

Remembering Black Saturday - 15th anniversary

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Content warning: This story contains information and descriptions of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, Australia and may be distressing. Reader discretion is advised.

Today marks 15 years since Black Saturday – a day that will forever be remembered for its widespread devastation and lifelong impacts on Victorians.

The Black Saturday bushfires occurred in February 2009, following a record-breaking heatwave.

Many Victorians suffered vast impacts to life and property as a result of the fires, which remain the worst bushfires in Australia's history in terms of loss of human lives.

Around 400 fires were recorded across the state that day, which ravaged more than 78 communities. Over 400,000 hectares were burnt, and thousands of homes and buildings were lost or damaged.

As smoke blanketed Victorian skies and turned them dark on that historical day, thousands of volunteers and emergency service personnel worked to protect communities right across the state.

As each year passes, the 173 lives that were lost will not be forgotten, nor will the long-lasting physical and emotional impacts on many Victorians.

15 years on, we reflect on the communities that came together in times of tragedy, pay tribute to those who risked their lives to protect others, and share the lessons that have shaped emergency response for future generations.

We sat down to hear from some of the people who were dedicated to protecting communities that day – and who continue to do so.

Here are their stories.

Black Saturday - 15 year anniversary



Rick Nugent

Emergency Management Commissioner Rick Nugent was working with Victoria Police on 7 February 2009. He clearly remembers the days leading up to Black Saturday and the predicted extreme weather conditions, following a significant heatwave the month prior.

“Saturday itself had an eerie feeling,” he says.

Commissioner Nugent says he vividly remembers saying to a colleague that morning, that the last time he remembered conditions with such significant heat and wind, was on Ash Wednesday.

“Whilst we knew it was a catastrophic day and everyone was preparing for the worst, I don’t think anyone could have foreseen what actually occurred.”

He says the police force had a significant role to play on Black Saturday and the months following. In fire impacted areas, local police responded quickly to support agencies, including helping people evacuate.

“Police had a really important role working with our agencies. There were occasions when many of our police risked their own lives to help people evacuate the area,” he says.

“Following the event, police had a really critical role to identify the many people who tragically lost their lives and inform relatives of the passing of loved ones.”

Commissioner Nugent also recalls the significant investigation into a deliberately lit fire in the Churchill area.

Reflecting on the community response during that time, he says it was something that he hadn’t seen before in his working life.

“People came from everywhere to help each other and to volunteer. The resilience and stoic nature of the community – they just get down and help – and came from right across the state and nation.”

Describing Black Saturday as a tragedy difficult to comprehend, Commissioner Nugent says, “It was a disaster so significant that 173 people lost their lives, 414 others were injured, many of them with lifetime scars and permanent injuries, and two thousand homes were burnt to the ground. The devastation was very hard to comprehend.”

“The way that communities got together, right across those fire impacted grounds, was phenomenal – supporting loved ones, neighbours and friends, and then rebuilding those communities,” he recalls.

A key thing Commissioner Nugent learnt from what he saw on Black Saturday, as well as in the more recent 2019-20 fires, is the importance of leaving early.

“Knowing where you live, what the fire risk is and leaving early – don’t wait until the last minute. Your home, your possessions can be replaced – lives can’t. There will be people 15 years on that are still grieving loved ones that perished on that day.”

“Have your fire plan ready, know your conditions and don’t rely on one source of emergency information.”

Over the past 15 years, there has been significant reform undertaken in the emergency management sector.

“Widespread reforms that have supported our preparation and prevention activities for emergencies, in particular fires, in this state. Our warnings and public information system has significantly matured, ensuring we get timely and accurate information out to communities to enable them to make those decisions.”

He says the exercising, planning and preparation by local councils, communities and all of the agencies has also matured in the years since.

During Black Saturday and the months following, Commissioner Nugent witnessed the dedication and strength of Victorian emergency services.

“I was incredibly proud of the efforts, commitment and professionalism of our police workforce at a really difficult time, and of all the agencies that put their lives on the line to keep communities safe.”

“I’m enormously grateful for all of those people for what they did on Black Saturday, and what they have continued to do since.”

Allyson Lardner

Allyson Lardner is the current Assistant Commissioner State Operations at Emergency Management Victoria. In 2009, she worked for the Department of Sustainability and Environment and lived in Horsham in western Victoria.

On Black Saturday, Allyson wasn’t on duty – she was home with her two young children. Her partner and a number of her friends and colleagues were out on the fireground.

She recalls seeing a black cloud of smoke at the end of her street, when she “kicked into gear”.

“My house, with myself and my children, was pretty much in the middle of the fireground on the outskirts of Horsham,” she says.

“We had made very deliberate, careful decisions to stay at home as our property was prepared. The fire did come quite close – it came to our back fence. With the help of our neighbours and CFA, it didn’t make it into any of our properties. Very fortunate from that perspective.”

Allyson says she took the strength of community for granted when she lived in Horsham.

“The resilience that communities have and the support - everyone came out to help each other. In hindsight, that is quite special. Not every community has that, and that is certainly one of the strengths out in regional Victoria,” she says.

“As a sector, we have tried to leverage that strength and build off it.”

Another key aspect Allyson has seen evolve since Black Saturday is the timeliness and accuracy of information for communities.

“Not just in warnings, but also accuracy of information about what’s going on, situational awareness and making sure that information is getting to the right people in the right places,” she says.

On reflection of the day, Allyson expresses how proud she is of her now-adult children.

“I gave them jobs to do, and they stayed home with me and did it. My eldest was on phone duty and still remembers answering the phone,” she says.

Allyson says her experience on Black Saturday contributed to who she is today.

“I think it collectively makes you who you are over time – being able to put all of that together with your experiences and learn from it – and be able to contribute into the sector and society.”

“Take those opportunities and learn from those experiences, and hopefully you can put them into something to make things better.”

Chris Hardman

Chris Hardman was the night shift Incident Controller for the Bunyip Ridge Track fire in Bunyip State Park, which was already burning before Black Saturday. Chris’ colleague David Nugent was the day shift Incident Controller for the fire.

On the Monday following Black Saturday, Chris transitioned to Deputy Incident Controller for the Kinglake-Murrindindi complex, based at Kangaroo Ground.

“Black Saturday began at midnight when I was on duty. I had been on those fires since Thursday – when we had 43 degrees, 41 degrees and then eventually 47 degrees on Black Saturday. The thing that was occupying my mind throughout those days was the unimaginable ferocity of this fire, and how it would unfold,” he says.

He remembers the “incredible intensity” of the fire as it moved through the landscape.

“I recall at 3 am, I had firefighters down by the Bunyip River and we had 30 metre flame height backing down a hill towards the river, which at that time in the morning was extraordinary,” he says.

“We didn’t have enough time to suppress that fire and I made the decision to evacuate those firefighters and get them into a safe location, but understanding that did put a lot more fire in the landscape and that fire was likely to have devastating impacts the following day.”

“Once we realised the implications of what this single day was, they will stay with us for the rest of our lives.”

The fires on Black Saturday and the days following had ongoing impacts on Chris’ mental health.

“For me, I really struggled. Although I was working on the Bunyip Ridge Track fire, the worst nine days of my life were working on the Kinglake complex, where I was attending a range of community meetings and people were asking me really unanswerable questions,” he says.

Chris turned to clinical support from psychologists to help him during that time.

“I had what I thought was going to be lifelong impacts on my ability to do my job.”

“Having that psychological support helped me work through why I was feeling the way I was feeling, and what impact Black Saturday had on me – and realise that it was a completely normal reaction to going through such a traumatic event,” he says.

After a few years had passed, Chris decided to return to bushfire management.

“I thought, I can’t let that experience go to waste. On the back of my experience on Black Saturday and other fires, I can continue to provide a service to the community.”

“Utilising that devastating experience, once I got through the trauma and had the help I needed, I felt that I could get back in the saddle and continue to contribute to helping protect the community. I think it strengthened me.”

Over the years, Chris says the biggest improvement he has seen is the channels of information, which allows people to make better decisions.

In his current role, Chris is the Chief Fire Officer of Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) and takes everything he learnt from that time into supporting our current firefighters.

“I need to know that the training, skills, capability and support of the people we put in front of these fires is the best it can be.”

When asked what he is most proud of during Black Saturday, Chris says the way agencies and communities collaborated.

“I saw the best of people in terms of working in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and the way people collaborated and worked together for the betterment of the whole community,” he says.

“That’s a continued strength – I’m really proud to be part of the sector in Victoria. We have this mantra, ‘we work as one’ – it’s not a slogan, it’s true. Today, it doesn’t matter what colour your uniform is. There is a group of people who wake up every day with a view of putting the community at the centre of their

thinking and protect and support communities in the most difficult of times.”

David Nugent

Parks Victoria Director of Fire, Emergency and Enforcement David Nugent was the Incident Controller for the Bunyip Ridge fire on Black Saturday, based out of the Pakenham Incident Control Centre (ICC). He took over from Chris Hardman who had worked overnight.

Part of the planning by the ICC was around supporting communities north of the Princes Highway, from the edges of Melbourne near the Gembrook area, right through to Warragul.

Following Black Saturday and as the fires continued to burn across Victoria for weeks, David continued to work as an Incident Controller on other fires, in particular, out of the Woori Yallock ICC which supported communities around Marysville, into the Yarra Valley.

“My memory of Black Saturday is that sense of inevitability as I got up that morning. I was dealing with a fire that had been going for some days before and we had been warned about what was ahead,” he says.

“In this business, we can’t predict everything. We knew what was likely to happen – that the fire we were dealing with would continue to burn, and probably get out of control, which in fact it did.”

“But we didn’t know what else would happen that day.”

David remembers feeling shocked as he and his team began to understand the extent of the fires in other locations around Victoria.

“As the news started to come through, it was absolutely shock, uncertainty and sadness once we started to know that many people had lost their lives.”

After David finished his shift on Black Saturday, he drove home to the Yarra Valley, where he saw a horizon of fire.

“That responsibility that many of us have in having to do our job to help manage these emergencies, but then go home at a personal level and have to deal with that was something I encountered. There were days afterwards where I was in a situation that we ask the community, whether they should stay or go – so I had to deal with that myself, but then also continue to do my job.”

David says the Royal Commission process allowed for a very detailed look at how the event unfolded.

“Since Black Saturday, we needed to look at what happened and why, and what we could do about it, so we could avoid the extent of tragedy and loss of life in the future. It has resulted in us being able to save lives, there’s no doubt about that.”

“We’ve spent an enormous amount of time and effort into developing how we better tell the community what is happening during emergencies so they can make decisions, and help us, as agencies, respond and save lives.”

The Black Saturday bushfires highlighted the enormity of the job that emergency services have – something David says he continually reflects on.

“Black Saturday was something that many of us had never experienced before. It was a wake-up call for us to understand the potential of what can happen. We know that these events will continue to happen in the future – that highlights the importance and challenges of what we do.”

Although difficult to reflect on the day itself, David says it is important to acknowledge the life-saving work of emergency services.

“We planned, prepared and responded in a way that helped many people and the communities that were at risk. We had a great team of people – everyone is absolutely committed to what we do when we come together to fight fires.”

“I’m really proud that I can play a role in bringing those people together, ultimately with the outcome to save people’s lives.”

Reegan Key

Reegan Key was also working within the Pakenham ICC on Black Saturday.

She was in the Information Unit and says their ICC was lucky in a sense, as the fire they were managing was already burning.

“Our fire started on the Wednesday in Bunyip State Park, so we were working on it well in advance of Black Saturday. We had firefighters on the ground and had time to map out, with the predicted conditions, where we thought the fire was going to go, and which communities were likely to be impacted. So, in that context, we were lucky,” she says.

Reegan explains they were able to use the systems, processes and information available to spend time talking to communities prior to the day.

“Our biggest day aside from Black Saturday was the day before, when we ran six or seven community meetings, talking to each and every one of those communities about what was coming,” she says.

In reflection, Reegan says the predictions were accurate, as the fire escaped Bunyip State Park in the afternoon.

“We thought we would be in trouble if it came out too much earlier. We were able to stop the fire at certain points, before it got to the Princes Highway,” she says.

“We didn’t lose any lives. We lost multiple houses and properties were damaged, and the impact on communities was still really significant, but in reflecting on what happened that day in a lot of other areas, we were lucky.”

She recalls they didn’t realise the extent of impacts across the state until the evening.

“The moment we realised how big that day was, was during the news, as we had been working since 7 am and for three days prior on this fire – and you’re in the zone and focused on the communities you’re working with.”

Reegan says she left home on the Wednesday before Black Saturday and didn't have a break until Labour Day, as some communities remained under constant threat with fires continuing to burn for weeks.

"Black Saturday and the days following still sit in my mind. The experience and work that followed with communities, and the resilience of those communities during that time, really stays with me."

Looking back at how Black Saturday affected her, Reegan says, "The main reflection I have is that this is my job now."

"VicEmergency exists now because of Black Saturday. The work we do every day is to continue to build and improve how we provide information during emergencies, and how we better prepare people in Victoria for all different types of emergencies."

Dawn Hartog

Dawn is one of Victoria's Public Information Officers, working at a state level, as well as regionally and at incident when emergencies occur. She currently works in the water emergency management space and has strong ties to CFA, as a board member and also as captain of the Toolangi Fire Brigade.

Dawn had been working at the State Control Centre (SCC) for a number of weeks leading up to Black Saturday. The day before, she recalls seeing the hands shaking of the person giving the weather report of what the day could bring.

She made the decision to go home to be with her family in Kinglake at the end of her shift, and not be at the State Control Centre on the 7th of February.

"In hindsight, I'm really thankful I was home with family and friends, as I was able to successfully defend my home, and that of my friends and neighbours around me."

Dawn says she got up early on Black Saturday and put the last actions into place to prepare their home, with the knowledge from the weather reports the previous day.

"Seeing a big cloud of smoke – that was when it became real. We knew what we had to do, theoretically, and as the day unfolded and the sky became darker and embers started coming into the backyard, it was eye-opening."

"I locked into 'I have a job to do, and I need to do it', and that's how I was for the rest of the evening. I had a responsibility that I felt," she recalls.

Dawn reflects on the now central focus of Public Information across emergency management.

"It has always been an area we have put warnings out and communicated with the public for a long time, but it has been great to see over the last 15 years how it has evolved, and how it is front and centre of decision-making."

Looking back, Dawn says she has always put the community at the centre of how she works but since Black Saturday, she is able to see things from a different perspective.

“Being home and having been a community member on the day, as well as emergency management personnel, I’m able to see it from the community’s point of view.”

Dawn is most proud of how she and her colleagues operate across the emergency management sector.

“I’m really proud of when the chips are down and things are tough, to see how everyone bands together and drops their badge or logo and focuses on what needs to occur.”

“Personally, it has really heightened my passion for the sector, the area and what we do.”

Jacqui Thurgood

On Black Saturday, Jacqui Thurgood was rostered on to work a night shift in the State Control Centre as a Warnings and Advice Officer.

“February 7 was a day of dread. It came towards the end of a really heavy fire season and was about the fourth day into Victoria’s most extreme heatwave on record. We knew it was going to be really bad. My dad was at the wheel of a CFA truck for a couple of weeks in Gippsland leading up to it.”

“Waking up on that day in inner city Melbourne, it was 46 degrees. I couldn’t see in front of me because it was so smoky, and the wind was blowing an absolute gale,” she says.

She recalls realising throughout her shift that the scale of what they were facing was uncharted territory.

“That night shift, it felt like it reached a point where we all realised, we were well outside our lived experience – the systems, processes and our experiences had been surpassed.”

“A memory that really sticks with me that night was the silence in the room when the police came out to say they believed the scale of the loss of life was really significant. I remember there was around 200 of us in the room – and there was just silence.”

Jacqui remembers everyone in the centre being focused and doing their best, but she says it felt like it wasn’t enough.

“We just couldn’t get the information out to people fast enough – and even if we did, the scale of the event and the consequences were just so big.”

“I feel really proud that everybody absolutely did their best – and everyone kept turning up to do their best. Even though Black Saturday was one day, it was at the end of a very heavy fire season, so people had been coming in for shifts for months at that point,” she says.

Jacqui also feels proud to have been part of the Royal Commission.

“The Royal Commission was a huge undertaking. We are lucky that when something of such significance occurs, the time and care is taken to go through in detail how we can try and avoid that happening again – so that was a really important thing to be part of.”

After some years had passed and following a break from emergency management while on maternity leave, Jacqui remembers how she felt when she returned to the SCC.

“It was healing, because it was so radically different. We had learnt and changed – particularly in the Information Unit. The priority given to getting actionable information to communities now almost feels on par with getting a truck on the scene.”

“Getting people the information they need is so powerful.”

John Cheevers

On Black Saturday, John Cheevers was a volunteer firefighter with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and working on Greenvale Tanker 1, deployed to Humevale and surrounding areas. It was early on in his volunteer career.

“We learnt a lot that day – we had trained and were well prepared – but we still learnt a lot.”

“The preparation before the day, I don’t think we could have done any more, but no one could have prepared us for the actual day,” he says.

John and his strike team got the call up around 4 pm.

“We were ready – we had been waiting in case we were called. We were deployed to the staging area, and we could see the smoke in the hills,” he says.

He recalls a number of near misses over the course of the day, including when his team had to go into full shelter mode while they were on the back of the truck.

“The roar of the fire was so loud. When the fire front hits, it takes all the oxygen. I was having trouble breathing and was down on my knees below the heat shield for protection,” he says.

Before deploying, his crew leader told them the signal to go into protection mode was when the horn blew three times.

“I heard the horn blow. I looked at my colleagues and they were still fighting the fire. I grabbed them and we went into protection mode.”

John and his colleagues pulled the fire barrier curtain over themselves, and the only thing they could do was wait until the fire passed.

“We had no communication with the crew leader or the cabin,” he recalls.

“Eventually, we drove down the road. They stopped the truck and got out to pull the protection back and said, ‘thank god you’re still there’ – they didn’t know we were still on the back of the truck.”

Looking back, John remembers his team was able to rescue a family in Humevale, when fire ravaged their property.

“We managed to get them out, but they lost their home. We were lucky to be there at the right time for the family. The three people we rescued were the grandfather, father and son, so three generations from the one family.”

John credits Black Saturday as his motivation for the path of his career, now working in the SCC.

“I wanted to be able to do more. I wanted to work in roles that had more value for the community. After Black Saturday, I always wanted to work in the State Control Centre,” he says.

“As you get older, there’s less you can do on a fire truck but still plenty I can do from here.”