



A CFA Captain eye witness account – Karleen Elledge, Bayles

Extract 1 of witness statement to the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission

Narrator: Karleen and her husband Mick, and three children live on a small property in Bayles, eastern Victoria. She is Captain of the local CFA Brigade. She fought the 7 Feb 2009 fires in Longwarry. After the fires she set up what became a major relief centre at the CFA station in Bayles.

5. During the days leading up to 7 February 2009, we were informed by the CFA that it was anticipated to be a big day for fire and we also heard about the anticipated weather forecast on the news. When we get warnings like that, Mick and I always arrange for our children to go somewhere else because we might both be needed to fight fires. On this occasion, we arranged for them to stay with relatives in Berwick.

6. On 5 February 2009, I met with the members of the Bayles CFA brigade and we went through some additional training on safety and survival. We discussed who was going to be around and who would be available on the ground, if needed. We also discussed the usual procedures, such as reminding everyone to stay hydrated and rested. We were all aware that it was going to be a hot day and, if we had to go out, we wanted to make sure that we were all in peak condition.

7. We also double-checked that all of our equipment, including our vehicles, were ready. We had two crews rostered on and prepared for the day – this was made up of a slip-on strike team and a tank crew. The slip-on strike team was in charge of a four wheel drive that can carry up to 400 litres of water. The tanker crew used the two wheel drive fire truck. I was rostered to be on the tanker and Mick was rostered to be on the slip-on.

8. We knew that what we were driving into was going to be pretty full-on. We could see the smoke in the distance. When we first saw the smoke, it looked like it had just punched through the inversion layer so it looked like a nuclear mushroom. It looked pretty horrid.

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10. The fire was on a 60-acre farming property. Longwarry is south of the Princes Highway and the fire was separate from the much bigger fire that was burning to the north in Labertouche. Our goal was to stop the Longwarry fire from spreading and merging with the Labertouche fire. When we arrived at the property, it appeared as though the fire had initially started at the back of the property and was gradually heading down the steep north-facing hill towards the highway, with the house in the middle of the property. The fire had also spread to three neighbouring properties. The flames were probably only a couple of feet high, because it was mainly a grassy paddock, rather than a forest.

Bushfire Education



11. We fought this fire for about nine hours. It was hot and the fire was moving very fast. Added to that, the topography in Longwarry was very different to what we were used to. Bayles is completely flat, whereas Longwarry is very hilly country. The wind was also strong and sustained, with the strongest gusts coming from a northerly direction, and this made the fire difficult to control. However, our training had prepared us for these type of conditions.

12. To begin with, the six of us were the only CFA crew out there. Later, we were joined by a support vehicle from the Longwarry CFA brigade, but it could only carry 200 litres of water and a pump. There was one person working the vehicle, and another working the radio. In addition, there were some local farmers, from the farm we were on and neighbouring properties, working on the back of Utes. Our focus was on stopping the spread of the fire and preventing it from heading north, while the farmers were trying to save the silage on the property. The owners of the farm prepared the house and animals as the fire approached, with help from some of their friends and CFA volunteers from my Bayles tanker and a Longwarry support vehicle.

13. Our crew, the Longwarry brigade and the farmers used a private swimming pool on the property as a fill point, assisted by a pump which had been put in there. We also used a dam, which was about one and a half kilometres from the swimming pool as a water point. We had to ensure that we timed our visits to the dam right so that the fire would not cut us off. There was only one time we needed to take refuge, when the fire popped out of a gully. We were at a fill point at the dam and had to take shelter close to the water and tanker. Luckily, the fire ran past us so fast that we were never in any real danger.

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