



December 2019

MEDIA RELEASE

Bonegilla Fire Brigade captain Brian Church just faced his toughest fire in 45 years as a CFA volunteer...but that didn't stop him going back to join two more strike teams.

As part of the massive volunteer support effort from Victoria, Mr Church completed two stints at Bateman's Bay and one at Armidale during the NSW fires, and he's willing to return again if needed.

It was tough and tiring but Mr Church said his experience and training kept him safe and helped him to save property.

"The first strike team at Bateman's Bay was the toughest fire I've ever faced," he said. "We were on the fire front for three days. The first night we had expected to finish about 10 o'clock but the fire hit about 11 so we were there for hours.

There was a massive ember attack. "I've never seen anything like it," Mr Church said "You see the footage on television and then you realise you're right in it. The fire was within 10-15 metres of us. You had to almost look straight up to see the top of the fire in the trees."

Mr Church was on the Kiewa fire truck, one of seven trucks in the area four protecting houses and three protecting a service station complex, which was home to antique motorbikes and wagons.

All properties were saved.

"We went into self-protection quite often, using a nozzle to suck in some cool air from the water," Mr Church said.

Despite the awful conditions, Mr Church was confident the volunteers could succeed in their tasks. "It all comes back to your training and experience," he said. "I've been a firefighter for 45 years and have never been in anything as big as those first three days, but we had a good crew, everyone was well trained and knew what they were doing. I felt safe the whole time."

After returning to their camp after 2am, the crews were back on the fireground by 9am. "It's an eerie feeling to go back the next day," Mr Church said. "Everything was black right around the houses and the service station."

Mr Church said the three-day deployments were exhausting but worthwhile. "You can't believe the gratitude you get from local people. You'd get a coffee and pack of lollies and they wouldn't take any money for it, then you see people clapping as you're coming towards them."

Mr Church and his fellow volunteers at Bonegilla, 12km south of Wodonga, are prepared for Victoria's summer. "Our turn will come eventually," he said. "I've never seen so much growth in our area and these hot days will dry everything out."

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) CEO Adam Barnett said CFA volunteers had yet again stepped up when needed the most.

“Volunteers are the backbone of CFA and will again be there to protect life and property as Victoria experiences another long and challenging fire season, but they go further than that to provide support across Australia when needed,” he said.

“We should be proud of our volunteers.”

Learn more about CFA’s world-respected surge capacity at: www.vfbv.com.au/surge

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