



Survival against the odds – Edward Cherry, Marysville

Extract of witness statement to the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission

1. I am usually known as Ed. I own the 0.6 hectare property located at the above address with my wife Diana and we have lived there permanently for about nine years. Prior to that, it was our holiday house. ... The bushfire on 7 February 2009 damaged our house and other parts of the property and I suffered superficial burns plus a minor injury to one of my eyes. Diana was not injured.

2. Although the experience of surviving the bushfire was traumatic, Diana and I saved our lives and our house and we recognise that we are among the most privileged and fortunate people in Marysville. We lost many friends to the bushfire and have many other friends who lost everything.

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7. Diana and I want to say on record that we owe our survival to the CFA. We have never been members of the CFA and when we moved to Marysville, we were city people who were quite ignorant about how to fight fires. Between about 2001 and 2003, we went to about three CFA information sessions in Buxton and these were invaluable. We found out about the meetings through a local newsletter and I recall that every meeting we went to was poorly attended: there were never more than 20 people and sometimes there were only about half a dozen.

8. Apart from the poor attendances, the meetings we went to were excellent. The speakers seemed to have first-hand knowledge about bushfires and they gave us practical tips on how to fight them. Almost everything they said would happen during a bushfire actually did happen to us on 7 February 2009. They told us that:

- a. we would hear a terrible noise;
- b. the roof wouldn't fall in while a fire front passed through so we could shelter inside;
- c. because our house is on a dead end street, we should not expect a CFA truck to come to our rescue;
- d. radiant heat is extremely dangerous; and
- e. ember attack usually precedes a bushfire.

These types of tips were very important on the day because when we heard the indescribable noise that the fire made (I don't think "jet engines" does it justice) we were not frightened or surprised. We also knew that we would have to fight the fire on our own and that knowledge informed our plans and actions.

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9. With the help of the CFA, we also developed a fire plan. The fire plan was never written down but both Diana and I knew exactly what the plan was when the fire struck us on 7 February 2009. The cornerstone of the plan was that we would stay to defend the house. Our plan included:

- a. cleaning the property around the house and underneath it (inside the barge boards);
- b. regularly clearing gutters and spouts during summer;
- c. wearing long woollen or cotton clothes if we needed to fight a fire, plus hats, gloves and leather shoes;
- d. filling the bath with water on days of high fire danger;
- e. laying out and positioning our fire fighting equipment on days of high fire danger – this equipment included long fire fighting hoses, a petrol powered pump, mops and buckets; and
- f. having a battery powered radio and battery powered torches on hand.

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13. ... I heard a report that a bushfire had broken out near Kilmore. That is a long way away and I wasn't worried about it. The first sign of bushfire we noticed in our area was just before 4.00pm, when I was outside and I noticed a large plume of smoke in the sky to the west.

14. The sight of the smoke didn't trigger anything in our fire plan and we spent the next hour or so in the same relaxed way that we had spent the rest of the day. At 5.16pm, our power was cut. I know it happened at that time because I noticed later that our analogue clock had frozen showing that time. When that happened, Diana and I became seriously concerned about the bushfire and started preparing the house in accordance with our fire plan. We worked fairly quickly and never considered evacuating. I was already dressed in my cotton overalls and Diana got changed into hers at that time. I also remember laying out our fire fighting hoses and getting the petrol-powered water pump out of the shed. While I was doing that, Diana started filling the bath but the reticulated water supply was cut off while she was doing that and the bath was not completely full. I estimate that it had about 80 litres in it and this water later saved our lives.

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16. Things then changed very quickly at some point between 5.30pm and 5.45pm. The smoke was getting thicker and thicker all the time and we could hear an incredible roaring noise. The wind howled. We could smell the smoke but we couldn't see any fire but the smoke up on the hill to the south had a pink tinge to it. All of a sudden a small spot fire broke out in a garden over the road but it didn't look particularly terrible so I set off with my hose to put it out. I called Diana to help me move the hose (which is quite heavy) and we had been carrying it for no more than 20 seconds when an ember storm struck. It was like a horizontal snow blizzard, only it was burning embers. Diana went back to our house and inside immediately but I felt like I could stay out so I abandoned the fire over the road and turned the hose onto our roof, hoping to fill the gutters with water. I did

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that for a couple of minutes while Diana shrieked at me to come inside. Then all of a sudden I became aware that virtually everything around me had burst into flames and I realised that the heat was such that I would fry if I stayed outside any longer and I went into the house. I could feel the heat affecting me inside my body at that stage.

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19. After about five minutes, I noticed that a few parts of the house had caught fire and I tested the temperature outside to see if I could exist out there. When I decided that I could go out, I went to the petrol-powered pump and found that the engine had cut out while I was inside. It started again first try, but there was no water. We found out later that our large tank had been destroyed by the fire but I have no idea where the water went. It was a huge tank which was full to the brim at the start of the day but I have no memory of seeing water flood down past the house. At the time, all I knew was that the water was gone and that was that. All we had left was the water that Diana had poured into the bath.

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21. From that point onwards, Diana and I set off to see what we could put out using mops and buckets of water from the bath. We worked jolly hard for about three hours, but the first half an hour was the most intense part. Diana also took two photographs of the fire in the surrounding bush at 6.56pm – these photographs are attached to this statement and marked EMC-5. While we worked (I can't remember the exact time), I remember hearing a vehicle in the neighbourhood. It sounded like a fire truck and I think it was on Falls Road, but I couldn't see because of the smoke and darkness. It didn't stop and I don't know where it was going. Because we only had a limited amount of water, we had to be very careful with it. I was amazed at how far a bucket of water could go – one bucket can put out an awful lot of fire. I almost never poured water onto a fire but used the mop to douse fires when I saw them. To keep myself cool, I came inside a few times and leant over the bath while Diana tipped a bucket of water over the back of my head so that the excess would fall back into the bath.

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