

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Baptism of a novice fire fighter

Kim Fitzgerald
Probationary Firefighter

I joined the Rivers Brigade in Canberra in September of 2002 and completed my basic training by October. I had my first real operational exposure during the week preceding the Canberra fires whilst crewing a Light Tanker on an overnight shift in the Brindabella Mountains near Canberra. That night, I participated in back burning operations and the protection of Priors Hut. At that time, after experiencing significant heat, smoke and flames and the most surreal dawn, I thought I was blooded as a fire fighter.

On joining *Rivers Tanker 1-1* at Rivers brigade depot at 6 am on Saturday, 18 January 2003 it became quickly apparent we wouldn't be going up to the mountains that day but would be involved in property protection as the weather conditions deteriorated.

We started the day patrolling the Kambah Pool road and watching with fascination as the early day turned into night. The radio traffic began to increase and we heard our brother Rivers Tanker unit *Rivers 1-0* going into action at the *Huntley* property on Uriarra Road. Shortly after we were summoned to *Huntley* to assist.

As we sped to *Huntley* with sirens and lights flashing, we put on our jackets, face masks and goggles. I felt a degree of apprehension in my stomach but was surprised at my clear-headedness. On route, we were diverted to the *Winslade* property on Cotter Road. The sky continued to darken and the wind



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Kim Fitzgerald, Probationary Firefighter before the looming backdrop of the Canberra fires.

continued to pick up. On arrival, we spoke with the property owner and then proceed to a back paddock where we first witnessed the inferno burning in the Cotter Valley. A grass fire quickly came racing over the hills and three of us jumped onto the back of the truck and manned the cannon and one of the live reels. While the truck was moving along the edge of the flames, we did our best to put it out. At some stage we were dampened from above so we can only assume we were water bombed, but I certainly couldn't hear anything. My thanks to the pilot, it reassured me that we were not alone. Shortly after, flames surrounded the truck so we scampered into the truck cabin and drove onto a burnt out area.

There was no time to regroup. As soon as we could, we headed back to the homestead and prepared our defences. The property owners were doing what they could to wet down as much as possible. We had enough time to refill our tanker with water from a hydrant on Cotter Road. We placed the truck in a safe position and spread ourselves in a line with hoses in the direction from which we knew the flames would come. At one stage, I looked over my shoulder and saw a bull standing 5 metres from me. I quickly negotiated a truce with it and we agreed that he wouldn't charge at me.

It was like an old Cowboys and Indians film; as I looked through the windstorm, I could see a line of red approaching at incredible speed. We scurried back to the truck and sheltered near its front corner with our hoses gushing. I can remember thinking "I wish I had a bigger hose!" As the flames raced by, we chased after them. I am delighted to say that we saved the place.

While we were mopping up, I heard the thump thump thump of a helicopter rotor blade. Through the swirling black clouds, the *South-Care helicopter* appeared above hovering just above the treetops.

I looked up to see a couple of faces peering at me from above. I guess I should have waved at them. Again, it was such a surreal image that is burned forever into my memory.

We then heard that our Brigade depot was under attack. By the time we could get there, all but three of the cars of the members who were out fighting fires had been destroyed, including most of our crew's. The actual shed was ok but the power pole was on fire. We doused the remaining fires that might threaten the shed, filled up with water and headed off to Kambah.

The magnitude of what was happening to Canberra began to set in as we drove down the closed flame-enshrouded Parkway to Tuggeranong. On arrival at Kambah, it was just a matter of doing what we could do and where we could do it. It was heart breaking to see so many houses destroyed. We later moved to the Chapman/Duffy/Holder area. Many others with better word skills than me will no doubt describe the devastation we witnessed. There was not much left to do there.

We finally got to the staging area at Curtin around 9:00 pm, exhausted, bewildered and blackened. We found out some of our brigade members had been injured and some had suffered property losses. After several beers and several large whiskeys at home later that night, it was impossible to sleep. I had absolutely no concept of time during that day.

To the crew of Rivers 1-1: Tony Hill, Deputy Captain Rivers Brigade, crew leader and driver; crew members: Nicole King, Stephen Robey and Gerard Thrift – champions, the lot of you, you made me feel as safe as anyone could possibly feel on such a day.

To Matt Dutkiewicz, Deputy Captain and Training Officer who suffered great personal tragedy on the day; thank you for your diligence in your training of us newbies. It paid dividends for me on the Saturday. To the rest of the Rivers Brigade, it has been truly magnificent to watch the way in which you have supported one another.



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Rivers Tanker 1-1 at Kambah Pool road.