

Reflections on Tasmania's Black Tuesday 1967

Hansika Bhagani, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience

The worst bushfires in Tasmania's history, the Black Tuesday bushfires of southern Tasmania, involved 110 separate fire fronts that tore through 2640 square kilometres of land across the region. Many small towns were burned to the ground. The fires claimed 62 lives in a single day with 900 injured and thousands of people left homeless. In terms of loss of property and loss of life, Black Tuesday is considered to be one of Australia's worst disasters.

Tasmania Fire Service's Gerald Crawford was just 14 years old then and remembers 7 February 1967 well.

'I was going to high school just north of Hobart. I remember there being a lot of smoke. It was very hot and windy, but we didn't know what was going on because there was no technology like we've got these days to let people know what was happening.

'It was a very strange day in that everyone went home from school at midday. I was from a farming area and it was impacted by the fires, which would have been the same for a lot of the other boys who were at school as well. I went back to the boarding house with a few other boys not knowing whether our families and our properties were still safe.

'In most areas the phone lines were down. It was at least two, if not more, days before my mother rang. Mum let me know that our house and property were safe but one of my grandparent's farms had been completely wiped out,' he said.

Mr Crawford attributes the survival of his grandparents to luck rather than planning.

'In those days, no one had a fire plan. In country areas no one took much notice. There was the odd fire or two and they dealt with them, but large fires like that were beyond the imagination and scope of most people. In the built-up areas of Hobart and a lot of the towns that were burnt out, people there would never have imagined what happened that day.

'I went back to school and life went on the same as it normally does after a disaster event. Things started to be rebuilt and people got back to some normality. In some cases it took years and years on farming properties to get back to normality where they'd lost everything or a significant amount of stuff; to get all the fences back, stock up and running. You can't do that overnight. It takes years. And to lose 62 people in one day in a small populated area like Tasmania was a major catastrophe,' he said.

Only five years later Mr Crawford joined the Rural Fires Board; a new authority with a big mandate.

'As a result of Black Tuesday, the Rural Fires Board of Tasmania was set up. Prior to that there was no effective firefighting force for areas outside of the major metropolitan areas in Tasmania.

'There were some brigades but they were very rudimentary compared to what we've got today. The Rural Fires Board job was to set up lots of volunteer brigades across all of Tasmania, which they did very successfully. We also embarked on a very large program of putting in fire trails in different areas. As the years went on, a lot of those things just slowly went away. The volunteer system kept going but our preparations with fuel reduction burning and trail work just died off. It's only in the last two years, after the fires in Dunalley in 2013, that Tasmanians have started to put the pressure on the government to form a fuel reduction unit to look at burning off strategic areas throughout the state,' he said.

Mr Crawford's 45 years in the Tasmania Fire Service has mostly been in operations. He is set to retire later this year and is keen to reflect on the changes that have come in through increased firefighting capability and technology since Black Tuesday.

'We've certainly come a very long way since 1967. We've got a lot of programs now that our communities can become involved in. Our school fire education program teaches kids about fire safety in the home and a bit about bush firefighting. We've got our juvenile fire lighter intervention programs where we deal with kids who are lighting fires and try and put them on the right track. We've got fire safety home visits where we look at homes for elderly people and give them an assessment as to whether their home is safe and things they should do to reduce their risk in a house fire.

'We've got very good brigades in most areas. We're starting to suffer, as most other states are, in relation



Gerald Crawford, Mathew Healey, DPAC Bushfire Recovery Unit and the late Mayor of the Central Highlands, Ms Deidrie Flint OAM.

Image: Gerald Crawford

to volunteer numbers in remote areas. Fifty years ago a lot of the larger farms had a considerable number of people working on them and those people were available to join the local brigade. These days with the changes in technology and methods of farming, lots of the large farms might have only one or two people. The numbers are not there to sustain a lot of our more remote brigades,' he said.

Prior to 1967, Mr Crawford explained, the warning system for residents was rudimentary.

'The warning system was someone saw smoke, they rang the police and the police would ring the local fire warden who would make phone calls to get people to help put the fire out.

'These days we have spotter flights, we have fire towers and people with mobile phones are reporting fires.

As soon as there's a bit of smoke you can guarantee the fire is reported. On our database we can see whether that fire is one that is lit with a permit, if it's a non-permit fire, or if it's not one of those two, it's a wildfire and we can dispatch a brigade and deal with it,' he said.

Yet Mr Crawford is pragmatic about the chances of a Black Tuesday re-occurring.

'Mother Nature and fire are two things that are uncontrollable in a lot of cases. Since 1967 we've had the 2009 fires in Victoria and fires in Western Australia and NSW where people have been lost. Fires will always happen. It's a question of when. If it's getting dry, there will be more fires and those fires will be harder to contain. But people have reliable avenues now to seek advice, either from Tasmania Fire Service through the phone or online, or through local radio. The information is there, people just have to access it,' he said.

The Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC has released a free documentary that relates the incredible stories of the fires. The film was developed by the Bushfire CRC in 2005 with the support of the Tasmania Fire Service. Watch it online at www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/presentation-audio-video/3361.

The Tasmania Fire Service has a new online resource: Stories of the '67 Fires at www.67bushfires.fire.tas.gov.au.

Hosted by the Office of Emergency Management

10th AUSTRALASIAN NATURAL HAZARDS MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE PERTH | 2017

Early bird registrations are now open
Visit www.anhmc.org to register

WHEN
31 OCT - 1 NOV 2017
Workshops 30 Oct & 2-3 Nov

WHERE
PERTH
University Club of WA, UWA

Call for abstracts!

ANHMC 10 abstracts will be considered for inclusion in the Australian Journal of Emergency Management. Selected authors will be invited by the Journal to submit a written paper. For further details visit the ANHMC 10 website and click on "abstracts."

Abstract submissions are encouraged for oral presentations, posters or workshop sessions that align with the theme of ANHMC 10:

"translating research into practice"

We are seeking outstanding examples of research translated and applied in the field.

If you are a hazard or emergency management professional that is interested in presenting at ANHMC 10, abstract submissions must be submitted via the ANHMC 10 website by 1 June 2017.

www.anhmc.org