

Appendix 4. Sherylle Holster - Cann River -18 January 2020.

“Where do you want me to begin?”

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Where do you want me to begin.

I was until last year the Secretary Treasurer of Cann Valley Brigade and Firefighter.

Resigning after I saw members of the brigade vilified for attempting to right the many wrongs.

I along with former Captain David Morrison along with other members of the brigade all left at the one time due to the ineptitude of our officers in charge from District 11 Headquarters Bairnsdale.

We tried to point out the lack of preparedness for Cann River and surrounds and voiced our concerns regarding a potential catastrophic fire impacting the areas we covered some 299,000 hectares and 7 communities apart from our own with one tanker.

In comparison Mallacoota our neighbouring brigade covered 10,000 hectares with 3 appliances and slipons.

Requests for another tanker or slipons for Cann River were ignored.

It is the responsibility of the officers in District 11 to maintain Local Incident Management Plans. (LIMP) Emergency plans in case of fires.

These plans would include water fill points, which in an emergency visiting fire fighters would know which roads to use and where to refill their tankers.

Our LIMP plans had not been revised since 2007. Had visiting fire fighters tried to access some of these fill points in an emergency they could have found themselves in areas without water and could have become trapped in some cases bridges marked on map were no longer there. Very dangerous in a fire.

Requests for extra and specialist training met with declined or no funds, yet brigades in other districts had no problems attaining courses.

We did not even have breathing apparatus or structural uniforms to protect us for structural fires.

It took 18 months for new recruits to sit their Minimum Skills test, a prerequisite for joining CFA. Until then these new recruits could not go on callouts or assist us when we needed them.

The more we pointed out the failures the more we requested extra training or equipment, the more members were vilified, reputations tarnished accused of false allegations.

Former Captain David Morrison was highly trained in emergency incidents, including fire in the Australian Navy and also after leaving the navy with National Parks and Forestry and was part of a strong fire fighting force in the Ash Wednesday Fires.

As no training was forthcoming or being denied from our District Officers he commenced training the brigade himself and later enlisted the aid of the Captain of Mallacoota Brigade Graham Clark.

Once it was known that Graham and his training officers were assisting our brigade he and his officers, members of his committee became targeted undergoing the same vilification and tarnishing of character and names, even to the extent of being accused of misappropriation of funds, all proved incorrect, but his reputation was ruined.

This tended to be the modus of operation separate, destroy reputations and put so much pressure on the volunteer with false allegations, suspensions until they gave up and walked away.

Bullying was rife.

Our fears for our community remained the same. Many requests to burn off went unanswered or declared Complex Burns which requires either heavy machinery a Tanker or both. Member's of the community offered the machinery and time, yet no burning off was permitted.

We could see the undergrowth growing, a real fear evolving regarding the potential for a catastrophic fire.

We were not heard, and because we dared to voice our concerns the targeting increased.

It really hit home after the suicide of one of our members.

He had walked the streets of Cann River and surrounds with a petition to remove the Officers at District 11 Headquarters due to ineptitude and lack of Duty Of Care for our community. This petition signed by our community was sent to Members of parliament including Darren Chester, Tim Bull and the Emergency Services Minister Merlino.

It resulted in passing the buck not much more.

I cannot begin to explain what we endured not many would believe.

As a result both Captains, myself and members of both committees from the Cann Brigade and Murrumbidgee Brigade along with firefighters from both, either walked away or due to false allegations, vilification were forced out.

For Cann River we knew our town was at severe risk of being overrun and we knew the one tanker would not be enough to protect our town and feared the worst.

CFA made a statement in our Community magazine Jinga.

"Do not expect any help" and that was exactly what occurred in this fire zero.

When the fire first impacted Cann River there were evacuees at the school with the one tanker to protect them.

If not for former Captain David Morrison now working with McKinnon Earthworks a local company in Cann River, their small crew along with Warren Fenner, Fenners Logs and a small local DWELP crew Cann River would not be here.

I was informed that by the time the fire impacted Cann River these local crews had put in well over 100 hours.

No help came to Cann River until after the fires had already impacted Cann River and the help that came were tankers assigned to other areas but became stranded in Cann River.

Former Captain Graham Clark now in Club Terrace worked to save 3 homes during fire with friend Greg and was successful using a Fire Trailer

We began our own initiative by building fire trailers after we left the CFA because we knew NO HELP would come.

Our fire trailers were built by former and some brigade members and were situated in Club Terrace, Chandler's Creek, Tamboon and friends of ours encouraged by us and our fears also built there own and had them in areas around Cann River and in surrounding communities .

To cut a long story short a crew of 25 men using local machinery and a few ex volunteers with fire trailers protected Cann River and it worked.

We did this with no help or support from the CFA.

Tankers arrived in Cann after the first and hardest battle won by a community of locals.

Although CFA have announced their presence in Cann River now, it is too little too late.

The battle was won by a determined group of locals who refused to say die.

After being forced out, leaving, resigning from CFA we formed a team offering our skills to community residents undertaking fire and risk assessments to anyone for free.

We actively promoted the use of fire trailers and offered to assist in attaining water pumps water tanks and equipment.

No-one denies at the time of the stranding of the fire tankers bound for other areas in Cann River , the work done by the visiting fire fighters.

Their help is so gratefully appreciated.

For our exhausted locals it was a Godsend.

So many thanks to these fire crews most volunteers like us wanting to help the communities.

Our argument is not with the volunteers.

Our argument is about the lack of care, preparedness, fire mitigation and responsibility for our isolated communities. We were not listened to and as stated not one extra Tanker was allocated to our Community.

Our residents owe their lives to men like Gus, Warren their crews and the few DWELP personnel who remained in Cann River.

It should be noted that the control of local DWELP was moved to Orbost despite CFA ACO Owen making the announcement that DWELP would be picking up the slack due to Cann River's CFA deficiency and that DWELP were fully trained for that job. It seems he didn't know that DWELP control hand been moved to Orbost (remote)!!

We now know DWELP was not retrained they do not have structure certification which meant on the bad day with the only CFA tanker hooked up to the school No body was allowed to deal with structure fires. We were on our own totally as we warned, no CFA units came from Orbost or Mallacoota as promised by Orbost Group for the very reason already identified, re roads to dangerous to travel totally impassable no one was coming.

Everybody in this district needs to be aware that the knowledge, expertise, equipment in those first days was all local and without the dedication of every single crew, men and women of local DWELP McKinnons contracting and Warren Fenner's logging crew along with his heavy logging equipment the outcome could have been very different for Cann River.

These crews never gave up on us like the CFA and the proof of this is, we still have a town.

Protected by local crews refusing to give in.

They are the true hero's.

No matter what is said by CFA or how many tankers are in town we know who we can depend on and it's not the officers in the CFA who left us all to burn.

Well done to Gus, and crew to Warren Fenner and his crew Tony, Mossie, Mitch and to our local DWELP crew. True Heroes all.

We send our sympathies to our East Gippsland friends in the towns of Genoa, Mallacoota, Club Terrace, Chandler' Creek, Noorinbee, Buldah, Tamboon, Wingman, Wangrabel, Werragua and of course the people of Buchan.