**Maxwell John McDonnell Toolangi 1957**

Sometimes the passage of time and the movement of relatives restricts the knowledge we have about the brave firefighters who’ve died in the line of duty. It means true justice can’t be done in telling their story, the people they were, the acts of bravery they may have performed, or the meaningful lives they led in their communities. But sometimes there’s just enough detail to piece together something of their story. This is what we know of Maxwell John McDonnell.

He was born in 1920 and at the time of the fire that tragically took his life, he lived on a small dairy farm at Toolangi, in the Yarra Valley north-east of Melbourne. Back in the day that property provided a paddock for Toolangi Football Club’s first-ever footy game! These days it’s owned by the famous Toscanos fruit and vegetable firm. It was not a smart property in Maxwell’s day, but that is where he lived, in tougher times. Local recollection is that he had a wife and children, but that they left the area following Maxwell’s demise and never returned. For certain, Maxwell McDonnell was a volunteer firefighter and ready to assist whenever the need arose.

On the date in question – the 9th April 1957 - a bush fire had started in Castella, a short distance to the west of Toolangi. Maxwell took off, first to rescue some wood cutting implements from the fire, and then to return to help defend the properties under threat. It was as he drove back towards the fire that disaster struck. His vehicle ran into billowing smoke from the fire, blinding him. He collided with a tip truck on the side of the road and sustained injuries. An ambulance was called to rush Maxwell to hospital but in an added twist of fate, that ambulance also crashed on the way to the hospital, exacerbating Maxwell’s injuries further. Maxwell McDonnell made it as far as the casualty department of the Royal Melbourne Hospital, but no further. He died that day.

Memories of Maxwell John McDonnell may be fading, but his life will not be forgotten. He joins the proud ranks of other firefighters who paid the ultimate price in their determination to protect lives and property in the event of fire. For that, the CFA and the broader Victorian community will be forever grateful.