

FIGHTING FIRES

Interview

Announcer: Bushfires can be devastating. Even when you're well prepared, they have a way of surprising you! Today we'll be talking with firefighters and landowners who have survived extreme bushfires.

Sound FX: Sirens, fire trucks, running footsteps

Firefighter 1: Yeah, we're going into burnover mode, buddy.

Firefighter 2: Yeah, we're in burnover mode as well. Let us know when the fire has mostly passed over. So we're covered in blankets, put our heads down, put all the canvasses down. Wait till the fire front passes and then inform Keyneton Station that the danger's passed.

Firefighter 1: Yeah, I think the fire front is gone. We'll get out and check everything.

Firefighter 2: I know, we'll just get out and check under the truck and make sure nothing's burning.

Announcer: Bushfires can be unpredictable, and you can suddenly find yourself being overtaken by the speed of a fire. How would you feel if you had to suddenly leave your home, possessions, pets, and livestock behind, not knowing what will happen to them? So, what's it like to fight a fire, or to suddenly evacuate your home?

Bruce: I don't remember in the fires we had back in January feeling scared or fearful of anything? You didn't really have time to feel that way. You sort of got in and got the job done as best we could and probably only afterwards, after the event, that you sort of sit back and realise just what sort of situation we were actually in and we realised it could have been a lot, lot worse.

Rob: Yeah, we could see this big, red glow in the sky south of home. Then within five minutes, fire was right upon us.

Coralie: The phone rang and it was an automatic message saying "Either go or stay, decide now." My stomach just went loop the loop, you know?" Couldn't find the cat, grabbed the dog and left.

Announcer: This is *Messages of hope*. Here's James sharing his experience as captain of his local fire brigade, and then Coralie who had to flee her farm.

James: That particular fire would be the most horrific fire that I have ever had to attend in my 50 years' experience and service. 60 to 80 kilometres an hour, the fire was gone before we knew where it was. Traveling over the fire ground one or two days later, we saw there was some greater

intervention than what we had to save those particular properties. To think that they burned right around houses and houses that should have normally been destroyed in fire that were saved was just miraculous.

The tone of the firefighters becomes fairly heavy after battling severe heat and wind and dust for five, six, seven, eight hours, probably more than that. We were probably there for 12 hours and then to be called back in to action within another four or five is pretty difficult and for myself, as captain, getting home and thinking you'll get a little bit of sleep and the phone is constantly ringing with people querying things and you don't get much rest and you really have to try and trot up and carry on with the job, yeah. Stuff you don't want to experience every day but that's part of when the situation arises.

Coralie: Hi, I'm Coralie. I live on a farm here at Keyneton. On the day of the fire, I was actually home. I knew there was a fire around and it was several hills away and blowing the other way, so I figured we were in no danger. It wasn't until later that afternoon that the wind had changed and it was just full of smoke. It's interesting that I told my sister-in-law and mother-in-law to pack and get ready to go and to go and I was still staying. I wasn't going anywhere because ... yeah.

Interviewer: Because ...

Coralie: Because I don't know. I think I was just stubborn. And it will be right, it won't get this far, but I would just make sure everybody else was okay first. We have always felt safe where we are. The house has always felt safe in terms of the fact that we live on a crossroad and that the paddocks around the house, are kept down kind of thing, feed-wise. I didn't really think it was serious enough to go until the phone rang and it was an automatic message saying "Either go or stay, decide now." Couldn't find the cat, grabbed the dog, and left.

Interviewer: What thoughts were going through your mind when you got the phone call, stay or go?

Coralie: Ah, my stomach just went loop the loop. I guess it was like "quick now, what am I going to do, what am I going to take?" We've never really seriously drawn up a plan of flight and as I walked out the door, I looked around and I thought there's all this stuff that I can't take with ... my grandmother's or my grandparents' dining setting, table, chairs, side board, and lounge seat, probably not worth much on the open market, but worth a lot to me in terms of memories and sentiment and I at looked at it and thought that it's just stuff. At the end of the day, if I can walk out with James and the kids and we're okay, the rest would be really horrible to lose, but first things first.

Announcer: Have you ever felt helpless and wondering why did this happen? Sometimes in the midst of a tragedy miraculous things happen that you can only comprehend when you reflect back. Here's Rob to share his story

Rob: Yeah, I'm Rob. We're victims of the Eden Valley fire. Approximately 11 o'clock on the Friday morning when the fire alarm went, my three boys, they hopped on the fire truck and they went off and then it was

approximately 6 o'clock, I think, one of the boys come home and he had smoke inhalation and heat exhaustion and he was going to have a shower and then he sort of camped for a couple of hours or so and then go out again, but in the meantime the wind had changed and the smoke was already at our place. Then he asked me whether he should go up in the hills to round up sheep and I told him no, look, I said that it's too late to do that now. I said with the smoke coming through, although I was fond of the sheep, probably you could get trapped yourself. We had 2-1/2 thousand acres that we were leasing, about 2300 acres of that got burned out, plus about 500 acres of our own and about 6-7 kilometres of fencing on our own property.

Then on the Saturday morning we knew we'd have to go up and have a look-see, what state we'd find the sheep in. Well, we had 1600 sheep in the county that got burned. We mustered the first part, we had 100% muster. We went back into the rougher country and it took us a while to round them up, but eventually we did have more rounded up there and we only lost about half-a-dozen, so the Good Lord, He must have been looking after them, because when we saw the fire racing across the hills, we thought that those sheep didn't stand a chance because they just wouldn't have been able to outrun it. No, definitely we were very fortunate in that regard, I daresay.

These are just events that occur and you know, like I say, it could have been much much worse than it was. The Good Lord, He was definitely out there, batting for us.

Announcer: I'm Richard Fox and this is *Messages of hope*. If you've experienced a miracle in the midst of disaster, go to our Facebook page at *Messages of hope* and share your story with us. We'd love to hear about it, and your story may inspire someone else.

We've been hearing firefighters and farmers sharing their stories of surviving a bushfire. From facing the flames to fleeing their properties, they all have surprising stories to tell. Stay tuned to hear how they make sense of it all.

Bruce: When you sit back at the end of it and you take it all in, you think well, yeah, if the wind hadn't changed or if that person didn't have a ploughed paddock, or if that person didn't have a couple of paddocks of lucerne, quite green, that actually stopped the fire from probably even coming towards the town of Keyneton really. I think potentially if that wasn't there, it could have been a lot worse for the town of Keyneton, I think. So there is a couple of spots where the fire just seemed to make a beeline for a person's property. I know south of Cambria, there's a property you could see on the map, a finger of fire just went straight for that person's property and you think, well why? It's just the way the wind took that fire, that finger of fire, straight to that guy's property and it was the only one that was affected by it. It was unbelievable. That question you ask about where's God in all this. Nothing's ever perfect and if everything was perfect, we wouldn't have accidents and fires, and I mean fires can be your friend too.

God gave us fire for using as a tool, a useful tool, all sorts of things, but lightning does hit trees and cause sparks and it's nature really. It's been

happening for millions of years, but just because man have put houses and properties in the way, that's when it becomes tragic. I guess that's our job to protect those properties.

Coralie: There is one thing I would like to add though, another little story. I mean we were talking about where was God in this? A farmer who lives further up toward Keyneton from us came past in his own farm unit, probably 150 litres of water left and he saw our place burning and he said Oh that's gone. He said I might as well go home and start looking after my place and as he went around the corner, he looked back and he said "You know," he said to the chap alongside him, he said "You know, I reckon there's lucerne in that paddock.

I've always seen lucerne growing in that paddock. He said I'll just have a look, just drive in there and have a look, and do you know he came in and had just a garden hose and a nozzle from their water tank. They sprayed all along the edge of the fire and they put the fire out all the way around and they ended up with 100 litres of water left. I'm positive in my mind there was an angel running alongside them, pumping water in nearly as fast as they were pumping water out.

James: When you analyse the fire and analyse some of the stories that are coming in afterwards, it really does make you think there is a God. I can relate some stories where there was a person out attempting to muster his stock and a couple of more firefighters realized that he was doing that, quickly phoned him up and said get right out of it because it's coming at astronomical speed and that person to this day admits that if it had not been for that phone call that he wouldn't be here with us.

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