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MEDIA RELEASE

VOLUNTEERS REUNITE TO RECALL 1965 GIPPSLAND BUSHFIRES

The 1965 Gippsland fires weren't assigned a catchy name and they don't feature prominently in the history books, but they were significant in their damage and in how they ushered in a new era of volunteer firefighting.

The fires burned from February 21 to March 13 covering 300,000 hectares of forest and 15,000 hectares of grassland. According to Forest Fire Management Victoria's website, more than 60 buildings and 4,000 stock were destroyed.

Significantly, the fire campaign was run by newly-formed groups of CFA brigades, marking an early example of today's CFA volunteer surge capacity and local driven leadership.

When towns were under threat, up to 40 tankers were called in from around the state to protect properties.

Now 55 years later, volunteers who helped save communities in the campaign are coming together for a reunion at Valencia Creek on March 1.

For volunteer firefighters like Maurie Killeen, the campaign was ground breaking.

"It wasn't really documented in the annals of the CFA," Mr Killeen said. "There were a few injuries, nothing too drastic, but size wise it was one of the biggest fires since the formation of the CFA in the 1940s."

Mr Killeen has clear recollections of the fires. "What was significant was that it was run by the newly-formed groups of brigades, which were formed to discuss preparation and events," he said.

Brigades on the forest interface were part of the Maffra group which worked on a plan of action.

Mr Killeen and his fellow volunteers helped the Forest Commission to put breaks and tracks in, despite the hilly terrain and lack of machinery.

"There was a north wind forecast and we were worried about it coming down to Valencia so we started preparing ourselves. There were very few fire tankers in the area at the time but we organised about 40 tankers from across the state to congregate at Valencia to fight the fire."

"Seeing them lined up, some of the locals felt a little embarrassed thinking this was overkill, but when a fire started on Blanket Hill on March 3 with a north wind behind it heading towards Glenmaggie, all thoughts of overkill were forgotten."

The new fire went to Tambo Crossing, impacting all communities along way.

As the fires spread in coming days, Valencia became the headquarters to feed and rest volunteers and organise backburning operations.

The threat to the township peaked on March 5. "We heard the roar of the fire getting louder and saw the great smoke cloud getting bigger," Mr Killeen said.

"We were as prepared as could be, waiting. We saw several spot fires in the grassed slopes on the edge of the bush about 1.30, because of the short and sparse grass they quickly spread in size of many hectares in less than a minute and rolling down the grass slopes like red water onto the flats. There was very little to burn on the flats as some paddocks had been ploughed waiting for rain to put in crops and the rest had very little grass, it swooshed over these leaving the cow pats alight.

"We all survived this onslaught but Valencia lost two houses in the bush and for about five days after we had flare-ups from burning stumps, trees falling etc. My father Maurice Killeen along with another chap saved the sawmill."

Looking back, Mr Killeen said it was interesting to see the communities come together as one in adversity.

"As the original fire at New Place Creek was a Forest Commission fire, the CFA did not see the need to be involved, but the locals on the forest interface did, so the build-up of tankers and the forward planning was done with local CFA, Forest Commission, and forest interface brigades and their groups. It was the fledging groups of brigades that proved their worth.

In those days, local volunteer captains and groups led the initiative and provided all the planning, coordination and leadership."

The reunion on March 1 is at the Valencia Soldiers Memorial Hall, opening from 1pm with afternoon tea and presentation of awards at 3pm.

"There's not many of us left from 1965 but I'm looking forward to catching up with those who are there on the day," Mr Killeen said.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) CEO Adam Barnett said volunteers then and now worked tirelessly to protect their communities and support their neighbours.

"The 1965 fires are an early example of Victorians coming together in times of crisis, something that continues today with our world-renowned volunteer surge capacity," Mr Barnett said.

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