

1939 BLACK FRIDAY IN VICTORIA & WITH THE WORLD AT WAR

Contents

Black Friday in Victoria	2
With the world at war	6

Black Friday in Victoria

Like a giant blow-torch in the hands of a madman, one of the most disastrous bushfires in Australian history swept through drought-stricken Victoria in the first weeks of 1939. On one day alone — 13 January, still remembered as Black Friday — fifty people died in its fiery embrace; by the time it was over the death toll had reached seventy-one, with many hundreds injured. In addition, reported Mr Justice Leonard Stretton, whose Royal Commission investigated the tragedy:

Sixty-nine mills were burned. Millions of acres of fine forest, of almost incalculable value, were destroyed or badly damaged. Townships were obliterated in a few minutes. Mills, houses, bridges, tramways, machinery, were burned to the ground; men, cattle, horses, sheep were devoured by the fires or asphyxiated by the scorching debilitated air.

Generally, the numerous fires which during December, in many parts of Victoria, had been burning separately, as they do in any summer, either 'under control' as it is falsely and dangerously called, or entirely unattended, reached the climax of their intensity and joined forces in a devastating confluence of flames on Friday, the 13th of January.

On that day it appeared that the whole State was alight. At midday, in many places, it was as dark as night. Men carrying hurricane lamps worked to make safe their families and belongings. Travellers on the highways were trapped by fires or blazing fallen trees, and perished. Throughout the land there was daytime darkness... Horses were found still harnessed, in their stalls, dead, their limbs fantastically contorted...

Steel girders and machinery were twisted by heat as if they had been of fine wire. Sleepers of heavy durable timber, set in soil, their upper surfaces flush with the ground, were burnt through...

Balls of crackling fire sped at a great pace in advance of the fires, consuming with a roaring, explosive noise, all that they touched. Houses of brick were seen and heard to leap into a roar of flames before the fires had reached them.

Some men of science hold the view that the fires generated and were preceded by inflammable gases which became alight. Great pieces of burning bark were carried by the wind to set in raging flame regions not yet reached by the fires.

Such was the force of the wind that in many places hundreds of trees of great size were blown clear of the earth, tons of soil with embedded masses of rock still adhering to the roots; for mile upon mile the former monarchs were laid in confusion, burnt, torn from the earth, and piled upon one another as matches strewn by a giant hand...

As thousands of volunteer bushfire fighters, hampered by some of the hottest weather ever known in the State (on Black Friday temperatures reached 47.7°C), gradually gained the upper hand, the full horror and the heroism gradually began to emerge.

Newspapers told how, at one timber mill where fifteen men had died, one man had sought shelter in an elevated water-tank — which had then boiled dry.

Others were roasted in a sawdust heap in which they had buried themselves. One fleeing man had been caught by the thorns of a blackberry bush which held him prisoner while he burned to death. Others died, from suffocation or burns, inside the cars in which they had tried to break out of the flaming hell.

Some were luckier: one group of eleven narrowly escaped suffocation while they were trapped inside a well in which they had sought refuge.

At Noojee, devastated for the second time in thirteen years, postmistress Gladys Sanderson continued to operate the telephone exchange as the inferno advanced from house to house towards the post office.

Her last call was to a neighbouring town: 'I am about to close down now as the flames are licking the building. I have locked the valuables in the safe and I am going to the creek. If the worst comes to the worst you will find the keys of the safe and the office strapped to my wrist.'

With seventy-four others she watched from the creek as the fire razed the entire town, save for the hotel and one house. For her courage and dedication, Mrs Sanderson was awarded the Order of the British Empire.

The Stretton Commission recommended the establishment of a central country fire fighting organisation to minimise the chances of a similar tragedy recurring — but fifty-one more people died, and hundreds of homes were gutted in 1943 and 1944 before the Country Fire Authority was finally set up.

Today, with some 107 000 fire-fighters, it ranks as one of the biggest-and most effective-volunteer fire-fighting services in the world.

Other States, too, have had their share of tragedies from bushfires which, on average, sweep through about 400 000 hectares of Australian grassland and forest each year.

One of the worst occurred in Tasmania in a single day in February 1967 when sixty-two lives were lost as bushfires advanced on Hobart along a 140-kilometre front at speeds of up to 80 kilometres an hour.

The flames were finally halted a mere two kilometres from the island's capital, but the devastation, wrought by the release of energy 'equal to several nuclear explosions', was staggering: over 1300 houses razed, leaving some 7500 people homeless; 1500 motor vehicles gutted; 172 000 hectares of forest wiped out; more than 100 000 livestock and poultry killed.

Total property damage was estimated at \$40 million — equal to the State's fire insurance premiums for the preceding century. Since then Tasmanian rural bushfire brigades have been increased from 48 to 356, manned by over 10 000 volunteers.

Throughout Australia there are now 240 000 men and women from all walks of life who form a frail, but increasingly effective, barrier between the inevitable bushfires and our homes.

They have aircraft, computers, and some of the most sophisticated fire-fighting equipment in the world; more importantly, they share a determination to protect not only what is theirs, but the whole community's. Without them, Black Friday would not be history, but a very frequent reality.

With the world at war

At 9.15 p.m. on Sunday, 3 September 1939, Prime Minister Robert Menzies went on national radio to inform Australians that, for the second time in just over twenty years, they were again at war with Germany.

'It is my melancholy duty', he said, 'to inform you officially that, in consequence of the persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her, and that, as a result, Australia is also at war'. He continued:

The history of recent months in Europe has been one of ruthlessness, indifference and inhumanity, which the darkest centuries can scarcely parallel. It will demonstrate that the Leader of Germany has for a long time steadily persisted with a policy which was deliberately designed to produce either war or a subjugation of one country after another by the threat of war ...

A halt has been called. Force has had to be resorted to to check force. The right of independent people to live their own lives, honest dealing, the peaceful settlement of differences, the honouring of international obligations — all these things are at stake.

There was never any doubt as to where Great Britain stood in regard to them. There can be no doubt that where Great Britain stands, there stands the people of the entire British world...

What may be before us, we do not know; nor how long the journey.

But this we do know — Truth is with us in the battle; and Truth must win. In the bitter months to come, calmness, resolution, confidence and hard work will be required as never before. It will involve not only soldiers, sailors and airmen, but supplies, foodstuffs, money.

Our staying power, and that of the Mother Country, will be best assisted by keeping our production going, continuing our avocations and business, maintaining employment, and with it, our strength. I know that in spite of the emotions that we are feeling, Australia is ready to see it through.

Within less than two months, conscription had been introduced for home defence, which meant that all men over twenty-one were given three months basic training, despite bitter opposition from some important trade unions.

Recruiting for active service also went ahead briskly, with nearly 15 000 enlisting in September, and on 9 January the first A.I.F. troops embarked for the Middle East under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Blamey.

Before the second World War ended, almost a million Australians — including about 66 000 women — would join the armed forces. Thirty-thousand never came home.

Although Anzac troops were heavily involved in North Africa and Greece by early 1941, most Australians felt themselves personally threatened only after the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

By now Labor was back in office and, for the first time in its history, Australia

declared war without reference to the British Government.

Prime Minister John Curtin called it 'The Gravest Hour of our History' when he announced that, as from 5 p.m. on 8 December 1941, a state of war existed with Japan. The following day the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted in an editorial:

Now the call comes to us to defend in our own waters, and perhaps on our own soil, the things for which we have fought and are fighting abroad. We shall need everything we can muster of unity, resolution, and strength. The enemy who has so wantonly attacked the British Empire and the United States is powerful as well as treacherous. He may not have immediate designs upon Australia, but this country is within easy reach of his navy and air army at least...

A mere ten weeks later this warning became a bloody reality.