



Ash Wednesday 40th Anniversary Commemorative Event

ASH WEDNESDAY BUSHFIRE EDUCATION CENTRE
COCKATOO
SUNDAY 12 FEBRUARY 2023 AT 2PM



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Some of the images and stories in this booklet may be distressing for some people. CFA has a Wellbeing Support Line which is available 24/7 for current and former CFA members and their families – phone 1800 959 232.

Message from the Minister for Emergency Services

Forty years ago, Victoria experienced one of its worst fire days in history, with widespread destruction across the state. More than 16,000 firefighters battled the fires to protect their communities in the face of an unprecedented firestorm.

Tragically, 47 people lost their lives as a result of the fires, including 14 CFA volunteers who are honoured and remembered by their brigades – Narre Warren, Pantom Hill, Nar Nar Goon and Wallacedale – to this day. Two Forests Commission Victoria firefighters were also killed a few weeks earlier during what was a devastating fire season.

We will never forget those who died trying to save lives and property, or the communities which were forever changed as a result of the fires.

Many veterans of Ash Wednesday remain part of CFA as proud volunteers and staff, or both, as well as members of other fire agencies.

We know that many of our state's current firefighters were inspired to join Victoria's fire services after seeing the firefighters in action during this tragic event, or as a result of personally living through the long-lasting impacts of Ash Wednesday.



This anniversary service acknowledges and thanks those who served on that terrible day and it allows us to reflect on the lessons we have learned over the following decades.

Ash Wednesday was a day that so many will never forget, and it is inspiring to see the continued and vital role that Victoria's fire services play today; respected and recognised as vital emergency response agencies protecting our communities.

As your Minister, and as a Victorian, I am so grateful for the immeasurable contribution of our firefighters, and to those who we commemorate today.

**Jaclyn Symes, Minister for
Emergency Services**

Message from CFA leaders

As one of the most bushfire-prone environments in the world, Victoria has faced many devastating fires throughout its history. Ash Wednesday is one of those. It is permanently etched in the minds of a generation who lived through that darkest of days.

This is a time to remember, honour and reflect on the incredible strength and commitment of the 16,000+ emergency services workers who stood shoulder to shoulder to protect their communities on that day – and in the many days which followed.

The extreme nature of the conditions meant human efforts to fight or control the fire were incapable of succeeding until conditions moderated, leaving crews to focus on trying to sustain life against the odds.

Tragically, 47 Victorians were killed as a result of Ash Wednesday, including 14 CFA volunteers. However, incredible acts of bravery on that day prevented an even greater loss of life and property.

Many of these stories of courage and sacrifice were not known or acknowledged at the time, but have become evident in the years which have passed. We thank all those who played a role to protect the lives of others.

This anniversary is also a time to acknowledge the remarkable resilience of our communities which recovered, and rebuilt, after 1983, and remain vigilant against the ever-present threat of bushfire.

Many people were inspired to join up to support emergency services after Ash Wednesday. Today, we have many exceptional members taking on roles as firefighters, captains, group officers, incident controllers, crew leaders and community safety educators – in agencies across the sector.

The reviews following Ash Wednesday, and other fire emergencies, resulted in the world-class emergency management sector Victoria has today. They drove improvements in protective clothing, vehicle design, communications and public information warnings, command and control response arrangements, fire behaviour and modelling research, and safety and wellbeing support.

As a sector, we stand ready to respond to the ongoing challenges which will be thrown against us in an environment where fires will continue to be an ongoing threat.

We will never forget tragedies like Ash Wednesday, but we learn from them.

On behalf of Victoria's fire services, we acknowledge and thank those who served on that day, we honour and remember those who lost their lives, and we pay tribute to the communities who were forever changed by the devastating fires.

Board Chair Greg Wilson

CEO Natalie MacDonald

Chief Officer Jason Heffernan



Order of proceedings

12pm	Ash Wednesday Bushfire Education Centre opens
1.55pm	Guests seated
2pm	Introduction by Master of Ceremonies/CFA Board member Peter Shaw AFSM
3.30pm	Service concludes

Welcome to Country

Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Perry Wandin

All stand

Presentation and Placing of the Colours

Piper/Colour Party enter and place the Colours

Colour Party Commander Jim Read AFSM

Colour Party Member Matt Ahern

Colour Party Member Vicki Linaker

Colour Party Member Dick Smith

Colour Party Member Sukhi Singh

Colour Party Piper Mick Ryan

National Anthem

Advance Australia Fair

*Sung by Lance Peele,
accompanied by
Stewart Kohinga*

Australians all let us rejoice,
For we are one and free;
We've golden soil and wealth for toil;
Our home is girt by sea;
Our land abounds in nature's gifts
Of beauty rich and rare;
In history's page, let every stage
Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

Beneath our radiant Southern Cross
We'll toil with hearts and hands;
To make this Commonwealth of ours
Renowned of all the lands;
For those who've come across the seas
We've boundless plains to share;
With courage let us all combine
To Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

Please be seated

Call to Remembrance

Samantha Collins, VFBV State President

Friends, firefighters, we are gathered here in the sight of God, as loyal citizens of Australia, to honour the memory of those who have died in the service of the CFA and our state.

As we have gathered at this time let us offer thanks to God, for the remembrance of sacrifice made by these members, some known to us, and others not known to us.

We give thanks to their devotion to duty and we will pray for those still mourning their sad loss. We ask that we continue to do our duty, and honourably walk in our service to CFA and our communities.

Official Welcome

CFA Chief Officer Jason Heffernan

Reading

Spirit of CFA

Justin Seddon, Captain Nar Nar Goon Fire Brigade

“Hailing from all walks of life, you are our mothers and fathers, our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, our grandparents, neighbours and our friends.

You help and protect us, without wanting of recognition or reward. In our time of need you are there. Your courage and compassion are inspiring, your loyalty unquestionable.

You comfort us with a tender hand; you stand at the face of nature’s beast and fight for our lives and our land.

You are the essence of the true meaning of community.

You epitomise the Australian spirit, the spirit of CFA.”

Until We Meet Again

**Ian Pinney, Captain Upper Beaconsfield
Fire Brigade**

No farewell words were spoken
No time to say goodbye
You were gone before we knew

Every day we miss your smile
That no one can replace
But still it brings us comfort
In the sadness that we face

You're missed so much more
Than you could ever know
There are memories of you
In all the places we go

We think about you always
We talk about you still
The times we shared
Will never be forgotten
We hold you close within our hearts
And there you will remain

But I know some day somewhere
We will meet again

Memorial Garden Introduction

Master of Ceremonies Peter Shaw AFSM

1983 Reflection

Graham Simpson AFSM

Firefighters Prayer

Chris White, Captain Cockatoo Fire Brigade

When I am called to duty, God,
Wherever flames may rage,
Grant us the strength to save lives,
Whatever be their age.

Help us embrace a little child,
Before it is too late,
Or save an older person,
From the horror of that fate.

Enable us to be alert,
And hear the weakest shout,
To quickly and efficiently,
Put the fires out.

We want to fulfil our calling,
And be the best we can,
In guarding our every neighbour,
And protecting their property.

And if it be, while on the job,
I should lose my life,
Please bless with your sustaining hand,
All those I've loved in life.

Amen.

This Heritage

Ross Luke, Captain Macedon Fire Brigade

They are not dead,
who leave us this great heritage
of remembered joy.

They still live in our hearts,
in the happiness we knew,
in the dreams we shared.

They still breathe,
in the lingering fragrance from
windblown flowers.

They still smile in the moonlight's silver
and laugh in the sunlight's sparkling gold.

They still speak in the echoes of words
we've heard them say again and again.

They still move,
in the rhythm of waving grasses,
In the dance of the tossing branches.

They are not dead;
their memory is warm in our hearts,
They are not apart from us,
But a part of us
For love is eternal,
And those we love shall be with us
throughout all eternity.

Anonymous

Wreath Procession

Music

The Place I Want To Be
*Composed and performed
by Stewart Kohinga*

Junior Members of Beaconsfield Fire Brigade

Roll Call

Ash Wednesday Roll of Honour

Bell tolled by Simon Wallace, Captain Panton Hill Fire Brigade.

Roll of Honour read by Travis Carter, Captain Narre Warren Fire Brigade.

Osborne Edward John Lowen	Nar Nar Goon RFB
Lloyd Donovan	Narre Warren RFB
Neil Rodney Henry	Narre Warren RFB
Murray John Forsyth	Narre Warren RFB
Dorothy Balcombe	Narre Warren RFB
John Richard Minett	Narre Warren RFB
Darrell John Wilkes	Narre Warren RFB
Keith Busbridge	Narre Warren RFB
Stuart Robert Duff	Panton Hill RFB
Neville Lewis Jeffery	Panton Hill RFB
William John Marsden	Panton Hill RFB
Peter John Singleton	Panton Hill RFB
Maurice Atkinson	Panton Hill RFB
Peter Ronald Clover	Wallacedale RFB

Forests Commission Victoria firefighters who died 8 January 1983

Des Collins	Forests Commission Victoria
Alan Lynch	Forests Commission Victoria

Laying of wreaths

Music

The Place I Want To Be

*Composed and performed by
Stewart Kohinga*

Laying of wreaths called by Graham Simpson AFSM

Laying of wreaths by dignitaries

CFA Chief Officer Jason Heffernan

CFA Chief Executive Officer Natalie MacDonald

VFBV State President Samantha Collins

VFBV Chief Executive Officer Adam Barnett

FFMVic Chief Fire Officer Chris Hardman

Fire Rescue Commissioner Ken Block

Emergency Management Commissioner Andrew Crisp AM APM

Victoria Police Assistant Commissioner David Clayton APM

SES Acting Chief Operations Officer Alistair Drayton AFSM

Parks Victoria Director Fire Emergency and Enforcement David Nugent AFSM

Australian Red Cross State Manager Emergency Services Vic Fyowna Norton

Ambulance Victoria Chief Executive Officer Jane Miller

AFAC Chief Executive Officer Rob Webb

Cardinia Shire Council Deputy Mayor Cr Jack Kowarzik

Laying of wreaths for the eight major fires

Cudgee/Ballangeich: Owen O’Keefe and Liam Keegan

East Trentham/Mt Macedon: Keith Miles and Robert Hyland

Otways: Ross Girvan and Rod Taylor

Belgrave Heights/Upper Beaconsfield: Eric Bumpstead, Nancy Boura, Stanley Hamilton and Herb Detez

Monivae: Paul Kenny and Kevin Sparrow

Branxholme: Celeste Benoit and Ray Downes

Warburton: Barry Marshall AFSM

Cockatoo: Tony Den Hartogh (escorted by Christopher White) and Ian Symons AFSM

Laying of wreaths for deceased firefighters

Wallacedale Fire Brigade: Ray Downes

Nar Nar Goon Fire Brigade: Wes Richie

Panton Hill Fire Brigade: Kahn Franke

Narre Warren Fire Brigade: Colin Booth AFSM

Group Officer Cardinia: Andrew Wenczel

Group Officer Casey: Shane Keen

Cardinia Group 1983 Representative: Ivan Smith AFSM

Families and individuals are invited to place floral tributes at the base of the alter.

Conclusion

Master of Ceremonies Peter Shaw AFSM

All stand

Return of the Colours, Piper/Colour Party depart

About Ash Wednesday

The Ash Wednesday bushfires were a series of devastating fires that swept across south-east Australia on 16 February 1983. Years of severe drought and extreme weather combined to create one of Australia's worst fire days in a century.

Within 12 hours, more than 180 fires, fanned by winds of up to 110 km per hour, caused widespread destruction across the state of Victoria. The fires were one of the deadliest in Australian history, until the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009.

In Victoria, 47 people died, including 14 CFA volunteers.

Many fatalities were a result of firestorm conditions caused by a sudden and violent wind change in the evening which rapidly changed the direction and size of the fire front.



The speed and ferocity of the flames, aided by abundant fuels and a landscape immersed in smoke, made fire suppression and containment impossible. In many cases, crews were unable to reach residents, as fires brought down communication lines, cut off escape routes and severed electricity and water supplies.

Experienced firefighters recall that the extreme conditions prevented them from fighting or controlling the fire until conditions moderated, leaving crews to focus on trying to sustain life against the odds.

As the Victorian Government's Bushfire Review Committee stated in its final report, "The levels of destruction resulting from the fire amounted, in many instances, to total wipe-out. Houses, business premises, government properties, churches, farms and vehicles were destroyed or damaged beyond repair and, often, recognition.

"In many cases the total wipe-out effect... closely resembled that more usually associated with war. Most normal life support systems had gone and whole communities were left stunned and bewildered."

A massive relief effort followed, with agencies such as SES, Victorian Government departments, Red Cross and local authorities spending many months restoring essential supplies and infrastructure to return communities to a sense of normality.

To this day, the impacts of Ash Wednesday are still felt or remembered by a generation of Victorians.

Areas affected on Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday impacts

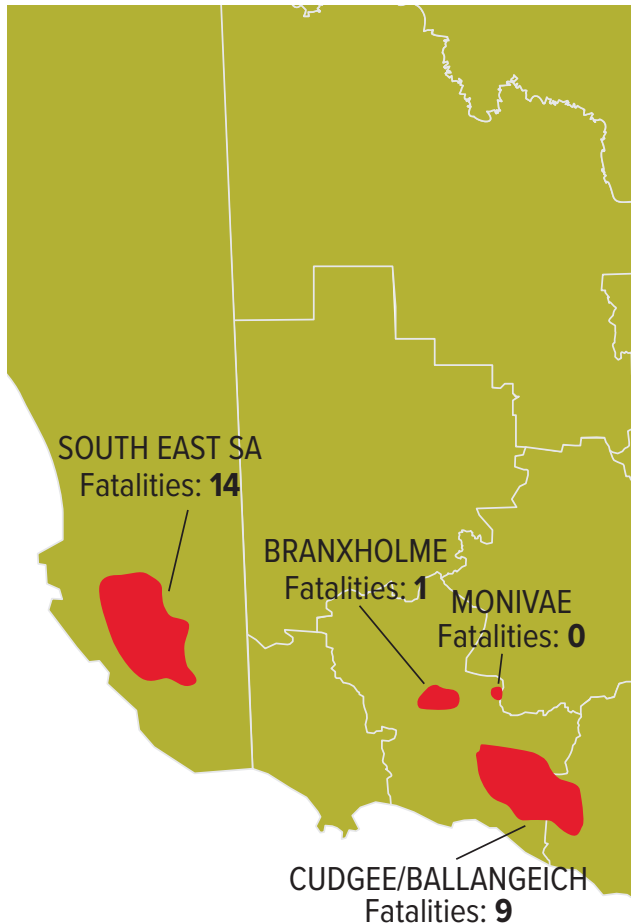
Area burnt: **200,000 hectares**, including **85,200 hectares** of state forest

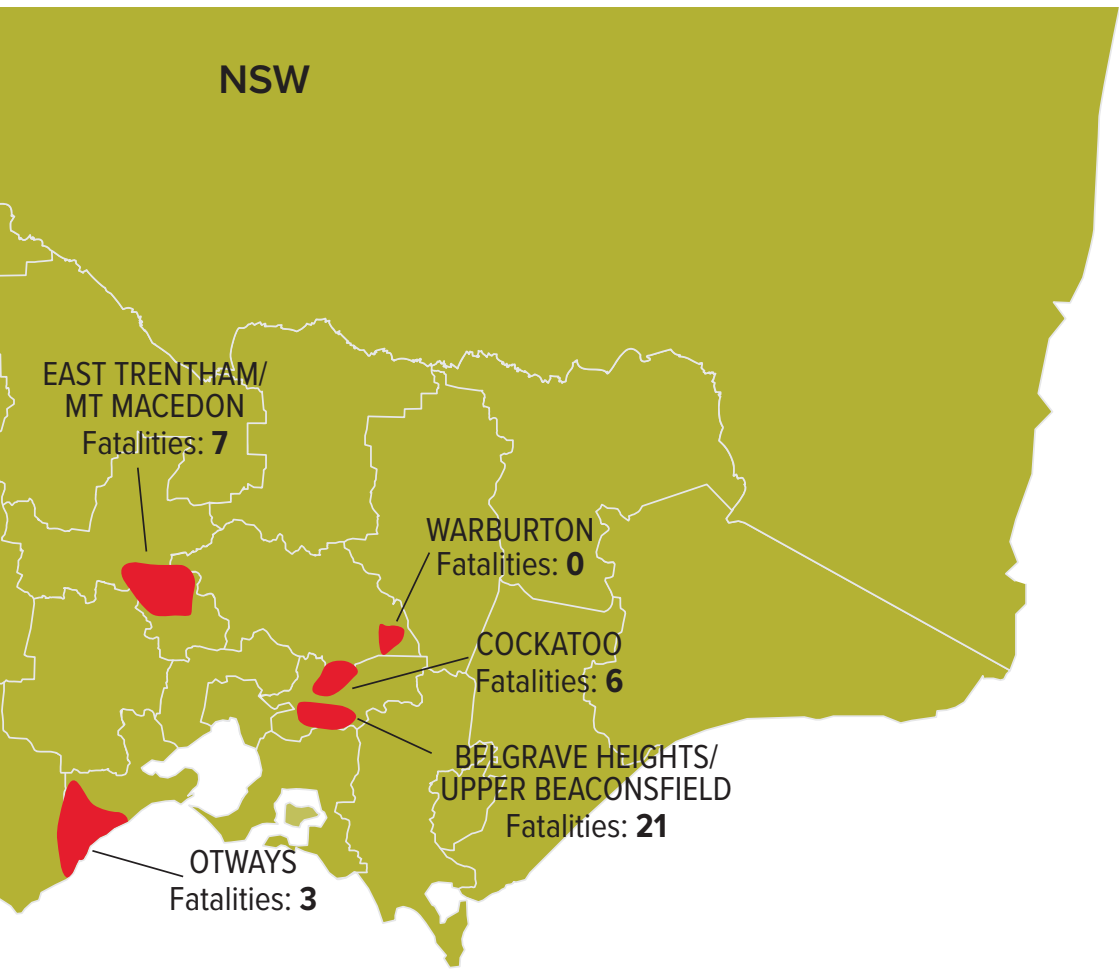
Fatalities: **47** people

Property lost: **2080** homes destroyed/damaged

Livestock lost: **32,750** head

Across Victoria there were 180 fires reported on Ash Wednesday, with eight classified as major fires. The map shows each area and the number of deaths.





Conditions on Ash Wednesday

Temperatures in excess of 40 degrees were widespread that day, combined with relative humidities of less than 15 per cent. Hundreds of fires were responded to by fire crews across the state.

However, a powerful weather change moving eastwards across the state produced gale force wind changes in the afternoon and evening of Ash Wednesday, drastically affecting the movement and direction of any fires still alight.

The Victorian Government Bushfire Review Committee report 1984 stated, “These weather conditions, combined with an extremely flammable fuel state, meant the fires assumed dramatically severe proportions.

“The speed of onset was alarmingly fast, extremely high temperatures developed within the fires themselves, and in certain cases firestorm conditions prevailed. The result was that firefighting resources, normally capable of dealing with more usual fires situations, were virtually overrun. Fire containment and suppression became impossible.”

Fire services were seriously hampered by overloaded communications, lack of power, access into and out of fire-affected areas impacted by heat, smoke, fallen trees and other hazards, and drastically depleted water storages.

Adding to the challenges for emergency services, the wind change and fire impact occurred after dark in a number of communities, hindering response, protection and evacuation activities.

Resources used

It is estimated that more than 16,000 firefighters participated in the Ash Wednesday fires, as well as other emergency services.

Also involved, and assisting in fighting the fires, were 1,000 police, 500 Defence Force personnel and many local residents.

A variety of equipment was used to fight the fires, including 400 vehicles (fire trucks, water tankers and dozers), 11 helicopters and 14 fixed-wing aircraft.

The emergency saw the largest number of volunteers called to duty from across Australia at the same time – an estimated 130,000 firefighters, Defence Force personnel, relief workers and support crews.

Up to 8,000 people were evacuated in Victoria at the height of the crisis.

Damage caused

At the time, Ash Wednesday was one of Australia's costliest natural disasters. In Victoria, more than 200,000 hectares were burnt, including large swathes of the Otways Forest, Wombat State forest and Dandenong Ranges National Park.

More than 2,000 homes and other buildings were destroyed or damaged, including businesses, government buildings, churches and farms. The total cost of the property-related damage in Victoria was estimated to be over \$200 million.

Livestock, fencing and feed losses were also significant and followed a prolonged drought.

The fires destroyed vegetation protecting soil, leading to further damage through soil erosion affecting streams and water catchments.

The cost of the loss of native habitat, flora and fauna is impossible to calculate, but the impacts were felt for many years to come.



In memoriam

Forty-seven Victorians lost their lives as a result of the Ash Wednesday fires, including 12 CFA volunteers from Narre Warren and Panton Hill brigades who perished when their two tankers were overwhelmed by the fire at Upper Beaconsfield.

A firefighter from Nar Nar Goon brigade was also killed at Cockatoo and a Wallacedale brigade member died from injuries sustained while fighting the fire at Branxholme.

We are eternally grateful for the service and sacrifice these firefighters made for us all.

We also honour the memory of Forests Commission Victoria firefighters Des Collins and Alan Lynch who died while fighting a fire at Greendale on 8 January 1983.

CFA volunteers who lost their lives as a result of Ash Wednesday, 16 February 1983

First name	Last name	Home brigade	Location of fire	Length of service
Osborne Edward John	Lowen	Nar Nar Goon RFB	Cockatoo	6 years 10 months
Dorothy Ellen	Balcombe	Narre Warren RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	21 months
Lloyd Huon	Donovan	Narre Warren RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	6 months
Murray John	Forsyth	Narre Warren RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	1 year 9 months
Neil Rodney	Henry	Narre Warren RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	17 months
John Richard	Minett	Narre Warren RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	11 years 1 month
Darrell John	Wilkes	Narre Warren RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	18 months
Maurice	Atkinson	Panton Hill RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	3 years
Stuart Robert	Duff	Panton Hill RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	2 months
Neville Lewis	Jeffery	Panton Hill RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	2 months
William John	Marsden	Panton Hill RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	2 years
Peter John	Singleton	Panton Hill RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	2 years 2 months
Peter Ronald	Clover	Wallacedale RFB	Branxholme (Died from injuries 22/02/1983)	1 year 3 months
Keith	Busbridge	Narre Warren RFB	Upper Beaconsfield	Keith signed up on 16.02.1983

Forests Commission Victoria firefighters who lost their lives on 8 January 1983

Des Collins	Forests Commission Victoria
Alan Lynch	Forests Commission Victoria

Reflecting on the eight major fires

Cudgee/Ballangeich fire

Fatalities: **9**

Area burnt: **50,000 hectares**

Property lost: **872 homes/buildings**

Livestock: **11,500** sheep, **7,800** cattle

Infrastructure: **1,000,000** bales of fodder, **7,000km** of fencing

Overview

At 1.10pm a fire started on a property on Andersons Road Cudgee, believed to have been caused by clashing conductors on a private SEC transmission line.

The fire spread quickly in a south-easterly direction. In the first 20 minutes it is believed to have burnt 150 hectares and travelled 1.5km, and within five hours it had travelled 27 kilometres.

Following ignition at 2.27pm, the Ballangeich fire burnt in a south-easterly direction, reaching the town of Framlingham within an hour. The fire travelled 31km in three hours and 40 minutes.

At 5.58pm the wind change arrived and the Cudgee and Ballangeich fires joined. The majority of the eastern flank was lost almost for the entire 42km length.

Many small communities were impacted by this wind change.

“Through our listening set (radio channels), we could hear everything that was going on and we had been warned the weather would be extreme on that day.

At that time, our brigade had a good tanker which was not the case for all brigades. Many relied on a lot of private firefighting units. Because of the predicted extreme weather, we had a crew on standby. The tanker was dispatched soon after the outbreak of fire. It was away for three days and was crewed continuously by the brigade.

The day after Ash Wednesday there was an enormous amount of mop-up work, mainly small patches of burning vegetation within the boundaries of the fire.

The only recognisable features of some properties were the smoking chimneys. Sheds were just piles of corrugated iron on the ground. Many farmers had dead or injured livestock to deal with, and in many cases the firefighters were the only people available to help. Some volunteers fought the fire at night and then buried stock during the day.

Something that happened then which would not be allowed now, was how the local hall at Panmure was used. It was set up as an operations centre, logistics centre, welfare services centre and catering facility for firefighters. It was difficult to manage all these functions in one building, but it was done.”

**Owen O’Keefe, firefighter,
Winslow Yarrpturk Fire Brigade**



East Trentham/Mt Macedon fire

Fatalities: **7**

Area burnt: **29,500 hectares**

Property lost: **628** homes/buildings

Livestock: **3,631** sheep, **149** cattle

Infrastructure: **10,350** bales of

fodder, **50+** km of fencing

Overview

The fire was reported at 2.22pm on the south side of the East Trentham to Bullengarook Road. The suspected cause was clashing conductors on an SEC transmission line.

The fire burnt very quickly through grass paddocks which had high fuel loads. By 3.08pm the fire began spotting into the Wombat State Forest. Heavy spotting occurred ahead of the fire and one fire became so large it became known as the Greendale fire.

The East Trentham Fire joined with the Greendale fire and its forward run was halted. After a helicopter reconnaissance, Forests Commission Victoria decided the terrain and fire behaviour was too dangerous for ground crews. Flame heights were two to three times higher than the tree height.

Gale force winds accompanied the wind change. From 9pm many spot fires were recorded in Woodend, Gisborne and Riddells Creek area.

By 10.20pm the fire reached Macedon. Firefighters focused on protecting what property they could and directing evacuating residents to safe passage over the top of Mt Macedon, away from the fire.

“There was no fire front in Macedon, and yet the town was destroyed. A strong wind change led to an ember attack on the whole town of Macedon. Embers from the East Trentham fire to the west of Macedon set fire to the Wombat State Forest before it hit us. As fires started around houses, people sought refuge in the pub or escaped by car.

We didn’t have a brigade tanker in the town at the time, so brigade members organised private vehicles from farms to be brought to the fire station to help fight fires.

At least 300 residents sheltered in the pub, so our priority was to protect them. Unfortunately, we couldn’t save the fire station and half the houses on Main Street burnt down. As the fires burnt, mains water pressure was lost. We were so desperate that we used buckets to carry water from the pub’s swimming pool to throw on the fires.

We saved the pub and all the people inside, but so much of the town was destroyed that we felt helpless. It wouldn’t have mattered how many tankers we had; we wouldn’t have been able to save all the houses. Days later, we were still putting out smouldering areas.

With the fire station gone, the pub became our base and we talked about what had happened. When it all sank in, it was depressing to see all the devastation. People who hadn’t lost their homes felt immense guilt, and those who lost their homes had to live in caravans and temporary shacks. It was a very difficult time for everyone.”

**Keith Miles, 1st Lieutenant,
Macedon Fire Brigade**



Otways fire

Fatalities: **3**

Area burnt: **41,000 hectares**

Property lost: **729** homes,
63 other buildings

Livestock: **2,624** sheep, **159** Cattle
Infrastructure: **25,000** bales of
fodder, **1,000km** of fencing

Overview

After starting at 2.56pm, the fire moved rapidly in a south-easterly direction through grassland. It crossed the Deans Marsh to Lorne road and at 3.30pm entered the Otways forest.

Heavy spotting occurred, with a rate of spread in the first hour of 7km per hour in its run to the coastline. By 5.10pm the fire was burning on both sides of the Great Ocean Road at Big Hill Creek. By 6.30pm, 30 houses were lost in north Lorne.

Within 10 minutes, the wind swung to the west and the fire began heavy spotting to the east along virtually all of the front.

Around 7pm a gale force south-westerly wind, estimated at 100km per hour, gusting up to 160km per hour, hit the fire and further extreme heavy spotting occurred.

At 7.20pm the fire spotted into the creek flat at Aireys Inlet and developed very quickly. More than 200 homes were lost in this area.

At 8pm the fire began spotting in the Anglesea area.

The fire was finally contained at about 11pm.

“It was very hot so a few of us went to the fire station to keep cool. At about 3pm, the Peters Hill Fire Tower sighted smoke, so we went to investigate. The howling, northerly wind was so strong we could hardly stand up. We fought a spot fire at the back of the school at Deans Marsh.

We then went to Spout Creek near Aireys Inlet. All we saw at this stage were spot fires – the main fire was spotting miles ahead. I heard on the radio that homes were being lost in Lorne before the wind changed. All power was knocked out, so we lost contact with people.

In the evening the wind changed and it took the fire towards Aireys Inlet, through the bush and all the way to Bells Beach. All we had was the Anglesea truck and Aireys Inlet truck. The battle for Aireys was lost and we had to get out fast. The wind change was so strong that it blew roofs off houses and knocked over trees.

We lost more than 120 homes in Anglesea and whole roads with houses were wiped out.

We didn't see the main fire front until it came through Anglesea late at night.

We tried to save houses. Having to choose which house to save and which to leave was a terrible thing when you know who lives there. I knew about 50 people who lost their homes, including brigade members.

About a week after the fires, I drove to Peters Hill. It was white with ash. It was eerily quiet. There were no chattering birds and no leaves rustling in the breeze.”

**Bill Bubb AFSM, Captain, Anglesea
Fire Brigade**



Belgrave Heights/Upper Beaconsfield fire

Fatalities: **21**

Area burnt: **9,200 hectares**

Property lost: **238** homes/buildings

Livestock: **526** sheep and **452** cattle

Infrastructure: **650km** of fencing

Overview

The fire was first reported at 3.24pm. It rapidly entered a heavily-fuelled area, with houses in the Mt Morton Road area destroyed in the first four minutes. The first crews on scene noted many spot fires burning in different directions.

At 4.02pm the fire crossed Belgrave-Hallam Road and by 4.20pm it crossed Wellington Road. Spotting activity was so intense that between 4.20pm and 4.40pm, spot fires were recorded 30km away at Tooradin.

Further spotting continued from all parts of the fire and at 6.21pm another spot fire occurred on the Princes Highway west of Officer.

At 8.50pm a violent south-westerly wind change with winds between 70 and 80km per hour hit the fire area.

The eastern flank was lost on the wind change and severe spotting allowed the fire to enter Upper Beaconsfield at about 9pm.

The rapid spread of the fire following the wind change overran two tankers near Upper Beaconsfield. Tragically, 12 firefighters, from Narre Warren and Panton Hill brigades were killed as the inferno swept through.

“At about 2pm my brigade, Narre Warren North, was called to attend a grassfire in Belgrave South. I jumped on a truck.

Darrell Wilkes had been a member of our brigade, but he had recently transferred to Narre Warren brigade. He called into our station to pick up his gear and then a Narre Warren truck picked him up on its way to the grassfire. We didn’t know it would be the last time we saw them.

As we headed to Belgrave South along Belgrave-Hallam Road, the column of smoke just kept growing – it looked bad. None of us had experienced anything like it before. It seemed to change direction at will.

It was a hot, windy day and nothing was going to stop the fire. We couldn’t hold it, so we were sent further along to try to get ahead of it. Unfortunately, that was impossible so we just did what we could, wherever we could. Back then, we just hung off the back of the trucks with no protection. We never stopped fighting until late that night when we changed crews.

We heard the Base Station calling the Narre Warren tanker many times, but we were too busy to take much notice. We didn’t find out what had happened until the next day.

Through the heartache of the loss of fellow firefighters, we took comfort that this was a turning point for CFA to make sure it was never repeated. We now have crew protection, diesel pumps, better radio communication, strike teams and incident control centres.”

**Lisa Hicks, 4th Lieutenant,
Narre Warren North Fire Brigade**



“As a young forester in the Dandenong Ranges, being sent away to bushfires for weeks at a time was just part of the job. We never questioned it. It was a deep part of our culture and even a bit of adventure.

It had already been a busy season, but the mood changed on 8 January 1983 when two of our own were killed at Greendale, the first losses since 1939. Then there was the Melbourne dust storm a month later in February when the sky went black. It was a countdown to catastrophe.



At around 3.30pm on Ash Wednesday, the CFA fire sirens began to wail, the radio began to chatter and the office phones began to ring.

All available Forests Commission crews rushed to Mt Morton Road at Belgrave Heights, which was very close to where I lived. Within four minutes houses were burning and police blocked the roads as frightened residents tried to get home to their loved ones.



It was a manic afternoon being scared stiff on a tanker with flames, smoke, roaring winds, heat, noise, dust, confusion and exhaustion.

Then suddenly it was over, leaving an eerie silence and drifts of thick white ash swirling on the forest floor. There was also unimaginable loss. Ash Wednesday changed everything, forever. I saw some awful things I will never forget, but I still can't join all the dots.”

**Peter McHugh, Kallista Crew,
Forests Commission Victoria**

Monivae fire

Fatalities: **0**

Area burnt: **3,181 hectares**

Property lost: **3** homes, numerous other buildings

Livestock: **1469** sheep, **203** cattle

Infrastructure: **209km** of fencing

Overview

The first notification of this fire reached Hamilton Urban Fire Brigade at 3.39pm via the district SEC office.

The cause of the fire is suspected to have been a private electricity supply on a property south-west of Hamilton.

The fire quickly crossed Port Fairy Road at 3.50pm and burnt towards Mt Napier Road.

Between 4.52pm and 5.14pm the fire entered the Buckley Swamp. Due to the green cover, movement of the fire halted but large areas of peat continued to burn in the swamp.

The main wind change reached the fire area at 6pm and the fire broke away in some areas of the north-east flank.

“It was a very bad day. There was nothing you could have done to stop that fire.

I was activated with the North Hamilton brigade at about 2pm on a truck to the Monivae fire near Muddy Creek.

There were four of us on the truck and back then the trucks didn’t have heat shields.

We got to Port Fairy Road and the fire came back on us. The driver swerved to avoid the flames and the truck went through a hole in the paddock.

I would have fallen from the truck, but my overalls caught on a piece of metal which held the hose line, and the other blokes on the truck pulled me back in. Otherwise, I would have hit the ground and been burnt alive.

As it was, the truck was burnt over. I lost some of the hair off my head and my beard was burnt off.

I was taken to hospital to recover. It was a terrible day.”

**Kevin Sparrow, Senior Firefighter,
North Hamilton Fire Brigade**

Branxholme fire

Fatalities: **1**

Area burnt: **200 hectares**

Property lost: **1** home,

9 other buildings

Livestock: **2,624** sheep, **159** cattle

Infrastructure: **900** bales of fodder,

20km of fencing

Overview

The fire began at 4.30pm as a result of sparks from SEC conductors, after a pole on the east side of the Henty Highway, just south of Branxholme, snapped.

The fire started under extreme weather conditions and burnt quickly towards Arrandoovong Creek, impacted by two wind changes. One change was from the north-west to the west and a further change to the south-west at about 6pm.

After the westerly change most of the north-eastern flank was lost and the fire ran into the Wallacedale Swamp at 6.20pm.

Tragically, a firefighter from Wallacedale was caught up in the fires and later died from burns received on the day.

“The Branxholme Ash Wednesday fire has had a significant long-lasting effect on the local community. This fire was started by a falling transmission line adjacent to the west boundary fence of the Glenlogie property just to the south of the township.

The early responders, both brigade and private, were from the Branxholme, Condah and Wallacedale communities, and were soon backed up by resources from a wider area.

As the fire started just prior to the catastrophic wind change, efforts to combat it were hampered by sheep droppings embers being blown across already-extinguished areas, starting new outbreaks.

When the wind change occurred, the old majestic home on Glenlogie was engulfed, even though a private unit had been wetting down prior to the change.

The worst part of the day was when the wind moved to the south-west and a private firefighting vehicle stalled and a young volunteer was fatally injured. Long will he be remembered.”

Ray Downes, Lieutenant, Branxholme Fire Brigade

Warburton fire

Fatalities: **0**

Area burnt: **40,000 hectares**

Property lost: **27** homes,
30 other buildings

Infrastructure: **300** bales of fodder,
10km of fencing

Overview

The fire started at about 7.20pm adjacent to a water board pipeline easement on Mt Little Joe Road, south of the township of Millgrove.

The cause of the fire is unknown but is regarded as being suspicious.

The fire spread quickly under the influence of a north-westerly wind and began heavy spotting in the early stages.

By 8.40pm the fire had reached Powelltown, a distance of 14 kilometres, through mostly inaccessible forest country.

After the wind change at 9.15pm, the fire moved in an easterly/north-easterly direction, reaching East Warburton at about 9.40pm.

The fire continued to burn throughout the night in inaccessible country and at about 10.30pm on Thursday 17 February it crossed the Warburton to Woods Point road at the Braham Road intersection.

“On that Wednesday evening most of our volunteers were on their way to the fire station for regular training, and as we looked west we saw a plume of smoke near Mt Little Joe, between Warburton and Millgrove.

We quickly sprang into action as the fire took off like a tornado. It caused a spot fire in front of it and when the two fires joined up the roar was unbelievable.

Melbourne Water came with firefighting equipment and a bulldozer and put in fire breaks. Our trucks returned to Warburton to protect properties, as the fire headed south towards Powelltown.

A wind change eventually helped us, but the fire returned to Warburton at about 9pm. We took water from a reservoir on Old Warburton Road to protect houses in that area. One bluestone home exploded in front of us from the heat, but we saved all the other homes.

We were fortunate to have a strike team of 12 trucks arrive from Shepparton. Six helped fight the fire at Powelltown and six at Warburton.

On Thursday we were busy cleaning up and protecting the edges of Warburton, and backburning. By the following Tuesday the fires were finally out after a week of incredible teamwork and support by so many people.

My lasting memory of Ash Wednesday is the intensity and power of the roar from the fire as it travelled up the mountain.”

**Barry Marshall AFSM, Captain,
Warburton Fire Brigade**



“Although Ash Wednesday was 40 years ago, the horrific memories from those lives lost and the vast destruction caused to both Victoria and South Australia will never be forgotten.

I was on an MFB fire truck with another firefighter. We were responded to assist the community in Warburton, along with many other firefighters from other firefighting agencies from across Victoria.

With little more than some scant directions and local maps for where the fires were broaching over the hills at the back of the town, we fought numerous fires and saved at least seven homes to my recollection over the next 24 hours.

The township was dark with overhead smoke, we rarely saw anyone, because all but a few had left for their personal safety.

Despite all the tragic circumstances from Ash Wednesday, we also learned from the tragedy by introducing improved State Arrangements for community safety.

Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and survivors.”

Frank Stockton AFSM, former MFB firefighter

Cockatoo fire

Fatalities: **6**

Area burnt: **1,800 hectares**

Property lost: **307**

Overview

The first report of fire was received at 7.28pm. It was believed to have been deliberately lit in two places in Wright Forest. A further fire was deliberately lit on the south side of Bailey Road, between 4th and 5th Avenues at about the same time.

As a result of the Belgrave South/ Upper Beaconsfield fire which had started earlier in the day, the Pakenham and Dandenong Ranges Group brigades were almost fully committed in terms of resources.

The Cockatoo area was not experiencing the strong north to north-westerly winds evident at the nearby Belgrave South fire, but the fire moved through an area of heavy fuel load and limited access.

The west/south-westerly wind change reached the area at 9.05pm, impacting the Cockatoo township by 9.10pm.

The fire progressed in a series of spots, with crowning and firestorms with defoliation of tree canopies.

In Cockatoo, several hundred people and their pets sought refuge in the Cockatoo kindergarten. A number of people sprayed water on the roof of the building to stop it catching on fire.

“After being the brigade captain for only three months, I received the traditional baptism of fire.

I finished work and arrived in Cockatoo as Cockatoo tanker one was heading out to the Belgrave South fire crossing Wellington Rd.

I checked that my family was OK. At 7.30pm we had a turnout out to a small fire on the south side of Bailey Road. I headed up the hill followed by our 600-litre support vehicle.

As the crew started to put out the small fire, I noticed smoke coming up from Wright Forest. I went to investigate and found a large fire front moving uphill in thick scrub.

After refilling, we relocated the support vehicle to the houses at the top of the hill while seeking more tankers through overloaded and congested radio chatter.

Being the last fire to start that day, every tanker was committed elsewhere. Our tanker returned from Upper Beaconsfield just before the wind change.

The centre of Cockatoo was bedlam with cars trying to leave town. The wind was incredible, but only lasted for about 20 minutes. It had pushed the fire so hard that by the following morning most of the town was lost. It changed Cockatoo forever.”

**Graham J Simpson AFSM, Captain,
Cockatoo Fire Brigade**



Changes since Ash Wednesday

Four decades on, the lessons learned from Ash Wednesday, and other fires since, have seen Victoria's firefighting capability transformed within what is a world-class emergency services sector.

The resources, equipment and response arrangements in place in 1983 meant local brigades and emergency services personnel were quickly overwhelmed in the unprecedented severity of conditions. Firefighters on that day recall the relatively primitive state of the protective equipment and vehicles. Crews turned out in overalls and boots (if they were available) and few trucks had any significant heat protection.

Aerial support was limited to a small number of aircraft, primarily for observation purposes, while petrol-driven tankers experienced vaporisation of fuel which stalled engines and blocked pumps.

Weather modelling was in its infancy and the provision of critical public information and warnings was ineffective in many cases.

Since Ash Wednesday, billions of dollars have been invested in new equipment, protective clothing, vehicles, communications systems and other resources to support firefighters in the vital work they do to protect their communities.

In the immediate aftermath, the rollout of personal protective clothing for firefighters was accelerated, firefighting vehicles were transitioned to diesel fuel and all tankers were fitted with heat shields. Significant changes were made to the way extreme bushfires such as Ash Wednesday were coordinated at a state and local level.

Dissemination of information and warnings during emergencies began to have a higher priority. Technological advances since Ash Wednesday and Black Saturday mean real-time warnings for residents are widely available through a range of channels. Fire prevention and preparedness received much greater emphasis, with a focus on the importance of community involvement and the ownership of risk by individual property owners.

Innovation in research and modelling means that local weather conditions, down to specific areas of a fire, can be examined in detail to determine the likely patterns of behaviour for fire crews to respond.

Recognition of the psychological trauma for those involved resulted in the creation of peer support systems and the beginning of discussions about mental health impacts, which are now widely acknowledged as a critical part of any health and wellbeing program.

The incident management structure now in place in Victoria provides a coordinated and integrated approach to management of major incidents across all emergency services through incident control centres, regional control centres and the state control centre.

Victoria is safer and better able to respond to, and recover from, similar emergencies, largely as a result of learning from tragedies like Ash Wednesday and the resilience of communities.

Reflections from a regional officer

Forty years on, my experiences and observations on Ash Wednesday and the subsequent weeks and months remain vivid in my memories.

A mix of painful, exhilarating, challenging and educational, they were sparks that ignited a passion in me to drive changes that would improve the capability of our equipment, our command and control systems and the welfare of our people.

The extreme conditions conjured up by Mother Nature on that day were always going to overpower mere human effort and we have seen similar outcomes during more recent extreme events, despite the tremendous advances made through more effective vehicles and equipment, better operating systems and more effective community messaging.

For me, this commemoration is a way of reminding us that we must continue to acknowledge that the most valuable resource during any crisis is the dedicated band of people who are motivated by doing whatever they can to make their community a safer place.

**Ian Symons AFSM JP, Regional Officer,
Region 8**





Ash Wednesday Bushfire Education Centre

The Ash Wednesday Bushfire Education Centre, located in Cockatoo, tells the stories of the eight major fires in Victoria on 16 February 1983.

The centre is in a former kindergarten which was used as a makeshift refuge from the fires that raged through the town late on that evening.

Up to 200 men, women and children, along with their pets, sheltered from the firestorm under wet towels as courageous men hosed down the bitumen roof to prevent any ignition of the building.

In the weeks after the fires, the building became a recovery centre and place for the community to gather and reconnect.

King Charles III and the late Princess Diana visited the centre just a few weeks after the fires, meeting local residents and emergency services workers and planting a flowering gum tree at the entrance as a symbol of renewal. This tree still stands in the grounds today.

In 2012 the building and grounds were listed on the Victorian Heritage Register as a site of historical and social significance to the State of Victoria.

Through the Cardinia Shire and the Cockatoo community working in partnership with local, state and federal funding grants, the building was restored as an education centre to tell the story of this significant part of Victorian history.

Today, the centre contains many historic photos of the eight major fires which occurred across the state and is open for school and community groups and visitors on weekends.

Visit awbec.webs.com for more information and opening hours.



Wellbeing and support

As we mark the 40th Anniversary of Ash Wednesday, people may experience different emotional, physical and psychological reactions. Although many decades have passed, it's important to remember that those people who were impacted by the fires on that day, and afterwards, may continue to need support.

Grief and loss can have a powerful and enduring impact.

Some people may feel more anxious, stressed or nervous because of new bushfire risks this summer, particularly if they live in a bushfire prone area or have been affected by other bushfires.

If you know someone who was affected by Ash Wednesday, it is a good idea to check in on them. If you or a loved one need extra support during this time, do not be afraid to speak up and reach out. There are many places you can go to for help.

CFA has a Wellbeing Support Line which is available 24/7 for current and former CFA members and their families – phone 1800 959 232.

Depending on the challenges you are experiencing, you can speak with your local doctor, a mental health professional or call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

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The Ash Wednesday Bushfire Education Centre

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Valuing Volunteers Program



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