

2019-2020 Fire Season – Mick's Notes

22/11/19 - I first received reports that a lightning strike had caused ignition of a fire on top of Square Rock near the Colong Dingo Sanctuary. The NSW RFS AIRS Crew were attending and reported that it would be wrapped up before end of day.

23/11/19 – 25/11/19 - Commenced working with NPWS as Deputy Incident controller based at Oakdale Air Base. Assisted with coordination and dispatch of resources and Aviation Radio Operator for multiple aircraft.

26/11/19 – After overnight storm activity and multiple lightning strikes additional ignitions were detected, The Peaks Fire, Green Wattle Creek Fire and Butchers Creek Fire, the latter 2 being named and plotted by me. Over the next few days operations ramped up as we struggled to find resources due to the northern fire season already in full swing. I spent many hours flying gathering intel, mapping the fires and in between, acting as ARO (Aviation Radio Operator).

28/11/19 – 3/12/19 - Still working with NPWS, the IMT had escalated, we were currently Brimstone Control and the decision was made to fall back to broader containment strategies and operations relocated to Yerranderie where we became Yerranderie Div Com. Over the next few days resources and logistics were arranged to put in containment lines around the assets associated with Yerranderie. There were many times, when due to the extreme temps and low humidity fire broke out within the village and everyone scrambled to extinguish what was essentially our safe refuge. I remember jumping on a spare cat 1 with an unknown helicopter crewman and extinguishing spot fires on Yerranderie air strip, we worked together frantically for a few hours before the situation forced us in different directions and I still don't know to this day who it was or his name. Due to a lot of sweat and sheer determination, Yerranderie was saved however the Green Wattle Creek Fire could not be stopped and all resources were forced to withdraw and continue to fall back to broader containment, by the time we left Yerranderie all fires had joined and the complex was now known as the Green Wattle Fire.

4/12/19 – 11/12/19 – After relocating from Yerranderie the NPWS Team I had commenced with headed further south and I returned to Oakdale Brigade as Captain. The fire was now on Lacey's Tableland and the threat of the fire crossing the stored water and impacting Oakdale and Nattai was significant. On the night of the 4th December the fire did exactly that. The fire crossed just North of the SADA Coal Washery quickly climbed the escarpment and smashed through the Northern parts of Oakdale, particularly Steveys Forest, Ridge and New Jerusalem Roads. I along with Oakdale Brigade members, most of who this was their first fire worked tirelessly over the next 48 hours surrounded by towering flames protecting our village with the assistance of many other out of area units. Amazingly no lives or houses were destroyed just sheds, fences etc. However this was just the beginning and the Brigade worked around the clock for the next 6 days as fingers of the fire ran up valleys and gullies threatening different parts of our village all whilst we were trying to burn control lines in an attempt to direct the fire away from the Southern part of Oakdale, Lakesland and beyond. I could not have been prouder of the Brigade as a Team during this time.

Edit 1 – I was very disappointed with IMT when the fire impacted Oakdale, I have an intimate knowledge of Oakdale and Nattai, I had spent countless hours developing Pre Incident plans however I was not included in any of the control/command/planning at this stage of the fire despite my repeated offer. It was frustrating hearing Officers from outside Brigade area trying to locate properties and plan evacuations with no local knowledge, I hope in future this is rectified.

Remote Operation - Old Cedar Road

11/12/19 -14/12/19 – Sometime around the 10 or 11th I was contacted by Operations and RAFSO regarding a very daring Remote operation they wished to conduct to attempt to stop the Green wattle Fire spreading further to the North. The task involved transporting crews via boat from Warragamba Dam to Cedar Road Point on the Cox's River Arm of the stored water, in addition Cat 9's were going to be ferried in to allow us to conduct a tactical backburn from Scott's Main Range to Cedar Road Point.

Due to the mammoth logistics and the time required to barge the Cat 9 to Cedar Road Point we only received one Cat 9, by the time we had all equipment unloaded and a base camp set up it was early evening, I briefed the team and the decision was made to commence burning from Scott's Main Range in 2 hour shifts, 2 crew at a time, we worked around the clock and managed to successfully and safely backburn 6klm with only 1 cat 9. Eventually Scott's Main Range was cleared by heavy plant and we were relieved by a strike team late on the 13th, they assisted with burning around Butchers Hut and water monitoring equipment. Remaining RAFT crews camped 1 more night before handing over to incoming strike team (air lifted in) and returning to Warragamba Dam.

The RAFT members involved in this operation still claim this to be the most unique task they have ever been involved with and I am very happy and proud to have led this remote op.

Edit 1 – During this Op I was able to travel to the remote property "The Shack" owned by Guntawang Catholic Bushwalkers and the historic "Kowmung Lodge" Not only was I amazed to find all the structures intact but I also had phone service and called the owners to notify them who promptly broke down and cried in relief, a very emotional moment amongst the chaos, it would be 12-18 months before the owners could return to this property.

Edit 2 – Sometime late on the 14th I received notification that the Strike Team had lost control of their burn and the entire area was burnt out!! (not the property in edit 1) This was very disappointing.

15/12/19 – 24/11/19 – The next 10 days I returned to Oakdale Brigade and we ran back to back shifts, a lot of time was spent in Nattai due to the topography and shifting winds, it came under threat a number of times and it was extremely challenging to make safe. Many times, spot fires broke out in unburnt pockets of Oakdale threatening varying properties and preventing our crews from dropping their guard, it was relentless. During this time crews joined strike teams and travelled over Warragamba Dam to contain a large spot fire that had crossed the Warragamba Channel. Oakdale crews also completed shifts in Buxton, Balmoral, Hilltop and Colo Vale.

On the 24th December our crew stood down from 33 days continuous firefighting to conduct a Santa Run for our exhausted community. This was extremely well received.

Remote Operation – Jenolan Caves

25/12/19 – 28/12/19 – On Christmas Day 2019 I was contacted by Operations to organise a crew for a Remote Task in the Jenolan Caves area, we were to fly out of Picton Air Base in Wildcat Helicopter HT 274 and travel to Oberon to pick up NPWS Cat 9's for a tactical backburn in rugged terrain for the protection of Jenolan Caves. On the morning of the 26/12/19 I met my crew at Picton Air Base and assisted with packing the aircraft, we were also transporting welfare to other crews working in the area, we lifted and tracked towards Oberon, as we crossed Burragorang Valley the smoke enveloped us and visibility reduced to a point where the pilot was unable to continue, we were forced to turn back however visibility was very poor and we actually discussed alternate options which included landing in the bush at next available location.

With the pilot circling from ridge top to ridge top and gradually making our way back visibility improved enough to fly directly back to Picton Air Base where we unloaded and made arrangements to drive to Hampton via RFS bus and meet up with NPWS Crews to be tasked. On arrival at Hampton we were unable to locate or contact anyone, so we continued towards Jenolan Caves until we met up with NPWS crews. We were briefed by Div Com who asked how we planned to travel down 4WD access road in our bus, this task was quickly abandoned due to the steepness of terrain and insufficient resources, we were then tasked to drive to Jenolan Caves and await re tasking.

On arrival at Caves House I met with senior NPWS officers and local RFS and became involved in planning strategy to protect Jenolan Caves assets and sensitive ecology. Some of this strategy was used and I am extremely happy to know that Jenolan Caves (other than a few minor outbuildings and the RFS Station) survived. We were accommodated in Caves House and issued a free Ice Cream. The next morning, we travelled to Oberon NPWS Office and swapped our bus for 3 NPWS Cat 9's, our new tasking was to assist with strategic back burn along the Black Range Road to the East towards Cox's River. We returned home on the 28/12/19.

29/12/19 – 3/1/20 – On the 29th I was asked to go on RART Standby at Bankstown Airport which was uneventful and a great opportunity to get some rest. The next few days was blacking out hotspots around Oakdale and Nattai with my New Year's Eve being spent on Fire Trail W5 Erskine Range Trail continuing with containing the spot over.

The Dallawang Incident

4/1/20 – 5/1/20 – On the morning of the 4th January 2020 I departed Oakdale Station as Crew Leader of Oakdale 1, we met up with a Strike Team at Warragamba Dam prior to crossing the Dam and travelled along W5 Fire trail for Dallawang Ridge (not far from McMahons Lookout). The task was to put in a tactical back burn along the Dallawang Ridge Fire Trail from a Hand tool line that had been cut down a very steep and very brushy gully

into a drain (creek) line that fed into Pearce's Creek below Dallawang Walls (Stored Water below).

When the Div Com discovered I was in the Strike Team he tasked myself and a WNSW Remote Fire Fighter to carry out a reccy of the hand tool line. We quickly determined due to the topography, fuel load and narrow hand tool trail that it would be too dangerous. This was reported to the Div Com who then asked us to identify an alternative. At this time, we were also advised another strike team was preparing a control line from the stored water to the base of the escarpment below us. After reviewing map and carrying out reccy on foot we decided to utilise the heavy plant that was with us to push a control line directly to the west out to the edge of the escarpment.

As the control line was being finalised the Div Com requested that I along with other *RFS* and WNSW Remote operators plan a control line beneath escarpment and down to stored water as others had been unsuccessful, I advised this would be difficult without actually putting feet on ground and scouting a suitable trail. The Div Com suggested we winch off the escarpment via Airs Helicopter and commence construction of control line as soon as possible in an attempt to achieve containment by nightfall. I advised that I was not adequately prepared as I had departed that morning as a truck crew and did not have any of my RAFT equipment or adequate comms plan in place. The Div Com was very persistent, and the Airs Crew were keen to attempt this. I am not sure if it was fatigue or an overwhelming urge to just be done with this fire, but I agreed to this mission even though it went against everything I had been taught and continue to teach others.

The *RFS* Helicopter was tasked, and mission was a go. As soon as I left the ground, I knew we should not have agreed to this task, I along with the initial crew and most of our equipment were winched into the incorrect location and very close to the active fire edge, I was unable to communicate with the *RFS* Crew leader as I had no comms in Helicopter. Once on the ground we gathered all the equipment, too much for 3 people to carry and quickly realised the rest of the crew were being winched into a different location. I guess it was around 1400Hrs and we decided to grab the gear bags and make our way to the other winch location, everyone of us had underestimated the terrain and vegetation, we took nearly an hour to move 100m so we decided to cache the gear on a rock and continue with minimum resources until we located the rest of the crew to assist with the gear. We had limited communications and the *RFS* Crew Leader became separated from us. Continuing on I took a tumble on loose rocks and rolled some distance down a rocky slope I was convinced I had broken my arm.

Due to the terrain it was nearly 2 Hrs before we met up with our Crew Leader and the other winch crew who had commenced cutting a line. We grouped our gear together we had no food, very limited water and no equipment for an overnight stay, not that that was really a great option as we had no way of telling where the fire front was. Progress was extremely slow and eventually we spoke with the Crew Leader and strongly suggested we abort this mission and arrange extraction before light was insufficient for winch extraction. He advised the Helicopter would not be returning and were to continue working until we reached the

waters edge. We worked until it became too dangerous due to failing light and we decided to work our way out to the waters edge where we were advised a boat would be waiting for us.

As a crew we battled on through the night in some of the most rugged and heavily vegetated terrain I can remember, we had no torches so a great deal of the way we crawled, slid, tripped and tumbled our way down rocky scree slopes, escarpments and crawled through impenetrable vines. As exhaustion took over our mental strength was put to the test. Time after time we were met with a vertical escarpment or waterfall and were forced back up the hill to try another route. It took us all night to reach the stored water where we made verbal contact with a WNSW employee who guided us out to the boats. We must have looked like members of the lost tribe, we were cut, scratched, bruised with our clothes torn.

During the boat ride back to Warragamba I radioed Operations as I had no way of getting home (I had left the previous morning in Oakdale 1) it was a little discomfoting to learn they had no idea that I was, or even why, I was out there. I ended up hitching a ride home from one of the workers from Warragamba Dam who was changing shift.

Edit 1 – By the time I got home later that morning the entire area we were extracting from was overrun by the fire, I have been in dangerous situations before and even been close to being overrun on foot during a Tasmanian deployment but thinking about this operation makes me realise what a fine line we were walking, the slightest change in our situation quite possibly would have ended in tragedy. In 2013, 19 Remote Fire Fighters (Hotshots) tragically lost their lives when overrun by fire in the US, in 2020 we were dangerously close to becoming the Dallawang 7.

Edit 2 – I later learnt that the original crew I departed with in Oakdale 1 were not advised of my location or task and when they were released at the end of their they attempted to contact myself and Div Com to find out where I was, they waited at Warragamba until midnight before going home in frustration not knowing where I was.

This was basically the end of my time on the Green Wattle Fire, I was physically and emotionally spent, I did a couple more single day RAFT jobs mopping up hot spots around High Range and Bullio around the end of January.

A lot of people did great things during that Fire Season and I am in no way trying to say I did or achieved anything different, this is just my story and experience that I do not want to forget.

As a result of the time spent assisting the community with fires and floods then Covid 19 my career of 30 odd years came to a sudden end. Luckily I commenced a new career path which is continuing well.

Mick.