Graham John Kirk Werneth 1977

Graham Kirk was a loving husband and father. He adored his little girls Susan and Julie, just five and three, and worked hard to provide a safe and happy home at his farm at Werneth in Victoria’s Western District. Graham loved farming but he was a talented builder too, renovating the family home and building much of his own machinery. And beyond farm and family, he was very involved in the local community.

Graham was acutely conscious of fire safety and his farm was one of the neatest in the district. He was Lieutenant at the Rokewood Junction Fire Brigade and acting Captain in the days leading up to the fires that ravaged the area in February 1977 and which so tragically took both his life and the life of his brother, Neville.

Graham’s wife Joy clearly recalls the fateful day of the 12th February. It was very hot with a northerly wind - the sort of day, Joy recalls, that country people fear. The girls had gone to stay with their grandparents about 30 kilometres away. By mid-morning, unable to reach them by phone – the line kept ringing out - Graham and Joy became increasingly concerned about fires in the area. And their fears were confirmed as they spotted smoke rising to their north-west.

Their farm was well set up for fire protection. Graham and Joy had their own fire truck and they had done everything they needed to do around the place to protect themselves, including large fire breaks around the house and sheds. But Graham and his brother Neville share-farmed an adjoining station and Graham called Neville to help move some farm machinery there.

By then, conditions were deteriorating fast. The heat had intensified, the wind changed and a large fire front was now heading straight for them. A neighbour and two babies had already come to their place for safety and Joy had dashed to pick up another family. Soon she was in charge of seven people, the danger was becoming palpable, the children were frightened, and at Graham’s suggestion, Joy bundled everyone into their V8 two-door Falcon and headed to the safety of Rokewood’s football ground, leaving Graham and Neville to protect the farm.

In the ensuing hours, information was hard to come by, everyone had different stories to tell, phone lines were down and Joy was frantic with worry about her own children, staying with their grandparents. Could they have been caught up in the fires? She was sure that Graham and Neville would be fine.

As night fell in and exhausted firefighters returned, the news came that Graham and Joy’s house had burnt down. But no news about Graham or Neville.

Joy was finally taken home to be confronted by devastation – apart from half the machinery shed, every other building had gone, including the house. There were many people standing around but where was Graham and Neville? Joy prayed they might be at the adjoining station – but that was not to be. She was taken back to the farm and slowly came to the dreadful realisation that the people there were looking for bodies.

Graham and Neville had perished. Joy believes they had retreated into the house because both were asthmatic. Graham was 29 when he died, and Neville was 26 years old and about to announce his wedding engagement. Susan, Julie and Joy’s parents had survived but everyone was in shock, and Joy was numb with disbelief. In just one day she had lost her husband and the father of her children, and her brother-in-law. Even in her grief, she spared a thought for her parents-in-law. She still had her daughters. They had lost their whole family.