

CHAPTER 5: 2003 - 2007 – MAJOR DISASTER AND RECOVERY

Leadership

Position	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
Captain	Richard Cannell	Dave Wassall	Dave Wassall	Dave Wassall	Dave Wassall
Senior Deputy	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler
Deputy Captain		Chris Berry Chris Barnes Bruce Ferrett	Chris Barnes Bruce Ferrett	Chris Barnes Michael Blaseotto	Chris Barnes Michael Blaseotto
President	Bob Moore	Bob Moore	Bob Moore	Bob Moore	Bob Moore
Vice President			Drew McLean	Drew McLean	Drew McLean
Secretary	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler	Dennis Kugler
Treasurer	Barry Smith	Anura Samara	Anura Samara	Anura Samara	Anura Samara
Training Coordinator/Officer			Dave Wassall	Dave Wassall	Dave Wassall
OH&S Coordinator/Officer		Pauline Wassall	Pauline Wassall	Pauline Wassall	Pauline Wassall
Equipment Officer/Coordinator			Michael Blaseotto	Michael Blaseotto	Michael Blaseotto
Elected Members Representatives – from 1997	Bruce Koch		Gary Hooker	Gary Hooker	Gary Hooker
ACT VBA representative	David Wassall	David Wassall	Dave Wassall	David Wassall	David Wassall
Landcare Representative					

Comments 2003-04: No AGM minutes found.

Comments 2005-06: No AGM minutes found.

Comments 2006-07: No AGM minutes found.

Canberra Bushfires January 2003

In 2002, most of Australia experienced one of the most severe droughts on record. On 7 and 8 January 2003 there were numerous lightning strikes over the Australian Alps, which ignited at least 89 fires in Victoria, 74 in NSW and 3 in the ACT. Those fires were not controlled and burnt for over 60 days, eventually blackening 1.96 million hectares. Four of these fires directly affected the ACT starting in the western ranges on 8 January 2003, gradually increasing in size over the following 9 days. Due to severe weather conditions experienced on 18 January, the fires spread rapidly out of control across Namadgi National Park, pine plantations and leased grazing land, heading rapidly towards Canberra.

Fire then entered the suburbs of Western Creek between 2.00 pm and 6.00 pm in the afternoon resulting in the deaths of four ACT residents and the burning of 164,000 hectares (or nearly 70%) of land in the Territory. Over 500 houses and most of the Mt Stromlo Observatory were destroyed. Fire damaged a further 315 houses and caused major damage to the city's infrastructure and facilities. Ninety percent of Namadgi National Park was burnt (much of it severely) and severe fire damage occurred to the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, the Murrumbidgee River Corridor, the Stromlo Pine plantation and the pine plantation west of the Murrumbidgee River.

The fire continued until 30 January when it was finally contained at Michelago. (ESA Web site)



On 9 January 2003, crews went to fires in Namadgi National Park. These were the first photos from the fire which would later become the worst in the history of the ACT. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



Rakehoe trails and chainsaws were used to contain the fire. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)

The following are some recollections from Guises Creek volunteers who were involved in the January 2003 fires.

Dave Wassall Remembers: The 2003 Fire

The following is a time line outlining the involvement of Dave Wassall in the first week of the fires based on the report he prepared for the Police.

Sunday January 12: 0700 – 2100 hrs. Dave Wassall as crew leader in G/CRK 11, with a crew of four, received a briefing at Bulls Head Survival Shelter and was tasked to protect the arboretum at Bendora Hut. We successfully carried out this task, blacking out the fire as it approached and directing fire around either side of arboretum. Late in the afternoon a dozer arrived and I instructed him to doze a fire break around the south-eastern side, where the threat was most immediate. Later in the day we were supported by Parks Units but they were released at approximately 1900 hrs. The volunteers however, were asked to stay and patrol until a relief crew arrived (such is the way volunteers are sometimes used). By 2000 hrs no relief crew had arrived and I then radioed Oscar 6 to find out what had happened; at that point we were released (I suspect that we had been forgotten).

Tuesday January 14: 0700 – 1900 hrs. Dave Wassall driver of G/CRK 10. We were tasked to patrol the Mount Franklin Road, south from Moonlight Hollow Road to the Chalet Road. We were re-tasked in the afternoon to Moonlight Hollow Road when fire broke that containment line but then we were directed by Parks 2 to leave this area when it became too dangerous and retreated to the intersection of Mount Franklin Road and Moonlight Hollow Road. We stayed there until fire had subsided over the Mount Franklin Road at which stage we were moved to Bulls Head Staging Area and were released.

Thursday to Friday January 16-17 1900 hrs to 0700 hrs. Dave Wassall - tasked as an Incident Controller (Guises Creek 3). The briefing was delivered at Curtin by Oscar 1 and I was tasked to carry out back burns near Bulls Head, but this changed as the fire had jumped the containment line that afternoon. I was redirected to complete a back burn down Bendora Road towards Warks Road. Oscar 6 also indicated that there was a small breakout on Flat Rock Spur south of Bendora Road, which was

under control but needed to be watched. The resources at my disposal included multiple Forest, Parks and Rural fire fighting units.



Left: G/CRK21 was involved in a head-on smash on Brindabella Road during a night shift in January 2003 fires. Chris Berry (Tackle) and Michael Blaseotto were ok. (Photo: Bren Burkevics)

At the end of my shift we had successfully completed the back burn on Bendora Road to Warks Road, along Warks Road to Aerodrome Corner and also commenced a burn from Bulls Head Staging area approximately 600 metres along Mt Franklin Road towards Brindabella Road. All fires were in the containment lines and burning quietly. The changeover briefing was with Parks 6 at 0700 hrs.

Saturday January 18: 0700 – 2200 hrs. Dave Wassall as Tanker driver on G/CRK 10. We were sent to Tidbinbilla Nature Park and briefed by Parks 7 on assets, property, watering points and escape routes. A small fire started on the Lookout in the Nature Park and we were tasked to extinguish it but this fire kept flaring up and we were pulled back to the ring road and tried to hold it at this point. The fire jumped the road heading east and there was not a thing we could do to stop it. We were then directed to the Animal Shelter with Parks 7 to extinguish fire in the compound. We had to retreat from the compound when this area became too dangerous. We were then sent to the Animal Rangers house to protect it; once again we retreated when the tanker was engulfed in flames. On leaving this area in thick smoke and flame I encountered a Light Unit reversing up the trail and a collision occurred. We retreated to the Overhead Fill Point where we caught up with Parks 7 and informed him of the accident and told him that the Light Unit had radioed saying that he was following us out. Parks 7 then directed us to proceed to the Visitor Information Centre and report to Oscar 8 and indicated that he would go and look for Parks Light Unit. On arrival at the Visitor Information Centre Oscar 8 directed us to black out spot fires and protect the building. The sky went black and then the firestorm hit. We parked the tanker and enacted our burn over procedures as fire swept over the vehicle. We then proceeded to extinguish fires around the building and extinguish a fire that had started in the air conditioning at the rear. We carried on extinguishing small spot fires until the danger had passed.

We were then deployed to Fadden Ridge to protect houses in this area. This area was under control with other units so Oscar 8 then tasked us to Farrer Ridge where we monitored and extinguished a fire at the rear of houses in Hawkesbury Crescent. We were released at approximately 2200 Hrs.



Bruce Ferrett and Shirley Shattos wait for the fire near Birrigai, Tidbinbilla – 18 Jan 2003. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)

Sunday January 19: 1900 – 0400 hrs. Dave Wassall Crew Leader of G/CRK 11, tasked to patrol and mop-up burning logs in the Northern Sector of Parkwood Road. Not much to do so Hall 1 released us from duty at 0400 Hrs.

The events of the 18 January are probably best summed up by Dave when he arrived home and gave his wife Pauline a big hug and kiss and said ‘I made it home’.



Maurice Kurtz holds Simon Fraser while Tim Holdsworth pretends to swing an axe. As firefighters we really need some light-hearted moments on the fireground. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



Tim Holdsworth points to the fire near Tidbinbilla on 17 Jan 2003. (Photo: Drew McLean)



Crew change-over at the shed, January 2003 fires. Back Row (L to R): Dennis Kugler, Graham (Duck) Tonge, Matt Green, Steve Collicutt, Bryan Cunynghame Front Row (L to R): ????, ????, Bruce Ferrett, Barbara Kugler, Claire Ellis (crouching), Shirley Shattos, Gary Hooker, Maurice Kurtz, Brendan Smyth, Anura Samara, Drew McLean, Michael Blaseotto. (Photo: Gary Hooker)

Gary Hooker Remembers: 2003 Fires

As a new recruit and on one of my first trips in January we left the shed in G/CRK 11 at 6:00am heading for the Bulls Head staging area located in the Brindabellas. I remember a discussion about how hard it can be to see where the fire is. I could not understand how anyone could not see a fire. As we got higher into the mountains and the smoke thickened I then understood. The smoke haze was everywhere and it was not clear where the McIntyre's Hut, Stockyard Spur or other fires were.

The Day We Saved Bendora Arboretum: Around 12 January 2003, G/CRK 11 with Dave Wassall (crew leader), Dennis Kugler (driver), Anura Samara and Gary Hooker as crew members were tasked to protect the Bendora arboretum from the approaching fire front. The conditions were initially relatively calm and the fire was creeping slowly through the dense forest up towards us and it was about 20 metres away. All of a sudden, I felt a terrible burning sensation on my left wrist. I looked down and saw that a large hot ember was glowing inside my glove. The ember had fallen from the trees above and lodged inside the glove onto my bare skin. The fire had been jumping through the tall trees above us and we were totally oblivious to it.

Later on the same day, Dave Wassall called in assistance from a bulldozer to clear a fire break around the trees in the Arboretum. From several hundred metres away we could hear the dozer working for hours while we were down a narrow winding trail suppressing the fire. All of a sudden, the breeze started to blow and the radiant heat became unbearable and the fire made a run up the hill towards the Arboretum. I found it a bit unnerving with the heat and I was getting a bit worried

about where we were located in the bush with no escape route or blacked out area nearby. Dave calmly called out to all the crew members *'unhook the hoses, leave them where they are and get into the truck as soon as you can.'* We didn't need to be told again. I was sweating so much in the heat that the end of my nose was dripping like a tap. I felt like 'a chook in an oven.'

Dave said to Dennis *'get us outta here.'* Dave called in a *'blue'* message and asked for helicopter support to water-bomb the approaching fire. He also advised the Incident Controller that we were not in a good situation and that we were getting out. Dennis reversed G/CRK 11 several hundred metres up the windy track until we got into a little clearing where he could turn the vehicle around. The fire eventually made it to the Arboretum, but we stopped it at the dozer line and patrolled until dusk. The Arboretum was saved that day.

Late one evening around 15 January 2003, Dennis Kugler, Anura Samara, Dave Wassall and Tim Borough and I left the Namadgi fireground in G/CRK 11 and were travelling down Brindabella Road. All of sudden, without warning, G/CRK 11 lurched into the air and we all hit our heads on the roof of the vehicle. Dennis said 'I think we have just run over a big wombat'.



Accidents do happen and when the fire trail gave way the tanker had to be extracted using an army dozer. The damaged tanker was sent to the Kambah Workshop for temporary repairs so it could be rushed back into use.

Left: A dirt bridge collapsed under G/CRK 11 damaging the passenger door resting on a tree. (Photo: Franco Ormazabal)



Right: G/CRK 11 being extracted by the Army dozer. (Photo: Franco Ormazabal)

So it was from the Kambah Workshop that the Guises Creek crew headed out early on January 18 after collecting the repaired tanker. Later that day as the fire tornado swept into Kambah destroying some out-buildings at the workshop as well as nearby vehicles, including Drew McLean’s car. This fire continued into the suburbs driven by a fire tornado.



“My car is gone” – Drew McLean still manages a big smile even though he lost his car and all his tools while parked at the Kambah Workshop. (Photos: Bren Burkevics)

Light Unit Patrol on 19 January 2003: Maurice Kurtz and I did a night crew on 19 January in G/CRK 20. We were initially tasked to Kambah Pool Road. I recall dragging several lengths of hoses through the bush to get to some burning logs. It was then I thought ‘gee, this rock is spongy’. I looked down and saw I was standing on the charred remains of a dead kangaroo – it was totally black and bloated.

Maurice and I were later tasked to patrol the Duffy area which was still smouldering in the aftermath of the firestorm from the previous day. We drove through the blocked off roads and zigzagged around power lines, burnt-out cars and some houses that were still smoking. It looked like a war zone. We ended up in the pine forest near the intersection of Eucumbene Drive and Cotter Road. We were emptying a load of water on a burning stump when all of a sudden the ground beneath me gave way and a red-hot glowing cavern opened up. It was about the size of a grave. Thankfully, I managed to fall backwards rather than into the glowing coals below. The roots were still burning with some intensity beneath the ground and really flared up once exposed to the fresh air. Roots can burn for weeks or even months after a fire has been through.

The Fire Went Through Mt Rob Roy: In the weeks following the 18 January firestorm, I was on a night shift on Mt Rob Roy with Bren Burkevics (crew leader), Graham (Duck) Tonge and others in G/CRK 11. On dusk we were driving through very dry burnt out paddocks which were almost bare, with no vegetation at all. There were lots of very distinct black zigzags and squiggles on the ground where the flames had appeared to have ‘*danced across the paddocks*’. We spent the night putting out chimneys (burning hollow trees) and smokers.

This photo of me was taken from Mt Rob Roy looking south towards Angle Crossing on the Murrumbidgee River corridor and Ingeldene pine forest areas. In the background, notice that the fire is still heading through Namadgi National Park towards Michelago.



(Photo: Maurice Kurtz)

Gerard Morrison Remembers: 2003 Fire

In an extraordinary year 2003, there were some lighter moments and Gerard Morrison, crewing in a heavy tanker, recalls returning to the Guises Creek shed which was being used as a staging area during the worst of the conflagration that engulfed Canberra and surrounds. They had been on the fire ground, around Smiths Road, for 18 hours or so. At this stage Brendon Morrison had a prosthetic leg and was driving.

As they pulled into Guises Creek Station an SES operative directed them, *'can you just park it down the paddock there.'* Brendons going *'yeah, yeah'* and the SES guy saying *'can I help you - down there!'*

Brendon's gone *'where's your disabled parking?'* And this SES guys gone *'yeah, funny one ... listen can you just put it down in the paddock.'* Brendon *'no I'm bloody serious, where's your disabled parking?'* And we'd been out 18 hours and we [the crew] said *'look just park it down there,'* but I could see where he's coming from.

This SES bloke has gone *'yeah good one, good one.'* Brendon keeps going *'look you're supposed to have disabled parking within 30 – 40 metres of the front door.'*

SES: *'Yeah, yeah right oh – put the truck down the paddock.'*

Brendon: *'Look, just hang on a sec.'*

And he's gone click [popped off the prosthetic leg] and he's opened up the door *'come here!'*

This SES bloke's walked up and Brendon's handed him his leg and said *'just hold on to that while I go and park it [the tanker] down the paddock.'*



The January 2003 fires reached Boboyan Pines on the old Boboyan Rd. (Photo: Gary Hooker)

Chris Berry (Tackle) Remembers: The Bee Sting

On the afternoon of January 30 2003 G/CRK 11 was responded as part of the ACT Task Force to assist NSW with the protection of Michelago from a large outbreak of the Naas Valley fire. G/CRK 11 was under control of Rob Gore who was the Task Force Commander and along with Southern 11 and various other ACT RFS Units formed up at the Service Station at Michelago on the Monaro Highway. The fire-fighters in G/CRK 11 that afternoon were Senior Deputy Captain Chris Berry (Crew Leader), Deputy Captain Dennis Kugler (Driver) and firefighters Chris Barnes, Simon Fraser and Deputy Captain Tim Holdsworth. Whilst waiting to be tasked one of the firefighters, who was allergic to bees, was stung by a bee which caused a severe anaphylactic reaction. The firefighters neck then began to swell up and he was having serious trouble breathing. G/CRK 11 then moved urgently to the NSW RFS base in Michelago where it was met by NSW Ambulance Officers who started to treat him. The firefighters condition worsened and he was urgently Medevac'd out by the ACT Rescue Helicopter, Southcare.

G/CRK 11 then left the area and moved straight up to the fire line and started to work on the fire front. The tanker at this stage had mechanical failures on both the pump and engine and we could not get water on the fire or retreat. A large fire front was rushing up the hill towards us and we went into defensive mode. We were unable to move and had no water in the hoses. Just as the fire reached us, we thought we were all goners, when one of the large Erickson Air-Crane helicopters called *Elvis* did a water dump right on top of us and saved our lives.

The fire was stopped and after some minor work we were able to restart the engine and drove off to meet the ACT mechanics who found the ongoing problem and fixed the damage by removing a piece of filter from the pump. G/CRK 11 then went back to the fire front and performed property protection well into the night and along with other fire crews helped save the homes in our area. The injured firefighter fully recovered and was back on duty within 2 weeks.



Anura Samara, Steve Collicutt and Bryan Cunynghame mopping up near Williamsdale.
(Photo: Drew McLean)



Right: Crews had to urgently prepare for an imminent ‘burn over’ situation at Mt Clear Range near Michelago. A last minute wind change saved them as the fire went in a different direction. (Photo: Drew McLean)

Anura Samara Remembers: 2003 Fires

I arrived at the shed just as the old G/CRK10 was leaving, so I got one of the light units ready and just waited until Brendan Smyth arrived. It was impossible to get through to COMCEN⁶ to notify them that we were available and I guessed we would be going to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve so we just self responded. It was my first time driving under lights and sirens.

We arrived at the Reserve just as some pines were going up, and the crew of TID10 were desperately doing a wheel change. We were put with a group of 5 or 6 other light units to become a fast moving team to deal with spot fires in the reserve, with Brett McNamara in overall charge.



Water -bombing on Farrer Ridge 19 Jan 2003. Mt Taylor is in the background. (Photo Bruce Ferrett)

At one point, we were asked to go and bring in a NSW strike team which was waiting on Paddys River Rd. When I asked them to follow us to the Incident Controller so they could be briefed, they refused because of the lack of communications. I was never sure if they actually went into action that night.

Later we were doing some fire fighting when the pump died. It had run out of fuel, but the Jerry can on the back was also empty. A good lesson on the need for even basic callout checks of the vehicles. During that night, I stood on an anthill. The only way to get rid of the ants was to strip off my pants and try to kill them all while Brendan kept fighting the fire with the hose. We watched as the fire crowned over the top of the mountain in the night, and started spotting on the reverse slope down to the reserve. It was a really beautiful and awe-inspiring sight.

In the early hours of the morning, we were tasked to escort a grader that was going to put

⁶ COMCEN – Emergency Services Communication Centre

a break around the old homestead *Nil Desperandum*. The heat as we left was intense and I always believed the homestead had burnt down. So I was later surprised to learn that it was still there.

We left the fireground early on the morning 18 January. The volunteers were the last to be released even though most of us had done a normal day's work followed by fire fighting through the night. When we left, the fires weren't contained but at the same time they didn't seem to be active.

18th January: I missed the initial pager call as I had turned everything off to get some sleep. Around midday I got the call to get to the shed. Chris Barnes picked me up and our first challenge was to negotiate a police roadblock on the Monaro Highway. A young detective refused to let us through but luckily there was an older officer, who took one look at our gear and let us get underway.

We eventually transferred to the North Curtin Oval where the staging area was and we picked up G/CRK 11. The crew included Bryan Cunynghame, Chris Barnes, Anthony Cannell and one of his mates. Our first stop was along Parkwood Road to deal with some grass fires. There were lots of small fires burning in the paddocks. At one point, with both live reels out Bryan and I resorted to hacking away with rakehoes. We then drove along William Hovell Drive just putting out anything that was still alight. It was sad to see dozens of cattle who had died on the fence lines.

Our last stop for the night was the Cork Oaks plantation at the Glenloch Interchange. I think our job was to protect this heritage asset, but in the end it didn't really need much help from us (but I'm happy to take any credit for the fact that it's still standing there!).

We had originally booked in a family holiday at Nelligen with the Blaseottos. I was pretty tired after two nights and parts of the days spent out with the brigade, so on the 19th we drove to the coast for the holiday. But Michael Blaseotto and I *commuted* back every second or third day to put in some additional shifts.



Left: Callum Green (Jerra) and Maurice Kurtz at the Boboyan pines. (Photo: Gary Hooker)



Maurice Kurtz and Franco Ormazabal sitting on G/CRK 10 waiting for tasking. (Photo: Gary Hooker)



“We lit up the tinder dry wind rows in front of the Boboyan pine plantation.” Gary Hooker is poised ready to squirt water if required. (Photo: Gary Hooker)



Maurice Kurtz still putting out smokers near Williamsdale. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



Bruce Ferrett and Brad Elias protecting Gudgenby Homestead as the fire was approaching. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



Heading up to the Boboyan fire. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



Graham (Duck) Tonge and Brad Elias near Gudgenby. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



G/CRK 10 crew putting in a back burn along new dozer trails near Fraser on 24 Jan, 2003, to make a fire-break on the edge of the urban fringe.
(Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



Ingledene Pine forest was still smoldering.
(Photo: Drew McLean)



Guises Creek Station was used as a staging area for the fires approaching the Michelago area. (Photo: Gary Hooker)



Helicopter landing at the Guises Creek Shed – staging area. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)



Bruce Kosh and Franco Ormazabal enjoy a lighter moment at the staging area. (Photo: Bruce Ferrett)