**Kenneth James Clark Ararat 1969**

If words could sum up Kenneth James Clark’s tremendous contribution to Ararat’s firefighting community, they would certainly include bravery, commitment and, ultimately, sacrifice. Tragically, in the prime of his life, Ken Clark died in the line of duty during the devastating “Black Wednesday” fires that swept through forest north-east of Ararat on the 8th January 1969.

This volunteer firefighter was an immensely popular figure at the Ararat Urban Fire Brigade. His personal commitment to protecting the lives and property of those around him led to years of brigade service. He joined up in 1957, rising to the rank of foreman, and it’s been stated that, had he not lost his life, he would undoubtedly have become Captain. Despite his young age he was considered a veteran firefighter.

Ken threw himself into much else besides. He competed in team events at Urban Fire Brigade Championships all over the state and was widely regarded as an outstanding ladderman – one of the state’s best. He was also a great all-round sportsman and a top-class footballer, playing over 100 games with Ararat in the Wimmera Football League before several seasons as a district team coach.

But who could predict the dreadful outcome of those “Black Wednesday” fires? The conditions that day were a firefighter’s nightmare – extreme temperatures, low humidity and hot northerly winds. Hundreds of outbreaks occurred across the state with the operations room at CFA headquarters receiving 74 reports of fires. North of Ararat, a fire broke out apparently as a result of an electrical fault in a tractor which, despite the dire weather conditions, was still operating. As the fire gained momentum, volunteers were called out to assist and Ken Clark joined a local unit with three other volunteer mates. Working in the Bulgana/Mount Boswell area, they were fighting one front when they were suddenly caught by a second fire which engulfed the unit in smoke and flames. Through skill and possibly great luck, the unit managed to navigate its way through the flames to reach safety, but Ken Clark, working outside the cabin, decided to make a run for it. It was a decision that cost him his life.

Kenneth Clark was 28 years old when he died, leaving behind his much-loved wife Margaret and two daughters, Andrea and Michelle. An immediate appeal was launched, raising almost $10,000 in support of the family. And in recognition of Ken’s achievements as a ladderman, the Ken Clark Memorial Trophy was created by the Ararat Urban Fire Brigade for the winner of the ‘One Man Ladder Event’, at Regional Council Number One’s Victorian Urban Fire Brigade Association annual demonstration.

Ken’s funeral attracted hundreds of people as family, friends and the wide Ararat community came together to pay their last respects. Full brigade honours were granted, with members from across Victoria marching at the head of the cortege as it passed the fire station, forming a guard of honour at the church and cemetery.

Ken Clark was deeply missed by all who knew him, but he will not be forgotten. He is remembered as a devoted family man, a generous friend, a talented sportsman, and a committed volunteer firefighter who gave his life performing a task that was so crucial to him during his lifetime - protecting his Ararat community from fire.