



OUR Bushfire Emergency

My apologies if there are mistakes in this – it was done in a rush for obvious reasons.

Handing out advice to others is all well and good, as long as you take it yourself. We covered this in the Focus 16 article, In Case of Emergency, making suggestions on how best to prepare before disaster strikes. I urge everyone to read it because what has just happened to us can happen to anyone...

Like most, we never expected we'd have to put our emergency plan into action; however, just as a precaution we made sure it was already in place. The grab-and-go bags containing important documents, computer backups and those items necessary for basic survival were packed and ready. It was as well they were because we were ordered to evacuate our home town with little more than sufficient time to load up the cars and leave. That was three days ago, or it may have been four: it's hard to remember under the present circumstances.

Messages received from concerned friends and relatives overseas confirm that the rest of the world is aware of our plight brought about by a terrible bushfire in the South West of Western Australia. They say it is one of the worst in the State's history. All we know is that, like hundreds of others, we won't be allowed to return home until authorities give the all clear. So we wait, listening to frequent radio updates that tell us pretty much the same as they did fifteen minutes before. That sounds like poor public service, but it isn't - everyone is confused, and with the fire raging out of control around a perimeter of over 200 kilometres and expanding every minute, information could never be comprehensive or up-to-date. Although we all understand this, we are still worried for the safety of our town and that we may not have a home to return to. That's not melodrama - it's plain fact. Our concern is based on reports that the small township of Yarloop a mere 20 Kms North of us has been virtually wiped out in a matter of minutes. Learning later that the fire front was reportedly heading South from there at alarming speed, it is now clear that those in charge evacuated us only just in time.

Now that we are miles away from the front, having been taken in by our next-door neighbour's daughter, there is time to reflect. In retrospect, the past few days seem like weeks, and memories of them skip from one moment of crisis to the next. The best I can do is document what I recall...

Thursday, 7th January 2016

The fire had apparently started somewhere North of us the previous day at 7.25 am. Next morning, smoke could be seen rising in the distance, quite a common sight throughout an Australian Summer. We thought: considering conditions and temperatures, it was bound to happen; good job it isn't closer. The chatter of a helicopter's rotors was approaching and we went out to look, imagining it to be the rescue chopper coming in to land at the nearby hospital, probably to pick up or drop off a patient. It turned out to be what we know as a helitack, one of those aircraft that suck up water from a dam or similar and drop the load on a fire. It headed North into a pall of smoke that had intensified, obliterating the sky and the landscape beyond the town.



I know we should have had the radio on, but we rarely use it, not since settling in a town which we thought would be pretty safe from any disaster. So we failed to hear the bushfire alerts that were already being broadcast. It wasn't until our son drove in around midday that we realised

how dire the situation had become. He was surprised we were in ignorance, saying: "Haven't you heard? We've got to get out!"

Grab 'n' Go was the immediate thought and the essential bags were in the car within a minute. Another check of the sky and I figured there was still time to pile in spare clothes, some food, extra water and whatever else we could think of that might be needed. "What about your guitar?" my wife asked, "You've had it since forever." I think my reply shocked her: "I can always buy another guitar. Leave it." I eventually conceded and tossed it on the back seat of the car. In hindsight, I'm glad I did: it helped more than just us to get through the worrying days to come.



Mid-afternoon the helitacks had begun re-fuelling on the football oval at the end of our street, one after another. It really was getting bad. Maybe we ought to go. Our next-door neighbour had decided to, but was worried for her husband who insisted on staying. We reassured her leaving was the best thing she could do; and our grand daughter added: "Don't worry about him. When it's time, I'll drag him out if I have to."

5pm and we were still there, hanging on till the last minute, ready to defend our home, despite being aware that this was probably a forlorn hope. I knew we needed to eat and decided to make the evening meal while there was still a semblance of daylight through the smoke haze. It had to be on the gas hob - electrical power had died hours before. Dirty dishes had to be left soaking - not ideal, but there was no hot water and time was running short. My main concern was for my wife, and for our grand daughter who had only recently qualified for her driver's licence. With little experience behind her, and being stressed into the bargain, I preferred the drive to be in daylight. It wasn't to be. The smoke hid what remained of the sun. A final check - the clouds visible from the back fence had taken on a red hue; no flames yet, but they were there, somewhere below! "That's us," I declared, "We're going."



The trip wasn't a problem. By then, the roads were deserted and we knew where we were going, up to a point anyway. Once close to our destination, my wife contacted our neighbour on the mobile and she gave us final directions to her daughter's place in Peppermint Grove Beach, a place I didn't recall ever visiting before. Strange the irrelevant thoughts that pop into your head at such times. They ceased to matter when we eventually found the right roads which, fortunately, weren't crowded with kangaroos as we were led to expect - I guess they'd all gone to bed. Perhaps we should have followed suit, but we were so relieved to be out of danger and needed to relax. I'm not sure what time we crashed that night, but it would have been later than normal, one word that had ceased to be meaningful for us.

Friday, 8th January 2016

It was weird to wake up in a strange bed, trying to gather thoughts fuzzy with snippets of a fantasy that had actually happened. Our usual routine went by the board. Checking website emails was hopeless with little or no signal; and there was no time for that anyway, having to answer text after text on the mobiles from people wanting to know how we were faring. Once that was done, everything went flat - nothing to do but wait for the latest radio news, plus relayed messages from a few who had stayed in the fire zone to defend properties. Much of this

information was conflicting - the fire's here; no, it's gone past; the visitor's centre is on fire; the Cookernup store's gone... We didn't know what to believe, and it was increasingly hard as the day dragged on. All we wanted was to go home, but the roads remained closed and even if we had been permitted on them, fuel was becoming scarce.

Evening eventually came. We dined with strangers who became friends we shall never forget and will be forever grateful to. Sitting outside under stars that we couldn't see a night before, we got to talking and joking. That's the way it is, especially for Aussies - forget the strife for the moment and have a laugh. Then someone said: "Go get your guitar and we'll have a sing-song." I don't perform in public, but this was for friends, people who'd opened up their home for us without a second thought. So I did it. I played and sang, everyone joined in, and I like to think that I was giving something back for the generosity extended to us. And, do you know what? Not one person either noticed or cared when I hit a bum note!

Saturday, 9th January 2016

Another day, another wait, more newscast listening, and then more waiting. The family we were staying with went to the beach as they seemed to do most days - parents, kids and dogs. They couldn't seem to understand why we declined to join them. We had no interest in it, you see. This was no holiday for us; merely an imposed exile that we wanted to return from - enjoyment would come later, if we were lucky. When night deigned to fall it started out tentatively the same as before, except for some late arrivals joining the throng - two family members on their way home to Melbourne; always assuming they could make it back to catch their flight from Perth via a 3 hour detour, and then some. Did they add a spark, or what? The sing-song turned into a very, very amateur, noisy and exuberant cabaret with everyone contributing. Did we make fools of ourselves? Yes. Did anyone care? Definitely not.

Sunday, 10th January 2016

There was negative news from the radio, but mobile conversations from real people disagreed - the danger's over; we're home now; you can get through via back roads. Maybe I was being over-cautious, but I said no: I couldn't afford to risk my family's safety based on the say-so of individuals who possibly had no-one that they were immediately responsible for. So, I said we'd wait a bit longer. Our neighbours, the ones whose family had given us shelter, decided they were going to chance it - did we want to follow them in convoy? I stuck obstinately to my guns - thanks, but no thanks: we'll wait. No problem with that - by then we were becoming experts! An hour or so later we heard that one of the two main highways was open, but only for those who could prove that they were residents of the town they were heading for.

It took less time to pack than it had when we were preparing for our exodus. No mystery - we were going home; hopefully. Approaching the police road block was a worry, not really knowing whether the advice we had received was fact or simply wishful thinking on someone's part. Up ahead were a couple of cops at the roadside; and as we drew closer, we were wondering: will they let us through, or turn us back? Hey, this was one time when you truly appreciate those boys in blue. A quick glance at the driving licences, a comforting smile of genuine understanding and it was: "Welcome back home. Just keep your radio on."

The drive down the main street of town was peculiar. On a normal Sunday most of the shops are closed, but the two supermarkets open; so there are always people around and a few cars parked at the roadside. I think we saw one vehicle and maybe three or four pedestrians: it was almost a ghost town. Closer to home that changed - cars and utes in driveways, folk wandering in and out and around their gardens as if nothing had happened. At that point it seemed like a bad dream, but we knew it was for real as did everyone else. Now that we are just on "Watch and Act" we realise it isn't over yet; but the power's back on and we can begin life again in a country town that proved it could withstand whatever Nature threw at it.

Many will now be thinking that they could have stayed - no buildings in the township were damaged, so what was all the fuss about? A look at media footage and the Emergency Services maps quickly dispel this naive notion. The fire came that close (1.6 kilometres). Had it been unattended there would be no town, and anyone foolish and inconsiderate enough to stay would have been lucky to survive. The only reason we did was thanks to the men and women of the combined bushfire brigades, and I'd like to finish this report with a tribute to these amazing people.

A Tribute to Our Bushfire Brigades

Firstly, let's not forget the "career firefighters" as they are called. It may be their regular job, but is a dangerous one and full praise for their invaluable contribution. However, when a bushfire strikes in Australia it is initially down to the local Bushfire Brigades. These are manned mainly by volunteers, unpaid men and women who give up their time to defend the communities in which they live; and it's no weekend hobby. Whether at home or work, they can be called out day or night at a moment's notice and are often required to be on duty for hours at a stretch. Sometimes it extends into days, risking their lives to battle blazes, able to snatch a bite of food and a short rest only if the situation allows. They accept this, as do their families and employers - bushfires are neither considerate nor convenient.



It probably isn't until a disaster of this magnitude hits that the tireless dedication of these unselfish people is truly appreciated. We hear stories of firefighters defending the homes of others while their own is reduced to ash just a couple of streets away. Amidst the chaos they have the compassion to rescue an injured possum, or cut fences so that endangered livestock at least have a chance to escape. They do more than can be asked of anyone, yet they look back on what they couldn't save and blame themselves for not doing enough. The survivors who are only here today because of the courage and determination of these True-Blue Aussies, they know this isn't true. As one of them, I felt the need to post my thanks on social media; and I'll close with those words:

Our Saviours, Our True-Blue Heroes and Heroines

We are here, alive, and our home is untouched, all thanks to you: the men and women of the Emergency Services. No-one ever doubted your courage and dedication and you delivered it in spades. Without your skill and determination, we would not be here today. There were homes you couldn't save, even lives, and you will doubtless be blaming yourselves for that. Please don't. We all know you did far more than even you expected of yourselves. If there is such a place, you have well and truly earned the key to that Heavenly City. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

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