

**Bushfire Resilience Inc.**



**Black Saturday, 2009**

**Interview with Steve Pascoe, Strathewen resident**

**Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM**

**Malcolm**

I'm here with Steve Pascoe who has very kindly agreed to relate his experiences on Black Saturday. Steve is a resident of Strathewen and a neighbour of mine. He lives on a ridge on the west side of the Strathewen Valley at the base of Mount Sugarloaf.

Steve, can you tell us a little bit about what sort of preparations you did on your property before Black Saturday?

**Steve**

Sure, my work has been in disaster management particularly around bushfire safety. I was a bushfire safety educator with the Country Fire Authority for a number of years. And so our plans were very much based on practising what I preached. And our family plan was to stay with the property during bushfires. And this had been our plan since we'd been on the property, we've been there 30 years now. And it was well understood by my wife and our two children who were adults at the time of the fires. Our plan was always to be at home. So even on really bad fire days I'd ask kids not to go to work or they'd stay home with us so we'd have enough feet and hands to do what we needed to do.

So, preparing sort of over years, we always maintained good clearance around the house. I'd installed some sprinklers under the veranda and under the eaves. Our house was a mud brick house which was pretty good for protection from bushfires but it had a fair bit of wood involved in it as well - wooden fascias, wooden veranda posts and wooden frame within the mud brick walls.

**Malcolm**

And on the day were you aware that the fire was coming towards you? Were you conscious of that?

**Steve**

Yes, I was watching the various websites and was listening to CFA the listening set during the day, serious lot of smoke from 11 o'clock in the morning to the west, to the northwest. So I was keeping an eye on that. All the websites and all the information said it was Kilmore East and for the next four hours that's all they said, that it was Kilmore East. When I was listening to the CFA listening set I heard fire calls and alarms going off for areas to the north and west of Whittlesea up in the Toorourrong Reservoir Catchment, Jack's Creek Road I think it is. And at that point I knew it wasn't in East Kilmore anymore. And I knew it'd gone a fair way and I knew that we were in line for it. So at that stage I got ourselves organized, let the neighbours know that things were happening and that they needed to make decisions now about what they were doing.

**Malcolm**

How did that fire event unfold?

**Steve**

For us at our home I kept watching it. A fire started locally on Eagle's Nest Road and so that again told me that we were in trouble, we were going to experience fire. We're always optimist so I thought well maybe it'll go one way, maybe it'll go another way, maybe the fire brigade will put it out. I didn't realize at that stage that this was the front of a very very very major bushfire. At that stage I was still thinking "Well maybe it's just spot fires and they'll be put out or we'll manage small spot fires or something like

that." But that wasn't the case it must have been about about 5 o'clock on that afternoon, it was impacting in our immediate area. Spot fires were starting in the Chadd's Creek Road area of Strathewen and landing and burning back up Mount Sugarloaf. So spots were coming over Mount Sugarloaf from the west and dropping into the forest on the eastern flank and burning back up the gulleys which was strangely quite beautiful. It was amazing to watch them because it was quite dark at that stage, the smoke had pretty much blocked out the sun and there was these bright burning flashes going up Mount Sugarloaf. It was quite dramatic, I was running around trying to find a camera.

Once that was going I knew that we were going to experience fire around the house. So we started concentrating around the house and that was always the plan to sort of protect the property then gradually work back to the house and don't go past the veranda post kind of thing. Over the next half hour spot fires landed up towards our house from one direction. And so at that stage when flames were in our paddocks essentially we'd come back inside the house, we'd returned inside the house.

### **Malcolm**

You've got horses and you had taken precautions with them. What sort of preparations did you have in place for your horses.

### **Steve**

Horses were largely my daughter's. We had three large horses and two ponies and our plan was always on a bad fire day to have them without rugs and wearing their halters so that they can be caught easily and managed. We had paddocks set up such that there was a house garden and a paddock kind of laneway set up that ran around that so that all other paddocks entered onto that lane wait. At the start of the day my daughter brought the horses up into the laneway around the house and that's where they stayed for the day and as the fire got into our areas I knew we were going to be impacted by fire, we brought the horses into the house yard which was secure. And were able to manage them there and provide them water and we had sprinklers around the house so they were able to gain a bit of cooling and protection from the sprinklers.

### **Malcolm**

When the fire was coming up towards the house, so that's really coming from the east or the south, and then you've got fire coming over Mount Sugarloaf from the west. Where did the fire front actually come from that impacted the house?

### **Steve**

Extraordinarily in something that I'd never anticipated. We actually had four runs of fire pass the house. So, the first one burned up from I guess the southwest which was not consistent with the prevailing winds - the winds from the northwest. So it burned up the hill so the spot fires were landing in the gullies and burning up the hills. So that was the first run of fire up to the house burned through the paddocks. And then it changed around to pretty much from the south which bought another run of fire.

### **Malcolm**

With a wind change or before the wind change?

### **Steve**

Before the wind change. I think it's actually the impact of the main fire convection column starting to suck wind back towards the convection column. So as the major fire front or the conglomeration of fire gets into the area the wind changes from the prevailing wind back towards the main fire front. So it almost changes in exactly the opposite direction.

### **Malcolm**

What sort of behaviours did you notice in the horses at this stage?

**Steve**

They were quite calm. So up and to the point where fire was coming around the house they were quite calm in the house paddock. They were not panicked. Our daughter was outside looking after them keeping control of the three big horses. We'd managed to bring the two ponies inside the house and my wife was looking after the two ponies inside the house. We pulled up the rugs and moved some furniture and brought them into the house which was our plan and a good plan. Unfortunately, the bigger horses were too scared to come through the door. So they wouldn't come into the house. So our daughter just stayed with them on the veranda holding them under the sprinklers.

**Malcolm**

I appreciate that this is emotional talking about this. But can you just talk us through what happened as the fire began to catch hold on the house.

**Steve**

Now as the fire got to the house it was very dark. I came to conclusion it was not safe to be outside any longer I asked my daughter to come in. Stop right there. Yes don't talk about that much.

**Malcolm**

No. It's okay. Go to the next bit.

**Steve**

As the fire came around the house it was time for our daughter to come inside. And so she just let the big horses go and came inside to help us inside the house.

**Malcolm**

And then the house caught fire?

**Steve**

We were safe inside the house for quite a while bearing in mind that I lost complete track of time, that there was no timing. It seemed like hours and I suspect it was minutes. We were safe inside the house for at least for the start of the fire around the house. We were inside watching the garden flare off. It was again completely dark completely black. Of course there's no power so there's no lights. So that we were looking inside the house from the fire outside the house through the windows. It was quite amazing, quite beautiful in a perverse sort of way. So we were patrolling around inside the house making sure that embers coming under doors were put out, that sort of thing, wet towels against the doors.

Some time after that I noticed the ridge beam in our lounge room was starting to smoulder. That was 6m off the floor. Cathedral ceilings.

**Malcolm**

Up in the roof.

**Steve**

So the ridge beam cathedral ceilings, so it was exposed. And I just noticed some embers started to drop down from the ridge beam.

**Malcolm**

How were the horses and the ponies inside during this?

**Steve**

Ponies were fine. I have a vivid memory of my wife holding the two ponies

**Malcolm**

Seems amazing.

**Steve**

So the ridge beam was dropping embers and I went outside to get a hose to squirt some water up the roof and there was no water so the pump had stopped. So without water I got a bucket of water from the bath which we'd filled up and discovered that I can't throw 10 litres of water 6m in the air. I was strangely calm at that stage and I think adrenaline's kicked in well and truly so I've got past the huge direct adrenaline rush which stops you working for a little while, and then became very calm and was able to go through very very calmly very logically all the things that we needed to do.

So at that point when the ridge beam caught on fire I said to my wife and my daughter that we're going to lose the house and we needed to prepare to be outside. So that continued to smoulder for probably another 10 or 15 minutes. And I was keeping an eye on it and we were still inside the house, the ponies were still very comfortable and no worries.

**Malcolm**

Had the front as such moved through?

**Steve**

I don't think we had a front, I think we had a conglomeration of spot fires. Of major major spot fires and like I said we had four changes of wind direction. We had essentially four different fires within two hours. Probably the most intensely over an hour. And each time stuff burned which again doesn't make any sense in our science. Every time the wind changed it was essentially life threatening. So we were able to stay inside the house for some time while just keeping an eye on things and protecting ourselves from that major non-survivable period. At a point I noticed that smoke started to build down from the top of the roof ceiling and that had a ripple of flame running along the bottom of it and to me with a bit of basic fire knowledge is sort of a pre-flashover point where these combustible gases that haven't burned, they just don't have sufficient oxygen. If a window broke or somehow air got mixed up with that it could flashover and become intense very quickly inside the house. And that was the moment I decided we needed to be outside the house.

So I said to my wife and my daughter "Grab whatever you think's important and we're going outside." So thankfully they grabbed the dogs which was a good thing to choose. A good thing to pick up, nothing else and we went outside to the back around to the verandah which was on the opposite side to where the fire and the wind is coming from. We took two ponies with us and had to let them go because we couldn't shelter with them. I tucked my wife and daughter into a corner outside of my veranda in a corner with a blanket over them with the dogs and I had to patrol up and down that veranda with a bucket of water and made an effort to put some things out which was futile in the end.

**Malcolm**

So that period of being inside the house and then sheltering outside, how long do you think that took?

**Steve**

Well I lost track of time so I kind of had to reconstruct it. So I know that we had fire in our valley about 5 o'clock in the afternoon. And I reckon the smoke cleared and we were able to move about 7 o'clock. So it was about two hours that we were managing our safety I guess. We were inside the house and doing very well I think for about half an hour before the house started to smoulder. And again I reckon we were able to stay in the house for another 15 or 20 minutes after that, may have been longer even. Just being safe during the conflagration. It was just a massive fire really.

**Malcolm**

And then on the veranda sheltering?

**Steve**

Once I decided that we needed to be outside the house that it was going to be dangerous inside the house I had a look outside and the intensity had dropped. The grass was still burning, bushes were still burning but it wasn't as intense as it had been. We were able to move outside onto the veranda on the downwind side away from the wind and shelter on the veranda. So tucked my wife and daughter, who was 24 at the time, under a blanket with our two dogs in the corner of the veranda and I was able to patrol up and down with a bucket of water just putting out what I could, which was a fairly futile effort at that stage.

**Malcolm**

And at some point you decided that that wasn't tenable. When did you decide that?

**Steve**

Like I said we had four changes of wind direction which brought again life threatening conditions which I think is related to superheated air. The fires that were in our gulleys was driving hot air up over the ridge. So tucked in the veranda and from the south and south-westerly wind and the wind changed around to north-easterly and brought that hot air, hot wind and fire back into where we were sheltering. So we had to get up and move around to what was then the windward or leeward side of the house which was outside the lounge room. That was okay so we're just sheltering against the wall and then the wind changed again to come directly from the north, which came down that side of the house. So we had to get up from there and move around to what was near the south side of the house and shelter there for some time. So that was probably 10 minutes and then 5 minutes and then 5 minutes.

**Malcolm**

Now I'm imagining that your mud brick house is giving you massive protection that you wouldn't get from lots of other houses.

**Steve**

Yes. So the timber within the mud brick ultimately failed. But the mud brick is solid and gave us great protection by moving around it. Sort of our final move to the south side of the house was against the lounge room. We had the big double-glazed windows and I could actually see the house burning inside. Everything was burning inside the house, the dormer windows had broken and there was flames coming out through the top of the windows. Again weirdly spectacular. And at that stage everything started to settle down, we could move around fairly freely. But I still didn't know what was going to happen next. So my next thought was to look for where are we going to spend the rest of our time? Because we weren't going to be safe sitting next to the house for very much longer. I had the choice of getting into the big above-ground concrete tank which is I knew we could get into it I just wasn't sure we could get out of it so I didn't think that was a great idea.

Veggie garden was a next option. The lettuce was still green and that was mounded up so we could sort of shelter in between the mounds. But fences were on fire and there was wire and all sorts of things and I thought the chances of getting from there to there was a bit of a challenge. And we had an old above-ground swimming pool up above the house that we pumped dam water up to and then out of for the garden. And so I was able to move around and I was able to check that and it still had two feet of water in the bottom of it, the plastic liner had melted to the waterline so I figured that was probably going to be the best and most comfortable place so I got my wife and my daughter and the two dogs and we moved up to there. I picked my daughter up and dropped her over the side of the pool, the same with my wife, and then threw the two dogs over which I got told off for, for throwing the dogs around.

**Malcolm**

Throwing the dogs in there.

**Steve**

And then I jumped over myself. Extraordinarily the steel sides of the pool were so hot I couldn't touch them. So I'd actually jumped over which I have never done before or since. I was able to do a four foot standing jump

Another adrenaline fuelled piece of strangeness. And so we were able to get into this pool and snuggle down in the water that was 47 to 50 degrees, whatever it was outside. So being in the water was lovely and just covered ourselves and blankets again and sat there. And it was about that time that the south-westerly change came through which would have been I think it something after 6 o'clock. And that actually blew the sides of the pool over. And fortunately we were tucked in the right side and it actually covered us, made a windshield for us so we were able to just stay there.

The liner had broken at that stage and the water had all disappeared. But because we'd been pumping dam water for 20 years there was this much mud sitting in the bottom so we just snuggled down into the mud and stayed there until the wind stopped essentially and were able to look out. The smoke was clearing, the sun was shining. It would cool down and we were able to step up and get out of the pool and have a look around.

**Malcolm**

It's a difficult thing to talk about. But can you tell us about how the horses coped?

**Steve**

So we had the two ponies and three big horses. The ponies survived inside the house with us. We're all mammals and we suffer the same things from heat and from fire. They did very well with us. Once we left the house, once we started shuffling around the verandah, we had to let the ponies go. After we got out of the pool and able to walk around we found them again and they were fine. They were healthy and well. So it would appear that the really dangerous time is in that hour while we were inside the house. Because we couldn't bring the big horses inside they didn't do so well. I noticed that when we left the house and sheltered on the verandah I saw one or two of them, I can't remember now, standing not far from the house but in deep shock. So I think they suffered life threatening injury and I suspect to the airways. I think their lungs and their throat were probably burnt at that stage and probably not survivable.

**Malcolm**

Afterwards, those ponies did they exhibit any injuries or behavioural problems? Stress as a result?

**Steve**

They had no burns or physical injuries.

Smokey had a bit of a cough for a few weeks. We kind of sensed that they weren't quite as calm and as comfortable as they were before the fire. That it had actually done something to them - mentally I guess, but other than that they were fine. And unfortunately, in the wash up we found two of the large horses were dead and we never found the third one.

**Malcolm**

There's a lot of things we could talk about but one thing I want to note is that that bushfire - like most bushfires - is incredibly distressing for people. It's distressing for the suffering of human beings and often that's one of the things that people focus on. I attended a very moving commemoration - now I'm going to do it - for pets and animals held on your property. This is a Dorothy Dixier but how important do you think it is for people to grieve for their animals and do it properly?

**Steve**

Pets, animals in general, are very dear to us and we don't realize that, but it certainly becomes more prominent in that suffering how we have all suffered. I think in hindsight we feel responsible for our

animals and we feel terrible when we've let them down, if we've not provided safety for them, if we've not provided for their well-being. I think we've got a very special relationship with our our pets at least but also with our stock animals and I think it's because we have responsibility for them. They depend on us for their well-being and when something bad happens to them we feel that we let them down. And that's a tough thing to live with. I guess we have a special relationship which maybe sometimes we don't quite understand particularly with our pets and also with our stock animals so a memorial service was a wonderful way of recognizing that and remembering our animals.

### **Malcolm**

It certainly felt like that to me and that sharing with other people who've been through something similar to you is a bonding experience as well.

One of the things we've detected in our research for these discussions with people is that some many people don't have a detailed plan for their property let alone for their animals and yet when catastrophe strikes that sense of responsibility is huge. So looking after your own mental health means having a plan for your animals because you can just know you're going to feel shocking if you've let them down.

### **Steve**

Yes. The other part of that is that people will do very dangerous things to protect their animals. Our neighbours drove back into the fire from a safe place. I think they were in Hurstbridge. They drove back to get their dog and they managed to get out again but that made perfect sense to them because again we didn't know where the fire was heading but really highly dangerous thing and people will do that. Farmers will go out and move their stock around in the middle of a fire and that's lives lost many many times doing that. So to protect ourselves to make ourselves safer and survive better we need to be thinking about what we're doing with our animals so we're not pushed into that last minute bad decision. All last-minute decisions are bad.

### **Malcolm**

Steve looking back on your fire plan what would you say were the successful parts of it? And what were the not so successful parts? And then thinking of your professional role when you're talking with other people what do you now tell them about making a fire plan?

### **Steve**

We tell people to have a written plan and it's really quite important. And I spent some years trying to figure out why it was important. From our own bushfire plan I practice what I preach. We actually had a written plan and it worked through different stages from the start of the fire season, to a bad fire day, to when there's a fire in the area and when there's a fire around the house, and it worked really well. So oddly enough I didn't think my kids ever listened to what I said. Probably they don't. But our daughter was able to do everything that I had always talked about. She looked after the horses, she filled the bath with water, got towels, got blankets, organized everything which was amazing.

So our plan worked. And what I've always thought and what I've discovered was that at the point where your life is at risk then there's very little things you have to do and basically that's sheltering and drinking water and taking care of yourself. So my observations of working with people after bushfires is that if they don't have a plan if they just make it up at the time, they end up at that point where their life is at risk with many many things to do without any clear understanding of what's most important. And it's so confusing they often do irrational things like washing the dishes or making the bed or doing something strange that's got nothing to do with their survival. Working in community bushfire safety education over a number of years I came to the realization that doing a staged plan for like I said at the start of the fire season, on bad fire days, when there's fire in the area, and there's a fire around your house is really valuable. And what I discovered is that there is lots of things to do and if you do it in that process you have a lot of things to do at the start of the fire season. Checking pumps, checking

hoses, clearing grass, clearing gutters, putting up screens on your windows, all those things that take time and energy. You have to plan. You have to get spare parts.

So there's a lot of stuff to do at the start of the fire season. On a bad fire day there are things about again checking pumps, checking hoses. Putting into action your plans for your animals. If you're going to leave then that's the time to do that sort of stuff. And leaving on a bad day takes as much planning and as much energy as staying. So it's not a simple choice and so there's a handful of things to do then. When there's a fire in the area it'd be much more simple about maybe putting sprinklers on or having proper clothing on. And when there's fire in the house it becomes even more simple which is be inside the house if you're staying, drinking water and patrolling for embers and such things.

What happens is, as the event becomes more intense you fill up with adrenaline which is really useful in those high intensity events. However adrenaline is great, it's a fight and flight thing, so it fills your muscles with energy, it gives you enormous power and it focuses your brain on survival. But focusing your brain on survival the brain doesn't think rationally or doesn't have the capacity to think more abstractly my guess, so it's very very simple actions. And if you've got the written down you can do those simple actions. If you don't your brain is actually not capable of doing logical rational development thinking about what do I do next. So having a written plan's very useful because all you do is put it on the fridge and then follow the bouncing ball.

### **Malcolm**

The Bushfire Resilience Incorporated group we've been looking at the idea of checklists so that they're things that you will understand that you need to do and possibly an order that you need to do things in. You'd be a big supporter of such things then?

### **Steve**

I think it's the only thing that works. If you live in a bushfire prone area you have to think about what's going to happen if there's a bushfire. You can't not do that. Failing to do that puts your life at risk and your loved ones and your pets and animals. You have to think about it. And having a plan in your head is okay if you actually have a plan in your head as opposed to "I'll make it up at the time." Having a written plan takes that thinking out of your brain. You do it well ahead of the time when you've got good clear-thinking space as opposed to when your life is at risk and you can't actually do that thinking properly then.

### **Malcolm**

Steve you involved your children when they were children in tasks that they were going to carry out in the plan. Were they involved in making the plan?

### **Steve**

As much as they were interested, which was not very much. But they did hear. They may pretend not to be thinking it important but they did hear, they did listen, they picked things up in the background when I was talking about what to do or how we would operate. And they're a tremendous resource. They can do things when you're running around like a chook with their head cut off. They can actually do things that are practical and sensible. Filling the bath with water, getting some towels and blankets, looking after the pets, making sure that mom and dad drink water and then have something to eat, and doing the background caring. And that helps them enormously cope with the stress and the trauma. If they feel useless, if they feel that they're just dependent, they don't do so well.

### **Malcolm**

Thank you Steve for sharing that with us. Before we finish out I do want to acknowledge that you've taken those experiences - your own experiences - and you've used that for good in all sorts of other places particularly with the Murrumbidgee Fires and the support for their township but also into other parts of Australia. And I think given that deep emotional trauma that's pretty impressive to continue on doing



that. So I thank you for talking with us but also thank you for what you've been doing for other people since Black Saturday. Are there any things you'd want to say that we haven't touched on?

### **Steve**

Absolutely. Planning for animals is really difficult. Its really hard to come up with a decent plan even just for small animals. Where do you put them? What time? What's the safe place? And of course the safest option is to not be there. To pack them up in the car and drive off before you're actually at life risk. And that takes a lot of planning and a lot of decision making. It's far more difficult than people realise. Planning for large animals - I still don't have a solution. We do have a couple of large horses on our property now. And my wife says "So what do we do? Will we have to take them out when there's a fire? Well when do you do that? Where are you going to take them?" And I still don't have an answer for that.

If we take them to a friend's place who's got paddocks somewhere else we might be taking them out of the frying pan into the fire. I think there are moves to have places in country areas, sometimes their stockyards sale yards something like that where you can take large animals and stay with them. It's important to stay with them not to just dump them and leave them someone else's problem. But it's one of our failings I guess at a larger community level that we've not actually addressed this. We don't have plans for what to do with large animals, particularly horses. Probably some arrangements can be made with pony clubs or something like that if they're in a safe area. Maybe it's taking them to more urban pony clubs and having arrangements with those pony clubs to look after and that sort of thing. But I'm not aware of that being successful anywhere locally.

### **Malcolm**

Something for us to explore further and we will do that. Thank you. Appreciate it.