

HELL CAME ON THE WIND

DECEMBER 22, 1943, dawned another hot summer Wednesday in North-East Victoria.

The morning newspaper headlines scorched with the great horror of the time — World War II.

The Russian and German Armies were locked in battle as the Soviets advanced on Poland. General Blamey was claiming the Japanese had received "a good, sound thrashing" on the Huon Peninsula in the New Guinea campaign.

Most of the young men from the farming areas around Wangaratta were overseas, fighting.

But by the end of the day, tragedy in its most awful mask would be on the district's very doorstep.

A hot wind sprang up as the day advanced, driving across the dry paddocks, dehydrating the men and women stooking the hay and bringing in the grain harvest.

At 4.30 pm, a gust blew a limb across powerlines at Bowser, a few kilometres north of Wangaratta, on the Hume Highway.

Flames dancing

A shower of sparks fell to the paper-dry grass.

Within moments, flames were dancing east before the wind.

Alerted by the smoke, farmers raced to the scene with wet bags and leather beaters.

Their most sophisticated piece of equipment was a knapsack sprayer.

The wind and the lack of fire-fighting gear beat the men as they tried to hold the blaze at Reedy Creek.

The fire jumped the creek and raced away towards Tarrawingee.

The whole district was soon alerted.

Mr Arthur Stewart, captain of the Tarrawingee fire brigade, attempted to burn a fire-break at Wighton's Lane, a few hundred metres across the paddocks to the east.

But the fire reached the break before it could be completed and continued to storm across the fields.

Another stand was attempted at Petticoat Lane, to the south-east.

But the wind, gusting in several directions, had spread the blaze across a wide front.

Dozens of volunteers from Wangaratta — school-teachers, a newsagent, telephone linemen and technicians, youngsters, businessmen — had answered the call of the tolling fire bell in their town.

But only one official fire truck was available.

It had been put together by a group of former Wangaratta Technical School students at Mr Bill Richardson's farm at Boorhaman.

It is perhaps not too harsh to describe the vehicle as primitive.

A water tank, equipped with hoses and a gear-and-piston water pump, was mounted on the chassis of an old truck.

The machine was driven along the Owens Highway towards the fire by the proprietor of a Wangaratta menswear shop, Mr George McLaughlan.

A scratch crew of volunteers was aboard.

The truck and the fire arrived about the same time

near the junction of Petticoat Lane and the Owens Highway, 1km west of Tarrawingee.

Apalling bad luck, lack of experience in fire-fighting, panic and fate fused for a moment to create the most horrifying disaster in the district's history.

A clump of trees stands at the corner.

Swept along by the fierce wind, the flames leapt in among the trees.

Blinded by smoke, firefighters rushed to the fire truck, perhaps believing it held salvation.

The truck's driver attempted to wheel the vehicle around in an effort to drive out of the confusion.

But the heavy truck dropped its front wheels into a table drain on the road's edge.

The chassis bottomed. The next few moments remain best pushed from the mind.

When the smoke finally cleared and the fire, now on two fronts, had roared on, 10 men and boys were found dead or dying.

Eight others spent days and weeks in hospital, suffering burns and smoke inhalation.

Many others were treated for less serious burns.

North-East Victoria was stunned.

Within hours, half a tonne of food had been collected in Wangaratta to feed the survivors and the firefighters, who fought long into the night to control the blaze.

Ken Stewart was only 30m or so from the scene of death — yet it was not until five hours later that he discovered men had died.

Ken, now a farmer who lives a couple of paddocks-wide from the tragic spot, was 19, discharged from the Army only three months before.

Among the trees

He remembers being among the clump of trees at the corner of Petticoat Lane and the Owens Highway as the fire approached about 6 pm.

He had seen bushfires before and he knew that a stand of trees was no place to be when the going got hot.

He shouted to several mates nearby to head out into the open and led the way.

The men who followed him owe Ken Stewart their lives.

But he did not know the fire truck and other men were trapped in the smoke.

It was a frantic few moments.

Bill Richardson advised Ken to urinate on his handkerchief, hold it to his face, run through the flames and lie on the burnt ground

behind if he became trapped.

But Ken was not trapped. He moved away up the lane lighting fire breaks.

He did not arrive home until 11 pm. In the meantime, word of the tragedy had swept the district.

Ken's mother, like many mothers and wives in the area, was frantic for fear her son had been among the victims.

The following day, men from the Army base at Bonegilla and the RAAF base at Benalla arrived at Tarrawingee to help douse the final embers.

Money and offers of help flooded in from the region.

But there was little to be done but mourn, bury the dead and get on with the war effort.

Obelisk built

An obelisk was built at the site where the men died.

Few people outside the Tarrawingee district know the story of that monstrous Wednesday afternoon.

But the people of Tarrawingee remain almost obsessively fire-conscious.

It is a matter of pride to be a member of the Tarrawingee Fire Brigade

— Ken Stewart and his brother Harold, who also fought the December 22 blaze, are both former brigade captains.

Each year about this time, wreaths of flowers are placed at the foot of the stone obelisk at the corner of Petticoat Lane and the Owens Highway.

The wreaths are put there by the families of the men who died on that hot, blustery day 37 years ago.

Those who died were: Kevin Dunkley, 14, of East Wangaratta; Claude Hill, 14, of North Wangaratta; Andrew Guthrie, 45, manager, of Tarrawingee; Theodore Lea, 32, foreman, of Wangaratta; John Marks, 29, farmer, of Markwood; Joseph (Louis) Ryan, 32, lineman, of Wangaratta; Norman Robinson, 49, lineman, of Wangaratta; Edward Seymour, lineman, of Wangaratta; Godfrey Spencer, teacher, of Wangaratta; and Arthur Wellington, farmer, of Markwood.

Swathe of fire took 10



ABOVE: Ken and Harold Stewart remember the horror of December 22, 1943. A tribute of fresh flowers stands at the base of the cairn.

BELOW: Ken Stewart, 58, talks of the day 37 years ago when he stood 30m from the greatest disaster in Tarrawingee's history.



Man murdered 'over drugs'

DETECTIVES believe a man found stabbed to death near the Wayside Chapel in Kings Cross yesterday was killed over a drug deal.

Police found the body of the man, 29, at 8 am in a lane behind the chapel but they believe he had been murdered some hours earlier.

The man had been stabbed near the heart and in the stomach with a long-bladed knife, detectives said.

He had been identified but police were withholding his name until his relatives had been contacted.

A team of 12 detectives, led by Det-Sgt Don Worsley of the homicide squad, were called to duty yesterday to investigate the murder.

They interviewed a large number of people in the Kings Cross area who had know the man.

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'I never felt so hopeless in my life as at that moment'

BILL Richardson, of Docker's Plains, was a fine man, an exceptional farmer and a skilful fighter of bush fires. He even had his own fire fighting truck, one of only two privately owned in Victoria.

He wrote an account of the Tarrawingee fire and its aftermath. What he recounted is historically important because what he said and later did assisted in the formation of the Country Fire Authority.

This is what he wrote in his own hand about what happened on the day of the killer fire:

WIND chopped to the north several times and this, with insufficient patrolmen caused outbreaks in our rear and necessitated our returning to deal with them.

I now realised that the fire was beyond our ability to cope. It was in several paddocks, each one more heavily grassed than the last. Only one of many onlookers came to render assistance with the hoses.

When the water on the Wang fire truck was exhausted I asked the driver George McLaughlin (owner of a Wangaratta menswear store) to return to town to refill it.

This would not take long and would save my going with him to Fisher's property in order to pump out of a creek.

I was anxious to render every assistance in order to save J. Bell's home. We had plenty of men, but only 20 gallons of water in a drum on McDonald's utility but we managed the job.

I realised then that the fire further up had crossed the sludge channel so went back and got Bill White in Clem Fisher's truck to run me to the front of the fire.

It had just crossed Wightons lane and I could see that the only thing to do was burn a break at the next lane.

As we approached it I saw Godfrey Spencer with a small gang trying to burn a break along the Beechworth road (Ovens Highway).

They were working under difficulties without rakes or fire lighters. Arthur Stewart, captain of Tarrawingee brigade, and others were working in the lane too but



● Bill Richardson: he wrote an account of the Tarrawingee fire and its aftermath, which later assisted in the formation of the Country Fire Authority.

also without fire fighting equipment.

I sent White back in a truck with all speed to contact the Wangaratta unit or my own in both of which were rakes and lighters.

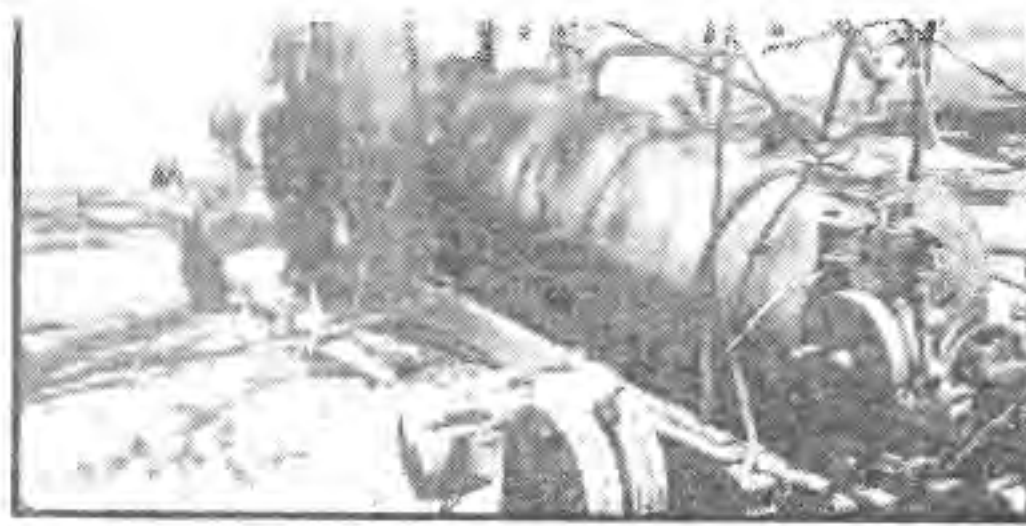
I stayed and discussed the position with Arthur and rendered some assistance till I reckoned his break was far enough along to check the tongue of the fire which was by this time not far away.

I hurried back towards Beechworth road as the fire was going to

hit our breaks near there and I thought the fire trucks should soon be along.

I was enveloped in smoke and dust and the only thing to do was lie on the roadway with a wet handkerchief over my nose and mouth. I heard a vehicle roaring and thought it wise to move.

The fire had crossed the lane into Fisher brothers' stooks and when I came to Beechworth Road I saw Simmond's truck parked across it. Simmonds and several others



Tarrawingee's day of hell

were walking about. Some seemed very dazed.

I saw Jack Allan (an Everton farmer, later admitted to hospital) who had both arms very badly burned. I suggested to Simmonds that he take Jack to the Wangaratta hospital.

It took some time to induce the few men there to get on to the truck. They could do nothing standing in the dense smoke and heat with the surrounding trees on fire. I saw Godfrey Spencer (who died in hospital) in the back of Gorman's car and advised his immediate removal to hospital which I believe was done after picking up another sufferer some distance down the road. I rode on the footboard of Simmond's truck and was horrified to see the Wang fire unit burning fiercely in the table drain. Worse sights followed.

When we emerged from this inferno I saw my own truck working away putting out the southern flank of the fire by wetting a trail and lighting a break inside.

We then went back through the fire after being joined by 20 other light trucks with water to see how Reidsdale had fared, sent the lighter vehicles on and they reported all well. The fire was got under control at the culvert past Reidsdale where Mr Canny had a gang of men who did good work.

We were just congratulating ourselves when a holocaust from the west caught us. The only thing to do was drop to the ground.

I don't know how many seconds or minutes it lasted, but it swept all the paddock bare of cinders and when we could look up again we saw the two haystacks burning furiously and fire was everywhere.

I never felt so hopeless in my life as at that moment.

I saw Arthur Wellington come out a few yards away very badly burned and helped him into a car. (He died later in hospital).

The circumstances were such that I felt it imperative that we should return to Wangaratta which we did in our own truck. I stayed at the police station for a while trying to render assistance before returning home."

Christmas: what does it mean in just one word?

WHAT are we waiting for? "Christmas of Course," most people would say.

We look forward to Christmas for many reasons. Christmas is the season to be jolly. Christmas is a happy time. Christmas is a time for giving and receiving (let's put it in that order because, as The Book tells us, "it is more blessed to give than to receive").

Christmas is family time for many — perhaps the only time of the year when the whole family gets together. Christmas means a break from work and the humdrum of routine.

Christmas is the beginning of holidays for many weary workers.

What are you waiting for this season? What are you looking forward to as Christmas draws close?

It's good to celebrate; it's even better to know why you celebrate. Our annual celebration has expanded to include many things.

But it is good to remember that Christmas was, and is, first of all a birthday celebration.

Christmas celebrates the birthday of a baby, Jesus, and millions of people around the world recognise this Child as the Christ, the Son of God, who came to free us

from the power of sin and death and evil.

So Christmas is a celebration of life, of hope, of peace, of giving and sharing, of joy.

Who talks about joy in today's world? They wish us Merry Christmas! Happy Holiday! Have a Fantastic Christmas! But does anyone wish you joy?

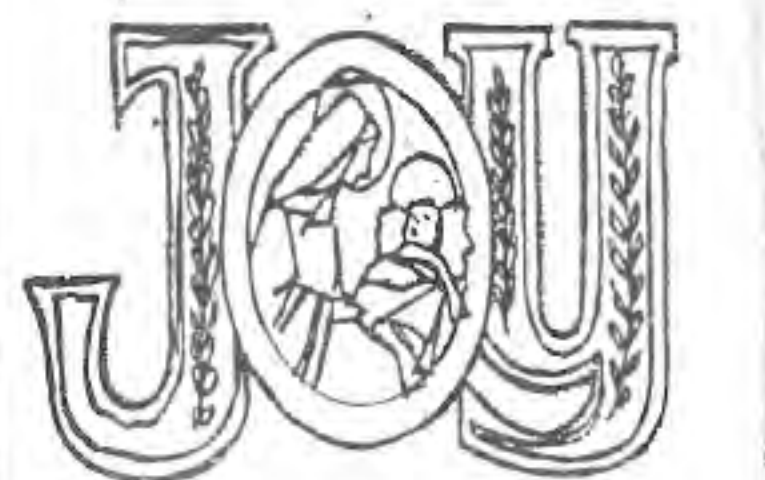
Joy is not a mark of our culture, nor a characteristic of our times. In these hectic days pause a few minutes to study people's faces.

You will see that many look tired or harried or distracted or even bored.

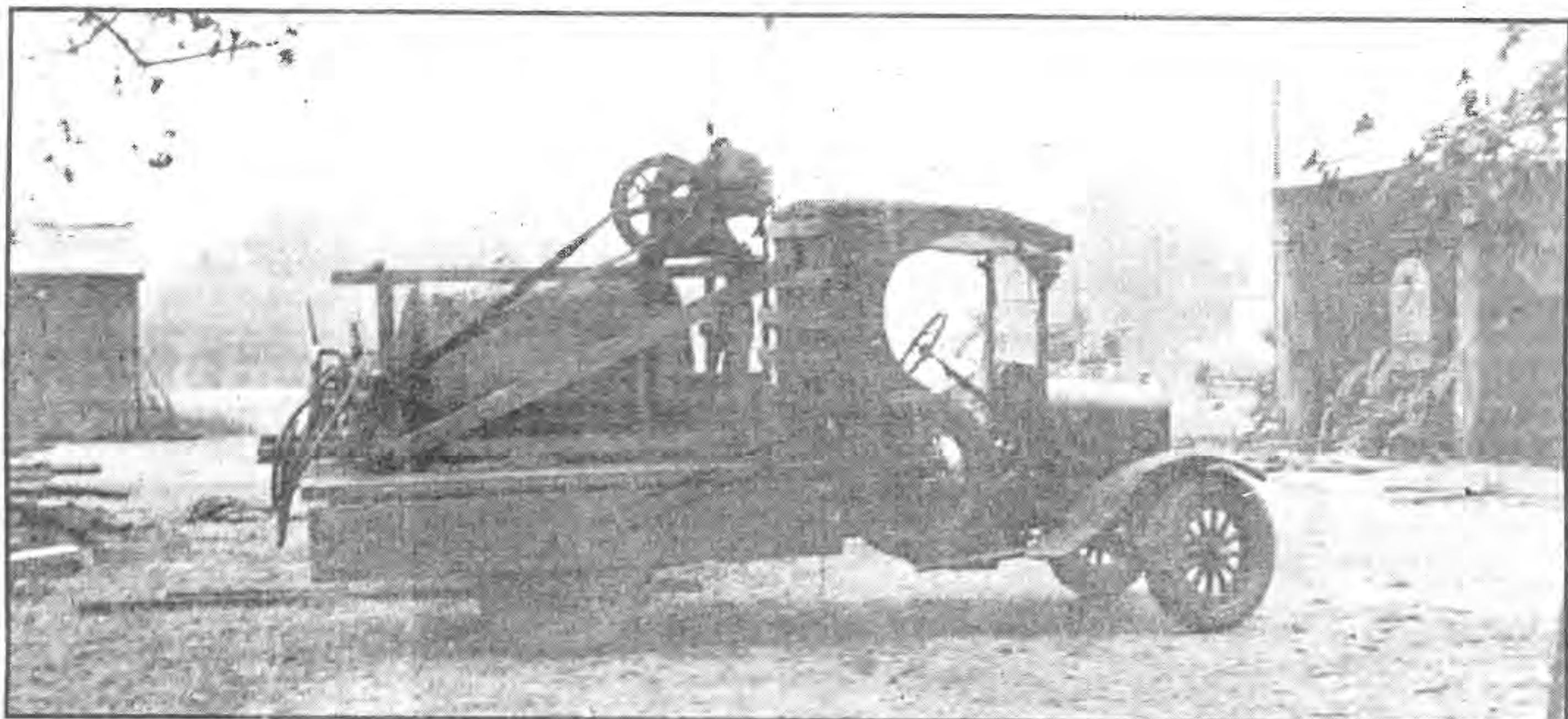
You will see very little joy reflected in their faces.

Joy is the reflection of a deep inner peace and happiness. Our joy in this season can be renewed if we focus less on what we are waiting for, and more on who we are waiting for. The old carol has it right:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room;
And heaven and nature sing.*



— Dean Zweck, Pastor, St.



● A private fire truck built by Bill Richardson and his family. Pictured in 1937, it is a 1925-26 Model "T" T-Ford truck, with Ruckstell rear axle; four forward, two reverse gears; water tank capacity: 410 litres and believed to be the second power-operated pump unit in Victoria.

Fire tragedy still vivid 50 years on



A special report by Terry McGovern



● Ken Stewart at the monument to the Tarrawingee fire victims. (Picture: Peter Merkesteyn).

A TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORY OF
KEVIN DUNKLEY | **JOSEPH (LOUIS) RYAN**
ANDREW GUTHRIE | **NORMAN ROBINSON**
CLAUDE HILL | **EDWARD SEYMOUR**
THEODORE LEA | **GODFREY SPENCER**
JOHN MARKS | **A.W. WELLINGTON**

WHO LOST THEIR LIVES NEAR THIS SPOT
WHILE FIGHTING THE DISASTROUS BUSH FIRE
ON 22ND DECEMBER 1943,
DUTY NOBLY DONE.

BUT for a sudden shift in the wind, Ken Stewart, a farmer of El Dorado, would have been taken by the voracious flames of the Tarrawingee bush fire.

Fifty years on he has not forgotten that or that others in his family, brother Harold, an uncle Arthur, very luckily got out unscathed.

He was one of the organisers of aid to the bereaved and the construction a year later of the monument at the site of the deaths.

Subsequently, he wrote an account of the fire and his part in it.

Late in the afternoon of December 22, 1943, he and some companions working on Springdale farm saw smoke in the south from a fire which had started, he discovered later, under power lines at Bowser near the Hume Highway, a little way north of Vine's Hotel.

The lines fouled a tree, sending sparks cascading into the tinder dry grass below.

A hot, gusting northerly picked up the flames sending them searing across the plains westward through open country leaping the El Dorado road and Reid's Creek.

It was on a sheep track near the creek that a small force of firefighters using leather beaters managed to intercept and hold the fire briefly while it was down out of the wind.

"Arthur and I had kerosene lighters and were burning a break in front of the running fire. That was the main method then of interception. Angus Simmonds, a local carrier, was there with his truck. He drove us around to Petticoat Lane, via the Beechworth road.

"Godfrey Spencer, a school teacher, who responded to a call in Wangaratta for volunteers, two boys, Kevin Dunkley and Claude Hill, Syd Wallace and a couple of others were on the truck.

"I said to Syd: 'You come with me.'

"The others got off the truck at the Beechworth road and Syd and I tried to get a fire break going down a lane off the Beechworth road.

"Uncle Arthur was doing the same from the other end.

"Bill Richardson, captain of the Boorhaman brigade, came along and told me I was doing the right thing lighting a fire break.

"He gave me some other advice: 'If you find yourself trapped, piss on your handkerchief, cover your face, run through the flames and lie on the burnt ground.'

As Ken and Syd moved up the lane lighting the breaks the wind veered away sending the fire to his left towards the Beechworth Road. He was safely out of the way on the north side.



● The dedication of a monument, in 1944, to the Tarrawingee fire victims.

"This was the side nearest our property and I stayed there all night with Bert Lyons."

The sudden wind change split the fire in two and in no time was on both sides of the Beechworth Road, burning towards Tarrawingee, where a party of volunteers from Wangaratta was waiting.

They were surrounded. The fire was then at its height, had crossed the road into Reidsdale burning among stooks of hay.

The thick volume of smoke made

it impossible to see. Suddenly a whirlwind lifted the flames into the air and across the road on to the firefighters. Just then some of them were getting the Wangaratta fire fighting unit into position.

They were found near the fire truck driven earlier from Wangaratta.

The driver, George McLaughlin, seeing the fire flames coming, attempted to turn the vehicle around to make a getaway with the accompanying men. But the truck overshot the edge of the road dropping its front wheels into a table drain. The chassis bellied.

The escape route closed.

The fire roared into the surrounding trees spewing fatal gases into the faces of the stricken men.

Later, the full horror of the tragedy was revealed — eight men dead, two more critically burnt and eight others severely burnt and suffering smoke and gas inhalation.

They were all trapped in the smoke and flames.

One man made a run for the Owens River to get water for his knapsack, but was engulfed.

A couple were hardly marked by the fire. The gas and smoke had killed them.

Dozens of others were temporarily maimed by angry, but not too serious flesh burns.

Five hours later Mr Stewart, still out in the field on guard, learned of the terrible event. He was stunned that men he had known so well were no more. Godfrey Spencer, one of the finest men he had known, had perished.

Also dead were the lads Dundley and Hill, of North Wangaratta; Andrew Guthrie, 45, farm manager of Markwood; John Marks, 29, a farmer of Markwood; Joseph (Louis) Ryan 32, Norman Robinson, 49, and Edward Seymour, all Telecom (then known as the PMG) linemen of Wangaratta; Godfrey Spencer, of Wangaratta; and Arthur Wellington, a farmer of Markwood.

Stewart noted that all of them had died voluntarily defending other people's lives and property.

Next morning, soldiers from Bandiana and airmen from Renald arrived to help fight the fires which were still burning.

"I can remember Mum handing out wheat bags dipped in the horse trough to men as they arrived.

"The people of Wangaratta rallied to our aid. They sent out a mountain of food and drink. It had to be seen to be believed. Everyone pitched in."

In hindsight it appals him that volunteer firemen of the time would pit themselves against such a deadly foe with no protection.

Surrounded by dust and soot

How Don Gardner fought the fire

IT is the smell of burnt human flesh which remains Don Gardner's most vivid memory of the tragic Tarrawingee fire.

Mr Gardner, for many years an officer of the Milawa Fire Brigade, remembers starting out for the fire with his father, Duke Gardner, and brother Mac, in the family Auburn.

"We had spotted the smoke in the early afternoon," he said.

They collected Jack Roberts, a wood carter, and Roy Louger, from the Milawa Butter Factory, en route and crossed the river to the Owens Highway, where they left their car, after turning it away from the fire.

They walked in to join the fire fighters already there, equipped with one knapsack and a couple of leather beaters.

"The fire was burning quite low along the ground, you would almost think you could have peed on it and put it out, then a sudden gust of wind brought it across a paddock of stooked oaten hay.

"You would almost think someone was in each of the stooks lighting them," Mr Gardner said.

"We were surrounded by dust and soot.

"Jack Marks was working along the road there. Mac and I were probably the last people to speak to him. He died within a short distance of where we last saw him."

"Angy Simmonds dragged Norman Goodwin in behind a big gum tree and Henry Johnson and Jack lay down in a deep drain.

"Jack Marks was working along the road there. Mac and I were probably the last people to speak to him. He died within a short distance of where we last saw him.

"He could just as easily have come with us. I don't know why he didn't," Mr Gardner said.

"Dad struck Hobley, a policeman, who asked what was happening on the other side of the river.



Fighting the fire with a knapsack - Don Gardner pictured recently.

"We were sent back around to Goodwin's property to watch for sparks coming across the river."

Mr Gardner said they had stopped to fight the fire in a wheat paddock.

"We saved half the paddock of wheat with just one knapsack of water," he said.

Mr Gardner said it had been necessary to keep watch for two or three days.

"The following Sunday, the fire started again at Reidsdale. We had to run like hell to get into the river," he said.

Mr Gardner said two of the men killed in the fire, John Marks and Arthur Wellington, were members of the Milawa Fire Brigade.

"Jack, and his wife, Nellie, were good friends of mine. We were pretty close and I would go down to their home for a meal when I was home on leave.

"Cars lined the road from the Presbyterian Church to the cemetery for his funeral. It was Christmas eve, and a very hot day."

Mr Gardner said the Milawa brigade virtually covered the area from Wangaratta to Carboor in those days.

"Now there are brigades at Bobinawarrah, Oxley Flats and Carboor.

"We didn't have much in the way of equipment then."

Mr Gardner said only for the loss of life, the Tarrawingee fire was not the worst he had fought.

"We were only on one fringe of it," he said. "It came in gusts.

"The fire which went from Benalla to Moyhu was really a worse fire. It just roared."

coming celebrations.

Although it's 50 years since that day Val Robinson (now Mrs Arthur Clark) remembers the events and emotions of the day as if it were only yesterday.

Val says, "While my memory is rather vague about the specific details, some things are embedded in my memory forever.

"There was an eerie feeling in the air and a heavy pall of smoke hung over the town

A day when something terrible could happen

Mary Gregory remembers the last time she saw her father, Godfrey Spencer

IT came as no surprise to anyone in Wangaratta on December 22, 1943 when the fire bell began to toll.

Oppressively hot and very dry, the fierce north wind gusting over the countryside, it was a day when something terrible could and did happen.

Mary Gregory remembers: "It seemed inevitable. As the bell kept tolling during the day and the air over the town began to get smoky we all knew it would be serious.

"I remember my father (Godfrey Spencer, a school teacher) dropping the book he was reading and going to the fire station. "I said to him to go with someone who knew about firefighting."

That was the last time Mary saw her father.

In those days firefighters had a minimum of training and equipment, often only a wet bag or a leather beater, and few trucks carried more than a small tank of water.

"As the day wore on the smoke bloated out the sun. We had a premonition of the seriousness of the situation," Mary said. "But it was when reports came in of men being brought into the hospital that the seriousness hit home.

"Christmas 1943 was a day of mourning for the whole town with a feeling of loss replacing the joy and celebration of previous years."

The impact hit everyone.

For Clarice Tobias the memory of the fire is as vivid as if it were yesterday.

"I'd gone to the pictures with my mother. She was worried that something had happened to Dad (William Richardson) or my brother Wallace," Clarice said.

"No-one could tell us what was happening but I knew it was serious."

Clarice said the next time she saw her father that day was after he had come out of the police station.

"Wallace's face, hands and feet were badly burned. He was in hospital for three weeks."

"Rode on the footboard of Simmonds' truck and was horrified to see the Wangaratta unit burning fiercely in the table drain, worse sights followed."

Clarice said her father was very involved in what had happened on the day and in the weeks that followed was determined in his efforts to gain support for local firefighters.

"Dad kept meticulous records of what happened on the day. "He was determined to get adequate fire fighting equipment for the district.

"He knew the local fire trucks weren't serviceable and went out of his way, even contacting John McEwan, the Country Party leader in Canberra, to get proper trucks."

Bill Richardson was the kind of man to have his own fire truck, one of only two privately owned in Victoria.

He wrote an account of the Tarrawingee fire and its aftermath. What he recorded later helped in the formation of the Country Fire Authority.

Here is part of his story: "We had plenty of men but only 20 gallons of water in a drum on McDonald's utility. I realised then that the fire further up had crossed the sludge channel so got back and got White's utility and Clem Fisher's truck to run me to the front of the fire."

"It had just crossed Wighton's Lane and I could see that the only thing to do was burn a break at the next lane (from Reidsdale past Tom Klemm's). As we approached I saw Godfrey Spencer with a small gang trying to burn a break along Beechworth Road.



Godfrey Spencer - dropped the book he was reading and rushed to the fire station.

"They were working under difficult conditions without rakes or fire lighters.

"...hurried back towards the Beechworth Road as the fire was going to hit our firebreaks and I thought fire trucks should soon be along. Was enveloped in smoke and dust and the only thing to do was lie on the roadway with the wet handkerchief over nose and mouth.

"Heard a vehicle motor roaring so thought it was wise to move so kept on going.

"The fire had crossed the lane into Fisher brothers' stooks and when I came to the Beechworth Road I saw Simmonds' truck parked across it.

"Saw Simmonds and several others walking about, some seemed very dazed.

"I saw Jack Allan (an Everton farmer, later admitted to hospital) who had both arms and legs very badly burned.

"Saw Godfrey Spencer in the back of Gorman's car and advised his immediate removal to hospital which I believe was done after picking up another sufferer some distance down the road.

"Rode on the footboard of Simmonds' truck and was horrified to see the Wangaratta unit burning fiercely in the table drain, worse sights followed.

"When we emerged from this inferno I saw my own truck working away putting out the southern flank of the fire.

"We then went back through the fire, after being joined by two other light trucks with water, to see how Reidsdale had fared.

"Fire was under control at the culvert past Reidsdale where Mr Canny had a gang of men who did good work.

"We were just congratulating ourselves when a holocaust from the west caught us and the only thing to do was drop to the ground.

"I never felt so helpless in my life. Saw Arthur Wellington come out a few yards away very badly burned and helped him into the car.

"Circumstances were such that I felt it imperative that we should return to Wangaratta.

"Stayed at the police station for a while trying to render assistance before returning home."

'There was an eerie feeling in the air...'

DECEMBER 22, 1943 had been an oppressively hot day. Wangaratta's fire bell had been ringing almost continuously the whole day and the air was thick with smoke.

Eight-year-old Val Robinson swung on the front gate of her Ryley Street home, waiting for her father, Norman Robinson, to come home.

It was almost Christmas and Val remembers feel-

truck with Dad and several other workmen pulled up out the front.

"Dad called to us that they were going to Tarrawingee to help fight the fire. "As the truck drove off down the road, Joan and I ran inside to tell Mum. That was the last time I was ever to see my father."

Val said the fire bell continued to ring as word came that a P&G truck carrying her father and other men had

"We found out later that my father had died."

Val said the event had a big effect on her life - "not just at the time, but for the rest of my life."

There were five Robinson children without a father: Bill, 13 years old, Jim, 10, Val who was eight, six-year-old Joan and Norma, who was four.

"I can remember the great sorrow which overtook the whole town...and

to our family."

Val smiled at the memory of a huge ice-cream bought for her by an aunt who had come to take her back to Melbourne for a holiday.

"It's funny the things you remember.

"I remember my mother sending my brother to the butcher (the late Les Bell) and returning with a huge parcel of meat for which he would not accept payment.

"The Salvation Army ar-

mas... there were hundreds of letters and cards from all over the state.

"What a sad Christmas it was, not only for us. The whole town was in mourning."

Twelve months later Val lay a wreath on the monument erected at Tarrawingee in memory of her father and the other men who died.

"I can never speak too highly of the many kindnesses shown to my mother and our

and a jail for Christ family"

Graphic Tarrawingee Bush Fire Pictures



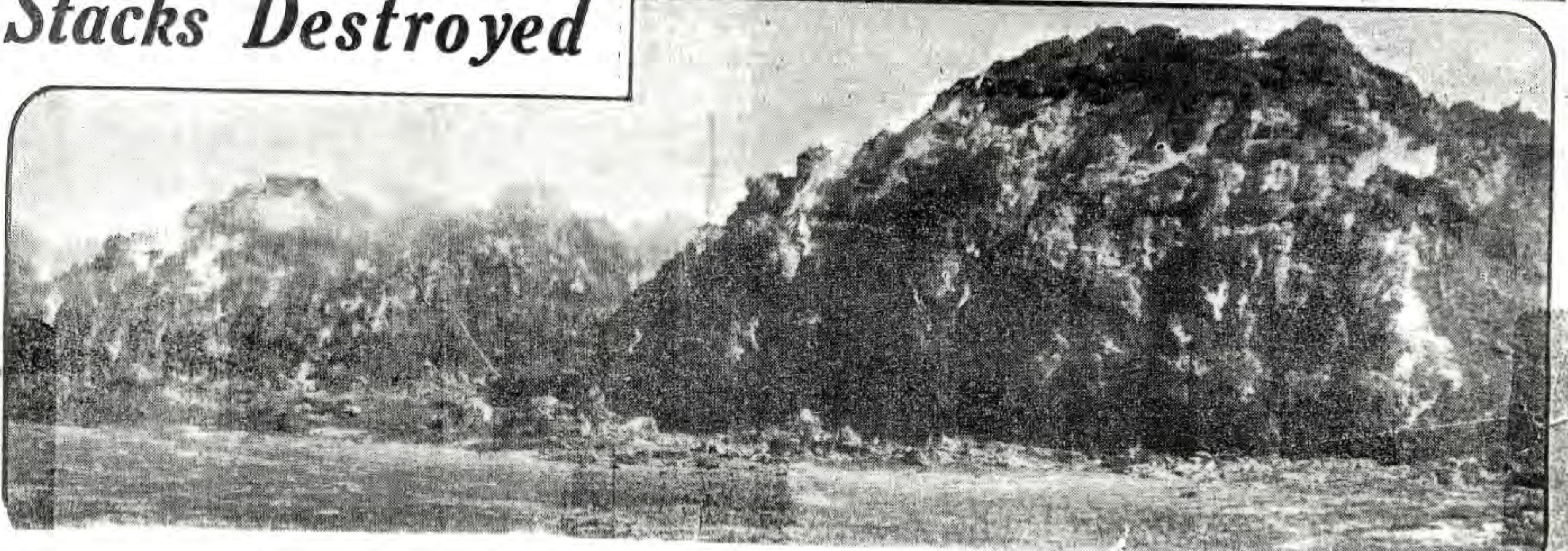
FIRE which broke out late on Wednesday and swept through

between Bowser and Tarrawingee, near Wangaratta, has left a wake of death and destruction. Four deaths among fire-fighters were reported during Wednesday night and yesterday the death roll mounted. Other fire-fighters are in hospital with burns. Above: Mr. J. Barter searches charred ruins on his son's property at Tarrawingee. Right:

Norman Robinson, postal linesman, was fatally burned beside this fire-fighting truck when it was trapped. Below: Flames devour two big hay stacks on Reidsdale Estate.



Stacks Destroyed



TARRAWINGEE FIRES 22-12-1943.

Dedication of the monument 22-12-1944.



December 1944 - a year after the fire, the memorial is unveiled. *H.G. HARMAN. CHRONICLE REPORTER*



Vic Edgar as he is today.

The bitumen was boiling

● From front page

"The truck took off, the driver not realising we were still on the ground, and we were left alone to fight this fire.

"We saw it come over the top of us first, like an express train, the Spirit of Progress, then it followed along the ground, creating its own wind.

"It was a firestorm, throwing burning sticks and rubbish into the air.

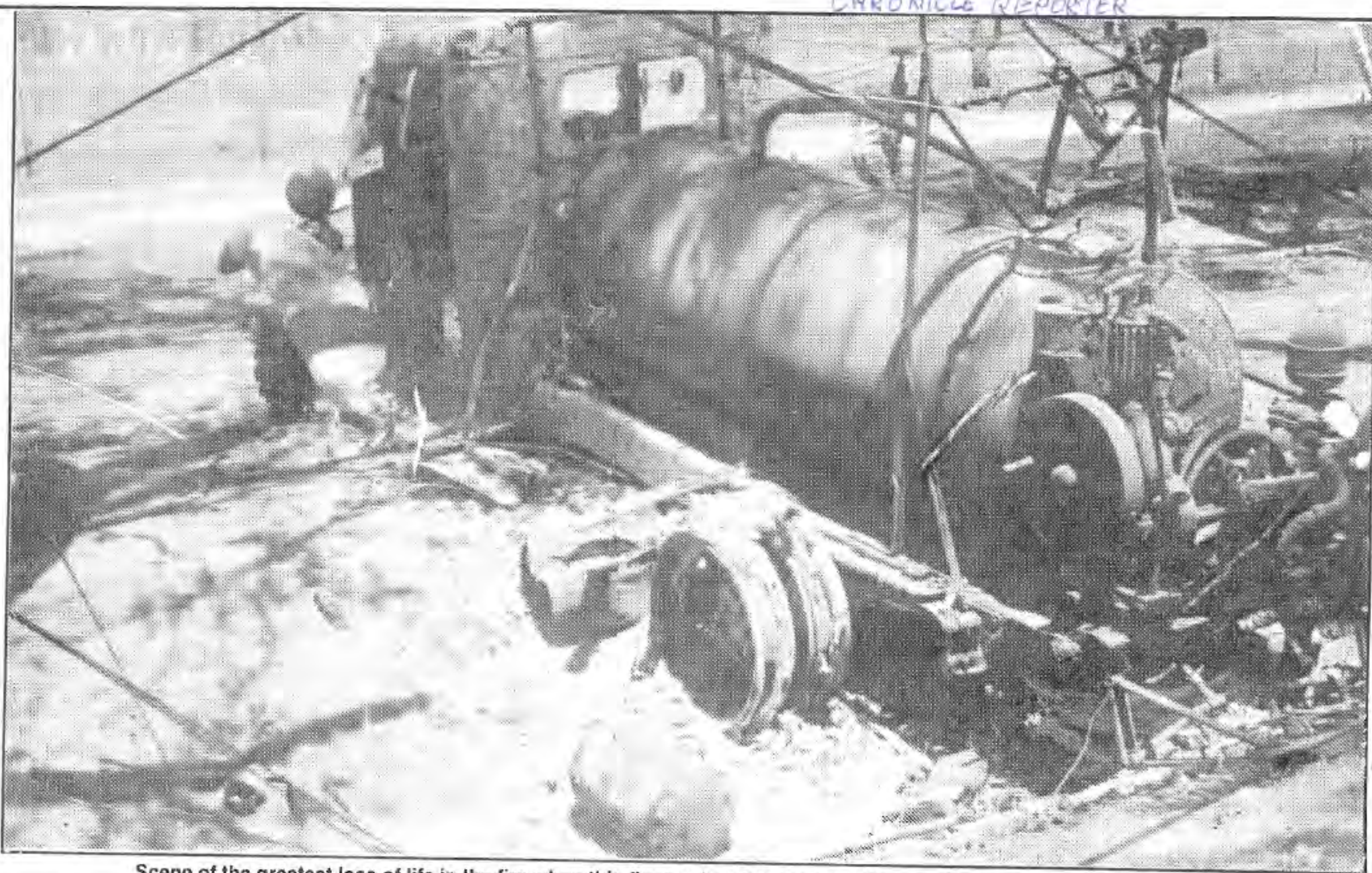
"Arthur Wellington got into a culvert and John Marks made a run for the Owens River.

"I dived under a car on the Beechworth Road, crouching between the bonnet and the mudguard.

"The fire got under the car, burning my face and arms, and I decided to get into car, crouching down in the front seat.

"I got into the car expecting it to explode," Mr Edgar said. "I thought it would be better to be blown up than roasted."

"I've forgotten whose car it was. I



Scene of the greatest loss of life in the fire when this fire truck, returning from Wangaratta, was surrounded by flames.

know it was a Rover. It was just enveloped by the flames. You couldn't see out the windscreen.

"Fire was roaring around me at 60 miles an hour."

Mr Edgar said he got out of the car when all was peaceful.

"I remember the bitumen on the road was boiling.

"A policeman from Benalla, a police sergeant I think, came along and picked me up from the road and took me into hospital.

"I spent a couple of months in hospital. I got a new face out of it," he said.

"I wasn't frightened at the time. I thought it was the end, that I would lose my family, or rather that they would lose me.

"I think the families had a more trying time than we did," Mr Edgar continued.

"It was a terrible ordeal for the families of those who went out to fight the fire.

"It was a frightening day in Wangaratta. The fire bell was ringing all the time.

"My poor wife was in a terrible state, she didn't know where I was for a while, just that I had gone out to try and help.

"Her biggest ordeal was before I was brought in. Word was coming in all the time about men being burnt.

"We had a young family. My daughter was just three months old and my eldest was five.

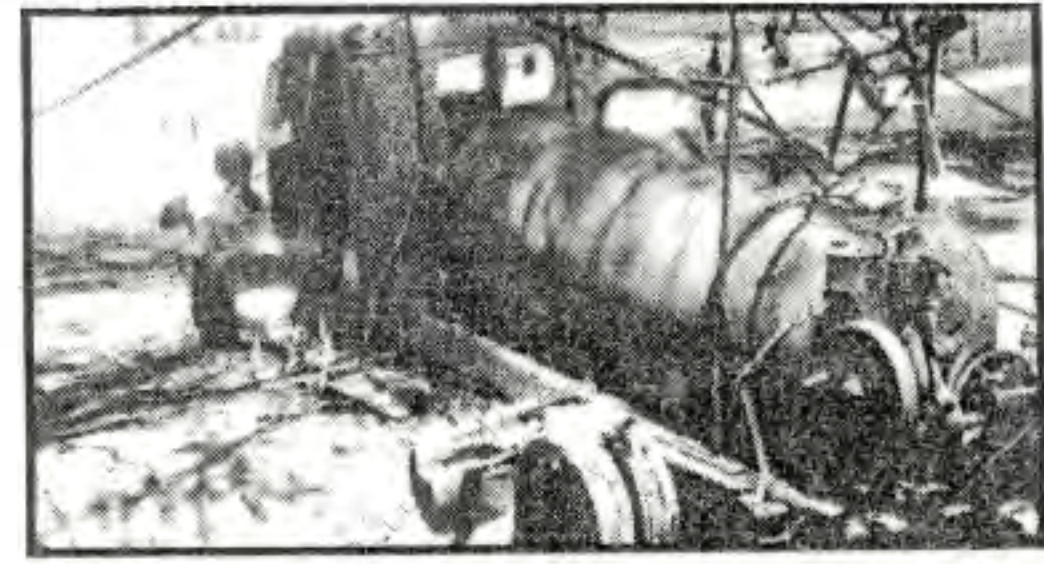
"After the fire died down, a fellow called Reg Mitchell drove my car in for me."

Mr Edgar, who was then Wangaratta's newsagent, said everyone rallied around to help with the business.

"Harry the baker would come along to get my boys out on the paper rounds and Gordon and Gotch sent a man up from Melbourne to look after the shop.

"It took all the worry of the business off me."

A decision that saved his life



Tarrawingee's day of hell

"I GOT a new face out of it." That is how Victor Edgar, 90, of Wangaratta, remembers Tarrawingee.

More compelling is that he got away with his life, given that two companions at the critical moment were killed. They ran to hide from the flames, but he stayed put, hiding first under a car and then inside it, even though he was certain it would explode. That saved him.

He learned 50 years ago what fire experts have established only recently, that motor vehicles do not explode in outside fires.

Mr Edgar was Wangaratta's newsagent in 1943 and just as keen as anyone to answer the urgent call to

go to the aid of the stricken Tarrawingee people.

"I drove out in my car, then picked up with eight or 10 other fellows on a truck.

"We were very keen about putting out the fire, but had no beaters, no bags, nothing.

"Three of us — John Marks, Arthur Wellington and I — hopped off the truck to pull branches off a tree alongside the Beechworth road to use as beaters. While we were doing that the fire came roaring across the paddock and the truck took off, the driver not realising we were still on the ground.

"There we were left alone to fight this fire.

"We saw it come over the top of us first. It came like an express train, the Spirit of Progress. Then it followed along the ground, creating its own wind. It was a fire storm throwing burning sticks and rubbish into the air."

Arthur hopped into a culvert and John made a run for it across a paddock towards the Ovens River.

He got tangled on a barbed wire fence and the fire caught him.

Arthur suffocated in the culvert.

Vic dived under a motor car on the Beechworth road.

He crouched down between the left front wheel and the engine.

"I was certain I was going to get

roasted. The fire got under the car, burning my face and arms and bum. I decided to get inside the car, thinking it would be better to be blown up than roasted.

"I crouched down in the front seat. The fire came right over the car. It was terrible. I couldn't see through the windscreen for the flames.

"They were roaring around me at about 60 miles an hour. They were right up in the air.

"But the car didn't blow up.

"After a while all was peaceful and I got out. The bitumen on the Beechworth road was boiling. I remember it.

"The sergeant of police from

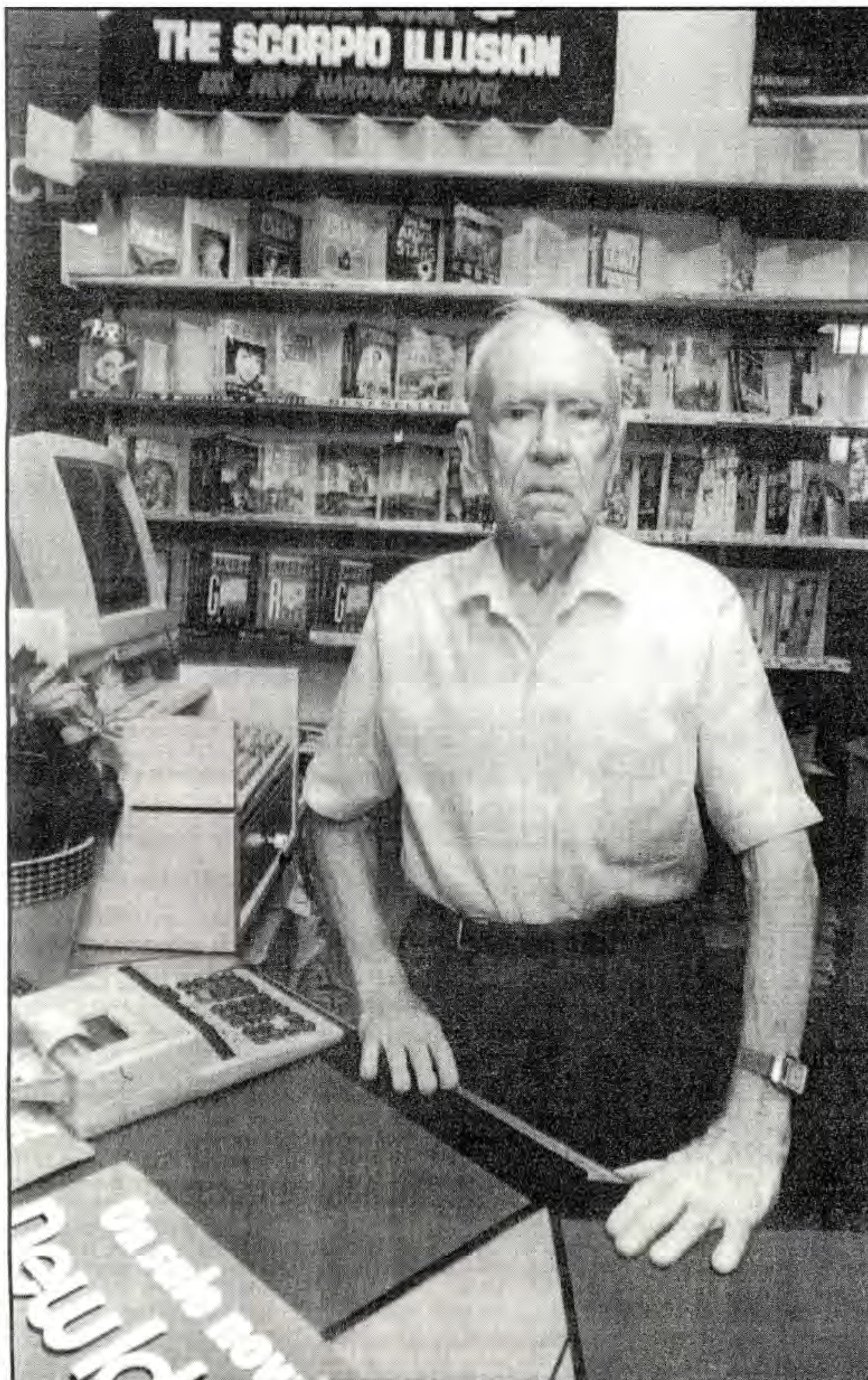
Benalla took me to the Wangaratta hospital where I stayed for about three weeks.

Mr Edgar had gone with Wellington and Marks, both farmers, because he believed they knew what to do in the situation.

"I was just a blooming newsagent who knew nothing about bush fires.

"I want to emphasise I was no hero. I feel very humble about it — that I lived and those two men died. I have often felt since that I didn't deserve to get off. It's ridiculous. It's absurd.

"I didn't find out for some weeks what had happened to them."



Victor Edgar, 90: "The fire came like an express train."

Strong gust of wind and a wall of flame

WALLACE Richardson drove his father's fire truck, a 1925-26 Model T Ford, from Docker's Plains to the Tarrawingee fire of 1943.

He went to Bowser, the starting point, and followed the tracks of the Wangaratta fire truck which had already been to the fire and back to town to pick up more water.

"They wanted a full tank on hand while they burnt a break down Petticoat Lane in the face of the oncoming fire. We arrived at the scene just as the Wangaratta unit, a vehicle in immaculate condition, was coming along the road. We jogged along behind it on the Beechworth road."

Wallace remembered a strong gust of wind sending a wall of flame leaping ahead of the main body of fire and engulfing the Wangaratta truck, which stuck in the drain when the driver tried to reverse to make a run for it.

"I had time to turn around and get away."

But not before the fire passed through the cabin of the truck burning him badly on the arms, legs and feet.

He met his father who drove him, Les Sandford and a couple of others to Dr Cole's surgery in Victoria Parade, Wangaratta.

Mrs Cole, who met them was stunned. "It's hospital for you chaps," was all she said.

The burnt men, dazed and sick, sat in the gutter for a while before going

off to hospital where Dr Cole and every other person with any medical skill at all had assembled to help deal with the scores of injured firefighters coming in.

"I was in hospital for three weeks. The care and attention was fantastic.

"In their wisdom the doctors told us nothing about who had been hurt.

"The fire was so hard on so many people. The worst part was that all the men killed had died protecting other people's property."

Mr Richardson remembered the aftermath, the armchair critics who had done nothing to put out the fire sitting back and demanding to know why the firefighters had not done this or that at the time.

He referred to the cause of the fire — power lines touching each other and overhanging trees, causing sparks to fall into the dry grass below.

Several times previously, local councils, fire brigades the Country Roads Board and landowners had urged the State Electricity Commission to reduce the hazard by putting spreaders between the lines.

The SEC had to accept responsibility for the fire and subsequently paid compensation.

Mr Richardson remembered the trouble his father had persuading farmers to pay a levy of five shillings per 100 acres into a fire protection fund. From some, he got abuse.

Army tankers sent to fire scene

Continued from previous page.

BILL Richardson looked everywhere for help and finally telephoned Jack (Black Jack) McEwan, the Country Party leader in Canberra.

Army tankers and personnel were sent to the district to relieve the people's fears.

That was just as well, for another fire broke out at Springhurst and raged to Everton before being checked.

Richardson set about rebuilding his fire truck and persuading farmers to

contribute to a fund to combat bush fires.

He found them hard-headed and mean — unappreciative that 10 men had perished defending other people's farms.

Twelve months later at the dedication of the memorial to the dead, Mr Richardson hit back at the people who had nothing to help at the time of the fire but had criticised the efforts of those who had. He won a lot more respect for that. He was a real man.

ChronicleFeatures



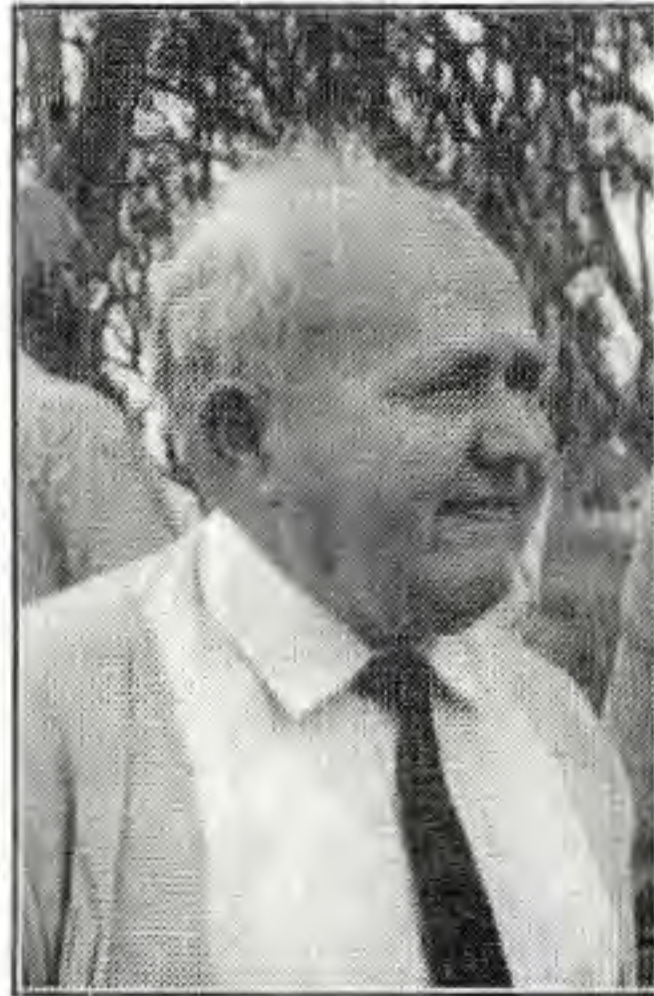
Members of the Country Fire Authority formed a sombre guard of honor at Wednesday's Tarrawingee bush fire memorial service.



Ken Stewart, the driving force behind the memorial service organisation, and one of many who fought the Tarrawingee fires 50 years ago.



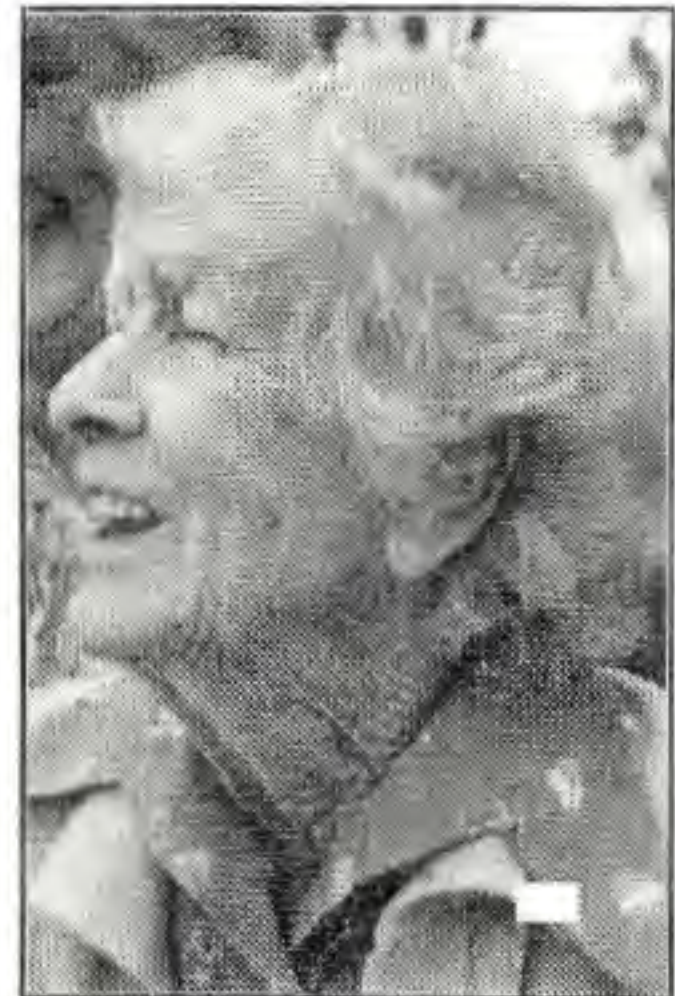
Nellie Marks, the widow of John Marks, a fire victim caught by flames while running to the river to re-fill his knapsack.



Les Sandford was a lucky escapee from the Tarrawingee fires. He was burnt while fighting the blaze and spent time in hospital.




Wallace Richardson was burnt when fire went through the cabin of his father's fire truck and spent three weeks in hospital.



Mrs Ethel Lea, the widow of Theodore Lea, one of the ten fire victims. Theodore was a foreman at the Huttons factory.

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CHALLENGE 09/93

Service rekindles memories of Tarrawingee's blackest day

Fiftieth anniversary of December bush fires shows that the memories haven't faded

IT only cost an extra four pounds to inscribe the words "Duty Nobly Done" but Ken Stewart believed it was money well spent.

In his address at the memorial service held in honor of the Tarrawingee fire victims, Mr Stewart said he was honored to be able to speak at the service in honor of men who had given their lives to help others.

He helped fight the fire that claimed the lives of eight men and two boys on December 22, 1943 and was there 12 months later when a monument to commemorate the awful day was unveiled.

Mr Stewart spoke of the overwhelming kindness and generosity of the community, which raised more than 18 000 pounds to

By Irene Grant

help the families of the victims, with an additional 154 pounds raised to erect a monument.

The Governor and Lady Duggan, even took the time to visit each family to offer their condolences. It was a time when the community grouped together to help wherever they could.

On Wednesday this week, every man who died that day was remembered by his family and friends, wife, children, brothers and sisters who gathered to pay their respects, re-

membering with the painful clarity the impact the tragedy had on all their lives.

Although 50 years on the memory of that day is still strong, Wednesday's ceremony showed that no-one had forgotten.

"We are all proud to remember," Mr Stewart said.

"These men have not been forgotten.

"It was a terrible tragedy but it put us into gear."

Mr Stewart, secretary of the Wangaratta Fire Brigades, said the fire was the turning point for district brigades as the need to change attitudes to fire-fighting techniques was finally recognised and a push for essential fire-fighting equipment was made.

Weekend Mail

WANGARATTA and district people will gather at an Ovens Highway monument on Wednesday, December 22, to pay their respects to 10 men who were killed in a bush fire in 1943. The memorial service at 11 am will be the 50th anniversary of the tragedy, which left an indelible legacy on the lives of hundreds of people and led to the formation of the Country Fire Authority in Victoria. After the service there will be a social gathering at the Tarrawingee hall. TERRY MCGOVERNE reports on Tarrawingee's day of agony:



Tarrawingee's day of hell

● The Wangaratta fire truck burnt out in the 1943 bush fire, which claimed 10 lives.

KEVIN Dunkley was 14 when he died.

So was his mate Claude Hill. He died, too.

They and eight men were burnt to death fighting the Tarrawingee bushfire.

That and the expanding horror of World War II destroyed any semblance of peace on earth and goodwill to anyone in the Wangaratta district that Yuletide.

To make matters even worse, the funerals were on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Christmas dinner... it tasted like ashes in people's mouths.

The town and district were stricken, angry, frustrated, crestfallen.

The death of so many people a crushing agony.

The loss of two boys fighting a fire armed so primitively with against-the-odds equipment. That was too much.

How do boys fight flames 3 m high, travelling at 100 kmh, protect themselves with limbs pulled from trees?

How did Kevin and Claude's parents feel about them dying?

No one dared ask. It was just too much.

So much courage needed — to

face the day, face a Christmas destroyed, face anyone, anything.

Fifty years have passed.

The scars have healed and in a few days people will return to where the flames did their worst and pay tribute to the dead.

Mrs Clarice Tobias, of Wangaratta, will be there.

Though she did not see even the smoke, she remembers the fire as if it were only yesterday.

The impact hit everyone.

Her brother, Wallace Richardson then of Docker's Plains, manning his father's fire truck, was burnt, but survived.

Her father, William Richardson, heroically stood between people's panic and fear of another fire without protection.

He had built his own firefighting unit, the only one left after the Tarrawingee inferno.

He organised firefighters to be ready for action in any more fires. Another came only two weeks later at Everton, doing immense damage but mercifully claiming no one.

Clarice was in the thick of the emotion of the aftermath.

Though only a lass at the time, it branded itself so indelibly she had no difficulty recalling the details.

Moreover her dad kept records of



● Clarice Tobias.

everything. He was so meticulous, so careful — especially about the danger of fire.

"Dad was interested in bush fires all his life."

He started work as a water joey on a steam-driven threshing machine.

He had to fetch the water in an old Furphy tank...

"We were at Docker's Plains eight miles north of Wangaratta.

"On the day of the fire Mum and I went to town and were going to the pictures.

"We were just about to go in when we heard the ambulance go out.

"There was only one. For an ambulance to go out really meant trouble.

"I went to the pictures and mum stayed outside. She was worried something had gone wrong with dad or Wallace.

"I spoke to the fireman on duty at the pictures and asked to let me know if anything was wrong.

"He came in and said mum and I were to go home with a neighbor Frank O'Keefe, of Boorhaman.

"Mum said: 'Where's dad?'

"Frank said: 'It's a big fire and he'll be a while'.

"Frank drove down the main street into Faithful St and I looked left into Victoria Parade where I saw our fire truck and Wallace and Les sitting in the gutter outside Dr Cole's surgery waiting for help.

"There was no one to help. Every doctor was at the hospital.

"Wallace's face, hands and feet were badly burnt. He was in hospital for three weeks.

"Les was not badly burnt.

"Frank took us home. Dad came out of the police station. He had told the police what had happened. When he got into the car you had

only to look at his face to realise there had been some tragedy.

"Mum said: 'Bad fire was it?'

"Yes, we have lost some men and a truck.

"We didn't know then how Wallace got to hospital.

"Mum kept asking about him and dad kept hedging. At home he started to get concerned and went over to the neighbor's to ring the hospital.

"We were all worried about Wallace. His wife was expecting a baby."

He had a big straw hat on at the fire.

His hair was burnt where the two holes were.

The fire got to Richardson's truck manned by Wallace and another man who had helping with the harvest.

They had to get out when the flames leaped into the cabin and melted part of the windscreen.

Clarice's father played a major role in the aftermath in damping down fears of what might happen if another fire came. It did.

He knew there was no bush fire truck serviceable.

It was war time and to get anything one had to fill out forms in triplicate.

MORE PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF THE WORST

Surrounded by dust and soot

How Don Gardner fought the fire

IT is the smell of burnt human flesh which remains Don Gardner's most vivid memory of the tragic Tarrawingee fire.

Mr Gardner, for many years an officer of the Milawa Fire Brigade, remembers starting out for the fire with his father, Duke Gardner, and brother Mac, in the family Auburn.

"We had spotted the smoke in the early afternoon," he said.

They collected Jack Roberts, a wood carter, and Roy Lougier, from the Milawa Butter Factory, en route and crossed the river to the Owens Highway, where they left their car, after turning it away from the fire.

They walked in to join the fire fighters already there, equipped with one knapsack and a couple of leather beaters.

"The fire was burning quite low along the ground, you would almost think you could have peed on it and put it out, then a sudden gust of wind brought it across a paddock of stooked oaten hay.

"You would almost think someone was in each of the stooks lighting them," Mr Gardner said.

"We were surrounded by dust and soot.

"Jack Marks was working along the road there. Mac and I were probably the last people to speak to him. He died within a short distance of where we last saw him."

"Angy Simmonds dragged Norman Goodwin in behind a big gum tree and Henry Johnson and Jack lay down in a deep drain.

"Jack Marks was working along the road there. Mac and I were probably the last people to speak to him. He died within a short distance of where we last saw him.

"He could just as easily have come with us. I don't know why he didn't," Mr Gardner said.

"Dad struck Hobley, a policeman, who asked what was happening on the other side of the river.



Fighting the fire with a knapsack - Don Gardner pictured recently.

"We were sent back around to Goodwin's property to watch for sparks coming across the river."

Mr Gardner said they had stopped to fight the fire in a wheat paddock.

"We saved half the paddock of wheat with just one knapsack of water," he said.

Mr Gardner said it had been necessary to keep watch for two or three days.

"The following Sunday, the fire started again at Reidsdale. We had to run like hell to get into the river," he said.

Mr Gardner said two of the men killed in the fire, John Marks and Arthur Wellington, were members of the Milawa Fire Brigade.

"Jack, and his wife, Nellie, were good friends of mine. We were pretty close and I would go down to their home for a meal when I was home on leave.

"Cars lined the road from the Presbyterian Church to the cemetery for his funeral. It was Christmas eve, and a very hot day."

Mr Gardner said the Milawa brigade virtually covered the area from Wangaratta to Carboor in those days.

"Now there are brigades at Bobinawarrah, Oxley Flats and Carboor.

"We didn't have much in the way of equipment then."

Mr Gardner said only for the loss of life, the Tarrawingee fire was not the worst he had fought.

"We were only on one fringe of it," he said. "It came in gusts.

"The fire which went from Benalla to Moyhu was really a worse fire. It just roared."

'There was an eerie feeling in the air...'

DECEMBER 22, 1943 had been an oppressively hot day. Wangaratta's fire bell had been ringing almost continuously the whole day and the air was thick with smoke.

Eight-year-old Val Robinson swung on the front gate of her Ryley Street home, waiting for her father, Norman Robinson, to come home.

It was almost Christmas and Val remembers feeling very excited and happy about the forth-

coming celebrations.

Although it's 50 years since that day Val Robinson (now Mrs Arthur Clark) remembers the events and emotions of the day as if it were only yesterday.

Val says, "While my memory is rather vague about the specific details, some things are embedded in my memory forever.

"There was an eerie feeling in the air and a heavy pall of smoke hung over the town. "Eventually the PMG

A day when something terrible could happen

Mary Gregory remembers the last time she saw her father, Godfrey Spencer

IT came as no surprise to anyone in Wangaratta on December 22, 1943 when the fire bell began to toll.

Oppressively hot and very dry, the fierce north wind gusting over the countryside, it was a day when something terrible could and did happen.

Mary Gregory remembers: "It seemed inevitable. As the bell kept tolling during the day and the air over the town began to get smoky we all knew it would be serious.

"I remember my father (Godfrey Spencer, a school teacher) dropping the book he was reading and going to the fire station.

"I said to him to go with someone who knew about firefighting."

That was the last time Mary saw her father. In those days firefighters had a minimum of training and equipment, often only a wet bag or a leather beater, and few trucks carried more than a small tank of water.

"As the day wore on the smoke blotted out the sun. We had a premonition of the seriousness of the situation," Mary said.

"But it was when reports came in of men being brought into the hospital that the seriousness hit home.

"Christmas 1943 was a day of mourning for the whole town with a feeling of loss replacing the joy and celebration of previous years."

The impact hit everyone. For Clarice Tobias the memory of the fire is as vivid as if it were yesterday.

"I'd gone to the pictures with my mother. She was worried that something had happened to Dad (William Richardson) or my brother Wallace," Clarice said.

"No-one could tell us what was happening but I knew it was serious."

Clarice said the next time she saw her father that day was after he had come out of the police station.

"Wallace's face, hands and feet were badly burned. He was in hospital for three weeks."

"Rode on the footboard of Simmonds' truck and was horrified to see the Wangaratta unit burning fiercely in the table drain, worse sights followed."

Clarice said her father was very involved in what had happened on the day and in the weeks that followed was determined in his efforts to gain support for local firefighters.

"Dad kept meticulous records of what happened on the day.

"He was determined to get adequate fire fighting equipment for the district.

"He knew the local fire trucks weren't serviceable and went out of his way, even contacting John McEwan, the Country Party leader in Canberra, to get proper trucks."

Bill Richardson was the kind of man to have his own fire truck, one of only two privately owned in Victoria.

He wrote an account of the Tarrawingee fire and its aftermath. What he recorded later helped in the formation of the Country Fire Authority.

Here is part of his story: "We had plenty of men but only 20 gallons of water in a drum on McDonald's utility. I realised then that the fire further up had crossed the sludge channel so got back and got White's utility and Clem Fisher's truck to run me to the front of the fire.

"It had just crossed Wighton's Lane and I could see that the only thing to do was burn a break at the next lane (from Reidsdale past Tom Klemm's). As we approached I saw Godfrey Spencer with a small gang trying to burn a break along Beechworth Road.

'There was an eerie feeling in the air...'

truck with Dad and several other workmen pulled up out the front.

"Dad called to us that they were going to Tarrawingee to help fight the fire. "As the truck drove off down the road, Joan and I ran inside to tell Mum. That was the last time I was ever to see my father."

Val said the fire bell continued to ring as word came that a PMG truck carrying her father and other men had been burned.

"We found out later that my father had died."

Val said the event had a big effect on her life - "not just at the time, but for the rest of my life."

There were five Robinson children without a father: Bill, 13 years old, Jim, 10, Val who was eight, six-year-old Joan and Norma, who was two.

"I can remember the great sorrow which overtook the whole town...and the great kindnesses shown



Godfrey Spencer - dropped the book he was reading and rushed to the fire station.

"They were working under difficult conditions without rakes or fire lighters.

"...hurried back towards the Beechworth Road as the fire was going to hit our firebreaks and I thought fire trucks should soon be along. Was enveloped in smoke and dust and the only thing to do was lie on the roadway with the wet handkerchief over nose and mouth.

"Heard a vehicle motor roaring so thought it was wise to move so kept on going.

"The fire had crossed the lane into Fisher brothers' stooks and when I came to the Beechworth Road I saw Simmonds' truck parked across it.

"Saw Simmonds and several others walking about, some seemed very dazed.

"I saw Jack Allan (an Everton farmer, later admitted to hospital) who had both arms and legs very badly burned.

"Saw Godfrey Spencer in the back of Gorman's car and advised his immediate removal to hospital which I believe was done after picking up another sufferer some distance down the road.

"Rode on the footboard of Simmonds' truck and was horrified to see the Wangaratta unit burning fiercely in the table drain, worse sights followed.

"When we emerged from this inferno I saw my own truck working away putting out the southern flank of the fire.

"We then went back through the fire, after being joined by two other light trucks with water, to see how Reidsdale had fared.

"Fire was under control at the culvert past Reidsdale where Mr Canny had a gang of men who did good work.

"We were just congratulating ourselves when a holocaust from the west caught us and the only thing to do was drop to the ground.

"I never felt so helpless in my life. Saw Arthur Wellington come out a few yards away very badly burned and helped him into the car.

"Circumstances were such that I felt it imperative that we should return to Wangaratta.

"Stayed at the police station for a while trying to render assistance before returning home."

'There was an eerie feeling in the air...'

to our family."

Val smiled at the memory of a huge ice-cream bought for her by an aunt who had come to take her back to Melbourne for a holiday.

"It's funny the things you remember.

"I remember my mother sending my brother to the butcher (the late Les Bell) and returning with a huge parcel of meat for which he would not accept payment.

"The Salvation Army arrived with toys for Christ-

mas... there were hundreds of letters and cards from all over the state.

"What a sad Christmas it was, not only for us. The whole town was in mourning."

Twelve months later Val lay a wreath on the monument erected at Tarrawingee in memory of her father and the other men who died.

"I can never speak too highly of the many kindnesses shown to my mother and our family."

Special report to mark the 50th anniversary of the Tarrawingee bush fire

THE DAY THE EARTH CAUGHT FIRE

The Chronicle

A DEATH knell sounded over Wangaratta on the Christmas of 1943.

A bushfire on December 22 had claimed the lives of 10 men, two of them young boys of 14, and the small largely farming community, more used to hearing of tragedy on the war front, literally reeled with the shock.

Killed in the inferno were:

- Norman Robinson,
- John Marks,
- Joseph Ryan,
- Andrew Guthrie,
- Theodore Lea,
- Godfrey Spencer,
- Kevin Dunkley,
- Claude Hill.

Arthur Wellington and Edward Seymour died later in hospital.

To add to the pain and horror most of the victims were buried on Christ-

mas Day, a time when most families, would get together to forget their troubles and celebrate.

It was a tragedy unsurpassed in Wangaratta's history.

Tarrawingee farmer Ken Stewart has vivid memories of the events surrounding the fire and its aftermath that are still clear in his mind 50 years later.

The fire was reported to have started at Bowser and very quickly swept its way across farmland to Tarrawingee.

Firefighters, though valiant in their efforts, were hampered by lack of machinery and equipment and the fire raged its way to the area along the Owens Highway near the Reidsdale homestead.

"We tried to fight the fire back at Wightons Lane. We had to drive

around to Petticoat Lane to catch it," Mr Stewart said.

It was in this area that the firefighters, blinded by the thick smoke, were caught when a sudden gust of wind turned the flames back on their escape.

"Their truck just bellied into a table drain. They were trying to escape, we found most of the people just around the truck."

The bodies of John Marks and Andrew Guthrie were found some distance away.

The whole district rallied to help the families left behind, even to the extent of raiding the town's gardens to find enough flowers for the funerals and an appeal for the families of the victims raised 28 000 pounds (a considerable amount of money in those days).



Pictured above: The memorial to the men who died in the fire 50 years ago today and is the setting of a special service of remembrance at 2.30 pm being held by the Wangaratta Group of Fire Brigades.

Left: How the Chronicle-Despatch reported the tragic news of the fire.

Bitumen on the road was boiling

Survivor recalls tragic day

"I WOULD have gone with the other fellows if the Devil had had his due that day," Vic Edgar said yesterday, recalling the Tarrawingee fire of 1943.

"I was no hero, I just went out to see what I could do," he said. "I don't know why they died and I was saved. It still gets to me at times."

Mr Edgar, 90, was with Markwood farmers John Marks and Arthur Wellington, when they were engulfed in flames.

They ran away from the flames while he stayed put, hiding at first under a car left parked on the roadway, then inside it.

Mr Edgar had driven out to the fire in his own car, then joined up with eight or 10 people on a truck.

While keen to start work putting the fire out, they had no beaters, no bags, nothing.

"John Marks, Arthur Wellington and I had hopped off the truck to pull branches off a tree alongside the Beechworth road to use as beaters when the fire came roaring across the paddock," Mr Edgar said.

Continued on back page

Reports by Irene Grant and Jill McGillivray

"The fire was getting larger, travelling fast"

FIRE awareness week is not only a time to look at fire prevention and safety, but is a time to remember the fires of years past which have taken lives and property.

Perhaps the North East's two most devastating fires were during the summer of 1943/44.

Tarrawingee's James 'Ken' Stewart was among the brave who fought the fires which took the lives of 10 firefighters.

Here is his account of one of the worst disasters to hit the district in an extract from 'The Life and Times of James Kenneth Stewart'.

"The end of 1943 and the beginning of '44 saw the biggest grass fires we have ever had in our district. In fact the whole of Victoria was bad and from these fires started the Country Fire Authority as we know it today.

On the late afternoon of Dec 22, a fire started from an SEC pole on the Hume Highway just north of Bowser Railway Station.

We were up at Springdale and came down with Uncle Arthur, who had just taken over the captaincy of the Tarrawingee Fire Brigade from Dad, and met the fire down in the creek.

I can remember holding it on a sheep track for quite a while, with beaters made of strips of canvas or leather the only things we had in those days.

It eventually beat us and when it got out of the creek up onto the grasslands, which were tinder dry, it took off across the paddocks towards Tarrawingee.

We retreated to Wightons Lane and tried to burn a break on the side of the road, but it hit us before the break had burnt wide enough.

Uncle Arthur and I both had kerosene lighters and were separated when the fire shot between us.

I hopped on Angy Simmonds truck to drive back to the Beechworth Rd and along it to Petticoat Lane.

On that truck were my woodwork teacher at Tech, Mr Spencer, two young lads Kevin Dunkley and Claude Hill aged 14, who were all burnt to death.

On arriving at Petticoat Lane the fire was coming across the paddocks towards us and I could see Uncle Arthur down the lane burning a break towards me.

I started a break back towards him and later the captain of the Boorhaman Fire Brigade, Mr Bill Richardson, confirmed my action.

I can still remember him being concerned seeing the danger that was coming as the fire by this time was getting larger and travelling fast over the open paddocks.

He said, 'Lad! If you get into trouble, urinate on your handkerchief (as we had no water), hold it over your nose and run through the flames on to the burnt ground.'

It turned out our break was no good as the fire hit the Beechworth Rd on the Wangaratta side of us in among the trees with one tongue on the

south side and one on the north side burning towards Tarrawingee.

The fire unit from Wangaratta arrived, just as the fire hit, and tried to turn in the smoke, but the front wheels dropped in a table drain on the side of the road and bellied the chassis.

Men congregated at the scene around the truck and the trees and 10 men lost their lives in this area.

Army men were sent from Bandianna and air force from Benalla to help local firemen and volunteers from Wangaratta.

While this fire didn't cause much loss of stock or property, it goes down as the most tragic fire ever in our area.

Christmas Day and Boxing Day most of the victims were buried.

Our second fire on January 6 1944, which must go down as the most destructive fire in our history, started two weeks later at Springhurst on a bad north wind morning.

I can remember meeting it on the road between Grealy's and Clear Creek Station.

We were with Wally Swan on his truck and we had a 100 gallon tank with a hand pump.

Tarrawingee brigade got three more of these and they were just a little better than a knapsack or hush.

It beat us there and we drove down to the next road near the Byawatha tennis courts.

It was on our tail so we came round to the Eldorado Rd near the Carraragarmungee school.

It crossed Reidy Ck and was on to us very quickly and we should have had more time while it was crossing the green of the creek to put a fire break in.

But a landowner had lit a fire there to protect his haystacks.

It crossed the road in a terrific whirlwind that sounded like a tornado coming south to the railway line where it was stopped, as the railway line is burnt each year in case coals fell from the engine.

Everyone was saying how lucky we were that the two fires had burnt so close without loss.

We held it along the railway line for the rest of the day and all night until next afternoon when a terrific storm and wind came up from the west and took it off up the railway line towards Everton and Gapsted.

Today with all our equipment we would have had it all blacked out in time which shows how important it is to work and get things safe quickly after the running fire is stopped, as one never knows how bad the weather can get in a short time.

This fire caused much loss of houses, stock, fencing and timber, but no loss of life.

The Everton railway station and the hotel and many houses around Tarrawingee rail and Everton Upper were lost.

In the afternoon when the wind sprang up we were over at Brian Stone's half asleep, sitting under the shade of an acacia tree, as we hadn't had any sleep for about 30 hours.

Mr Walpole came along and

told us to head for home as the fire of the previous fortnight had sprung up again down at Hourigan's paddock and was burning over the old dried leaves dropped from the burnt trees.

I remember getting the sheep into the house yard and rushing down the back of the 30 acres behind the house which was in a crop of wheat, and by the time we got there, the fire had entered it.

We thought the fire would soon devour it so we made a stand behind the house to try to save it and the sheds, which we managed to do, but it took ages to burn through the standing wheat crop.

It burnt through Eric Swan's and our 100 acres of grass twice as quickly, so we were able to turn the sheep out on the burnt ground before the fire got up to the house without losing any.

With tubs and buckets of water we were able to stop the fire behind the house which meant we still had the grass in the front house paddock to feed the sheep.

Our main costs were fencing materials and fodder as we lost two big stacks of hay.

Because there were no fences our cows got into a pile of wheat where the bags had been burnt.

We had to rush to Wangaratta and buy every packet of Sand and Colic drench we could lay our hands on. The drench is high impaction to get the whole wheat going through their stomachs before they died of bloat.

These two fires were instrumental in the Tarrawingee Bush Fire Brigade getting a modern fire fighting unit and later neighboring brigades.

Reported in the local paper April 29, 1944 that 17 414 pounds had been collected for bush fire victims relief appeal.

At the end of June an appeal to erect a memorial to victims of the Tarrawingee fire was started.

Wangaratta formed a bush fire brigade when they previously only had a town brigade and in March the group combining brigades of the area was formed.

So in early 1944 great strides were made to see that fires could be better controlled and the next year the CFA was formed."



Above, the burnt-out fire truck where ten people lost their lives. At right, the monument built to mark the spot. Below, firemen pay their respects at a ceremony held last Saturday.



50 years since Wangaratta's worst disaster

The Christmas inferno of 1943

A DEATH knell sounded over Wangaratta on the Christmas of 1943.

A bushfire had claimed the lives of 10 men, two of them young boys of 14, and the small largely farming community, more used to hearing of tragedy on the war front, literally reeled with the shock.

Killed in the inferno were Norman Robinson, John Marks, Joseph Ryan, Andrew Guthrie, Theodore Lea, Godfrey Spencer, Kevin Dunkley and Claude Hill while Arthur Wellington and Edward Seymour died later in hospital.

To add to the pain and horror most of the victims were buried on Christmas Day, a time when most families, forgot their troubles and celebrated.

It was a tragedy unsurpassed in Wangaratta's history.

Tarrawingee farmer Ken Stewart has vivid memories of the events surrounding the fire and its aftermath that are still clear in his mind 50 years later.

"We had been fighting the fire all night when we got word that some men had been caught," Mr Stewart said.

"There was no radio and not many people had telephones so the communication was very slow.

"All that we heard was that eight men had died, no-one knew who it was."

Mr Stewart said the fire started at Bowser and very quickly swept its way across farmland to Tarrawingee.

Firefighters, though valiant in their efforts, were hampered by lack of machinery and equipment and the fire raged its way to the area along the Ovens Highway near the Reidsdale homestead.

"We tried to fight the fire back at Wightons Lane. We had to drive around to Petticoat Lane to catch it," Mr Stewart said.

It was in this area that the firefighters, blinded by the thick smoke, were caught when a sudden gust of wind turned the flames back on their escape.

"Their truck just bellied into a table drain. They were trying to escape, we found most of the people just around the truck."

"The bodies of John Marks and Andrew Guthrie were found some distance away."

Mr Stewart said the whole town rallied to help the families left behind, even to the extent of raiding the town's gardens to find enough flowers for the funerals.

"An appeal, which raised 28 000

pounds, was started by John Ryan, the mayor of the Borough of Wangaratta.

"Frank Keogh, secretary of the Tarrawingee Fire Brigade organised an appeal for a monument which was erected 12 months after the event."

A 50th anniversary service will be conducted by the Wangaratta Group of Fire Brigades on December 22 at 2.30 pm.

The service, followed by a wreath laying, will be conducted by Rev Richard Dutton, CFA Chaplain, at the monument on the Ovens Highway.

This will be followed by refreshments and viewing of memorabilia at the Tarrawingee Hall.

Firemen from the 13 brigades in the group will also be in attendance.

Mr Stewart, secretary of the Wangaratta Fire Brigades, has invited all relatives, friends and residents to the ceremony.

A full report on the tragedy, including special photographs and interviews will appear in The Chronicle on Wednesday December 22, marking the 50th anniversary of the fire.

Tarrawingee tragedy of 1943

December 22 marks the 50th anniversary of a tragedy at Tarrawingee, near Wangaratta, which saw 10 firefighters lose their lives when they were trapped in the flames of a large fire. Those who gave their lives have never been forgotten – a monument marks the spot and it is here that relatives pay their tributes from time to time and where fire service members of the district gather on occasions.

Memorial services have been held, often during Fire Awareness Week but this year a special commemorative service has been arranged, this to be conducted on the 50th anniversary.

It was about 4.30 p.m. on December 22, 1943, when a fire commenced through a limb blowing across powerlines at Bowser, a few kilometers north of Wangaratta on the Hume Highway.

In those days fire fighting equipment was primitive, branches and hand beaters often being the norm. Back burning from a roadside was a method often utilised to slow down or stop a running fire and it was by this means that firefighters tried to get on top of this outbreak. However, such actions at Wightons Lane and Petticoat Lane were unsuccessful as the fire burned towards Tarrawingee.

Fifty years ago there were very few motorised units set up to deal with grass or bush fires. However, there was one such unit at Wangaratta. Built up by voluntary labour it was housed at Wangaratta fire station, to be used in the rural area within a 20 mile radius of the town. It was manned by volunteer firefighters from Wangaratta.

This vehicle was crewed and despatched to the fire on this fateful day. It headed towards Tarrawingee and was on what is now the Ovens Highway when the fire reached this area. The truck tried to turn in the heavy smoke but the front wheels dropped into a table drain on the side of the road and bellied the chassis. A number of other firefighters

gathered with the crew and it was these people that lost their lives.

It was a saddened district who joined with the families to bury the victims on Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Whilst the fire burned a considerable area there was little loss of stock and damage was restricted to burnt pasture and some fencing.

Tarrawingee Brigade initiated a fund raising effort so that a memorial could be erected to the 10 deceased firefighters. Some 12 months after the tragedy an official unveiling of the monument, which still stands beside the Ovens Highway, took place.

Ten fire fighting units were present, these having been procured by district bush fire brigades following this tragic blaze. It indicated how land-

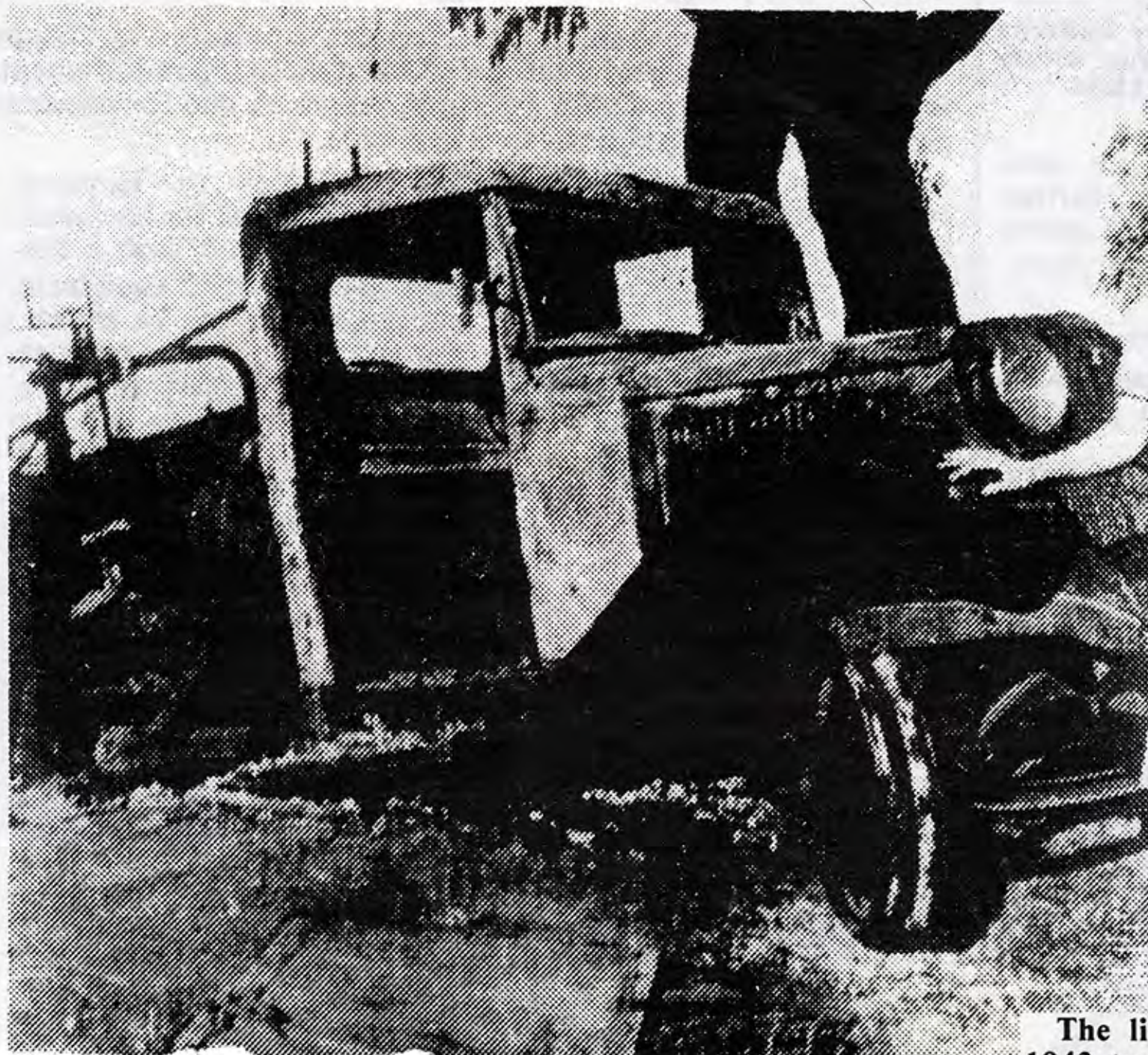
owners had become aware of the requirement for better equipment to combat any future fires. A bush fire brigade had been formed at Wangaratta and district brigades had combined to form the first group.

The obelisk at Tarrawingee stands not only as a memorial to those 10 men – it is also a reminder to the public of today that firefighters often put their lives at risk as they tend to their duties of suppressing fires and saving life and property.

There is still at least one direct local link with this fire, this being through Secretary Ken Stewart of Wangaratta Group who, as a schoolboy, was involved in helping to combat the outbreak. Ken can still vividly recollect the circumstances of this and other fires of that era, and has made reference to them in a book of memoirs that he has compiled.



• The monument that stands beside the Ovens Highway, site of the tragic deaths of 10 firefighters 50 years ago.



• Left: The burnt out fire unit which a number of the victims were crewing.

THEY GAVE THEIR LIVES

The lives claimed in the 1943 tragedy were those of Arthur Wellington, John Marks, Theo Lea, Norman Robinson, Lou Ryan, Godfrey Spencer, Andrew Guthrie, Edward Seymour, Martin Dunkley and Claude [Name]. The latter two were 14 years at the