

PERSONAL REFLECTION ON A 'CATOSTROPHIC' FIRE IN CANBERRA ON 18 JANUARY 2003

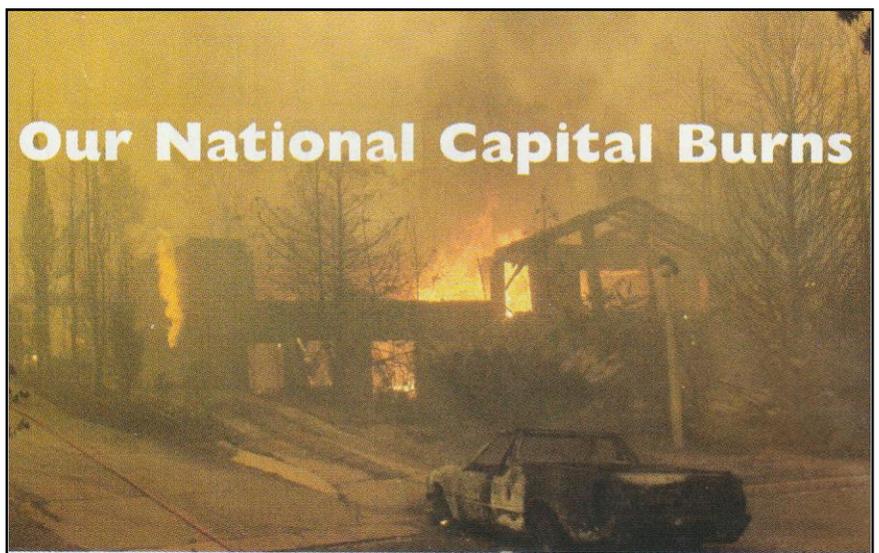
Considering the recent fires in Australia, including Canberra, I reflected on January 2003 when Ann & I were living in HOLT, on the western edge of Canberra. A fire that started in New South Wales, west of Canberra, swept past HOLT to Lake Burley Griffin and the Tuggeranong Valley.

On 8th January 2003 a dry lightning storm between Canberra and Yass started 4 fires in the NSW National Park across the ACT border. There was only in-effective water-bombing done to control the original fires. The ACT Government asked the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to extinguish the fires because history showed previous fires in that area had impacted Canberra when there were many less suburbs and houses in the western and southern parts of Canberra, and weather predictions indicated that the fires could flare up and head towards Canberra the following weekend. These small lightning strike fires weren't extinguished.

On the morning of Saturday 18 January 2003 I drove a kilometre west of our home in Holt and observed wisps of smoke in the NSW National Park on the other side of the Murrumbidgee River, with a sheep property between the National Park and the river. There was no wind and the fires didn't seem serious.

Camille & Colin Ducker were visiting us that afternoon, when, at about 3:00pm the emergency sirens sounded on all the TV and radio stations that were on, and we could also hear these sirens coming from surrounding homes. Programs were interrupted to advise a fire was sweeping across Canberra. A north-westerly wind before the predicted southerly wind change greatly expanded the small fires on the NSW side of the Murrumbidgee River. We went outside to see a huge plume of black smoke to the south of our home that had sweep past our suburb before the sirens sounded, but Holt was lucky as the fire missed the suburb by about 500 metres.

The toll from this fire was 4 deaths, 435 people injured, 491 houses plus other buildings destroyed or severely damaged, including the renowned Mt. Stromlo Observatory, approx. 70% of the ACT's pastures, pine forests, and nature parks severely damaged, at a loss of \$350 million. Two homes in the north Belconnen suburbs were destroyed by burning 'embers'.



After this 'catastrophic' fire, because there were still fires burning in the NSW National Park, our suburb HOLT was put into lockdown for 10 days as another weather change was predicted to do the same further north. This meant we couldn't leave the suburb and we had to block the house downpipes, fill the gutters with water, and regularly hose the house and yard a number of times per day to keep them wet. The suburbs under threat were allowed to clear as

much material as they wanted to and take it to the green waste recycling centre in Holt at no cost. The ACT Government ensured our local shops in the suburb had all the supplies we needed during those 10 days, including hoses for all outside taps, essential in extinguishing embers. The Australian Army used massive bulldozers to create a wide bare earth fire break on the western & southern edges of HOLT and other nearby north-western suburbs.

The problem after the fire was that insurance was paid out on the value of the policy before the fire, but clearing and re-construction costs almost doubled, so many people cleared their blocks and sold it without re-building a house.

After this fire I was seconded to a committee of many community groups to work with the ACT Government to help the recovery of Canberra from this fire. I represented Lions Clubs and Lions Youth Haven and learnt many details about the results of the fire.

After being told that they were safe to remain in their houses, residents who stayed witnessed winds up to 200 km/h, temperatures up to 1,100°C, exploding houses and trees, fire rivers & tornadoes, & flying roofs. Four people died during the fire, 491 houses were destroyed (approx. 400 in one suburb), and an emergency services complex of police, ambulance, fire brigade & rural fire service in the Tuggeranong Valley was destroyed while all the emergency workers were out attending this 'catastrophic' fire. Hundreds of hectares of grazing land and commercial pine forests were also burnt, and over 100 people were rescued by other residents rather than the emergency services.



This fire lifted burning branches into the atmosphere, with some landing alight between Bungendore & Braidwood (25km to 60km east from Canberra). The local Rural Fire Services had been called out because of their knowledge of what happened in previous fires. A major area of pine forests burnt out west of Lake Burley was cleared and the 'National Arboretum' was established, a positive outcome of this fire.

"Lions Youth Haven" in the Tuggeranong Valley was the last area to be burnt by that part of the fire before a southerly wind change turned this arm of the fire north towards Mt. Taylor to



meet another arm of the fire heading south past Mt. Taylor. (Photo to right by David Robson)

The intriguing thing was that Lions Youth Haven had been cleared of stock (horses & cattle), the buildings watered, then abandoned before the fire struck, but all of the old buildings were burnt to the ground while the new buildings weren't even singed. Also, underground thick plastic water pipes melted, metal 'star' picket fence posts became malleable and laid over onto the ground due to the high temperatures, some metal fence wire burned to ash, kangaroos and other native animals were incinerated to ashes, and eucalypt trees, some of which were huge old trees, were twisted around by tornado type winds and exploded over a wide area.

From the time the fire erupted in NSW, west of the suburb of Holt where we lived, and the parts of the fire that impacted the suburbs, the fire split into those two parts west of Lake Burley Griffin with the westerly part reaching Lions Youth Haven at the northern end of the Tuggeranong Valley where a 'southerly' wind change turned this fire front north along Kambah Pool Road towards Mt. Taylor where it met the other part of the fire that had crossed the Molonglo River heading south to Mt. Taylor, these two parts of the fire extinguished themselves when both parts of the fire reached black / burnt ground created by the other part of this 'catastrophic' fire. These two arms of the fire took approximately 30 minutes from ignition to self-extinction.

The pasture and bushland, shown on the map above in grey, continued to burn.

No person or organisation had any influence on the two parts of this 'catastrophic' fire, which impacted the suburbs, after it ignited west of Holt and self-extinguished at Mt. Taylor, except that the original small lightning strike fires 10 days previously hadn't been extinguished.

David ROBSON

