Eastern Division - Bairnsdale

- H R (Rolly) Parke - Divisional Forester.
- K.M. Gibson – Assistant.

Swifts Creek District

- Joe Adams – District Forester.
- D. Gribble – Assistant.

Bruthen District

- J. P. Salter – District Forester.

Nowa Nowa District

- J. B. Johnstone – District Forester.



Geoff Weste at the main console of VL3AA. Photo FCV 1965-66 Annual Report.



All bushfire information reported into the State Control Centre in Melbourne. Source: FCRPA collection.

Fire Towers

Wood-framed towers 10 to 20 metres tall, with a cabin at the top, were constructed on many prominent peaks.

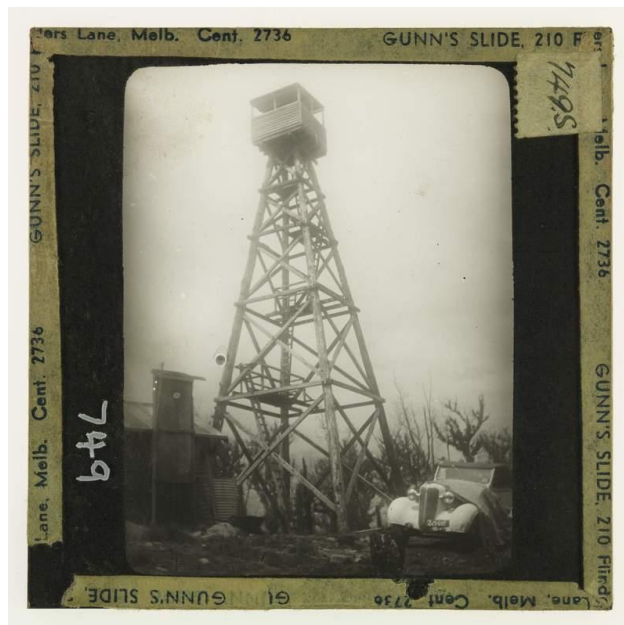
New towers were built in the 1940s on Mt Cann, Mt Buck and Mt Johnson and later on Mt Skene, Mt Useful, Delegate Hill, Mt Raymond, Mt Sugarloaf, Mt Seldom Seen, Noorinbee and Maramingo Hill.

Earlier, fire towers had been built at Mt Moornapa, Moormung, Mt Tara, Mt Buck, Murrungowar, Stringers Knob and Mount Nowa Nowa.

They were connected by telephone or radio to the local District Offices.

From the 1930s, Mt Nugong was manned by well-known Ensay identity Bill Ah Chow who spent the summer in his hut called Moscow Villa on the picturesque Bentleys Plain.

By 1964-65 the network had expanded to 103 fire towers across the state with another three new towers being constructed.



Four-legged timber fire towers were common across Gippsland. They were built by local FCV crews which required great skill. This Forests Commission design is believed to have been used at Mt Moornapa tower which first spotted the Gippsland lightning strikes in Valencia Creek on 16 February 1965. The Mt Moornapa tower burnt down later in the fires and wasn't replaced for many years.



Mount Nugong, on the other hand, was built out of a metal-framed control tower scrounged from the RAAF base at Bairnsdale and erected over the summer of 1952-53. The legendary Bill Ah Chow spotted the Omeo #11 fire at Bindi from here. Photo FCRPA Collection.

Radios

After the 1939 Black Friday bushfires, the Forests Commission invested heavily in a radically new communications network.

After suffering some inevitable delays due to the War, radio VL3AA switched into full operation in October 1945 proudly beaming out 100 watts across the state.

VL3AA made it possible for weather bulletins and fire-danger warnings to be transmitted as well as receiving reports from RAAF fire-spotting aircraft.

Ex-army two-way portable radios, model RC16B, became available in limited numbers and were of great value, but they were unwieldy and fitted with fragile vacuum tubes prone to break if bumped or dropped.

A lighter portable set, the TRP1 with solid-state transistors, more powerful base station radios at District Offices, together with the fitting of some mobiles to vehicles greatly improved general communications by 1965.

These communication systems were regarded at the time to be more technically advanced than the police and the military. These pioneering efforts were directed by Geoff Weste.



Evolution of departmental radios - RC-16B (1940s), Pye TRP-1 (1950s) and AWA Forestphone FP-1 (1960s). Source: Silicon chip.

But frustratingly, the lower frequency radio waves were often severely disrupted by the ionosphere, particularly at night, their signals sometimes overpowered by taxi drivers chatting to each other as far away as Port Moresby.

Communication with crews at remote lightning strikes remained difficult until VHF repeaters strengthened signals into District offices.



The Commission developed a strong relationship with the RAAF from the 1930s through to the early 1960s. L-R - Unknown RAAF Pilot, FCV Chief Fire Officer, Ted Gill, and FCV Communications Officer, Geoff Weste. Standing at Laverton in front of an Avro Lincoln used for fire spotting - circa 1962. Source: FCRPA Collection.

Communication around the fire edges was greatly assisted with the introduction of handheld portables in 1963.

In 1964-65 the Commission's radio system comprised:

Central Station (VL3AA)	1
Base Stations	40
Mobiles	192
Portables (H.F.)	210
Portables (V.H.F.)	120
Repeaters	8
Fire base trailers	3

Another 50 additional VHF portable sets were on order for delivery early in 1965-66.

A telephone network of 420 miles long through the bush was also owned and maintained by the Commission.

VL3AA calling . . . and it
could mean life or death



AT THE FORESTS COMMISSION'S fire control centre. The chairman of the Forests Commission, Mr A. O. Lawrence (centre) and the chief of Division of Forests Protection, Mr E. D. Gill, consult a map while Miss Joan Carlton is in touch by radio with firefighters in the Briagolong area.

The bushfire nerve centre

INSECTS,
plagues, fungus . . .
and FIRE

by
DAVID BORNSTEIN

This is the world of the Forests Commission division of forest protection.

For 18 consecutive days weary officers of the division have worked in a small, windowless room on the third floor of the commission offices in Launceston, St. City.

The plague on the door reads simply: VL3AA.

But since the now huge Briagolong fire developed from two lightning strikes at Valencia Creek and Newplace Creek on February 15, VL3AA has been a matter of life or death

for thousands of Gippsland residents.

As the commission's central radio operations room, VL3AA is the nerve centre for 40 base stations covering the whole of Victoria.

The focal point for today's firefighting operations are the base stations at Heyfield and Briagolong.

With the wind changing to a dangerous north-westerly and temperatures rising into the nineties, messengers are flooding into the operations room.

Meaning the powerful 100 watt transmitters are

Gill and his helpers, Mr. A. Hodgson, fire research officer, Mr. D. A. Vince, communications officer, and Mr. G. Wood, foreman.

Late this morning they heard these terse, dramatic calls:

"Fire broken away from control and heading towards Wukwuk via tiny township north of Lindenow."

"Forests Commission crews at Valencia Creek withdrawn being outflanked by breakaway."

Then at 3.15 p.m. came a message of disaster: "Confirmed report that fire has broken away at Wombat Flat and head-

ed towards CPA headquarters at Valencia Creek Hall."

"Even when we're not out organising, we have to be switched to a new outbreak there are many jobs to be done", Mr. Gill said.

"Whether the fire are racing along in a strong wind or comparatively stationary, there is still the need for continuous supplies of food and equipment."

"Since the Briagolong outbreak began we've had to send away additional radio equipment twice a day."

"This is the biggest operation we've had since 1959 and the toughest."

"The solution is easy for an inaccessibility fire like the one at Briagolong. We want RAIN."



Offloading a small First Attack Dozer (FAD) from Bedford truck onto a road batter. Circa late 1960s.



Small FCV dozer building fireline. Mt Disappointment area.

Photo: Karen Christensen.

Roads and tracks

Until the mid-1920s there were very few trafficable forest roads and even fewer motor vehicles... so District boundaries were based on how far foresters and overseers could travel by pushbike or on horseback from their offices. As you might imagine, this was an acute problem in the mountainous regions of eastern and north-eastern Victoria.

Forest road construction and bridge building were slow to start but kicked-off in earnest during the Great Depression of the 1930s with the employment of large work gangs.

Road building was rapidly expanded again after the recommendations of the 1939 Stretton Royal Commission, and then again with another flush of activity during the 1950s coinciding with the eastward expansion of the timber industry.

The growth of the road network went hand-in-hand with the evolution of motor vehicles. Together, these extended the reach of forest managers and gave scope to deal with the greatly increased areas of bushfire responsibility.

Friday 5 March 1965 – article from the Melbourne Herald about the importance of VL3AA in coordinating efforts during the disastrous Gippsland bushfires. The Chief Fire Officer, Ted Gill said they were the biggest and toughest fires that Victoria had experienced since 1939.

Bulldozers

Bulldozers were essential for both providing access and building firelines.

However, the Commission only had a few relatively small machines which were inadequate for bushfires of any size.

Often sawmill and logging contractors' bulldozers and their crews were used in fire suppression.

These machines proved invaluable and were to become a major resource.

The Tamboritha Road north of Licola had been completed for logging purposes in 1963 and the Marathon Road north of Briagolong existed on its current alignment at the time of the 1965 bushfires.



*Moving the blasted rubble from the Tamboritha Road sidecut.
Photo: Brian Williams, District Forester – circa 1960.*

But in 1965, most of Gippsland's forests were still remote and access for firefighters was difficult and slow.

Tankers and Vehicles

At the end of WW2, there was simply heaps of stuff that the Australian military needed to offload. So bushfire agencies from around the country went on a massive shopping spree.

Among the many bargains, the Forests Commission acquired about fifty 4WD White Scout Cars.

Over the period from 1946 to 1950, the Commission also borrowed about eighteen 4WD Blitz trucks from the RAAF at Amberley which had been fitted out as fire tankers.

From 1950 onwards, the Altona workshop began to manufacture large tankers to the Commission's own specifications.

Then from the late 1950s, coinciding with the availability of lighter 4WD Land Rover and Toyota tray body vehicles, "Pigs" began to replace the White Scout Cars and Jeeps.

In 1964-65 replacement purchases included thirteen 4WD 600-gallon Bedford tankers, two high-pressure trailer pumps and 40 small low-pressure pumps.

Twenty-five slip-on tank units, twenty 150-gallon rubber tanks, ten 100-gallon canvas tanks, and ten two-wheel trailers were placed in service.



*Forests Commission M3 White Scout Car at Nunniyong Plateau.
circa 1947 – Photo: Jim McKinty.*



*FCV Land Rover at Club Terrace taken in about 1957. Source:
Noel Fraser.*



*18 Blitz trucks from the RAAF were the Department's first large fire tankers. Ford F60L canvas door model from 1944-45. Photo
Barry Marsden.*



Bedford tankers were introduced from about 1960 with a design based on the earlier Blitz configuration.



One of the first rubber "pigs" in the back of a Toyota 45 series Land Cruiser. Mt Disappointment circa the early 1960s. Photo Athol Hodgson.

Pumps

The flush of war surplus equipment was either allocated directly to Forest Districts or stored in a purpose-built cache established on industrial land purchased in 1946 at North Altona.

Pumps like the ever-cantankerous high-pressure Pacific Marine and the trailer-mounted Coventry Climax pumps, brought over from England after the WW2 Blitz, were used as quick-fills and gave firefighters a much greater capacity than ever before to put the "wet stuff on the red stuff".

In 1965 the Commission maintained 1340 fire dams and 90 dugouts in State forest.



Coventry Climax and knapsack. Source: FCRPA collection.



Trailer water tanks that were fitted with a pump and hose racks were developed at Altona in the 1960s. Source: Barry Marsden.



The cantankerous high-pressure Type Y Pacific marine pump. A bummer of a thing to start and always guaranteed to take the skin off your knuckles. They had a very high fuel-oil mix so blew great clouds of smoke and screamed at high revs.



The first reference to the humble rakehoe was in the 1955-56 FCV annual report although it's more commonly believed they are a Victorian variation of the American McLeod Tool developed in 1905. The Pulaski Fire Tool had been trialled but never found favour with Australian firefighters. Source: FCRPA collection.



The advent of petrol-powered chainsaws after WW2 revolutionised both logging and firefighting. This two-man saw is an American manufactured Mercury Disston. The 11Hp model with a 36-inch bar weighed a massive 102 pounds or 46kg whereas a comparable Stihl 880 weighs about 14kg. Source: State Library of Victoria - circa 1948.



1340 fire dams were sunk in the bush by 1965. Source: FCRPA collection.



About 90 dugouts were in the bush. Photo: Rolly Park, District Forester at Powelltown - 1945. Source: National Archives.

Aircraft

Aircraft in firefighting have three main advantages: speed, access and observation.

The RAAF and the Forests Commission had a long-standing relationship that began using Westland Wapitis for fire spotting dating back to 1930 together with firebombing trials at Anglesea from 1946.



The first time fire spotting aircraft were used in Australia was on 18 February 1930 when a Westland Wapiti from RAAF No. 1 Squadron at Point Cook flew over the nearby Dandenong Ranges. Communications were sent in Morse Code back to the RAAF base and they quickly passed the information onto FCV fire controllers.

Photo: RAAF Westland Wapitis over Albert Park – circa 1930.



Because the State of Emergency had been declared, DC3 Dakotas from RAAF East Sale were made available for reconnaissance missions during the 1965 Gippsland bushfires.

RAAF planes and helicopters were used by the Forests Commission for detection up until 1964.

A contracted Cessna 180 aircraft from Morwell Aero Club was used to detect remote fires in the Macalister District. Staff acted as air observers and were able to radio information back to District Offices.

During the 1965 fires, because the State of Emergency had been declared, RAAF DC-3 Dakotas from East Sale as well as the contracted Cessnas were used extensively for reconnaissance.



A Cessna 180 was hired from the Morwell Aero Club by the Forests Commission for reconnaissance flights. Radio communications were primitive. Photo: Goodall's Aviation – circa 1965

It's also reported that the SEC made a Piper PA22 Tri-Pacer from the Latrobe Valley Aero Club and an observer available to the CFA.

Meanwhile, the Forests Commission's firebombing trials using fixed-wing aircraft were well underway but didn't become operational until 1967.

Early RAAF helicopter trials had been undertaken in 1948, and the experience of 1965 bushfires galvanised the Commission, so they put a Bell 47G on a permanent contract based at Heyfield.

In 1964-65 Commission officers made 53 flights in chartered aircraft on fire reconnaissance missions for a total of 92 hours flying time.



*Rappel trial in 1965 at the Snowy Range with a Bell 47G.
Source: Bryan Rees.*

Country Fire Authority (CFA)

The CFA was formed in 1944 after a second Royal Commission by Judge Stretton into more deadly bushfires at Yallourn.

The State Government hadn't acted on his initial recommendations after the 1939 Black Friday bushfires so the Judge was even more strident in his deliberations.

The eventual formation of the CFA gave much greater clarity to fire suppression responsibilities on rural land in country Victoria.

All the existing urban and rural brigades were invited to join the new organisation... most did... although some reluctantly...

CFA Regional Officers were appointed.

More importantly, these events shaped and cemented Victoria's deep-seated approaches towards bushfires outside Melbourne. Both the Forests Commission and the CFA adopted clear policies to detect and suppress all bushfires and became very focused and skilled at doing it.

A major revision of both the Forests and Country Fire Authority Acts later in 1958 clearly delineated and enshrined the roles of the two agencies into complementary legislation.

But by the time of the 1965 bushfires the CFA was reportedly suffering an equipment, manpower and leadership shortage. Throughout 1963 and 1964 the CFA medical adviser was recommending leave for overstretched Regional Officers.

A fire at Longwood in northern Victoria on 17 January had burnt through 100,000 acres of farmland and killed two mothers with their five children. This proved a huge shock to the CFA.

Internal fears about the CFA's capacity to meet a major emergency were put to the test in Gippsland in 1965.

Newspapers reported the strength of the CFA at 100,500 volunteers across 205 urban and 1042 rural brigades arranged into 120 separate Groups.

From about 1960, the CFA brigades began forming into Groups.

Locally for example, the Maffra Group consisted of Boisdale, Briagolong, Coongulla, Maffra, Newry, Tinamba, and Valencia Creek brigades.

These 1965 bushfires were to become a test for these newly formed Groups on the interface of the forested area.

There were also very few fire tankers in the area. The Forests Commission at major districts like Bruthen, Nowa Nowa, Briagolong and Heyfield had relatively new Bedford 4WD tankers.

In 1964, the CFA reportedly had a fleet of 714 fire trucks across the state of which 93 were owned by individual brigades.

For example, the Maffra CFA brigade had a 2WD 1953 Austin, Briagolong CFA had a 1942 2WD Chevrolet, both Stratford and Heyfield brigades had 2WD tankers, while Valencia Creek owned a 1942 International 2WD tanker.

Two-way radios were in very short supply and some brigades including Stratford borrowed £1000, which was a huge sum, to buy their own VHF units.



Austin firetruck. Circa 1950. Source: CFA

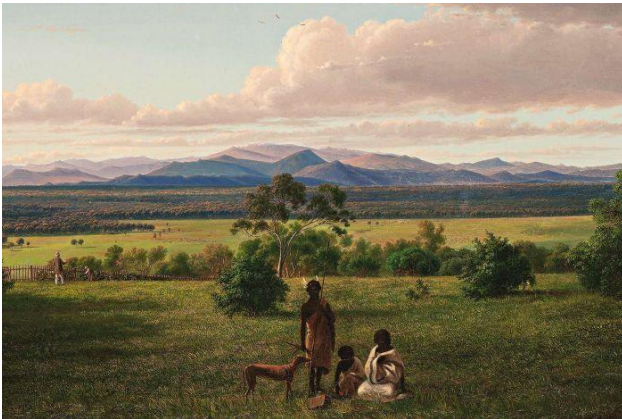
Like many other small country brigades, the CFA did not have a fire station at Valencia Creek.

At that time the CFA's Region 10 was working from a rented house with a shed by the Regional Officer, Les Lupton.

The local relationships between the CFA brigades and Forests Commission Districts had been forged over many years, and while there were a few rankles, they were fundamentally sound in the bush.

Gippsland bushfire behaviour

Much of eastern Victoria and alpine parts of NSW are remote, mountainous and inaccessible.



Painting by Eugene von Guérard of Mr John King's Station near Rosedale in 1861. Mt Wellington and Ben Cruachan, which are prominent peaks north of Valencia Creek and Briagolong, can be seen. This is where the great fire began.

The landscape features that distinguish Gippsland, and which strongly influence the weather, and therefore the bushfire behaviour are:

- the remote, sometimes inaccessible, heavily forested mountains and the snow-capped alpine peaks which rise up steeply from the hinterland and foothills.
- major river valleys like the Macalister, Tambo, Buchan, Mitchell, Snowy and Cann Rivers which are generally orientated north-south and tend to funnel the prevailing weather patterns.
- the Great Dividing Range and the strong north winds that tumble over the ridges which often brings bushfires from the northeast of the state.
- the blocking effect of the Strzelecki Ranges which influences rainfall patterns.
- rivers and valleys which empty out onto the flat fertile plains, the wetlands and the inland Gippsland Lakes.
- the exposed southern coastline of the Bass Strait from Wilsons Promontory to Point Hicks.

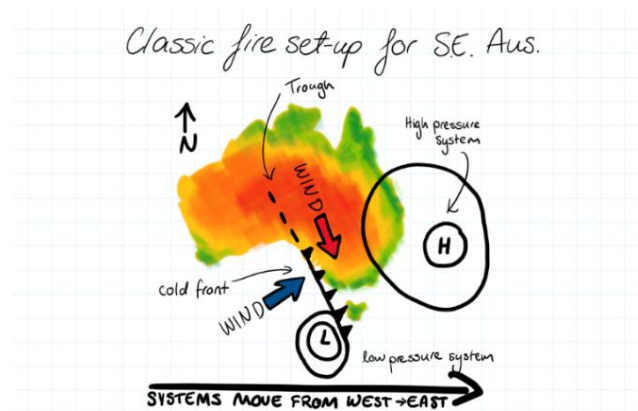
Gippsland is one of the few places in Australia where the forests extend unbroken from the mountains to the sea.

Internationally, southern Australia and particularly the State of Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and the island State of Tasmania, is commonly regarded as one of the three landscapes on Earth most prone to damaging bushfires. The other two are southern California and the Mediterranean coast.

Victorians live entirely within what the international fire historian Stephen Pyne calls “the fire flume.” It is the most distinctive fire region of Australia and the most dangerous in the world.

When a high-pressure system stalls in the Tasman Sea, hot northerly winds flow relentlessly down from central Australia across the densely vegetated south-east of the continent.

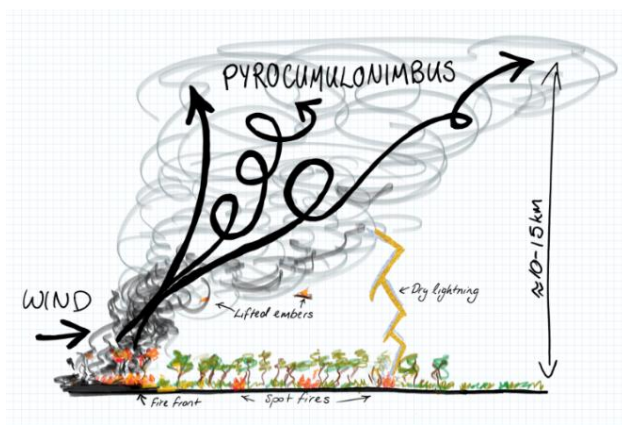
This fiery “flume” brews a deadly chemistry of air and fuel. The mountain topography of steep slopes, ridges and valleys channels the hot air, temperatures climb to searing extremes, and humidity evaporates such that the air crackles.



Weather conditions similar to 3 March when the fire at Blanket Hill started. Source: ABC

Fires starting under the influence of the strong north-westerly wind move quickly in a long straight line like the one that began near Blanket Hill on 3 March 1965 then swept over Glenmaggie towards Heyfield.

An unstable atmosphere with boiling pyrocumulonimbus cloud can also increase lightning and spot fires as burning leaves and bark get lifted up and carried through the air to start more fires downwind.



The fire ran hard in the early stages as it swept from Blanket Hill towards Coongulla and Heyfield on 3 March. Source: ABC

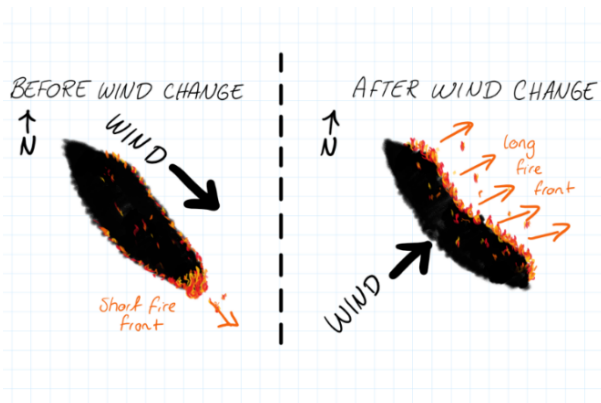
Typically, dry lightning storms without significant or any rainfall will roll across the landscape from the south-west with a strong cool change. The pattern of these storms begins before Christmas and continues well into autumn.

Depending on fuel dryness the lightning often starts numerous small fires on ridgetops as they strike dead trees. These trees ignite and fire spreads slowly for a while under the cooler conditions.

It is not uncommon for a single summer lightning storm to start as many as 50 to 100 small fires across the remote forests and mountains of eastern Victorian.

The Gippsland Zig-Zag

The strong south-west wind change in the afternoon of Wednesday 3 March switched the direction of the Blanket Hill fire so that the entire eastern flank then became a broad front. Fingers of fire swept back into the bush north of Coongulla and Valencia Creek and it was thought that the fire moved 15 miles in two hours towards Ben Cruachan.



When the wind swung around as it did on 3 March February 1965 the fire changed direction and headed back into the State Forest and towards Valencia Creek and Briagolong. The pattern was repeated over the following weeks. Source: ABC

With a strong cool change, sometimes there is rain, but more often in summer and autumn it is only light. Certainly not enough to extinguish any new blazes or wet the ground fuels.

After the south-west change has passed the weather in Gippsland is typically benign for a few days with the development of a strong inversion layer and light winds. So new fires that have been started by lightning often smoulder undetected.

Combined with low clouds in the valleys these conditions make detection of any new fires from aircraft or fire towers difficult.

But there is also a chance to do some good suppression works before it gets hot and windy.

Of all the factors that influence bushfire behaviour such as temperature, fuel type, fuel quantity and fuel dryness or even slope, it's the wind that has the dominant effect on the Rate of Spread (ROS) but also fire size, shape and direction.

Then the whole drying cycle repeats itself and within a few days, the strong north-west winds are back to push any existing or new fires out of the bush as happened at New Place Creek on 21 February 1965.

The end result of these repeating weather cycles interacting with the landscape and the forests is what I have termed the **"Gippsland Zig-Zag"**.

In combination with drought, campaign bushfires can burn for weeks or months. The Zig-Zag then becomes the typical pattern as they move with the wind, both up-and-down, and in-and-out of the forest while their overall footprint steadily creeps across the landscape from west to east.

Each time making a strong run with the north-west wind and then sweeping back into the bush with the cool south-west change.

Where it waits...

More importantly, it's the fire perimeter rather than fire area that is the main control consideration firefighters on the ground. A conundrum rapidly compounded by spot fires.

In many cases, the fire perimeter to be extinguished can stretch for hundreds of miles through thick bush, in rough terrain and remote from any tracks.

Another distinguishing feature of the campaign bushfires in Gippsland is the stress it causes to neighbouring communities. The endless sleepless nights waiting and wondering when and even if the fire will come out of the forest. Occasionally emotions bubble over and tempers fray.

Wet winter and spring with a dry summer

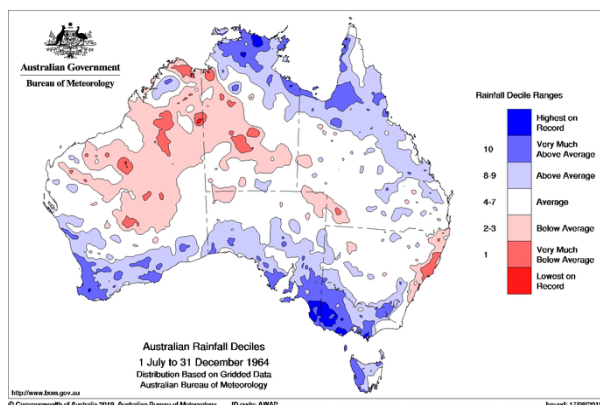
Copious rains during the winter and early spring of 1964 ceased abruptly by Christmas, by which time the open country was clothed with a prolific growth of grass making it vulnerable to bushfire.

From the New Year until the end of March 1965, all parts of the State, other than the extreme south-west, experienced dry conditions and intermittent periods of high winds.

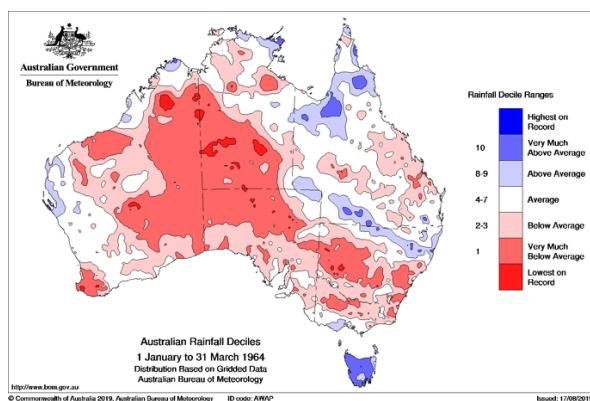
Newspapers reported the driest start to the year since records began in 1856 with only 54 points of rain in 64 days.

By March the Avon River at Stratford was barely flowing while the Valencia and Freestone Creeks near Briagolong hadn't run for a month. The Mitchell River at Bairnsdale was also very low.

The forest fuels were tinder dry. Low moisture contents of less than 10% made the forest litter and bark very easy to ignite and every burning leaf that fell ahead of the fire front probably took hold.



Six months winter and spring rainfall between 1 July and 30 December 1964



Three months of summer and autumn rainfall deficits between 1 January and 31 March 1965.

And so, the scene was set...

Lightning storms (16 February)

The great fire began on a ridge north of Briagolong.



Most bushfires on State forest and National Parks in Gippsland are started by lightning. Usually with a south-westerly change after a hot day.

A typical summer storm approached off Bass Strait from the south-west on Tuesday 16 February 1965. There was lightning around the mountains but only a sprinkle of rain.

The New Place Creek Fire #10 was spotted from Mt Moornapa at 18:30 on 16 February and the next morning at 06:30 the Valencia Creek Fire #11 was detected.

A reconnaissance flight with FCV District staff from Heyfield took off early on the morning of Wednesday 17 February to confirm the locations of the known fires and search for more strikes.



Forests Commission Heyfield Office in Pearson Street, Heyfield.
Photo: Gregor Wallace 1959.

It turned out to be a busy few days for the District Forest Officer (DFO) from Heyfield, Jeff Brisbane and his equivalent at Briagolong, Col Almond with additional fires at Ti-Tree range, Glenaladale, Bullock

Head Road and private land at Newry and Valencia Creek.

Across the Forests Commission's Southern Division on 16 February, there were a total of 99 bushfires burning at Heyfield, Briagolong, Neerim, Yarram, Erica and Mirboo North and the 133 staff and crew were severely stretched.

Meanwhile, another fire in the Tambo Valley was spotted by the legendary towerman Bill Ah Chow from Mt Nugong.

The East Gippsland Divisional Forester Rolly Parke reported about 30 fires at Bindi, Combienbar, Genoa and Club Terrace.

The main priority at Briagolong became the two fires in remote terrain north of the small settlement of Valencia Creek.

Access to both the New Place Creek Fire #10 and Valencia Creek Fire #11 was via the Marathon and Moroka Roads.



Frank Whitelaw was a very experienced and respected Forest Overseer at Briagolong. The large unit behind Frank is the 4880Mhz radio connected to the State Control Centre. Photo: Brian Fry - FCRPA Collection.

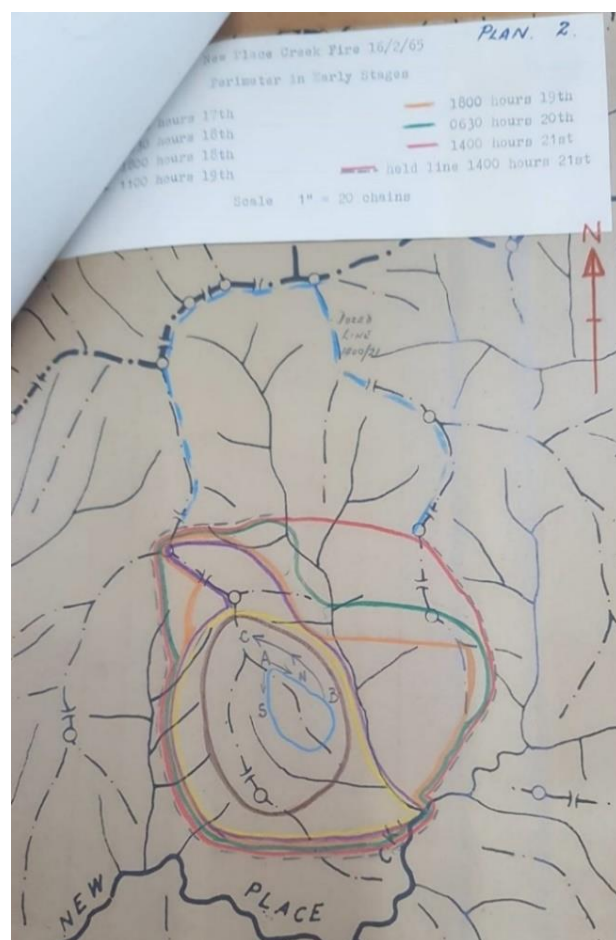
But the tracks were blocked by fallen trees and crews from outside the district became lost in the darkness because of a shortage of local crews to guide them.

It took a lengthy 12 hours to get crews to the Valencia Creek Fire #11 and an agonising 18 hours to get to New Place Creek Fire #10 after their initial detection.

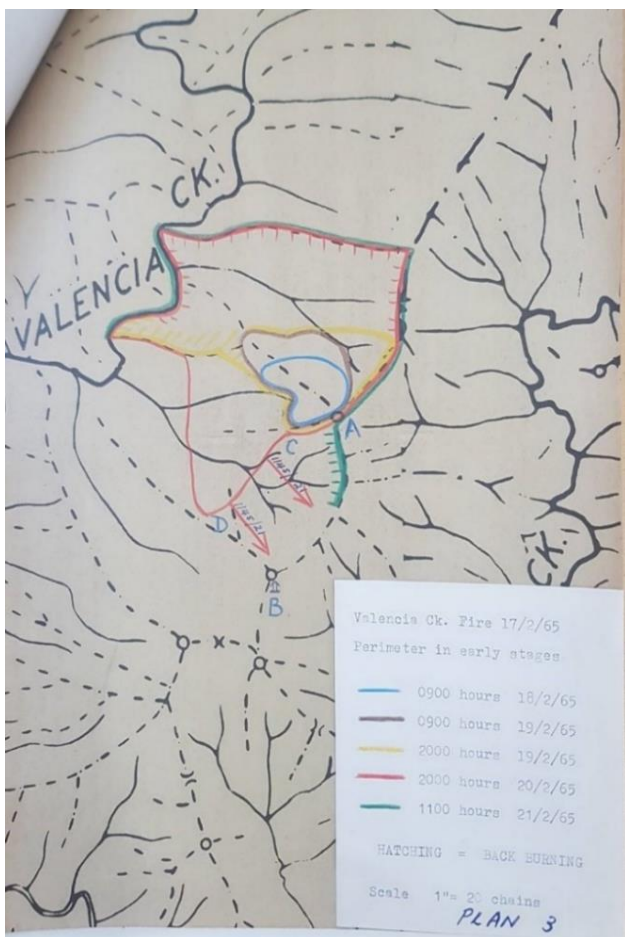
Once access was gained, a small camp was established on the north-south ridge between the two fires and men set to work with rakehoes and hand tools.

A D7 bulldozer operated by Noel Bennet was on site but was of limited use because of the steep and rocky terrain.

But the weather was stable for a few days and some good work was done on both fires.



Progress of New Place Creek Fire #10 in the early stages between 16 - 21 February 1965. Source: FCV Investigation Report.



Progress of fire at Valencia Creek Fire # 11 between the 17 – 21 February 1965. Source: FCV Investigation Report.

Even though the responsibility for these fires clearly rested with the Forests Commission, the relationship with the local CFA was very solid and it didn't take long before small numbers of volunteers from the Maffra Group were making the long journey each day up into the remote bush to help.

It was not possible for their 2WD tankers to make it so many came in their own cars as far as they could before heading off on foot with hand tools.

Travel during the dark was not safe so CFA crews left in the daylight hours at the end of a long and arduous day.

But there simply weren't enough people for the job.

The first run of fire (21 February)

Work continued until the two fires broke their containment lines at 11:45 am on Sunday 21 February.

Some of the crews at the New Place Creek fire had been pulled back in anticipation of the hot weather and strong north-westerly wind that were forecast.

The small base camp that sat on the ridge between the two fires was about to be overrun.



An FCV assessment crew was working nearby and was called in for support at the fire. This is a typical forest camp of the time and is probably what the fire camp might have looked like.

Photo: Arnis Heislars.

The FCV bulldozer cleared around the camp and the remaining men were frantically backburning to establish a refuge. None of the men panicked but Basil Reid, the supervisor from nearby Heyfield District, later revealed that he intended to forcibly restrain any that tried to flee.

A second camp near Blomford on the Marathon Road was also impacted. Nobody was injured but the crew lost some of their gear and the camp cook was badly shaken.

The fire made its run of about 15 miles to the south-east towards the boundary of the State forest and private property near Glenaladale on Beverley's Road.

A typical strong south-westerly change later that afternoon zig-zagged the fire back into the bush towards Cobbannah when fingers of fire, as well as thousands of burning embers, crossed the Dargo Road.

The fire also spotted into Glenaladale which about 30 CFA attended.

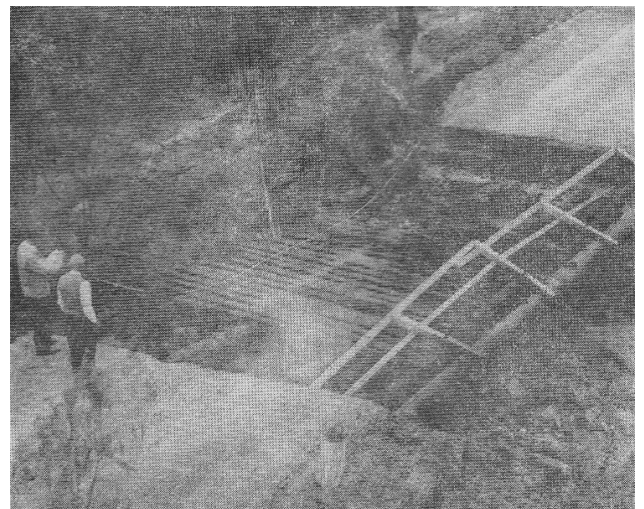


Forests Commission crews with a convoy of four Bedford tankers and five SWB land rovers leaving the New Place creek fire after the breakaway on 21 February 1965. Crossing Valencia Creek on the Moroka Road. Photo: Michael Gardiner.

The fire reached Castleburn in the afternoon after burning through Cobbannah and spotting up to three miles.

The Gippsland Times reported that the Country Roads Board (CRB) Depot and a house owned by Mr and Mrs Leonard Garland together with the Bullock Head Creek bridge on the Briagolong – Dargo Road near Cobbannah were all destroyed by the bushfire.

Gippsland Times 22 February. Some went fishing



The fire destroyed the Bullock Head Creek bridge on the Dargo Road. Gippsland Times, 25 February.

Many other wooden bridges were destroyed and telephone cables to Dargo were cut.

Thankfully nobody was hurt.

Meanwhile, the Eastern Divisional Forester Rolly Parke reported that the fire near Bindi also made a strong run of 1,000 acres to a bend in the Tambo River east of Black Fellows Flat. Local Sawmiller Ezards was making heavy bulldozers available to construct access tracks.

Period of uneasiness (22 February – 2 March)

The run of fire out of the bush caused considerable damage to the small settlement of Cobbannah.



*The historic Cobbannah Hotel was lost in the fires.
Photo: Maffra and District Historical Society of Skyline Tours
passing the hotel in 1948.*

The Age Tuesday 23 Feb 1965

Gippsland Forest Fires Burn Out of Control –

Three forest fires which sprang into life at the weekend "were still burning over 130,000 acres late last night. Two were burning steadily out of control in an inaccessible mountain country in Gippsland. Mr Gill said the smallest of the fires burning out of control over 1500 acres 12 miles east of Omeo would be the greatest danger. This one could be headline news by the weekend," Mr Gill said. The fire, started last Tuesday by a lightning strike, flared up on Saturday, climbing 3,000 feet to a ridge on one side of a Gorge. Yesterday an attempt was made to stop it on a front along the river but the fire jumped the river and raced 3,000 feet to the top of the ridge on the opposite side. Late last night, Mr Gill said, the first was increasing steadily in trackless, precipitous and waterless country near the head of the Tambo River. Thirty-five men and two bulldozers were attempting to contain the fire by driving a break along the top of the ridge, but the blaze was expanding much faster than it could be controlled.

The third, although still burning over some 8,000 acres in the Otway Ranges between Lome and Wye River, was described by Forests Commission duty officer (Mr Gill) as "three-quarters under control." Seven hundred acres near the Cumberland River were being back-burned from the Great Ocean Road,

and more than eight bulldozers and 10 tankers were standing by last night. "Provided we control this one by the weekend it will be all right, Mr Gill said.

Grazing fires were burning in State forests country, and apart from some rough grazing country at Treasure's, near Omeo, no farmland was threatened, Mr Gill said.

Three scrub-country fires near Cann River were brought under control by commission firefighters late yesterday. Another three at Club Terrace, Genoa and Combienbar were also controlled.

But the fire had disappeared deep into the forest once again on its zig-zagged march under the influence of the strong south-westerly wind change.

It lay there dormant waiting for the next big blow-up day that would inevitably come.

Now was a period of uneasiness, but also one of consolidation and preparation.

Avon Shire graders made firebreaks adjoining houses and communities. These later proved invaluable near Briagolong.



*A Forests Commission crew from Yarram arrive at the fire.
Herald Wednesday 24 February.*

Hundreds of volunteers from local businesses such as the Maffra milk factory, sawmills, bank workers, as well as prisoners from Sale who were given special leave, came to help. Fishermen from Lakes Entrance left their nets and also came.

The Red Cross came in support too.

Protection works were focused on building containment lines along the southern boundary of the State forest from Valencia Creek, Briagolong, Stockdale, Cobbannah and as far as Roderick's Road north of Flaggy Creek near Bairnsdale.

A control line was also cut from Coongulla along the forest boundary to Wombat Crossing and then as far as the settlement of Morgan on the Moroka Road.

But most of the effort went into Mt Ray and Iguana Creek.

The Valencia Soldiers Memorial Hall became a CFA HQ for planning and organising backburning and as a place to feed and bed down volunteers in the first stages of the fire. CFA Regional Officer Les Lupton was based at Valencia Creek.



The CFA set up its initial HQ at the Valencia Soldiers Memorial Hall. Les Lupton was the CFA Regional officer. Photo: Margaret Stockdale, circa 1940-50.

Day and night, FCV and private bulldozers upgraded existing 4WD tracks and made new ones where they hadn't existed before.

The aim was to keep the fire confined within the State forest.

The "Great Southern Break" was taking shape with backburning accompanying the machines to thicken the defences. CFA Tankers and hundreds of volunteers toiled behind to blackout the hotspots.

This common strategy of backburning from control lines can be effective in the right circumstances but can also be very dangerous and high risk because it introduces more fire into the landscape, often under extreme fire conditions.

Backburning requires great skill and courage as well as a generous dollop of good fortune to execute successfully which presents a common dilemma for all forest firefighters.



A recent example of pre-dawn backburning during the 2020 Gippsland fires. This is a common and effective technique for campaign bushfires in forests. But it requires great skill and an element of good fortune. Photo: Wayne Morris.

In addition to the Valencia Soldiers Memorial Hall, the Glenaladale Hall also became a CFA HQ as the fire crept relentlessly eastward on its zig-zag pathway in-and-out of the State forest.



Another CFA HQ was set up at the Glenaladale Hall. The nearby school was closed for over a week. Photo: Peter McHugh 2020.



The main CFA HQ, with Assistant Chief Officer Arthur Pitfield as Fire Commander, was at the Wy Yung Hall. Photo: Peter McHugh 2020.

Even though the fires were generally considered to be under control and there was confidence that the Great Southern Break would hold, on Monday 1 March the CFA Chief Officer Alex Larkins, who had been the first Regional Officer in East Gippsland in the 1940s, began moving all available CFA permanent officers and equipment into the area.

Larkins appointed Assistant Chief Officer Arthur Pitfield as the overall Fire Commander based at an operations centre at the Wy Yung Hall.

Several Regional Officers led these groups from Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and Dandenong. More than 100 rural brigades brought their own equipment and relief crews, often traveling uncomfortably on the back of the tankers.

Chester Eagle – Hale & Farewell

To begin with, it was caused by a lightning strike, but when the fires had run their course and died, there were voices claiming that someone had had it from a chap on one of the towers down that way that two fires started up in quick succession, on a ridge where there was a road, and the second one was back from the first; he was on the way out when he lit another. This sort of rumour, as unverifiable as divine truth, was rife throughout those days when the town created a sense of crisis as part of its response to the danger in the hills.

Every leaf in every valley it ran through was burnt, every trunk was blackened, and the gravel took on a scorched appearance.

For a week the sky was a yellow-brown murk, with the sun a sullen yellow in the eastern sky and a baleful red in the west. People recalled the 1939 fires.

FINAL

492,715
daily sales

102

— And a hot night ahead

Melbourne had its hottest March day for 23 years today. The temperature reached 102.8 deg. at 3 p.m.

It was the hottest March day since March 4, 1942 when the temperature reached 104.8 degrees.

And it was the first March century since 1953.

Today was the second day of autumn.

This is how it rose —

9 a.m.	72.0
10 a.m.	91.0
11 a.m.	94.0
Noon	96.2
1 p.m.	98.0
1.35 p.m.	100.8
2 p.m.	100.0
2.30 p.m.	100.0
3 p.m.	102.8
3.30 p.m.	102.0
4 p.m.	102.5

And the bureau expects a hot night tonight.

Ouyen was the hottest town in Victoria. The 3 p.m. temperature there was 105 deg. Nhili was 104.8 and Mildura 104.6.

It was so hot in the sun that 2900 waterside workers stopped work for an hour at 1 p.m. leaving 41 ships idle in the port of Melbourne.

Hot northerly winds helped to send the temperatures soaring.

Change tomorrow

The weather bureau said no change was expected before midday tomorrow when the wind would swing to the south.

Temperatures would drop sharply but the bureau expected no rain.

Firemen put out more than 30 grass fires in Sunshine, Essendon, Fawkner, Strathmore, Balwyn, Kew and Ascot Vale in one of their busiest days this year.

Residents in Godfrey in North Sunshine were woken by water for four hours today when a main burst.

Melbourne was a scorcher on Tuesday with more than 30 grass fires across the State. The Bureau of Metrology correctly forecast a wind change for Wednesday. Herald evening newspaper 2 March 1965.

Spike Day (3 March)

By around 9 or 10 o'clock on Wednesday 3 March, after another hot night, the temperature had already risen to 96 degrees. It was day predicted to reach a Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI) of 42 (Very High).

Then inexplicably another fire started in grassland on the road to Licola at Blanket Hill, on a property owned by Mr Gay.

Many believe it was deliberately lit.



The Blanket Hill fire broke around 10 am on 3 March on the property of Mr Gay north of Glenmaggie and spread rapidly. This fire was suspected of being deliberately lit. Photo: Maurice Killeen.



The original grave of William Saffon, a shepherd who died at Blanket Hill north of Glenmaggie in January 1847. This is about where the fire is believed to have started on 3 March 1965. Photo: State Library – circa 1950s.



Many locals believed the Blanket Hill fire was deliberately lit, but the arson squad police believed a glass bottle was responsible for the blaze. Gippsland Times.

The Blanket Hill fire took-off and ran hard and fast with the strong northwest wind behind it and quickly engulfed Coongulla on the eastern edge of Lake Glenmaggie.

It then continued to head out over the parched farmland towards Tinamba, Boisdale and Newry in the general direction of Maffra.

The 40 or so CFA trucks that had been assembled at Valencia Creek from across the state and under the command of the Maffra Group of the CFA were quickly mobilised.

Spot fires were thrown into paddocks and remnant forest well ahead of the fire front.

But it stopped when it reached the irrigated dairy pastures.

It was pandemonium for firefighters on the ground that afternoon. Local farmers with Holden utes and makeshift 44-gallon drums of water, pumps and beaters were in the firefight trying to protect their properties. Poor radio communications didn't help.

Then later in the day around 3 pm, there was another strong south-west wind change and the Blanket Hill fire zig-zagged rapidly back into the bush for about 15 miles towards Ben Cruachan.

The fire stopped in the State forest when it ran into a large area that had burnt the previous year in March 1964. That fire had started after an autumn regeneration burn escaped near Mt Margaret and covered over 90,000 ha.

Around the same time as the Blanket Hill Fire started, the south-east corner of the Great Southern Break near Mt Ray and Iguana Creek, where all the hard work had been done since 21 February, broke away and crossed the Mitchell River heading towards farmland around Lindenow.

The tongues of fire running across the paddocks split in two as they ran into an area near the Fingerboards that had been burnt in a 700-acre grassfire only a few weeks earlier on 3 February.

The fire travelled quickly for about seven miles in five hours. And like the Blanket Hill fire, many suspected it was deliberately lit but no evidence was ever found.

This new breakaway led to a dangerous burnover of a CFA tanker near Cobbannah. Trainee firefighter and later CFA Chief Officer, Brian Potter was one of those injured. Don Fullgrabe and Max Shields both from Lucknow also became trapped when the fire unexpectedly changed direction. The paintwork on their truck was blistered. All three men were burned to some extent and taken to hospital.

With the same wind change that was affecting the blaze near Newry, the fire zig-zagged to the north-west and posed a threat to small settlements of Flaggy Creek and Melrose.

The fire also got to within 50 yards of the Bullumwaal Post Office and kept going for several more miles before the wind eased. Thankfully, the town was spared.

Women and children were hurriedly being evacuated.



Fire came close to Bullumwaal. Photo: EG Heritage Society.

Meanwhile, the Bindi fire north-east of Omeo also broke its control lines and crossed the Buchan River heading towards the Snowy River, with one spot fire thrown as far as Gelantipy.



Bulldozer working on the Bindi fire which burned through to Gelantipy in 1965. Source: Bairnsdale Advertiser.

By this stage, seven hundred Forests Commission personnel were mobilised, together with thousands more Country Fire Authority crews.

The CFA was focused on the private farmland whereas the FCV focused on the fires deep in the mountainous State forests.

But in another part of the state, on the same day as the blow-up in Gippsland, a bushfire at Eltham near Melbourne burnt 12 homes and killed three people. Not surprisingly that story dominated the newspapers for the next few days.

And more bad weather was forecast for the Labour Day long weekend.



Three people lost their lives near Eltham on the same day as the big blow-up in Gippsland. The Sun, Thursday 4 March 1965.

The Lull (4 March)

There was a lull in the weather on Thursday 4 March, which is typical after a hot day with a strong south-west change.

An atmospheric inversion layer developed, which in combination with lower temperatures, slight winds and high relative humidity subdued fire behaviour.

The Maffra Fire Brigade resorted to pouring kerosene and petrol on the ground to get backburns to ignite with the damp fuels.

The Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI) developed only a few years earlier by pioneering CSIRO scientist Alan McArthur, dropped from a peak of 49 (severe) on the previous spike day to about 9 (low).

An aircraft chartered by the Forests Commission was sent up to assess the extent of the damage.

But there was no respite, strong winds were forecast for the next few days and there were fingers and spots of fire right across the landscape that still needed to be extinguished.

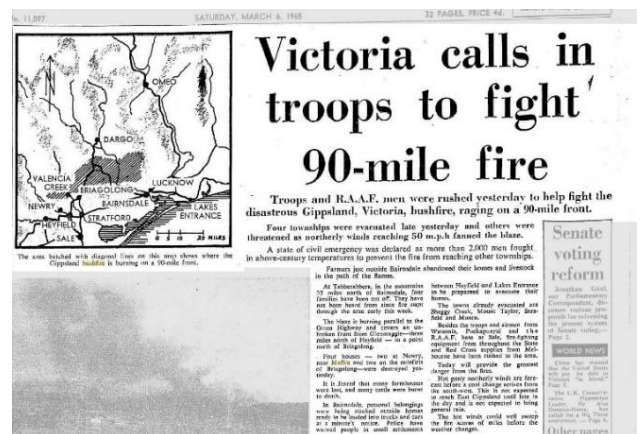
Fires at Eltham near Melbourne had already killed three people and emotions were running high.

State of Emergency (5 March)

Friday 5 March was declared a Total Fire Ban (TFB).

Hot daytime temperatures combined with strong north-west winds and a late afternoon south-west change were forecast.

The State Government declared a State of Emergency which allowed military resources to be deployed.



The Age 6 March - reporting on the State of Emergency.

The Commissioner of Police, Mr Rupert Arnold advised that troops from Southern Command were being rushed to Heyfield and Lindenow.

Men from the RAAF base at East Sale along with their DC-3 Dakota aircraft were made available as well as 500 Army soldiers from Puckapunyal and Watsonia.

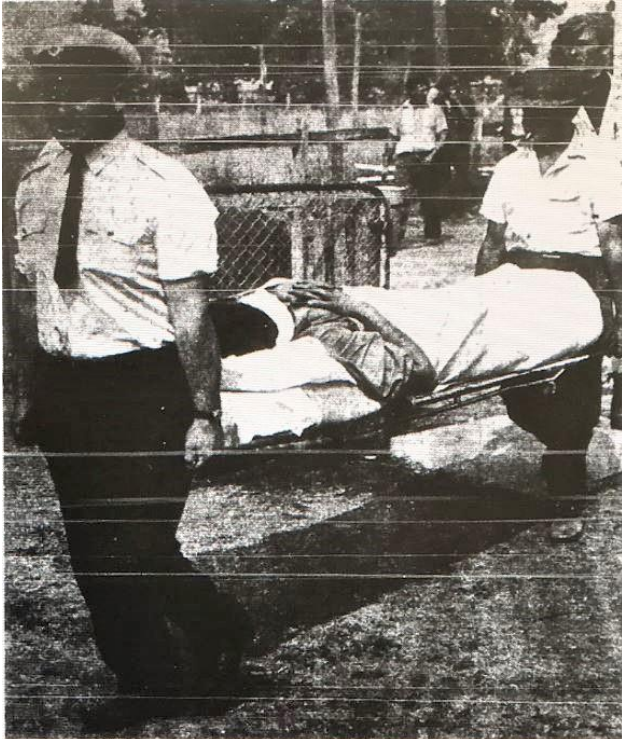
Over 2,000 CFA and 700 FCV men were already committed to the fires.



The CFA set up a communication HQ under the command of Assistant Chief Officer T. Morrison at the Lucknow Hall when the State of Emergency was declared on 5 March 1965. Photo: Peter McHugh 2020.

The Red Cross sent 400 volunteers to establish four major relief centres.

Other volunteers helped in so many ways, such as making refreshments, or on radios as local communities galvanised into action.



Peter Mowbray, Captain of the Sale Emergency Services, is carried away from Valencia Creek after collapsing from exhaustion at the end of a 36-hour shift. The Age Friday 5 March.

PMG (Telstra) technicians worked tirelessly in hazardous conditions to repair many miles of phone landlines while the Wireless Institute set up communication bases.

Then in the east, the fire broke out and crossed the Great Southern Break on Roderick's Road at 10.35 and by 11.30 was heading for Mt Taylor.

Later at 1.10 pm, a radio message was received at the Forest Commission HQ in Melbourne VL3AA that fire had broken containment lines at Wombat Flat and was heading straight towards the CFA HQ at the Valencia Creek Hall.

The Valencia Creek CFA logbook reveals a confused and frantic afternoon with hundreds of spot fires across a wide front.

With hindsight, it now seems that the fire broke out at a number of locations along the "Great Southern Break" which had been constructed and backburned between 22 February and 2 March.



Fire near Valencia Creek on Friday 5 March. Photo: Maurie Killeen

The strong north wind pushed the fire again towards Upper Maffra and Newry. The flames snuck through the dry ridge between Boisdale and Newry near the motocross track, jumping the Boisdale/Newry road.

The fire skirted the irrigated farmland near Boisdale township and went around the Boisdale Consolidated School.

But the historic homestead at Fosters Hill north of Maffra came under attack on 5 March as the fire ran to the south.



The historic homestead at Fosters Hill, which is north of Maffra, came under attack on Friday 5 March.

The Maffra CFA planned to make a stand at Sandy Creek Road with a backburn, but it's said that a CFA official would not allow the burn to take place. But it was lit north of the cemetery anyway and it undoubtedly saved the town.

There are two versions of the story of who lit the backburn, one was the Maffra Police Sergeant, and the other was a CFA local, Jack Burley.

Meanwhile, the fire was heading towards Stratford when a late south-westerly wind changed its direction.

Evacuations for women, children and the elderly were in place for Briagolong, Fernbank, Valencia Creek, Boisdale, Upper Maffra, Glenaladale and Newry. Some refused to leave their homes and farms, preferring to stay and defend. Luckily nobody was killed.

Houses, as well as the historic Delta Bridge, were lost at Briagolong.



The 200 foot long historic Delta bridge which crossed the Freestone Creek near Briagolong was lost on Friday 5 March. The nearby Gentle Annie bridge was also lost. Herald 6 March.

The Dargo Road sawmill owned by Fredrick Ladner and operated by the Downey family was destroyed.

And houses on the Marathon Road of Billy Smith, and the Coghill family were lost.

Sadly, Archie and Edna Hair's eclectic house, "The Arches", at the Blue Pool was lost too. The Boy Scouts later made offers to help rebuild their house.



The Tambo Hardwood company mill at Briagolong was lost on Friday 5 March. The Age Monday 8 March.



Billy Smith's house on Marathon Road was lost on Friday 5 March. Photo: Maurie Killeen.



Archie and Edna Hair's eclectic house "The Arches" at the Blue Pool north of Briagolong was burnt on Friday 5 March. Source: Stratford Museum.



Archie and Edna Hair, an elderly couple with a rare spirit of generosity, lost their eclectic home "The Arches" at the Blue Pool on Friday 5 March. Source: Stratford Museum.



Undeterred, Archie rebuilt his house at the Blue Pool with the help of the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides and the local community. Gippsland Times December 3, 1970.

And when the word came to evacuate the town, legendary local cattlemen Bill Gillio (aged 72), said "not on your life" and instead sipped his cold beer on the verandah of the Briagolong Hotel where he lived, and waited for the fire to pass.

But 300 left town.

Old Bill just sat

From JOHN STEVENS

BRIAGOLONG, To-day. — He sat there rocking gently in his chair underneath the veranda roof of the Briagolong pub . . .

The time was about 3 p.m., and the people of Briagolong were streaming out of the town in cars.

The word had gone out to evacuate. The fire was only a mile from town.

WATCHING

Bill Gillio, 72, had been rocking on the veranda of the pub (he stays there) for the past 18 days, watching the smoke getting nearer and nearer.

"Come on, Bill, you've got to get out — hop into the car!" yelled publican George Russell.

"Not on your life," said Bill.

"If the town goes I'll go with it, but I'll back my judgment and reckon the fire will miss the town."

A BEER

Bill stayed on, helping himself to an occasional small beer from the deserted hotel.

He was in the 1939 fires, and he knew the country well.

When the firefighters returned to the pub 5.30 yesterday afternoon, Bill was still there, rocking in his chair.

"I told yer," he said. "But I reckon she went pretty close."



BILL GILLIO on the veranda of the Briagolong Hotel today.

The legendary and laconic alpine cattleman Bill Gillio aged 72, refused to leave town and instead remained rocking his chair on the verandah of the Briagolong hotel where he lived, and quietly sipped his beer. Herald 6 March 1965.



An exhausted five-year-old, Rodney Johnstone, was one of those evacuated from Briagolong to Stratford prior to Friday 5 March.

The CFA brought in an additional seven brigade units from the Goulburn Valley to help.

The Victorian Railways brought a steam train across the rickety Stratford Bridge to Munro with 35,000 gallons of water on Friday 5 March to resupply CFA tankers because the creeks were so low. Another train was on standby and an around-the-clock railway yard was established at Sale.

The CFA in Melbourne also asked the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) to send seven vehicles equipped with two-way radios to Bairnsdale.



Firefighters between Valencia Creek and Briagolong faced a wall of flame with only a knapsack and beaters. The Age Saturday 6 March.

Moomba Weekend (6 – 8 March)

Another Total Fire Ban was declared on Saturday 6 March with a forecast of strong north-west winds followed by a south-west change moving across Gippsland but with no significant rain.

The Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI) rose to 59 (severe).

The spike-day on Friday 5 March had spewed out countless fingers of flames and millions of embers along a broad 50-mile front from Valencia Creek to Mt Taylor.

These fires had mostly originated from the previously backburnt control lines along the State forest boundary, or the "Great Southern Break", which had been hurriedly constructed by the CFA and FCV between 22 February and 2 March.

Another late afternoon change on Friday evening had blown the fire to the north-east again... just-in-time to save Stratford.

But this torrent of fire had left a rural landscape littered with hundreds of patches of burnt ground, smouldering stumps and fence posts. Some homes were lost as well as many livestock.

There was no respite. The Gippsland Zig-Zag was unrelenting.

Gippsland Fire Raging on 80-Mile Front

STATE authorities last night prepared for a major civil disaster in the face of one of the most serious bushfire threats this century.

The Gippsland fire, raging out of control along an 80-mile front, threatens a dozen towns and thousands of acres of farmland.

Half a dozen towns and hamlets in the path of the fire are already being evacuated.

More townspeople are ready to move out if the threatened strong north-westerly winds drive the fire across the Princes Highway and the main railway line.

The biggest hope is the Weather Bureau's forecast of rain in the area tomorrow afternoon.

But firefighters fear it may come too late.

Grave fears are held for the safety of people in Tabberabbara, a small township 35 miles north-west of Bairnsdale.

Police said last night several inhabitants of the village had refused to leave.

Story on the front page of the Age on Saturday 6 March outline preparations

These strong south-westerly winds persisted over the next few days and drove the fires further to the east.

The fire front eventually stopped well beyond Bruthen and Tambo Crossing and nearly as far as Nowa Nowa.

It was a very confusing and frantic time. Radio communications were poor, telephone lines were down. People were understandably frightened but still stoic and resilient in the circumstances.

Many more small settlements came under direct flame or ember attack as the fires moved rapidly to the east under the influence of the strong winds.

Lakes Entrance, Nowa Nowa, Omeo, Ensay, Johnsonville, Swifts Creek, Swan Reach and Lake Tyers were all on "evacuation alert" as searing 40 mph winds pushed flames towards them.

There are newspaper reports of the Minister for Forests Lindsay Thompson and the Chairman of the Forests Commission Alf Lawrence being trapped at Briagolong at 1.30 am on Saturday morning. They had both gone to inspect the damage for themselves and visit the FCV base camp at Cobbannah which had been impacted by the fire.



The Herald 6 March reported on the Minister for Forests, Lindsay Thompson and Chairman of the Forests Commission, Alf Lawrence being trapped by fire at Briagolong.



The new FCV fire basecamp at Cobbannah. Two other camps had been burnt out. Photo: Barry Marsden.

The fire near Munro township had blown in the day before from the north and then approached quickly from the south-west on the morning of Saturday 6 March to threaten the town. Thankfully, it skirted to the north, aided by a CFA backburn at Swallow Lagoon which helped to steer the fire away from the tiny settlement.

Despite reports at the time, the fire didn't cross either the railway line or the Princes Highway.



Like many other smaller Gippsland CFA brigades, Munro was busy throughout the 1965 fire season. Their log shows their main engagement began on 24 February assisting with backburning on the "Great Southern Break" near Mt Ray. Photo was taken at an earlier fire at Paynesville. Bairnsdale Advertiser.

Distressed local farming families reported that some sheep and cattle sheltered in gullies. Some did not survive as they were pinned against fences or found their way into thick flammable manuka scrub. Hundreds perished.

Large areas of plantations owned by Australian Paper Manufacturers (APM) were lost near Stockdale on Saturday 6 March with the south-westerly winds. The company had its own fleet of tankers and crews out fighting the blaze.



APM lost at least 650 acres of pine plantation near Stockdale on 6 March. Photo: Maurie Killeen.

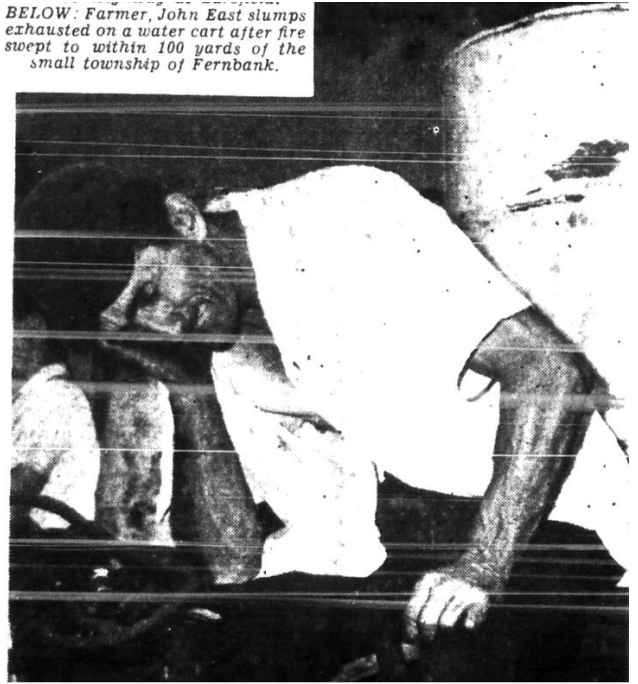
On Saturday 6 March, fire came within feet of the Stockdale Primary School, but the building was saved. Only the shelter shed, and the tennis court were lost.

Spot fires also came within half a mile of the Fernbank Primary School before being extinguished by local CFA brigades.



Spot fires came close to the Fernbank Primary School on Saturday 6 March. Photo: Peter McHugh 2020.

BELOW: Farmer, John East slumps exhausted on a water cart after fire swept to within 100 yards of the small township of Fernbank.

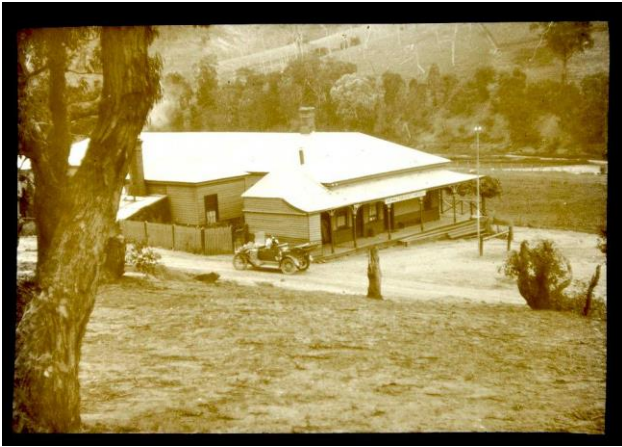


The Age reporting on the fires near Fernbank on Saturday 6 March. Published on Monday 8 March.

Ominously, a tongue of fire had penetrated as far south as Sarsfield on Friday and stopped about three miles east of the town.

Sarsfield, Bruthen, Mossiface and Wiseleigh were all set to come under attack with the strong south-westerly wind predicted for Saturday 6 March.

The newspapers later reported it was wise the planning and rushed construction of a major nine-mile long, 24 feet wide, firebreak and backburn that probably saved the town of Bruthen. The work had started at 3 am just hours before the expected wind change using bulldozers under the direction of local Forests Commission officers.



The local community and stranded CFA firefighters gathered at the Tambo Crossing Hotel and Post Office and waited for help. Photo. State Library.



Firefighters and residents listen for radio reports and wait for support at Tambo Crossing on Monday night after being surrounded by fire. A RAAF supply drop of food and blankets was later arranged. Canberra Times 10 March.

The Age headline on Saturday 6 March shouted that “FIERY TERROR HITS SMALL TOWNSHIP” at Tambo Upper where six houses and four cars were destroyed. The fire also came close to the Primary School and the Stephenson Road Bridge crossing over the Tambo River.

A local resident of Tambo Upper, Kevin Stirling, was trapped in his car and suffered serious burns. It was reported that the small settlement was badly impacted by the fire.

On 7 March the Chief Secretary, Arthur Rylah, appealed to former CFA volunteers living in metropolitan areas to register at Police headquarters for possible deployment.

Then on Sunday 7 March, the weather became cooler and there was not too much fire activity. The FFDI dropped to 23 (high).

By Monday 8 March the temperature in Sale had dropped to 75 degrees with an RH of 30%.

The autumn rain finally came...



Meanwhile, the Melbourne Moomba celebrations went ahead on Monday 8 March.



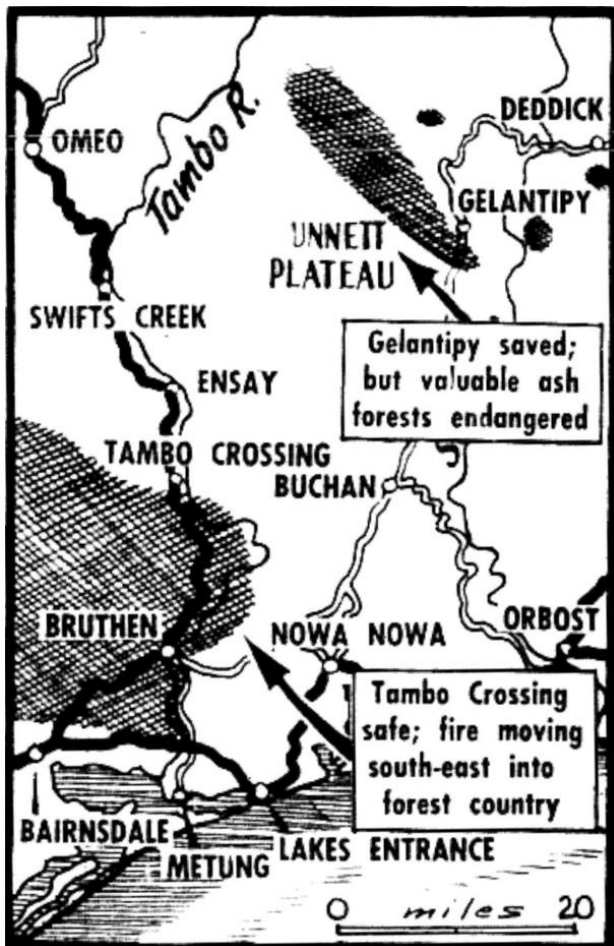
The annual picnic race meeting at Swifts Creek also went ahead on Labor Day but numbers were down. Herald 8 March.

Blacking Out (9 – 15 March)

The FCV fire tower at Mt Useful, 35 miles north-west of Heyfield, reported rain in all directions on Monday.

As much as half an inch fell in many areas and it dampened the southern edge on parched farming land sufficiently for about 1,000 volunteers to go home.

But the locals were left to pick up the pieces, mend their fences, and evaluate their losses.



The headline was "Three-day siege is over". A story about people stranded at Tambo Crossing. Herald Tuesday 9 March.



Front page of the Sun newspaper on Monday 8 March. Children sitting in the ashes near Bruthen. (Note there were no Sunday newspapers in 1965).

There were some grants for fencing and fodder but it's not clear who paid for them.

A large stockpile of valuable logs worth £15,000 at a sawmill at Bruthen was destroyed while the workers had been away helping at the fires.

But it wasn't over yet and another day of Total Fire Ban on Wednesday 11 March fanned the fires in the bush near Omeo, Deddick, Buchan River and Dargo.

On the same day, Nowa Nowa school was closed and 73 children stayed home as the fire front in the Colquhoun forest west of the town remained uncontrolled.

The CSIRO put a rainmaking aircraft on standby waiting for suitable cloud conditions. They eventually flew a mission on Friday 12 March and reported success by doubling the rainfall that had been forecast.



The CSIRO Division of Cloud Physics conducted cloud seeding on 12 March and claimed to have doubled the rainfall. Photo: CSIRO cloud seeding with an Avro Anson circa 1950s.

But the rain was not enough to completely extinguish the fires deep in the forest. Forests Commission crews were kept busy for another few weeks building control lines, blacking out and removing dangerous trees.

Meanwhile, a smoke haze was reported at 19,000 feet by airline pilots flying over New Zealand.

SEC crews from the Latrobe Valley equipped with bulldozers came for a couple of days to help the Country Roads Board (CRB) and the Shire clear debris from roads.

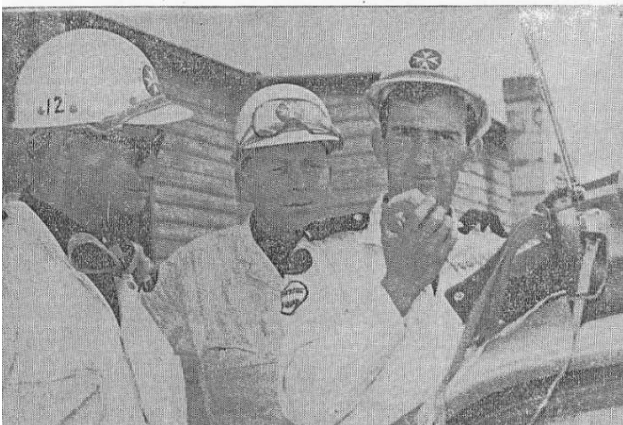
An unusual rescue mission was mounted to recover some valuable radar equipment owned by ESSO from a small and remote building in the bush near Mt Elizabeth. The gear was used for plotting and positioning oil drilling equipment in the Bass Strait. On the 18 February, Esso-BHP struck gas at its Barracouta well.

Rescue Squad Needed Here

The big bushfires taught — or should have taught — East Gippslanders many things, among the most important of which was the value of a thoroughly trained rescue squad.

Such a squad was in action continually for 16 days, forging its way through more than 2,500 miles of rough roads and bushland tracks, often surrounded by flames.

St. John's Rescue Squad



St Johns Ambulance sent a little-known 14-member specialist "Rescue Squad" that operated for over 16 days. They mainly reported to the Police and searched for people lost in the fires and helped with evacuations. Bairnsdale Advertiser 15 March.

At midnight on Sunday 14 March, the emergency provision was revoked, and another 500 volunteers dispersed from Gippsland leaving only about 100 FCV crews behind.

But fires continued on State forest at Dargo, Ensay and Wulgulmerang for another few weeks.

The Valencia Creek Fire # 11 was eventually declared safe on the 4 April, while the Omeo Fire #11 was not declared safe until 5 May, nearly three months after it had started.

And then the blame game began.

Maps

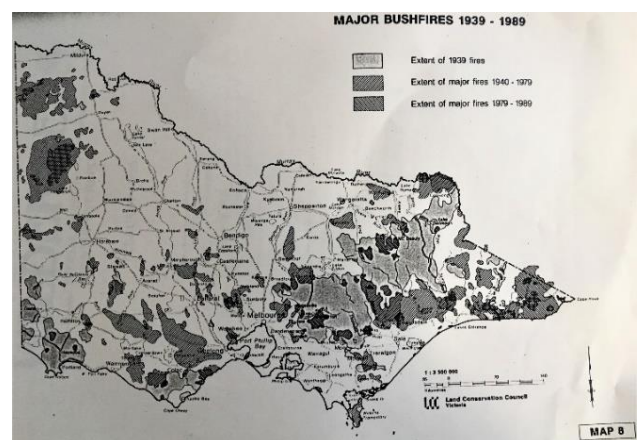
The overview map is a compilation from many sources, but the boundaries remain very approximate, particularly on the eastern and northern edges.

The main source was a large scale 1:3,500,000 scale map produced by the Chief Assessor of the Forests Commission, Murray Paine in about 1980 for the Atlas of Victoria and the Land Conservation Council.

Maps found in the Public Records Office of the Omeo Fire #11 near Bindi and an earlier bushfire north of Heyfield in 1964 seem relatively accurate.

Boundaries have been interpreted using other sources such as newspaper imageries and personal recollections.

It was not possible to develop a detailed day-to-day map as I had hoped.



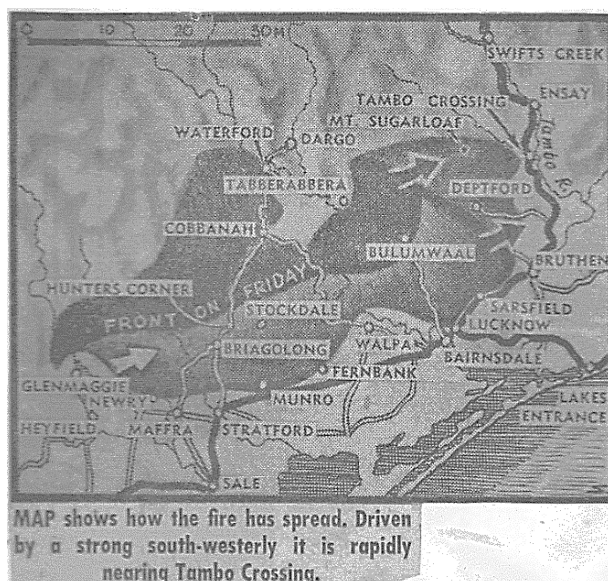
This large scale 1:3,500,000 scale map was produced by the Chief Assessor of the Forests Commission, Murray Paine, in about 1980 for the Atlas of Victoria and the Land Conservation Council. This map was used to identify the broad outline of the 1965 fires.



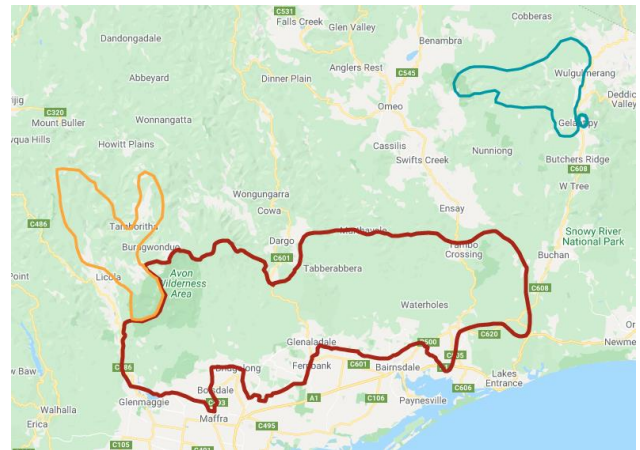
Detailed map of the 1964 bushfire from an escaped autumn burn found in the Public Records Office.



Map of the Omeo Fire #11 from the Public Records Office.



Newspaper clippings were also used to identify the boundary. Maffra Spectator. Tuesday 16 March 1965.



This document needs to be read in conjunction with an interactive Googlemap that I have assembled from a number of sources.

https://www.google.com.au/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1yITRQs_dA77CLXj-o4K9TkLFQ8Nf2VCS0&ll=-37.44950310453387%2C147.46897894999995&z=9

Aftermath and Repercussions

Over the summer of 1964-65, Forests Commission personnel attended 557 fires, 76 of which were outside and 481 inside the fire protected area. Of the latter, 175 originated in and were confined to private property, 61 originated in private property and burned into State forest, 240 originated in State forest and five in National Parks.

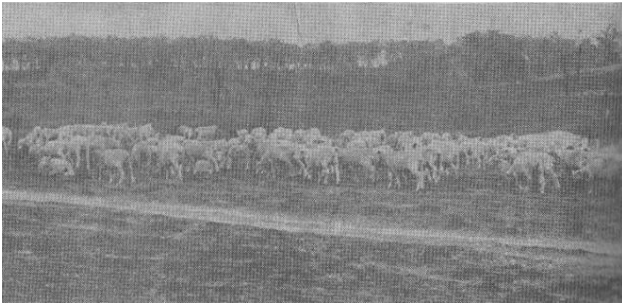
Lightning was responsible for 27% of all fires attended and for 36% of fires that originated in State forests.

Seven hundred Commission personnel were mobilised, together with very substantial numbers Country Fire Authority crews to combat the Gippsland fires.

The total recorded costs of fire suppression for the Forests Commission in 1964-65 were considerable at £195,406. The two main bushfires in Gippsland cost:

Macalister/ Heyfield	£ 58,600.
Omeo	£ 29,300.

About 750,000 acres of forest and 40,000 acres of grassland were burnt and more than 4,000 stock were destroyed. Although I have seen different figures quoted.



Burnt sheep huddle together after the fire devastated their paddocks near Briagolong. The Age, 6 March.

The Police reported £200,000 damage including the loss of 60 buildings.

The Shire Engineer from Bairnsdale, Mr R Bosworth, reported the loss of many wooden bridges including the 118-foot-long Boggy Creek Bridge on the Hodges Estate Road which was estimated to cost £12,000 to replace. The Council sought a £35,000 assistance grant from the Bolte State Government.

Community outrage

It's somewhat surprising, given that a State of Emergency had been declared in Victoria, that there was no formal government inquiry into the bushfires.

The State branch of the Country Party backed calls from the Labor Party and Unions for an independent inquiry but to no avail.

The Forests Commission undertook its own internal review of the initial attack on the fire at Briagolong but the report was never made public.

But there was still a considerable amount of community anger after the fires and many were looking for someone to blame.

There were meetings of Gippsland residents to discuss what they saw as the many failings and to make recommendations to the Government for better protection.

The Shire of Tambo (now East Gippsland Shire) asked the Government to alter the Forests Commission's policy to enable more protective burning in the bush adjacent to settled areas.

The Secretary of the firefighter's union Mr W. Webber complained about a lack of funding and lack of permanent staff. He also called for a government inquiry and estimated fire expenditure was £1,940,000 for Melbourne and only £862,000 for country areas.

There were even calls to revert to indigenous ways of controlling and burning forests.

Another speaker said Australians had much to learn from the aborigines. They burned the forests but still maintained wonderful stands of timber. Instead of sending men to study overseas, they could learn much from the history of their own land. An authority should be set up for this purpose.

Extract of a report from a public meeting at Lindenow Hall. Bairnsdale Advertiser, 25 March.

Graziers like Jack Treasure from Dargo advocated for control of State forests to be passed back to the Lands Department and to allow for more grazing and burning.



Legendary Dargo Grazer Jack Treasure led the attack on the Forests Commission. Bairnsdale Advertiser – 22 March 1965.

It's worth noting that there is an interesting backstory to this attack by Jack Treasure. Another Royal Commission by Judge Stretton, 20 years earlier in 1946 into grazing on public land, led to the Forests Commission gaining control of all grazing licences on State forest and National Parks. The alpine graziers had argued strongly against such a move and remained deeply incensed.

Lingering tensions between permanent CFA Regional Officers and local brigade captains also surfaced.

Fire control arrangements

Coordination between the CFA and Forests Commission had improved greatly since the 1962 Dandenong Ranges bushfires but there were many enhancements still needed.

A confidential report from the Chairman of the CFA, Sam Burston complained that Gippsland was not well prepared and brigades were poorly equipped. This report was leaked and caused great resentment amongst volunteer CFA members.

Burston said that relations with the Forests Commission were mostly good but there had been an insufficient exchange of information between the headquarters of the two organisations.

The State Government responded in March as Chief Secretary Arthur Rylah foreshadowed in Parliament some major reorganisations of Victoria's rural fire services.

He outlined a 12-point plan with the main proposals being for better radios, improved policies for protective burning, encouraging landholders to build private firebreaks and better liaison between agencies.

He also proposed "shock troops" to operate each summer under Forests Commission control and to extend aircraft for fire spotting.

Meanwhile, unions advocated for a single paid fire authority like the MFB for rural Victoria. But the Chief Secretary Arthur Rylah said there was effective coordination between the fire services.

CFA changes

For many in the CFA, these bushfires represented the first major campaign since 1939. It brought a number of important internal changes including:

- A new CFA chairman, Mr Richard Eason who set about reorganising and modernising the CFA.
- A new tactics and administration manual for the field.
- A new system of command and control with forward group HQ.
- The rollout of the new C-Series 4WD tankers.
- Adoption of VHF radios.



An impressive truck for its day, the International C1610 tanker. Circa 1960. Source:

Fuel Reduction Burning (FRB)

The Stretton Royal Commission after the 1939 Black Friday bushfires had examined the inevitability of fire in the Australian bush and heard evidence from foresters, graziers, sawmillers and academics whether it was best to let fires burn because they were part of a natural protective cycle or to combat them to defend people and the forests.

Importantly, his balanced deliberations officially sanctioned and encouraged fuel reduction burning (FRB) to minimise future risk which became a cornerstone policy of the Forests Commission.

Following the devastating 1965 bushfires, there was another very strong call from the community for increased fuel reduction burning within the forest margins.

In response, the Commission undertook this work, but greater risks were taken.

Most of the burning was carried out during the spring but in 1967 with the onset of severe

conditions during October many of these burns spread out of control.

Over the subsequent years, there were further problems with relights when unfavourable weather conditions occurred later in the spring months.

So, from about 1973 onwards fuel reduction burning in the spring virtually stopped.

Meanwhile from 1965, aerial ignition techniques using fixed wing aircraft were being developed by the CSIRO in Western Australia.

In 1967, the Forests Commission introduced its own system of dropping large double-ended matches or Delayed Action Incendiary Devices (DAIDs) from a helicopter.

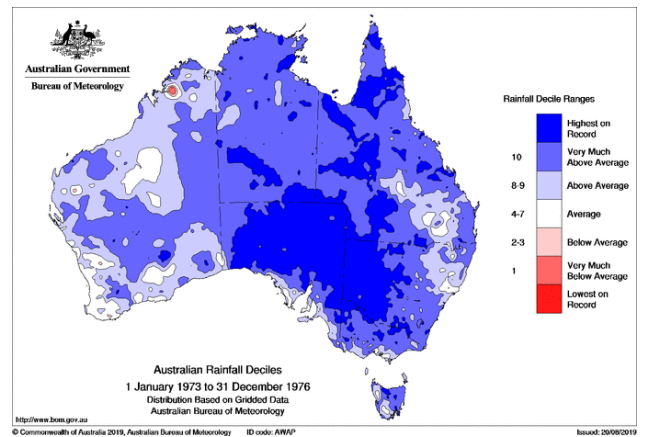
The Commission progressively moved its main FRB program to late autumn.

The area of Gippsland covered each year by FRB increased from between 8,000 and 13,000 ha in the early 1960s, to between 125,000 and 270,000 ha in the 1970s.



Large double-ended matches or Delayed Action Incendiary Devices (DAIDs) were struck on the striker pad on the side of this Bell 47G helicopter and dropped by hand. DAIDs were kept in a box on the outside of the door with a quick-release mechanism. The rate of ignition approximately 300 acres per hour. Photo: Grange Jephcott.

But it's worth noting that the 1970s were a relatively wet decade in Victoria. The rivers and creeks ran and the forest vegetation in the gullies was wet. These wet gullies acted as natural fuel breaks and this considerably aided the Forests Commission's FRB program.



The 1970s were a relatively wet period. Four-year rainfall patterns from 1973 to 1976. Source BOM.

Closer to settled areas, burning was still restricted because of the difficulty in setting up effective controls to ensure that the fire did not escape onto freehold land and cause damage.

Where this happened there was vocal criticism and claims for compensation for burnt fences and other assets.

Despite strong community calls for more FRB along the forest margins there remained a zero tolerance towards burn escapes.

Helicopter on a permanent contract

The Forests Commission had already conducted successful tests with a RAAF Sikorsky S-51 Dragonfly in 1949.



The Forests Commission pioneered Australia's use of aircraft for firefighting and crew transport. This Sikorsky S-51 Dragonfly was brand-new to the RAAF and was normally based at Laverton with Aircraft Research and Development Unit. This photo was taken at Erica in 1949. Photo: State Library of Victoria.



This Bell 47G helicopter from McInnes Central Airways and flown by an American pilot, Henry Whitfield, was engaged in a year-round contract by the Forests Commission in late 1965. Seen here in front of a group of admiring school children from Swifts Creek. Photo: National Archives.

After the 1965 bushfires, the Forests Commission took the bold step to contract its own Bell 47G helicopter which was a first for any Australian bushfire agency.

Development of rappelling techniques at Snowy Plains and Tallangatta followed, which led to operations based at Heyfield with a two-man crew to quickly attack small fires in remote locations.

The Heyfield rappel crew was another Australian first and remained in place for the following two fire seasons but lapsed after concerns from the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) about the stability of the small and underpowered Bell 47G.

Rappelling resumed in 1982 with the advent of larger, more powerful Bell 212 helicopters from the National Safety Council of Australia (NSCA) based in west Sale.

The local Federal MP, Peter Nixon, called for a dedicated fleet of RAAF fire tankers to fight forest blazes.

Calls were also being made from the Firefighter Union and others for a new body to fight fires in Victoria and for the CFA to have their own firefighting aircraft.

Fine, winds freshening. SALE — MONDAY, MARCH 15, 1965

"Form a RAAF fire unit"

TANKER AIRCRAFT FOR FIRES?

—NIXON

A special RAAF bushfire fighting unit equipped with tanker aircraft will be sought by Gippsland's Federal member, Mr Peter Nixon.

Mr Nixon will ask the Air Minister, Mr Howson, to make an investigation.

Mr Nixon said today the RAAF did not possess aircraft fitted for fire fighting. He said today he had just received from America details of specially equipped aircraft used there.

"I will give this information to Mr Howson and also table it in the House."

Mr Nixon added he believed tanker-aircraft could prove successful here.

● Sale's private aircraft operator, Mr Neil McInnes, believes the Gippsland fires could have been controlled in their early stages by tanker aircraft — See P12.

Market draw

Draw for tomorrow's Sale market: Elders GM 1, VPC 2, Dalgetys 3, AML 4, Aust. Estates 5, G and N 6, Denny's 7.

Yarded will be 825

Insp. Warren
"... conservative estimate only"

1965 Sale f

It will

A young Peter Nixon, later to become a senior member of the Federal Country Party, called for RAAF air tankers. Gippsland Times 15 March.

Fire Research

The Forests Commission had begun firebombing trials before the War and continued its pioneering research.

The first operational firebombing mission was later in February 1967 from Benambra.



Forests Commission firebombing tests at Anglesea with a RAAF P51 Mustang. Note the bomb "hung-up" under the right wing. November 9, 1946. Source Melbourne Sun Newspaper.



Firebombing trials at Ballarat dropping water thickened with bentonite clay from a CRC Ceres CA-28 aircraft – 1962. Photo: Athol Hodgson.



One of the Piper Pawnees that flew Australia's first operational firebombing mission from Benambra on 6 February 1967.

A feature of the bushfires in February-March was the convection development and long-distance spotting which made direct suppression impossible. The weather and fuel conditions necessary for this extreme behaviour were later studied.

So in closing

Every bushfire is the same, just as every bushfire is different.

There are some striking similarities to what happened during the 1965 Gippsland bushfire emergency and those of more recent decades. There are some obvious differences as well.

For example, the 1965 “Great Southern Break” has resurfaced as a way to protect rural communities along the State forest interface.

In this document, I have advanced a new concept of the “Gippsland Zig-Zag” to partially describe the interaction of weather, forest and topography that creates the unique shape and pattern of bushfires that the Region has regularly experienced.

In combination with drought, these campaign bushfires can burn for weeks or months, moving relentlessly with the wind, both up-and-down, and in-and-out of the forest while their overall footprint steadily creeps across the landscape from west to east.

And while firefighting technology, like helicopters, radios and tankers has changed and improved, the strong legacy of tradition and the camaraderie amongst firefighters, as well as the heartening community spirit to help others in need has not waned.

But sadly, the epic tale of the 1965 Gippsland bushfires was never written up into a consolidated document.

Shining a light on this story has involved a considerable amount of forensic detective work, searching through old newspapers at the state and local libraries, interrogating BOM weather records, uncovering dusty Forests Commission fire reports and maps at the Public Records Office, scouring official annual reports, reading a handful of written personal recollections, as well as interviewing some people who were actually there.

The overview map is a compilation from many sources, but the boundaries still remain very approximate, particularly on the eastern and northern edges.

So this account of the momentous events of the summer of 1965 will probably always remain a work-in-progress and any additional information is welcome.

But I hope this manuscript goes some way to putting these epic bushfires on the record...

The Fires of 1965

Contributed by Jeff Hann,

Perry Bridge Rural Fire Brigade.

As time goes by, and we grow old,
Or as long as we're alive
We'll tell of the tale of the terrible fire
Way back in '65.

That fire was started up in the hills
Where the brumbies used to roam
Which later spread to the open land
Burning many a home, sweet home.

We're told that the lightning started it,
So there's no one to blame
For the damage done to our dearest land
As it went up in smoke and flames.

As I've said it started up in the hills
And we tried hard to keep it there
For we burnt a break on the Mount Ray Road
High up in the Mountain air.

Our boots wore thin and our feet grew tired
As we climbed around the mountain's cleft
But we felt damned pleased with the job we'd done
That evening as we left.

Days went by and the smoke got less
We believed that our troubles were o'er
But the north wind came and fanned it up
And the crisis was on once more.

The black smoke billowed high in the sky
Down Perry we scarce could see
And we wondered by dawn of another day
Just where that fire would be.

Down from the Briag Hills it came
Like an eagle upon its prey
Claiming stock and fences homes and all
In fact everything in its way.

A state of emergency was declared
Big plans began that day
And fire carts came from everywhere
Near and far away.

Out through Leebrook way it roared
Then on towards Munro
But there it met its first defeat
As we all quite well know.

For they had burnt a break in Stotters block
And down the railway line
Another up through Maxfields ran
Which just saved the town in time.

The wind then changed the danger eased
But no time for a spell
There was still mopping up to do
Or it'd go again like hell.

They said to me "you go back home
And get your Dozer please
We've got a job that must be done
You'll push down burning trees.

The burning logs poke well back in
Burning heaps spread out, that's a must
And that's the reason my face
Was smothered in ash and dust.

When I went to the Munro Hall for a feed
They scarcely knew it was me
And one women said to another one there
'who would that dirty bloke be?

Still bushfires aren't a beauty parade
We were there to work and toil
And to stop the fire as some as we could
Or still more land it would spoil.

'Bout half past ten upon that day
The wind began to blow
And off the fire went again
But where we didn't know.

It's cross the Highway at the ponds
A rumour came to hand
But instead the fire raged further north
In A.P.M. forest land.

On through Stockdale, Fernbank north
And Iguana Creek
Then on to Bruthen, Sarsfield
It was here it reached its peak.

It struck a devastating blow
Without a doubt its worst
For more than twenty houses burnt
In this its final burst.

For somewhere in that region
Just where I'm not sure
That fire was finally beaten
And its smoke was seen no more.

And although it was a nasty fire
And caused a lot of strife
For one thing let's be thankful
It claimed no human life.

But the poor old sheep they suffered most
And forget I never will
How charred and black yet still alive
As statues they stood still.

And don't imagine just a few
There was a mighty lot
That suffered there in silence
As they waited to be shot.

A thousand odd I buried
And I know of hundreds more
So I guess it's true to coin a phrase
That sheep were burned galore.

And now I'd like to throw bouquets
To all that lent a hand
And tried to quell that rotten fire
Which ravaged through our land.

So if you used a knapsack
A fire cart or a plane
It doesn't matter what you did
You were helping just the same.

The blokes who used the radio
To keep us all in touch
And the Railways for their water train
Well we thank you all so much.

And the womenfolk were marvellous too
And deserve the utmost praise
For the food they freely fed us
When we came back from the blaze.

They served it with a cheery smile
And you know how much that means
For we were weary worn and tired
And far from full of beans.

Now I know there's scores of others
Who well deserve a mention
But I ain't got no more time to write
Though that was my intention.

For here I've got to fold it up
But I hope while I'm alive
That there'll never be another fire
Like the one in '65.

Information Sources

Newspaper clippings – State and Local libraries:

Melbourne Papers – The Age, The Sun, The Herald, and Weekly Times.

Gippsland Papers – Gippsland Times, Bairnsdale Advertiser and Maffra Spectator.

Trove.

Helen Carr – Newspaper clippings from Peggy and George Russell family scrapbook who were the previous owners of the Briagolong Hotel.

Public Records Office – Forests Commission fire reports including a few maps.

Maurie Killeen – Personal written account and interviews.

Valencia Creek Fire Brigade – Fire Log from Friday 5 to Monday 8 March. Handwritten > 50pp.

Ken Baxter – Stratford CFA – Newspaper clippings and personal recollections.

Fred and Julie Lotton – Munro CFA – personal recollections.

Noel Bennett – Briagolong Forests Commission. Personal recollections.

Maria Whykes – Memories of the 1965 bushfires. Three pages of typed notes.

Joanne Eastman – DELWP Bairnsdale. Conducted original meetings and began compiling the maps in 2014.

The Gap: Magazine of the Bairnsdale Schools Inspectorate, 1965, page 21.

Forests Commission Retired Personnel Association (FCRPA). Photo collection and records.

Max Coulter – FCV file numbers.

Brian Fry – FCV personal recollections. Email.

Kevin Wareing – FCV Personal recollections. Email.

Graeme Ford – FCV Personal recollections. 3 typed pages.

Craig Moralee – Munro CFA – personal recollections.

John Schauble – Recollections and links the Murray and White.

Moray Guild Douglas (2007) - A history of the forests and forestry in East Gippsland. Unpublished. Malcolm McKinty & Brian Fry Eds. 2019 Available on FCRPA website.

Denis O'Bryan (2018). Victoria's Bushfire History, 1802 to Present. Unpublished.

Jeff Hann – Perry Bridge Rural Fire Brigade - Poem.

Facebook – Contributions from a number of people of their experiences after a post on 31 July 2019.

Mrs Marie Edwards – Fernbank. Written account. Two typed pages.

Forests Commission Victoria. 1964-65 Annual Report.

D W M Paine. Forests Commission Victoria Chief Assessor. (1982) - Map of major bushfires 1939 – 1979. Produced for the Atlas of Victoria / edited by J.S. Duncan (1982). Department of the Premier. 239pp.

Forests Commission Victoria (1965) – Investigation report to the Commissioner Alf Lawrence by Ted Gill and Val Cleary into the fires at New Place Creek and Valencia Creek. 18pp.

Chester Eagle (1971) – Hail and Farewell! An Evocation of Gippsland. Book. Melbourne: Heinemann. 215 pp

Robert Murray & Kate White (1995) - State of fire: a history of volunteer fire fighting and the Country Fire Authority in Victoria, Hargreen. Fitzroy, Vic.

Jeremy Hales. (ED). Maffra Rural Fire Brigade. 1943-1993. Maffra & District Historical Society Bulletin Supplement No 5.

Meredith Fletcher (1988) - Avon to the Alps: A history of the Shire of Avon.

Minnie Higgins & Linda Barraclough (1988) - Glenmaggie to Glencairn: our valley remembered. Bairnsdale, Vic. Kapana Press. 64 pp.

David Luxford (1988). Sap in their veins: a history of Munro. 128 pp.

Footnote – On 10 March 1965 the first numbered ball was drawn from a barrel in the national service ballot to recruit 4200 young conscripts to serve in Vietnam. The draw was done by Mr E D McKinnon, Member for Corangamite. The barrel had previously been used for Tattersalls sweeps at the Melbourne Cup.

A young person's perspective

How We Faced the Fire

ON Saturday, 6th March, 1965, the bush fires which had been raging in East Gippsland for several days swept through the small settlement of Stockdale.

Margaret Dean, aged 11, who is a pupil in Grade 6 at S.S. 3712, Stockdale, vividly describes her experience as the fire approached her home.

It was Saturday morning, a very gloomy and frightening morning. Smoke hung about like clouds in the sky. All around the hills was a bright red glow rising every hour, but, worst of all there was a piercing red sun that looked as if it would burst at any moment.

About nine o'clock Mum and I moved some of our belongings out onto the ploughed ground. I could hear the fire roaring in the distance but we could see little because of the smoke. I looked up as I was filling the buckets to see Dad riding as fast as he could towards us. I turned the tap off and ran out to the back gate to see what was the matter. Dad let Cindy go in the calf paddock and came running in. Before I had time to say anything he told us that the fire was in Mr. Appleton's paddocks. We waited and we waited, but it didn't come. It was like being in a trap because there was fire in the north, south, east and west.

Suddenly the wind blew and blew with all its might. We were out on the ploughed ground and Dad had knapsacks with buckets of water. We couldn't see for dust and smoke, but Mum called out "Here it comes." Mum and I got onto the middle of the ploughed ground while Dad went out the front to try and stop it. The fire roared past in a matter of seconds and we were out in the paddocks putting out smouldering heaps of cow manure.

Six men and a tractor had come while we were out on the ploughed ground and they helped us to beat out the grass around the house. Luckily none of our stock was lost but much of our grass was burnt.

Even now when I smell a fire I still get a sinking feeling in my stomach.

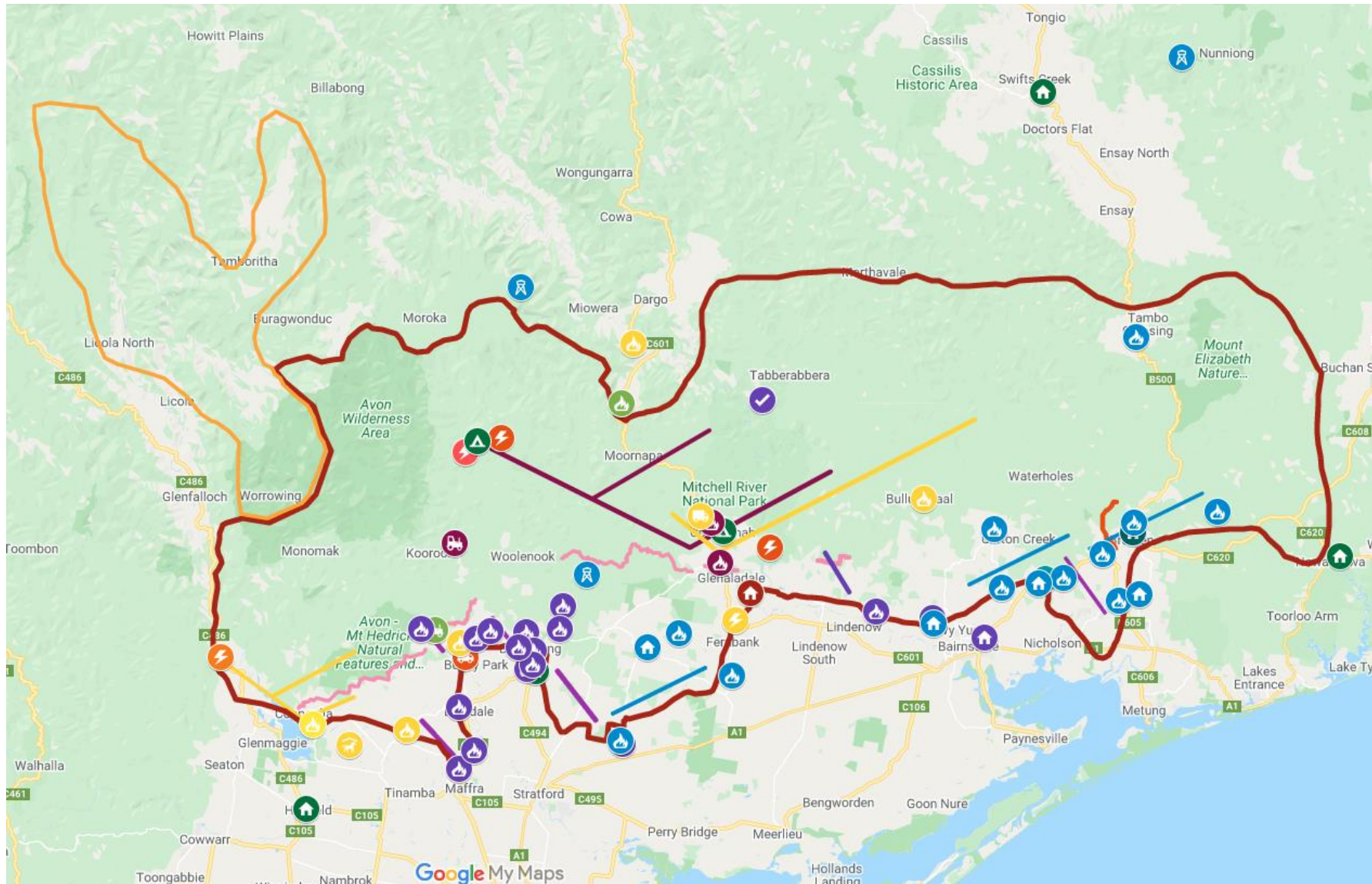
The Gap: Magazine of the Bairnsdale Schools Inspectorate. 1965. Page 21.

Weather records from the Forests Commission office in Nowa Nowa.

Conditions During Fire										Blow up day after backburn.																			
Date ..	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Temperature 3 p.m.	101	66	-	81	76	80	-	-	90	97	98	70	98	100	85	82	70	83	93	70	62	66	76	85	89	92	78	71	57
RH 3 p.m.	16	68	-	29	41	41	-	-	20	11	16	40	20	13	27	18	17	16	27	75	72	23	27	15	10	17	29	41	46
Wind direction 3 p.m.	NE	SE	SE	SE	SE	SE	-	-	SE	NE	NW	SW	NE	NWS	NWSE	W	NWS	SW	NW	NW	SE	SE	NW	NW	SW	SE	SW	SW	SW
Wind velocity 3 p.m.	10	20	-	15	10	10	-	-	0	5	15	10	3	20	15	15	15	0	15	15	5	5	10	5	5	3	10	10	5
Rain for day																													
F.D.I. 3 p.m.	36	5	-	20	10	11	-	-	19	34	42	9	24	59	23	29	24	18	27	3	2	12	16	24	30	24	15	9	5
Area at 2400 (1000's)	0.5	1.5		5							40																		

Overview Map - 1965

<https://www.google.com.au/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1yITRQsdA77CLXj-o4K9TkLFQ8Nf2VCS&ll=-37.44950310453387%2C147.46897894999995&z=9>



Printed with the generous support of Safer Together.



VICTORIAN LOCAL
GOVERNMENTS



Safer Together

A new approach to reducing the risk of bushfire in Victoria