

Bushfire Resilience Inc.

Black Saturday, 2009. Horses

Interview with Tim Calkin, equestrian

Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM



Malcolm

My name is Malcolm Hackett and I'm here with Tim Calkin, a Level 2 riding instructor who conducts a business of riding school and agistment in Healesville, and was impacted by the Black Saturday bushfires. Tim has agreed to share some of those experiences with us.

First off Tim, could you tell us a little bit about what preparations you had taken on your property before Black Saturday?

Tim

Our preparations for Black Saturday were exactly the same as any fire ban day except we knew it was going to be worse, so we were a little bit more diligent in what we were doing. On a fire ban day, we always make sure we've got plenty of fuel for the pumps, plenty of fuel for the Toyota Land Cruiser fire truck that we've got. Made sure all the pumps worked, made sure that the water was pumping because we had eight tanks on the property plus three dams.

All the horses had all their rugs removed, no head collars on and they were brought up. The property was set up so that we had a lot of private paddocks around the house so they were close. They were bare so we made sure they were eaten out. So any horses that were out on the edge of that property came up towards the house. If we had to we doubled them up. The only mistake we made was that we left one of the school horses and the cows in our south paddock. We thought the grass was short enough. It wasn't, and that was our biggest mistake of the whole episode, but I'll come back to that later on. I actually did some lessons that morning, which was a big mistake because it meant we had people coming in 4km down a dirt road with horses. We will never do that again.

As I say we knew it was going to be fairly serious. So after lunch we again checked everything. We brought the horses up and we made sure that the vehicles were in the indoor arena. The good thing about the indoor arena was that it had sprinklers on each of the uprights which we could change so they did a 360-degree sweep instead of just the indoor arena, so that we could spin and wet all the outside of the outdoors of the arena. And then we made sure that all the vehicles were in that space so again they were soaked, and our stallion at the time he also went in there, but he didn't go in until after we were impacted. So that was again a mistake I made. I should have done that a lot earlier. The problem is on that particular day everything happened so quickly, so we suddenly had to swing into action and make sure that a lot of animals were safe.

Malcolm

How many animals are on the property?

Tim

We had 17 horses. One of those horses had come in from Pakenham the day before because they thought that they were going to get impacted so that was riding from the frying pan into the fire. We had four cows and a calf, two dogs and a cat. So a fairly full complement. We were never going to leave. We couldn't get all those horses out so we had to make sure that they were safe as possible.

Malcolm

And how many people?

Tim

Two people, my wife and myself. My father-in-law managed to get in later. He followed the fire trucks and a bulldozer, and he walked in. Walked 4km and he managed to find a way through. So in the end there were three of us which is fantastic because we needed three people. What I will say is that I'm probably 10 or 11 years older now. Whether I would do the same again being the age I am I'm not sure. It's one of those things. We made the call at the time. That's a hard one, but our new property is very different. This was 60 acres, and it was easier to protect. Much easier. Even though it was bigger it was a lot easier to protect than the one we're at now.

Malcolm

So how did that event unfold for you?

Tim

We taught in the morning and then afterwards we checked everything. We got all the horses up near the house. We actually didn't know it was going to come because it was the Kilmore fire which was about a 5 or 6km front I think, and it was heading towards Yarra Glen, and actually heading towards Wandin with a northerly wind. And then about 4:30 I think and this is where we're a bit sketchy on timelines because everything just happened at once. The wind changed which meant it went from a small fire front to a very large fire front and we saw it on the hill which is about 5km away. We could see this orange-black glow. And the wind changed and it roared. It sounded like a jet engine. I've never heard anything like it. In about 10 minutes we went from bright sunshine to pitch black. We could not see a thing; smoke, embers. Embers were coming down like hail.

At that point I went up to look after the stables and the outbuildings, the indoor arena and try and put out any spot fires. As I said we had three pumps and eight tanks, so we had plenty of water. My wife stayed down at the house and put out any spot fires she could around the house. The problem we had was not so much a lot of bare ground around us but we had gullies going down away from the house. And the gullies brought the fire up to the house. Luckily, we had enough water sprinklers under the eaves of the house which took care of that.

But I remember at one point looking up at our neighbours who were above us and just thinking very calmly, I said to my wife "Rachel, I think David and Jenny might be dead," because all you could see was flames. And apparently, they looked down and saw the 30-foot plumes above all the gum trees on our south border and said exactly the same thing about us, and even now that's coming back. Because it's only now that you realize how horrific and how much in danger we actually were.

What was amazing was the horses in one of those south paddocks - there were two or three. The ponies are the smartest ones of the lot. They would wait until a patch of ground was burned out and then they'd walk onto that patch of ground. And very calmly they'd stand with their bums to each other so they were looking. The other horses again, because they were close together, they actually managed to look after each other.

The biggest problem was getting my stallion from the stables to the indoor arena because he was freaking out. He was by himself. We couldn't put him in with other horses. So therefore he was pretty freaked out. And handling a horse, a thoroughbred stallion in those situations is not to be recommended. If you can change or get the horse where you want it early that's the best way to go. But the biggest mistake we made as I said was to leave one of the school horses, our 29-year-old school horse and the cows in our big south paddock. Because the fire came through there and we found one of the cows survived but we found the other bodies in a gully down below the house the next day. So that was pretty horrific and a horrible way to die. But it could have been a whole lot worse, it really could.

But I think the hardest thing for us was to keep going outside because they always told us in our fireguard group, because we had a fireguard group going and we had a phone tree and we actually stayed in touch with each other through the whole thing. A phone tree is not ideal because it means

you've got to put a message out and you've got to try and ring people. We've got a WhatsApp group now and that works a lot better.

The philosophy we were always told in our fireguard group was to wait until the fire front hits you and then go in the house and wait till it goes past. There was no way known that could happen on Black Saturday, whether that happens in other fires I don't know. For a start the house was full of smoke so you couldn't get in there. The dogs were in there, the cat was in there, fire alarms were going off, so it was chaos all the time through there. Plus, we had hail-like embers coming down all the time. I've never seen, and you've got to remember this is in pitch-black with a roaring wind. A wind that sounds like a jet engine.

My wife was putting out spot fires and embers around the house and under the eaves. And as I said we had that sprinkler system under the eaves. And I was up doing the other stuff. But to try and get everything going in this chaos your mind switches off. That's the really funny thing. Everybody says "Weren't you worried?" At no point were either of us worried about dying, we just got on with it. And I think what happens is you focus on what you've got to do. And luckily, and again I mention the fireguard group, they briefed us on what we needed to do: focus on what you're doing, make sure that you keep topping up your fuel tanks on the pumps because the pumps are going to save your life. And then once the fire front passes then you've got a huge issue because then you've got to put spot fires out. And that's where our portable water we had, we've still got it actually, when it goes. It's an old Land Cruiser tray with a 1,000 litre tank on it, a pump, and we literally did several trips down to the dam all through the night, with my father-in-law we managed to put out spot fires.

The other thing we didn't realise was all our wooden fence posts burnt, so, we had almost no fences after the fires had gone through. We had horses in paddocks with fences falling down, so that was another thing we had to do the next day, to try and actually get them safe, so we didn't get injuries on horses trying to get over fences.

The other problem as well with pine fence posts is they're actually treated with arsenic, so then you have another problem after the fire, of arsenic piles. And the state actually asked, we found out later that they actually would have taken care of that, except that when we did ring them and they said, "How many posts have you got?" and we said about 4km worth of posts, they went "Nothing we can do. Absolutely nothing we can do."

What we found out was we were on our own. If you think that the fire brigade is going to come and help it isn't. Any of the preparations you make have got to be thought through and they take a lot of planning. For instance we also had a big box, and we've still got one at the new place, with radio. Because you've got no power, no way of communicating, phones didn't work. So you've got a radio breathing masks, overalls, water. Your water gets contaminated. We were lucky we had tank water, but we still needed the water. Just things like that in a box. We knew exactly where it was, we could go to it when we needed it. So, it's that forward planning that makes all the difference. We were never going to leave, we knew exactly what we had to do, we knew how we were going to do it, and we were a bit naïve I have to say.

Malcolm

We're all a bit naïve. Tell me about your fireguard group, because that's where you got some of that knowledge from, I presume; that exchange with neighbours and experts. How was that set up?

Tim

Well basically it was my wife's idea. She heard about it, and she's done a bit of work for CFA, she's a psychologist. Long Gully road is 4km. There are 40, 50, 60-acre properties on Long Gully. We got a group of our neighbours together and we would have a meeting at a different property every year, and we did this for a number of years before Black Saturday. And the person that came from CFA would go around the property and point out where the issues were what we needed to fix and how we could defend it. Because as I say, you've got to be in a mindset where you are either going to leave or

you're going to stay. We were always going to stay. But even if you're going to leave, you may not be able to, so therefore, you've got to have some kind of plan in place. And that's still stressed to this day. So, we would have meetings once a year to go around and work out the different properties and how we would defend them. And we had a phone tree. In those days that's the only option we had, not ideal because you had to start ringing people. And then if you couldn't get on to somebody, that you had to ring the next person in the line. So, it wasn't ideal.

We've got a fireguard group at our new place and we've got a WhatsApp group. All we have to do now is send out one message. The other good thing about a fire group is there were two or three in the area. So we could have one number from the other fireguard group in Chum Creek and they got impacted after us. We could tell them what was going to happen. So again, it's about communication.

The other problem we had, and it's even more of a problem now, is landlines don't work anymore. Soon as the power goes out, we don't have a landline because of NBN. They haven't thought that one through, unfortunately. Mobile phones kept working up until about 10 o'clock at night. But you can't rely on the mobile phone. So somehow the communication is the hardest thing. Once that drops out you've got nothing. But I think on the whole having a fireguard group saved our lives, absolutely no doubt about it, because we could all stay in touch, we could let each other know what's going on. But the training and knowing what to do just was invaluable. So, if anybody ever wants to start a fireguard group just contact the CFA. It's so simple and it doesn't take a lot of time.

Malcolm

Can we go back to the horses? We've heard from some people that opening gates and allowing them to be together and to be able to move around as you said, they'll move on to a burnt patch of ground. Were your horses able to move within the property or were they restricted in where they could move? Obviously, they didn't move to that that gully that was a danger.

Tim

The way we looked at it was the horses that were in a group paddock, a fairly large paddock stayed in that group paddock but closer to the house, because they were comfortable with each other. The other horses were in private paddocks, they could still stay close to each other, but we didn't want to put them in with each other because then you're creating a whole set of circumstances that they're not used to and as I say we had the problem with the stallion, there's no way known he can go in. So, you're looking at possible injuries from that side of things if you start changing things too much. From our point of view what we did worked. The most important thing I think was to have absolutely bare paddocks and then the fire really didn't impact the horses in the private paddocks because there was just nothing to burn. The biggest problem I think we had was afterwards was getting supplies in because we had some horses with burns, not drastic ones but they did have burns, and they had to be treated.

Malcolm

In terms of the aftermath did you have problems with say respiratory issues? Were there horses that had suffered smoke inhalation or stress? Any of those sorts of things?

Tim

Well luckily I have a very good friend who's a vet and who was working close and she and her partner managed to get into us in the day after and so she treated. And yes, there were respiratory problems over the next few days and weeks, but because they were treated early that didn't eventuate. Stress-wise yes they were but not to any great degree. The most stressed horse we had was the stallion because he was by himself, and probably the horse that we lost. Again, we look back on that and we made a big mistake there, but again you can only do so much. But I think if you start changing things too much on a fire ban day then you can cause a lot more issues.

Malcolm

We know that some people removed horses. You've said that wouldn't have been possible because you had so many. So, if you were in that situation again would you always aim to stay and defend providing you had a dependable property rather than try and remove animals?

Tim

I think that's a personal choice. I think you've got to look at your circumstances. Where we are now, we would probably stay and defend again, because again we've got independent water, we've got bare paddocks. I think once you start moving horses it's like people, they say basically if you're going to leave early. How many people are going to pack their horses up on every fire ban day? They're not. So, if you're talking about leaving on a fire ban day that means you've got to get into your agistment if you agist out, and get out again. And driving a car on a smoky road and having done that once I certainly wouldn't want to do that with horses. Plus, you've got heat, plus you've got stressed horses, plus you've got stressed people, and none of that works. So personally, I think we will keep staying because we know we can defend where we are.

It'll be harder to defend than the old place, but I think you've got to take into account getting out as early as you can. But again, we come back to that issue of the Pakenham horse, that was a vet's horse, she thought they were going to be impacted in Pakenham, so brought the horse to us. The next day we were impacted. The way the climate is going and the way fires go where do you take your horse? You might take it into danger. To me it makes sense to stay as long as the property is defensible. We're lucky in Healesville. We have a complex called the Don Road Complex which is literally just around the corner. It's a two-or-three-minutes' drive. You can almost ride the horses down there. I guess that might be an option. So that might help some people if they've got a complex that close, but again, it's really looking at the situation. But again, I stress, look at it early. Don't look at it two days before the fires are possibly coming. Look at it through the winter and say "Right what am I going to do? How am I going to manage this? Do I want my horse out? Do I want to help the owners?" There are all sorts of options.

Malcolm

You mentioned when you were talking about the fireguard group people visiting your property. I can imagine then if you've got friends who own horses as well they come and look at your property they're going to see things that you might not see. They're going to make observations that you might glance over. So, you need some, even if it's not a fireguard group, some more systematic way of checking against your plan I guess.

Tim

Absolutely. I mean our local fire captain always said to us "If you want me to come and have a look, I will, just to give you some advice." This is before we were in the fireguard group. And the guy that we have now, he's done the last few meetings, he came to us before he agreed to come and do the fireguard, and asked us what we did. But also he went to our neighbours who were also impacted and asked them what they did, because most of them had horses, so again it's all different. Some people have two or three horses, or one. We had 17. What we went through we had to do because we had 17 horses.

Malcolm

Are there any things we haven't talked about that you think the people watching this should know about? Or any particular things you'd want them to understand?

Tim

The hardest thing for us I think was afterwards. We cut our own hay at this property and we lost the whole of it. Because it was in February we had most of it left so we had no hay. We had to try and get hay and feed in and water. The biggest problem after the fires for us was getting out to get those

things, because at the time the philosophy was, and I think it still might be, if you come out through the police cordon you're not allowed back in again. So we had this ridiculous situation where we've been through the most horrific thing we'd ever been through, we were coming out into what we thought was calm water and yet we couldn't get out to get the basics for us and the horses and get back again. Once we were out, we weren't allowed back in again.

We also couldn't get, without a big fight, supplies of hay, food and veterinary supplies or veterinary treatment in as soon as we needed it.

The other thing to think about as well is your fencing, what kind of fencing is going to stand up to that kind of fire? Because you don't want to lose completely the fencing, particularly boundary fences if you've got main roads around you. We were lucky we were out in the country. But even so it's something worth thinking about.

But I think the other thing as well is the rebuilding afterwards. So, make sure number one you're insured. The insurance is the most important thing. Make sure your fences are insured. Because that is a huge expense and we had probably 5 or 6km of fence. And the government helped a bit but basically the insurance covered everything. And then we had six weeks of hard work afterwards. So again, it's about being very friendly with your neighbours and your friends and saying "Can we have a hand please?" Because it was amazing how many people came in afterwards once they could get in to give us a hand. And then the most touching one was a little Ford Falcon arrived one day a few days afterwards and she stopped and said "I've got dog and cat food in here. Would you like some?" And we actually were out of dog and cat food. She handed us a whole lot of stuff and she'd driven in all through this just because she wanted to help. Oh, it was fantastic.

Malcolm

All right. Thank you, Tim. I really do appreciate you sharing those experiences, and I'm sure that the people watching this will have gained something from that, and hopefully they start making plans as you say in winter when things aren't grim rather than the day before a total fire ban.

Tim

That's the trouble, we get complacent and we think it can't happen. And we don't make any plans. And then we're in trouble because we've left it to the last minute. The other thing I think as well, and something we didn't do, things like passports, insurance policies that sort of thing, have them in a box and have them ready so that they can go in a car or whatever particularly if you're going to leave. But even if you're not going to leave, get them out somewhere where they can be saved.

Malcolm: Thanks Tim.

Tim: Okay no problem.

Malcolm: Excellent.