

Bushfire Resilience Inc.

Black Saturday, 2009. Horses

Interview with Sue Leslie, equestrian

Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM



Malcolm

My name is Malcolm Hackett and I'm here with Sue Leslie in Arthurs Creek. Sue has very generously agreed to share her Black Saturday experience with us.

Sue is a very experienced horsewoman and a Level 3 instructor. Her story consists of an experience with evacuating horses on that fateful day. Sue, tell us about what happened to you. What led up to this?

Sue

Malcolm I'm not proud of what I'm going to tell you today. There's a couple of stories that I look at now and I think I can't believe how naive I was and how uneducated I was. So I feel that it's a good time to tell people this because I feel there's a lot of people in my situation. I'm wearing this jacket now from the CFA because since then I've tried to get some fire education and I feel that it was extremely important.

So do you want me to start with my story? So I'll go back previous to Black Saturday because it all stemmed from before that. There were two fires. I don't know what year, they were up in Kinglake. And there hadn't been fires for a while that I'm aware of and everyone became quite a dramatic situation. I evacuated my horses. We packed up half the house. This happened twice actually. Evacuated the horses my sister's property in Epping. Thinking you wouldn't expect Epping to have a fire and then came back home to pack up and get organized.

Just after we got home I got a call from my sister to say that a fire had broken out next door to her place in Epping. So where I had to take the horses was to a fire. It turned out to be okay but we went from one problem to another. I then sat home in Arthur's creek for the whole day watching the fire at Kinglake. Twice I saw a red glow over the top of the mountain. So we spent another day or two getting the horses back, unpacking the photos and going through everything. And that happened twice.

By the time Black Saturday came. I knew there'd been a week of lead up that there's going to be catastrophic conditions, be prepared. And I got very I suppose you call cocky, and said "I'm not going to be influenced by the media. I'm not going to be influenced by these people. I'm sick of these threats. I'm sick of this behaviour. I do ride horses competitively and I went off to a horse event at Werribee. And so that's how it's going to be."

So went down there. It was 47 degrees or something. It wasn't pleasant but that was my little way of "I'm going to do what I want to do," My independence. I was down there a couple of hours and then I heard that a fire had broken out in Wallan or Kilmore. And again I thought, "I live in Arthurs Creek. What's a fire in Kilmore going to have to do with me?" So again I waited a few hours longer. I had a very very special horse that was very dear to me and she was at a friend's place at Eden Park. I was listening to hear that the fire was coming closer but again it wasn't going to be affecting Arthurs Creek. And then all of a sudden I got a phone call from the friends of mine to say, "I'm really sorry, the police have just evacuated us and I've had to leave your horse Cindy on the arena and we're gone. And I'm really sorry we couldn't get her out." All of a sudden I went, "Oh I think, this is half serious now." I rang my neighbour who lives just down the road and she said the fire's just hit Eagle's Nest road and it was then I thought, "Oh dear." So I left my horse at Werribee and started to get in a little bit of a panic situation.

Flew up the ring road. There were fire trucks and sirens going and everything, traffic in and out. And I started to think, "This is a little bit different. And now I'm probably not so clever." Got to Diamond Creek and my brother rang me and my mother was in a little unit at our place and said, "I've just evacuated mum because the fire's coming our way." Then I really started to realize that I wasn't very clever. I came up the hill to Mine road Corner, the police had a roadblock there. They said, "Do you live anywhere near Eagle's Nest Road," which by the crow flies I do. But I said "No nowhere near." I think I would have been probably one of the last people to get through. My family at that time couldn't get in behind me and they weren't far behind me. I knew that my mother was out. Drove into our property to see the fire coming over the top of the hill. I just literally froze and thought. "Okay, I've got a sprinkler system on the house which is to say the least mediocre. I've got a petrol generator which I realized was probably not going to be that useful. I had this few minutes of watching. "There's not a real plan here."

And then I thought I had three horses at home, "I need to get them out." I had one horse float but it can only take two horses and I had a mare and a foal. I ran down the paddock. I didn't really have any plan apart from this. I ran down the paddock to get them out. I grabbed the mare. The foal had had very little handling, I patted her and everything but she had never been led properly. Took them up to the float. Don't really know how I got the foal up to the float. But anyway I got the mare up to the float. Put the mare on the float and course couldn't get the foal in because she'd had no education. And even to this day explaining this makes me feel like an idiot, because as a horse person I should know better.

I look back now I think this is what can happen when you are not planned in any shape or form. I put what we call a breaching strap around the foal which is a strap around the hind leg so that you pull on the back legs to get them up. The mare was pretty good. She stood in the float. The foal wouldn't come so I pulled really hard in desperation and the foal did a complete backflip off the float and landed nearly on its head which can be a lethal move for a horse. I just stood there and thought, "Wow." So then I realized I didn't have any plan where I was going to go if I got them in the float. When I look at how quick the fire was going, windy roads and that sort of thing didn't hit me at the time. So then I put the horses on the arena. Three of them. And then I just stood and didn't really know what to do. The fire was coming. And I hate to say this again but I watched the wind change and I saw the fire go through Strathewen and Kinglake and leave Arthurs Creek alone while I was still standing there achieving nothing and just through pure luck I was still there.

To top the story off the next day I caught that mare and foal when it was relaxed and I went back to the training that I've known since I was four years old when I started working with horses. I led that mare and foal straight onto the float in a very relaxed fashion. So it was pure lack of education, training, adrenaline, fear, whatever words you want to use, that caused the issue. So that's the story. I could go on and on about it but that's the main story, and I just want to get that through to people. I think there's a lot of people that get frustrated by being told to evacuate without any knowledge. "It's not going to happen to me." And I think there's a lot of people that think they really know about stock and animals and then a situation that you're unprepared for you can react in a way that you're embarrassed to say. So that's the story.

Malcolm

What we're worried about happening with a lot of people that haven't thought about what to do with their animals. Particularly people who agist on land out here they might think I'll have to go rescue them when the fire's coming because they've heard about it when it was coming over the hill. I guess our viewers need to know that's probably between two and three kilometres away but it's moving incredibly fast and there's spot fires ahead of it and it could easily have been there in 15-20 minutes.

Sue

If the wind had not changed, and I know that's not great for the people in Kinglake and Strathewen to hear, but if the wind had not changed it was on a direct path. I could not believe the intensity and the height of the flames. Obviously people would have been there, but for me who drove in and really "this was not going to happen to me". "This was not really real".

I realized that I had no plan. Our sprinklers on the house - I don't even know if they were working that well. I turn them on with a little trickle that would have had absolutely zilch effect. So I wanted to tell this story because when I do tell it to people they're shocked and I'm embarrassed that I reacted like that. I think I'm a fairly cool person. I think I'm fairly level headed, should know better. And there I didn't do it. And I proved it by the next day doing it and I did that to myself to see. And when I calmed down and went back to the training I know. The mare and the foal just walked straight onto the float.

Malcolm

So now the test of this. You've got the jacket on so that says you've gone out to find more information and you're more informed than you were. What other sorts of things have you done and what's your plan if your horses and property were threatened again?

Sue

Well my plan is to always keep a low fuel paddock - grazed out or mown or something like that. Other than a potential for a Black Saturday fire, I would hope that for most fires the property would be defendable. But because the plan would have been wearing this jacket that I might be on a truck and I won't be around that morning. I will be moving the horses out to Werribee Park if it is available. I know it's a long way away but a facility like that where someone can look after the animals for you, and you know they're safe and that you can potentially to leave them there for a couple of days.

The biggest issue there's many people have put up things to say, "Oh come to my place," but the prime thing was who would think there'd be a fire in Epping. And my sister only had seven acres with very little land around and the paddock next door caught fire. It was quite long grass and it had potential to do something. So the idea of "I'll just move them". It's very important you move them early enough. The other thing is that we all make plans. We all make plans for properties and we might say "Oh we'll move them to that paddock or we'll put them in the float". Do we decide which person? Do we say Malcolm you're going to move those cattle or those horses to that paddock? Or am I going to be responsible? We have these plans but we don't know when the time's right. Has Malcolm moved them? I don't know. Where is Malcolm?

So we also need to work out a way that we can have specific "This is my job." This is not quite answering your question because you were back to CFA training. But just from thinking about what people do. Even our plans need to be specific. On this day at this trigger point Sue will move the horses to so and so. So no one else in the family has to worry about has it been done. Because I might be on a truck or I might be picking up the grandchildren whatever. So it needs to be that I can check up. So Malcolm your job was that done? Tick. Sue, my job was that. Tick. I think there's also working out that you have got so called safe areas. There's also a lot of discussion on the fact that we tend to bring our good animals in around that house to us. Is that defendable?

It can happen to you. It needs to be thought out. I go back to the fact that I spent probably five hours of my life evacuating the horses from Kinglake. Well that was a waste of time. Was it? No. I did it without any education. Maybe I could have put them in a mown paddock or something like that. Again, I didn't think it through. Oh fire. Evacuate. Go. Do. Whatever. Done. No plan. We also have to understand, and this sounds pathetic, I got annoyed with the media. I got annoyed with them saying "It's going to be bad." And I was like "It's not going to happen to me." And I know that you're probably listening thinking that sounds pathetic aren't you?

Malcolm

No. But I heard it differently I suppose. I'd never heard a Premier say this is going to be the worst day in our state's history. That made me think "Well they don't usually say that because I'll get found out. So this must be really serious." That's what I'm saying. People do see those things differently.

You made a distinction which I think is interesting between a Black Saturday fire and what you might think of as a local fire. And I agree with that distinction. But what do you think is a bit different about a local fire?

Sue

Well it depends on the fire rating, the fuel loading and depends on the things that are happening around. And I don't want to say this because you have to be careful. Potentially it might be defensible. But I don't want to say that because there's a lot of issues and a lot of more experienced people than me to answer that question. But find out maybe from your local CFA or from some knowledgeable people. Is this potentially defensible? And I know that's "How long is a piece of string?" But a catastrophic type day or a day like that you have to get out. Because all you have to understand that it's potentially not defensible for you or your animals and that's a very big thing too because it's shown that people will try to defend their animals.

Malcolm

They risk their lives doing it.

Sue

They risk their lives doing it. I have to say I would. Maybe I'm not very bright but I would and so we need to know that it's going to be the same as how we feel about the rest of our family. Are our family in a safe situation? Have we got them safe? If I decide to stay and try to defend that's got to mean not leaving my animals or my family in a situation that may not be defensible. The hardest thing there is to go "Okay so maybe Arthurs Creek or Strathewen is not defensible today so where are we going to go?" That's why it has to be done early. And it has to be so that the animals are out. Because just say I had driven down the road with the mare in the float and just say the fire had come. I'm driving down a winding little dirt road in Arthurs Creek. The fire would have come potentially straight over the top of me.

Sue

There is wind and people have to be aware of those situations. It's a tricky one but you have to be aware. And hopefully we can get some available places we are able to take animals early enough. And I also have got some pet cows which I'll be moving them as well. So everything would go. It's hard. I think when your question was what's defensible? What's not? As I said it probably takes a more experienced person than me to give that answer. But if we're getting on the truck to go out there we probably think it's defensible. If it's not we're not going to be there. People have to be aware we're not going to drive into a really undefensible place in a fire truck as well. We're going to be doing what we can on the outskirts. So we'll be at the areas that are potentially defensible not in the middle of that as well. I don't know if I should say that but that's the facts.

Malcolm

It is the facts isn't it? And we've had other people in these interviews talking about you can't rely on people coming to save you. You have to be self-reliant and to be self-reliant you're going to have to have a really good plan. And in my view you need to see those plans fail and still be able to be alive at the end. Having had plans fail because fire really does exploit all the weaknesses in your plans.

Sue

They can never be probably foolproof enough. Knowing that you know your jobs. Not just written on the fridge door. You will do this. Knowing your job.

Malcolm

Would you imagine doing that on your own if no one else was around? Because lots of these when you say knowing your job that's one person, but lots of places perhaps become defensible when you've got two or three.

Sue

It would be very hard and very scary on your own. And what is defensible? What is the day? What is this fire? What are the winds? What is the FDR. Say that it was a defensible day. With training you'd have maybe more chance than anyone else but very very unpredictable. No I wouldn't want to be there by myself. I wouldn't want to be.

Malcolm

Which is worth knowing. It should be part of the plan. You shouldn't have to be by yourself.

Sue

I would not want to be I'd be scared. And you do what you're going to do but yeah part of the plan would be not to be there by yourself. That's how I'd feel anyway. Because I wouldn't want to leave the animals so I'd be there by myself and I might be doing the wrong thing. I think anyone would be scared in that situation on their own wouldn't they?

Malcolm

I want people to be alive at the end. That's a risk I know that I'm taking where if things go wrong I won't survive. That's not good.

Sue

There must be a plan and there must be trigger points to set those plans off. Whether you think it's inconvenient or not, there must be trigger points that you've sorted out and the animals are going to be very involved in that situation. To some of us they're like our family. They are our family aren't they? I said I tell this story because I like to think I'm a fairly organized person and I am not proud of this situation. I'd rather not be telling this story. I'd rather be able to say I was a hero that day and I did this and I did everything right and I was fabulous. But it shocked me that I wasn't.

Malcolm

So you said that you'd take your animals to Werribee where you knew they'd be looked after? I take it that's a safe facility. But the things that jumped into my mind, are there people there to look after them or will you need to arrange that? What happens if everyone tries to take their animals there? Is this something that's been worked out or is it only available to a few people?

Sue

That's a good question Malcolm. The facility is large with a couple of hundred stables and a couple of hundred yards. So obviously the whole of Victoria can't turn up there. And I probably erred by saying that it would be somewhere where your horses be looked after. There is no facility for anyone else to be looking after the animals there. The staff there are nine-to-fivers and they work in the office. So if you're going to take the animals to a showground. I said Werribee because it's our local one, you asked me where I would go. There are a lot of showgrounds offering the same thing with safe yards. But there is no facility to be looked after. And it has been recorded that people have driven into place like that left a bucket of water and driven out. So there needs to be in your plan somebody organized to stay with those animals. That's got to be part of the plan. You're going to go and you're going to have one less person at home or those people stay down at a facility or one of the showgrounds and looks after the animals until it is safe. And traditionally people are very good at dropping their animals off but not picking them up. It's a very important part of the situation.

Malcolm

I know nothing about this area but is the horse equestrian industry or associations grappling with what to do about this because it could get worse with climate change I imagine.

Sue

All they're saying is that we have a facility that it is safe because all around is market gardens and things. We have a facility that's safe. We have no potential for looking after your animals. And the staff as I said there'll be half a dozen staff working in the office. They may not even be animal people. And so you're allowed to go there but you will be looking after your own animals. And there'd be no one there at night, So it's you going with the animal and staying there until you bring the animal home.

Malcolm

Well thank you for recounting it for people and I'm sure it'll be a wake up story for a lot of people. Particularly how your knowledge of how to handle those animals went out the window under that stress, fear and so on. It's a really important story. So thank you. Appreciate it Sue.

Sue

Alright. Thank you.