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TARRAWINGEE FIRE 80th Anniversary Memorial Service

Friday 22 December 2023

Tarrawingee Memorial Stone, Great Alpine Road

OUR COMMUNITY • OUR CFA



Above: The 1932 Ford V8 Wangaratta and District tanker before the fire.



Left: Wangaratta and District tanker after the fire.

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Message from CFA leaders

The Tarrawingee fire of 1943 is a poignant reminder of the sacrifice which our volunteers make when they put their lives on the line every day to protect their communities.

The loss of 10 volunteers in this fire was a tragedy which, combined with a number of other deadly blazes including the Black Friday fires of 1939, resulted in the formation of the Country Fire Authority in 1945.

With so many men away fighting for their country in World War II, it was up to those remaining to answer the call when fire broke out in Tarrawingee.

As all our members do, they were there when their communities needed them, although the majority did not have any land or property under threat.

Those who responded were from a diverse range of backgrounds; Postmaster-General linesmen, farm hands, shop workers, abattoir employees, school teachers, schoolboys.

The volunteers had only primitive vehicles and very limited firefighting equipment at their disposal but they were committed to helping others and stopping this fire.

Without the safety protections of our modern firefighting resources, including planning, response and operational procedures, the outcome quickly turned into a deadly situation.

What occurred that day was the largest loss of emergency services personnel in Australia to that point in time.

For the local community, the loss of husbands, fathers, brothers and sons was a disaster they could barely comprehend.

Eight decades later, we acknowledge the sorrow and grief that must have swept over the district, particularly with so many men already supporting the war effort overseas.

Reflecting on the Tarrawingee fire, it is of some comfort to know how far we have come as a fire service with modern equipment and safety procedures to prevent such a tragedy in the future.

We honour and thank those who perished, those who survived and those who provided support in the aftermath for their incredible dedication.

Board Chair Greg Wilson

CEO Natalie MacDonald

Chief Officer Jason Heffernan

Message from Tarrawingee and District Brigade

The firefighters' monument west of Tarrawingee and the history behind it, are an important part of the community of Tarrawingee.

Every time I drive into Wangaratta, this monument is a stark reminder of the bravery of our volunteers and the knowledge that each time we go to a fire there is a chance that some members could be harmed or, perhaps, not come home.

This knowledge makes me extremely motivated to do everything I possibly can to help our current firefighters come home safe after a callout.

Fortunately, today we have modern equipment and resources that make our task a great deal safer. For example, we have heat resistant, roll-down curtains and tanker protection sprays, and our volunteers are trained

in entrapment drills that greatly improve our chances of surviving a burnover. In addition, we also have new generation wildfire personal protective clothing that protects from radiant heat and flames.

Tarrawingee brigade meets all CFA's training requirements, but more importantly we ensure all volunteers are highly trained and confident with all procedures and equipment.

Tarrawingee brigade is honoured to have dedicated people who put community wellbeing (local, statewide and interstate) ahead of their own safety and time commitments.

We should never forget the sacrifice that those brave men and young boys made in 1943, and we strive to continue this service.

Brigade Captain David Gilbert



Order of proceedings

Welcome/introduction and Acknowledgement of Country

Master of Ceremonies/South Wangaratta Fire Brigade and Deputy Group Officer Wangaratta Group Garry Nash

Reading

Call to Remembrance

Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade Captain David Gilbert

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.

Speech on behalf of CFA

CFA Chief Officer Jason Heffernan

Reading

Spirit of CFA

**Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade member
Charlie McGrath**

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.

History of the fire speech

Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade member Graeme Norman

Speech on behalf of Red Cross

**Fyowna Norton, Victorian State Manager Emergency Services
Red Cross**

Speech by Marya Spencer

**Firefighter, Mangatangi Volunteer Fire Brigade, NZ
and great granddaughter of Godfrey Spencer**

Wreath procession

Laying of the wreaths under the memorial stone

CFA Chief Officer Jason Heffernan

CFA Chief Executive Officer Natalie MacDonald

CFA Board Member Ross Coyle

VFBV Chief Executive Officer Adam Barnett

VFBV State President Samantha Collins

Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade

Wangaratta Group

Fyowna Norton, Victorian State Manager Emergency Services

Red Cross

Rural City of Wangaratta

Junior members representing local brigades

Floral tributes

Open to all attendees

Roll of Honour read by Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade Captain David Gilbert

Bell tolled by Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade Lieutenant Jamaine Cogle

Godfrey Spencer, 53, school teacher Wangaratta
Andrew Joseph Guthrie, 45, farm manager, Tarrawingee
John Wolstenholme Marks, 29, farmer, Markwood
Arthur Willesley Wellington, 46, farmer, Markwood
Theodore Luke Lea, 32, foreman Huttons Bacon Factory, Wangaratta
Joseph Louis Ryan, 38, postal linesman, Wangaratta
Edward Laurence Seymour, 33, telephone linesman, Wangaratta
Norman John Robinson, 49, postal linesman, Wangaratta
Kevin Dunkley, 14, schoolboy, Londrigan
Henry Claude Hill, 14, schoolboy, East Wangaratta

Reading

Firefighter's Prayer

CFA Deputy Chief Officer Ross Sullivan

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.

Conclusion of ceremony

Master of Ceremonies Garry Nash

About the Tarrawingee fire

22 December 1943.

In the depths of World War II, Australian troops were fighting in numerous theatres of war across the world. But many thousands of miles away, the bushfire threat remained ever present.

Excerpt from *Make Tankers Ten*

“In the Wangaratta district the day was a scorcher. The wind was blowing hard from the north-west making the community fearful of a fire breaking out which would be hard to stop. By 4pm residents were starting to believe they would get through the day unscathed, but little did they know what was about to unfold.

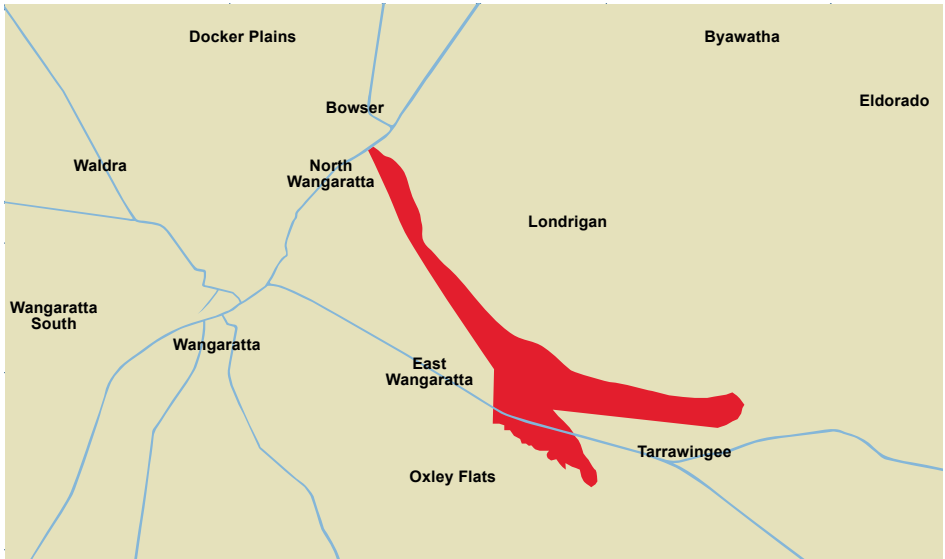
At approximately 4.30pm a fire broke out at Bowser, believed to be caused by tree branches in contact with power lines. Some people believed it was started by sparks from a train, others said it could have started from embers from a gravel truck powered by a charcoal burner. Regardless, there was a fire and it soon gained momentum heading for the Wangaratta-Eldorado Road.

In Wangaratta the fire bell was tolling. Men rushed to climb aboard vehicles going out to the fire. These men came from all backgrounds; abattoir workers, PMG (Postmaster-General) linesmen,

school teachers, retailers and factory workers, to name a few. They knew that there was a shortage of local workers to fight fires, so they volunteered to help. Some men climbed aboard the Wangaratta unit before it left Detour Road.

The fire crossed Reedy Creek, and it was said that at this stage, the width of the fire was only the length of a cricket pitch on the eastern side of the creek. As the fire crept out of the creek, Tarrawingee Fire Brigade Captain Arthur Stewart and his two nephews Ken and Harold Stewart arrived on the scene. They tried to burn a break next to a sheep track, taking advantage of the abated wind which had been slowed by the trees protecting Reedy Creek. They only had one knapsack and a fire beater, but they saw a truck in the distance which they thought was bringing more men and water.

The knapsack emptied but the truck never reached them. The fire jumped their break and swept across the paddock towards Wightons Lane. They believed that this was the turning point of the fire. Had they been able to stop the fire coming out of Reedy Creek it could have saved the day but losing it here started the drama that was about to come next.



Ken Ellis, who later became the Group Officer, told the story that he ran out of petrol on his way to the fire. Petrol was rationed during war time, so vehicle owners had to obtain petrol ration tickets. Ken believed that he could have made it in time to help stop the fire at Reedy Creek if petrol had been readily available.

The Stewart men, along with other firefighters were unsuccessful in trying to burn a break at Wightons Lane so they drove to Petticoat Lane to construct a break which would possibly stop the fire. The Wangaratta Unit, as well as Bill Richardson's private unit and some landowners' trucks, made their way towards Petticoat Lane, the idea being that with these resources a good break could be constructed. Some distance from Petticoat Lane, a change of wind direction caused the fire to head straight towards the firefighters.

The driver of the Wangaratta Unit tried to turn the truck around but amid the smoke and ash that had engulfed them, he failed to see a roadside drain. As he tried to turn the truck, the front wheels became embedded in the drain, causing the chassis to belly, leaving the truck unable to move.

Confusion reigned. Men panicked. Some tried to shelter behind trees, while other ran trying to get to the Ovens River. Unfortunately, some were caught in fences and sadly a number of men were badly burnt. Some survived to tell the tale, others tragically lost their lives. Many of the men who lost their lives made it to hospital but their bodies were so badly burnt that they died."

The fire was finally controlled with the support of soldiers and RAAF planes brought in later that day and the following day.

Role of the Red Cross

In early 1938, after almost a decade of operating in Melbourne, the then Red Cross Blood Service was expanded to rural areas of Victoria due to an anticipated need following the onset of World War II. But it was the bushfire risk that drove the need for blood serum.

The Red Cross publication *Blood Matters, A Social History of the Victorian Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service*, tells of staff working day and night to get blood serum to affected areas and the “almost legendary” stories including those of “plucky Red Cross transport girls driving at high speeds through smoke and fire”. Those deliveries helped save lives.

Following the devastating Black Friday bushfires in January 1939, Victorian Red Cross was prepared in 1943 with supplies in place for bushfire-affected people across the state. Unit stores were arranged in readiness for loading on cars or trucks to be taken to areas where families and communities would need them.

With so many men badly injured with terrible burns from the Tarrawingee fire, the local hospital sent an urgent telegram to the Red Cross transfusion service in Melbourne requesting blood serum for the men. Within an hour of receiving the urgent call the request was actioned.

During this devastating 1943-44 bushfire season, the Victorian Red Cross distributed 20,000 garments, 469 litres of blood serum and 350 sets of equipment for administration, and the transport drivers drove over 21,000 miles in Red Cross cars and trucks to deliver much needed aid.

Australian Red Cross remains committed to communities impacted by bushfire and other disasters across Australia, and it continues to be on the ground supporting people whenever they need it most.

Australian Red Cross recognises the significance of the Tarrawingee fire, the incredible spirit and resilience of all those impacted, and of all those who stood up to assist.

“The story was that two young Red Cross women drove a car up the Hume Highway with the serum on board. They were given permission by the police to travel at whatever speed was necessary to get the serum to the Wangaratta Hospital.

The journey took three hours which might not sound very fast nowadays,

but back in 1943 there were no divided roads, numerous bends and the highway went through many towns on the way to Wangaratta. They also had to cross the main railway line several times. This was a heroic feat that resulted in the survival of some of the burnt men.”

From *Make Tankers Ten*

The Aftermath

Funerals for those who perished were held in the days following the fire while the injured, many of whom had suffered horrific burns, recovered in hospital. The two schoolboys, Kevin Dunkley and Henry Hill, who'd spontaneously jumped on the truck to lend a hand, were buried on Christmas Day.

Relief and recovery efforts began immediately as the impact of the fire and the terrible loss of life began to sink in across the district. Locals set up a fund to pay for expenses for the impacted families.

After this devastating fire the Premier of Victoria toured the area and declared that the Government would help replace the fire unit and also contribute to a relief fund to help the families of those who had died.

In memory of the fallen firefighters, a monument was built on the Great Alpine Road carrying the names of each of those who died and unveiled on 22 December 1944 – one year to the day after the Tarrawingee fire. A plaque at the Wangaratta Post Office commemorates the lives of the three PMG telephone linesmen.

The Tarrawingee fire was one of a series of devastating and deadly bushfires across the state in the summer of 1943-44 which killed 51 people and injured 700. This included a blaze at Yallourn which claimed 13 lives and impacted the state's electricity supplies, resulting in a Royal Commission led by Judge Leonard Stretton.

The disastrous 1943-44 fire season, which followed the devastating Black Friday fires of 1939, led to the establishment of the Country Fire Authority in 1945 to create a single fire service for country Victoria.

Tarrawingee's day of hell

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

"We found Jack's hat first, a military style hat which hadn't burnt. It must have blown off. Not far from where we found his hat, we found his body, between the roadway and the fence."

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.



HELL CAME ON THE WIND

In Memoriam

Godfrey Spencer, 53,
school teacher Wangaratta

Andrew Joseph Guthrie, 45,
farm manager, Tarrawingee

John Wolstenholme Marks, 29,
farmer, Markwood

Arthur Willesley Wellington, 46,
farmer, Markwood

Theodore Luke Lea, 32,
foreman Huttons Bacon
Factory, Wangaratta

Joseph Louis Ryan, 38,
postal linesman, Wangaratta

Edward Laurence Seymour,
33, telephone linesman, Wangaratta

Norman John Robinson, 49,
postal linesman, Wangaratta

Kevin Dunkley, 14,
schoolboy, Londrigan

Henry Claude Hill, 14,
schoolboy, East Wangaratta





Kevin Dunkley, schoolboy, 14, Londrigan

Kevin Dunkley was living with his parents Christina Morrell and Vivian Dunkley and his older sister Peggy, at their farm at Londrigan, while attending the North Wangaratta and Technical Schools. But his life centred on the farm. He loved his family, the land, and he had a great way with horses. He could drive a team of them by the time he was six years old.

Kevin's sister Peggy had a clear memory of the day of the Tarrawingee fire. She wrote of it in her diary.

"A neighbour had called by to see if dad wanted a lift to help fight the fire. Dad had already left to round up some sheep, but Kevin stepped up and asked if he could go instead. The neighbour agreed and they were quickly on their way to the fire which by then was racing towards the Ovens Highway.

"As they joined the other firefighters, Kevin jumped aboard a truck trying to get ahead of the fire – he knew the back lanes and could help with directions. As they passed East Wangaratta, Kevin saw his best mate Claude Hill standing by his gate with his mother, watching the smoke.

"Claude called out to join them. His mother said "no" but one of the men reassured her with the words "Mrs Hill, the boys will not be allowed off the truck."

Disaster struck when the wind suddenly changed direction and drove the fire directly at them. Kevin and Claude sought safety behind some timber but it was too late.

For the Dunkley family, life was overturned that day. Kevin's mother was inconsolable for years and his father never spoke his son's name again.



Henry Claude Hill, schoolboy 14, East Wangaratta

“Don’t go to the fire!” his mother said. But Claude Hill didn’t always do what his mother asked and jumped on a passing truck. Within hours, at the age of 14, he had perished.

Claude’s sister June remembers hearing her mum call out to Claude to stay at home as the truck pulled up outside their home.

Claude’s good mate Kevin Dunkley was also on the truck, shouting out for Claude to jump on board. “I’m here, Claude, come with me!” he yelled. Claude’s mum finally relented and fetched shoes and a wet bag for Claude - and then he was gone.

His sister Merle also remembers the day. She stood on the verandah and watched as Claude, her beloved older brother, took off in the vehicle. Claude’s father had headed north. But Claude and Kevin headed in a different direction, towards Tarrawingee.

Their fate was sealed when the truck they’d mounted to fight the fire was caught by flames. The two boys, Claude and Kevin, leapt for safety to hide behind some timber.

Claude’s father returned home that evening but as the hours ticked by, with no sign of Claude, the family became increasingly concerned. His parents waited outside their house, desperately hoping for news as vehicles drove past the gate.

Finally, Claude’s father went to the police station. There was one unidentified body which they were sure was an adult. A neighbour was called in to identify the body, but needed to return a second time with Claude’s father. Dental records finally confirmed the worst.

Claude Hill was buried on Christmas Day. The family had lost a much-loved son and brother. It was a horrendous time. Like so many families who lose their children young, the Hills never recovered from Claude’s death.



The three PMG workers

Three close mates who worked for the Postmaster-General's Department had just knocked off work and were heading out for a drink when they answered the call.

Their sacrifice is acknowledged on a plaque outside Wangaratta Post Office, as well as on the Memorial.



Edward Laurence Seymour, 33, telephone linesman, Wangaratta

Edward Seymour, a linesman for the Postmaster-General's Department, joined the PMG truck and then the Wangaratta and District firefighting unit which, with other trucks and volunteers, headed east to get ahead of the fire, burn a break, and cut it off.

The fire suddenly split into two, with one arm spinning straight towards the truck. The driver desperately tried to turn the truck around but its wheel lodged in a drain, the men trapped and engulfed in flames.

Edward Seymour left behind his wife Gladys and two small children, three-year-old Joan, and Desmond, just 13 months.



Joseph Louis Ryan, 39, postal linesman, Wangaratta

Joseph Louis Ryan was also a linesman for the Postmaster-General's Department, a man who could put his hands to anything. He was also a committed volunteer. As the bushfire flared out of control from the Hume Highway to Tarrawingee, Joseph along with two of his close mates and PMG colleagues, Edward Seymour and Norman Robinson, quickly jumped on the PMG truck to join the firefighting mission.

Joseph jumped trucks to join the Wangaratta and District truck which had just returned to the site of the fire with a full load of water, but a wind change put that truck directly in the line of fire.

Joseph was critically injured. He made it to Wangaratta Hospital, putting up a brave front and requesting a shot of whisky at the local hotel along the way. He died the following day and was buried on Christmas Eve.

He left behind a wife and six children. His daughter Elizabeth recalled a good and adaptable man who loved his family. One of his great pleasures was to cook, including the big responsibility of cooking Christmas dinner.

Elizabeth remembered the wonderful way in which the local community rallied to support the devastated families in their loss, while a bushfire relief fund raised money to help the families financially.



Norman John Robinson, 49, postal linesman, Wangaratta

“We waited by the gate, my sister and I, we waited and waited. But Dad never came home.”

Norman Robinson’s daughter Valerie clearly remembered the day - so hot, so windy, a bushfire in the distance and her dad rushing home from work to join the firefighting operation.

With no time for goodbyes, Norman was gone; off and away on a PMG work truck as it sped towards the action.

He and his fellow firefighters headed across Tarrawingee Road to burn a break along Petticoat Lane. When the wind turned the fire towards them, Norman and his close work mates were badly burnt and were taken to Wangaratta hospital.

Norman died the following day, two days before Christmas. He left behind a wife, five children and memories of a loving family man.

He was described as a great bushman, loving camping and fishing and gave his sons a love of the outdoors. Family trips out in the horse and ‘jinker’ were a treat for the whole family. He was hard-working as a linesman for the Postmaster-General’s Department.

As daughter Valerie recalls, the firefighting trucks and equipment were so basic then, with so few protections. Yet he, like so many other men of his time, considered it their job to pitch in and fight the fire.



Theodore Lea, 32, foreman Huttons Bacon Factory, Wangaratta

During wartime, many local men had enlisted and were overseas. But those who remained, young and old, took for granted their critical roles as protectors of life and property in the regional farming community. One of those was Theodore Lea from Wangaratta.

Theodore was one of the volunteer firefighters on the Wangaratta truck trapped by the fire. He paid the ultimate price for his bravery and determination to play his firefighting role that day.

He left behind his wife Edith and two small daughters, Noelle and Dorothy.



John Wolstenholme Marks, 29, farmer, Markwood

John Marks was a farmer from Markwood, a short distance from the site of the Tarrawingee fire which brought such devastation to the local community on 22 December 1943. John and a brave community of firefighting men rushed to the scene to dig fire breaks in an attempt to stop the fire's progress.

John was on a truck with two other local firefighters – Arthur Wellington and Vic Edgar. They jumped off the truck to gather branches to fight the fire but the truck driver, unaware that they were no longer on board, continued on without them.

Their fates were sealed as the fire descended upon them. Arthur Wellington climbed into a culvert but lost his life, Vic Edgar sought refuge in a car and was badly burnt but survived. John made a run for the river but didn't make it in time.



Godfrey Spencer, 53, school teacher Wangaratta

Godfrey Spencer was a much loved and respected member of the Wangaratta community, despite being 38 years old before he and his family settled in that part of the world.

Godfrey enlisted with the Australian Imperial Force at the outbreak of World War I. He was shipped to France and Belgium where he received a military medal for bravery. That bravery and dedication to service was a signature part of Godfrey's personality and recognised by all who knew him as he settled back in Australia after the war.

He took up various posts before finally moving to Wangaratta in 1928 where he headed the woodwork department at Wangaratta Technical College. He contributed to many local causes and his happy nature and willingness to help gained him a large circle of friends.

Godfrey travelled to the Tarrawingee fire by truck with well-known local Ken Stewart and the two schoolboys, Claude Hill and Kevin Dunkley. A sudden wind change caused the fire to sweep towards them and in the chaos that ensued, the unluckiest firefighters were caught. Godfrey and the two boys perished.

He left behind wife Ellen and two daughters, Joan and Mary. A huge crowd attended his funeral including members of the VDC and the RSL and almost 100 returned soldiers. A guard of honour took him to his final resting place.



Arthur Willesley Wellington, 46, farmer, Markwood

As the alarm for the Tarrawingee fire went up, volunteers started to converge on the area. Arthur Wellington, a farmer from nearby Markwood, rushed to the scene to join other firefighters, trucks and brigade units in their efforts to contain the fire.

In a tragic turn of events, the wind changed direction and swept down on the firefighters directly in its path. Arthur, with fellow volunteers John Marks and Vic Edgar, became trapped. They had jumped clear of their truck to collect branches to fight the fire but the truck drove off, unaware it was leaving them behind. Vic Edgar was badly burnt but survived, but John Marks and Arthur Wellington both perished.

Arthur's memory lives on as one of those courageous volunteer firefighters, stepping up that day to do their duty in protecting life and land.



Andrew Joseph Guthrie, 45, farm manager, Tarrawingee

Andrew Guthrie responded to the call for volunteers that day, leaving his local farm manager job to lend a hand and play his part in the firefighting effort.

By late afternoon, the fire was sweeping across paddocks towards Tarrawingee. Firefighting units lined up to prepare battle along the Tarrawingee-Beechworth Road and in various lanes running northwards. But then, the wind changed direction and the fire swooped south. Andrew was one of those brave men who gave his life that day.

He was lost in the fire but his name will never be forgotten by the community he served that day and by the Country Fire Authority which emerged from those dark days and which continues to honour those who've died in the course of firefighting duty.

Reflections

Betty Canning, daughter of Joseph Ryan

“I think when his two mates went, he went too. They’d just knocked off from work and all went for a drink at the hotel.

“They were calling for volunteers and the three of them volunteered. Dad said ‘well I can’t be long because it’s Lilla’s [Betty’s mother] birthday today. I’ve got to get home.

“But then mum looked out and she saw all this black smoke up and she thought that’s a truck.

“I think everyone panicked that day. They went down Petticoat Lane trying to put it out with the leather beaters, that’s all they had.

“I wish it hadn’t happened. I wish they hadn’t gone.”

Betty’s father was buried on 23 December. “The bells just tolled and tolled, day after day. They were buried one after another.”

Des Seymour, son of Edward Seymour

“I never knew my father because I was only 13 months old. My mum never, ever got over it. She couldn’t talk about it.

“If I’d been a bit older and known him, I think it would have hurt more. The only thing I have is a photo.

“They were emergency volunteer firefighters and, naturally, when the fire happened they all jumped to it.

“It would have been that black and I think you wouldn’t have seen what you were doing. It happened on the spur of the moment.

“Imagine putting yourself in the position of those families. Burying them on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.”





Graeme Norman, historian and Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade member

Graeme Norman wasn't born when the fire occurred but has researched the tragedy and spoken to many people who were there and the descendants of those who fought the fire on the day, including his own relatives.

His research contributed to *Make Tankers Ten* - the official history of the Wangaratta and District Fire Brigade.

"All of those men and the boys came out to help the landowners. They volunteered to come out and help; gave their lives.

"None of them owned any land in Tarra, they didn't own anything. They were just prepared to come out and help when a lot of people were away at war.

"Most of them had only soaked old hessian bags or leather beaters

"It's a tragedy that Wangaratta and district had never seen before and, hopefully, will never see again."

Wellbeing and support

As we mark the 80th anniversary of the Tarrawingee fire, 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 fire 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 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 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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Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade

Graeme Norman, historian and
Tarrawingee and District Fire Brigade
member

Betty Canning

Des Seymour



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supported by
the Victorian
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