

FERN LANGMEAD

Strathewen

WE SURVIVED IN THE DAM



WE SURVIVED IN THE DAM WITH A DEER AND KANGAROOS

It is now over two months since the greatest peacetime disaster in Australian history turned my world upside-down. Black Saturday is a name that hardly does justice to the day that is etched permanently into the minds of innocent victims. But I remember it as 'Hell on Earth'.

The bushfires that devastated Victoria on the 7 February, 2009, all but wiped our tiny little community of Strathewen, from the face of the planet.

For seven generations my family have lived and worked on the land in the Valley of Ewen, and in one horrific afternoon any trace of that past, that family history, was destroyed. In the space of a heartbeat, we lost everything.

THE SMOKE TURNED THE SUN BLOOD RED!

It was around 3:00 pm when the heavy cloud of smoke that was billowing in the sky started to drift closer to home. It hung thick in the air, and I was already finding it difficult to breathe. The hellish black cloud spread over the iconic Mount Sugarloaf like a warning that none of us heeded. The smoke turned the sun blood red, whilst casting an eerie golden glow over the landscape. At this point I was alone at home, unaware of the real danger looming just beyond the mountain.

When Dad, Nyall and Earle did return home, we still weren't sure that the fire was heading for us, but we put fire overalls on, grabbed our masks and gloves, and prepared ourselves for the worst, just in case it kept coming our way. Thankfully Mum had been in hospital overnight for chemo, and due to a high temperature was unable to return home that day as planned. Rikki and Mal had also left early with Aidan, just in case things turned nasty.

I had already opened all the gates to the property so that if the fire did come, the horses would be able to run to wherever they thought was the safest place to ride it out. It probably saved their lives.

Earle took the Australian flag down and put it in his fire overalls. If we were going to survive, so was the flag.

Our fire plan was prepared should we decide to stay and defend the property, and we executed the plan perfectly. No plan though, however perfect, could have stopped that humongous fire. I'd already packed some things ready to put in the car, but by this stage it was clearly too late to evacuate, and I came to the conclusion that there was no point putting everything in the car, because it would only burn in the fire anyway. I thought the house would be safer. How wrong I was! My car made it

out of there with barely a scratch. I kick myself everyday for that. Saving something would have made the other losses a little easier to bear.

I TURNED THE CARS AROUND READY FOR THE MAD DASH!

The smoke and embers hit us long before the fire did. The boys were trying frantically to stamp out any embers that came close to the house whilst Dad got the pumps ready, and I turned the cars around ready for the mad dash to the dam..... In case it came to that!

Dad got a call from work, saying that the fire had jumped containment lines in Humevale, and that it was heading straight for us. This was the first warning of the fire coming our way, and the only time we knew that we were in danger. Within two short minutes, the fire was on us. An uncontrollable wild animal of a fire, roaring like 50 jungle lions, suddenly confronted us.

WE WERE CORNERED!

The flames rose higher than the mature gums on the mountain, in a fire engine red tornado. Like the greatest nightmare of hell, the smoke turned day into night, and spot fires were igniting everywhere. Down the driveway and up the top of the hills on either side of us, it came rushing towards us. We were cornered. The wind was blowing with a hellish fury in all directions, and the heat was so intense we had to shield our faces to breathe.

We had no time to look for pets, neighbours, or even each other. We could only scream over the roar to get to the cars as there was no choice but to make a run for it. We could never defend ourselves with hoses and sprinklers against that nightmare inferno.

I heard Dad scream at us to get to the cars, so we ran screaming for Earle as we did, because he had made his way to the front of the house, and we couldn't see him anywhere. There was nothing we could do except try to save ourselves, and each other.

DAD WAS SCREAMING!

With pounding hearts we made our mad dash to the dam in the cars. Dad was screaming over the roar of the fire to slow down as I nearly ran up the back of Nyall. We drove into the paddock, then parked by the bank, and ran for the water, only stopping to remove our boots. We threw our wallets and phones onto the bank of the dam hoping they would be there if we survived, so we could call Mum and tell her we made it out of thereIf we did!

We swam out towards the middle of the dam, taking our overalls off as we swam, because they were weighing us down. Nyall kept his on, but Earle turned his overalls into a floatation device. I remember panicking that the water would heat up, and that we would boil to death, but Dad reassured us the water was too deep. Fire was starting to burn all around us now, racing down the hill towards us. Earle was helping support Dad, as he isn't a strong swimmer, and he wasn't able to hold himself and Dad afloat for much longer.

WE WERE SHARING THE DAM WITH A FRIGHTENED DEER!

We decided to move closer to the edge where we could stand up, and shelter with the woollen blanket over our heads.

The boys and Dad got to the edge first, and by now we were sharing the dam with a frightened deer and some kangaroos. We were all finding comfort in the cool water. It was an amazing sight. Fire is the common dread of both man and beast alike, and every other fear recedes in the face of it.

Then the firefront hit..... I was still out in the water when the full force of the fire storm hit. Hot embers and black smoke attacked us with an unrelenting ferocity that is hard to put into words. I couldn't breathe. Every time I tried, I felt my lungs burning like crepe paper. I heard the others screaming my name out, but in the smoke it was difficult to see where I was. At this point I thought I was going to die.

THIS WAS HOW I WOULD DIE!

There were no ifs, buts or maybes. This was how I would die. At the age of 27, with an unfinished life, it was a fleeting thought, but it was there, and it was very real. Then I swam underwater, only coming up twice for the tiny bit of air that I could get before reaching the others. If they were any further away I don't think I would have made it. The blanket became my worst nightmare when the claustrophobia kicked in, but it saved our lives.

I WENT UNDER THE WATER EVERY 30 SECONDS

We spent two hours under that old woollen blanket, going under the water every thirty seconds or so to clear the smoke that had formed, and to put out the hot embers that stuck to the wool. After about an hour or so we were able to check what was happening around us, but then the wind would pick up and blow burning embers towards us again. We would then have to go back under the safety of the blanket. It was like a life support blanket that shielded us from the intensity of the heat and fiery embers.

I think the shock hit us eventually, because we all started making stupid jokes about needing a beer. The reassurance I got from the others, helped pull me through. I honestly think that if there had been one less of us, or one more, no one would have made it out of there alive.

Dad's car caught fire and we were so worried that it would explode that we moved along the dam a bit. Nyall got out and grabbed the phones and wallets just before they melted or caught fire.

I THOUGHT EVERYONE WE KNEW WAS DEAD!

All of a sudden it was daylight again. The smoke had lifted, and we assumed it was safe to come out of the blanket. Nyall tried to make a phone call, but with no reception he had to walk towards home to call out. I remember Dad and I were swearing at him and yelling because it was taking so long. Even then I didn't feel safe enough, and thought he might die trying to make a phone call.

I remember looking around at the total destruction that took only a short time to occur. It was as though a bomb had been dropped on us. There was nothing but blackness and red coals.

About an hour later, we risked going back up to the home to see if anything was left. The place was unrecognizable. There were fires still burning, but the house was gone. A pile of twisted roofing sheets lay on the glowing remains of our family home. The once towering gums were nothing but black sticks poking out of the once fertile earth. It looked like a war zone.

Like something out of a disaster movie.

Nothing could have prepared us for that sight. Not even living through it. My first priority was to see if any of the animals survived. I didn't hold much hope. As I made my way around Rikki's tank in the back yard I'd never felt such relief in my life as I turned the corner and saw my two horses standing there, frightened and shaking, but unharmed. I broke into tears as I thanked whoever was listening, that two of my babies had made it out alive. It was something at least.

RED HOT EMBERS WERE BURNING EVERYWHERE!

The hills were black as night, and red hot embers of glowing timbers were burning everywhere. They looked like city lights.

All night was a paranoid waiting game. Whenever a tree would fall in the area it sounded like a bomb dropping and exploding with showers of fireworks spraying the air around it.

Rosemary's house was full of smoke and made it hard to breathe and every time I closed my eyes to try and sleep, I would see flames lighting up my vision. I was still so fearful that the fire would return whilst I was sleeping. We could hear the firefighters trying to clear the road with chainsaws and bobcats all night, and I kept wondering when they would get us out of here. At 6:00 am whilst it was still dark outside, and the air was thick with smoke, we piled into my car and drove down the road. The road was barely a road anymore, just a dirt track with trees down everywhere. We passed several fire trucks, and some burnt out vehicles on the way, that hadn't made it out. It was still too dark to see anything clearly. An eerie light hung like a pall over the scene of destruction that heightened all our senses - especially fear! I remember a horse standing on the side of the road, stunned and unmoving, but alive. We passed the great community hall. Although no longer there, I know exactly where it once stood, and will again. We made our way to the Arthur's Creek fire station, unaware that the trauma was only just beginning.

The station became a meeting point for anyone who survived, and loved ones looking for their relatives. As every car pulled up, my heart would skip a beat, as I waited to see who else had survived. Eventually news of the less fortunate filtered in, and the number of close friends who lost their lives is still too unbearable to think of. The weeks that followed were just a blur.

We found our other two horses, alive and unharmed, but the dog and cats weren't so lucky. We found their remains when we could eventually get back to the property. It's a heavy weight on my heart that I carry with me every day.

After a month, the terrible fires of 'Black Saturday' are being forgotten by the general public, but for us involved it's only just the beginning. There is no closure, we have nothing to go back to, and the rebuilding process will take years. I find it hard to explain to people who weren't there, or who didn't lose everything that it's not as simple as going back to work and getting on with our lives. For some of us there is nothing to get on with. Jobs were lost, livelihoods ruined, and yes, it's been a month, but who says that grief should have a time limit.

MATERIALISTIC THINGS NO LONGER MATTER

For me, a career, money, and material things no longer matter. I had all that, a lifetime's worth, and I lost it all in a heartbeat. What's more important, is spending time with the people I love - my family and my friends. We will go back and start a new history in Strathewen. It will take a long time to forget the events of 'Black Saturday' and an even longer time to heal the scars. But I will make the most of my life. I have to, because it's all I have left.... And we will rebuild!