

THE MOUNTS

Community newsletter of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine
2019-2020 Special Fire Edition Part Four

17 DECEMBER 2019



Lesley Wilson



Helen Freeman



Peter Raines



6.55pm, Alex Halliday



Peter Raines



Peter Raines



Rosie Walsh

18 DECEMBER 2019



1.06am, David Howell



Smith Hill near Wedgewood, working to extinguish a 'candle' tree, Ted Griffin



Filling up at the Farrer Road West static water supply, Ted Griffin



Penny Ewing with Chris on the dozer cutting fire trail from Merry Garth to Cathedral, Ted Griffin
(see photos on 19 December when this trail stopped the fire)



This page and top of following page, Peter Raines





Lesley Wilson



Waterbombing helicopter, Alex Halliday



Going up the zig zag, Alex Halliday



19 DECEMBER 2019



Above and below, fire stopped at fire trail from Merry Garth to Cathedral, Ted Griffin
(see photo on 18 December of dozer on trail)





This page, Alex Halliday





Hugh Wilson waiting for an ambulance after being hit by a falling branch.
Three ambulances arrived and he was taken to Lithgow hospital via Hartley due to road closures.
Six weeks later, Hugh has fully recovered. Images from Lesley Wilson



20 DECEMBER 2019



Foam on Knight Brown trail, Ted Griffin



Morley Creek gully Glenhaven Brigade (note two people down in the gully),
Ted Griffin



Peter Raines



Alex Halliday



Alex Halliday



Ted Griffin



34-year-old Mercedes Benz, refurbished and used as a vehicle by Baulkham Hills Brigade, Ted Griffin

21 DECEMBER 2019



Ted Griffin



Bell from Du Fours Rocks, Ted Griffin



A reunion of Beth Raines and her nephews (above and below), Alex Halliday





Graham Tribe



Peter Raines



Alex Halliday

22 DECEMBER 2019



Coming in from the night shift 7am, Sarah Howell



This and following two pages, Peter Raines







A PERSONAL REPORT OF THE GOSPERS MOUNTAIN FIRE TEXT AND IMAGES, RICHARD BEATTIE, PACKWOOD, MT WILSON



Monday 16 December 2019 3.11am: Backburning on our north paddock fire trail



Monday 23 December 2019 7.35pm: The sun sets over a burnt out, devastated Mt Wilson Road

We have just endured the worst bushfire in the Mt Wilson community's living memory.

The terrible drought that has taken the moisture from the ground in much of NSW created the worst possible condition for a hot summer with high winds. The massive fuel load of fallen eucalyptus leaves, branches and trees over millions of hectares has been a tinderbox just waiting to be lit. That came for us on 26 October when the

huge Gaspers Mountain bushfire was started by lightning. The ignition source in the Wollemi National Park, a long way to our north, first appeared as a distant smoke plume. Weeks later as it burnt closer, but still a long way off, a red glow appeared at night above the ridge tops as the flames underlit the smoke clouds. Finally, on Saturday 14 December fire came to Mt Wilson when a backburn started on the west and north of the road into the village jumped the road heading south and east. That kept the Mt Wilson & Mt Irvine Rural Fire Brigade, and dozens of visiting brigades working very hard until 22 December.

Most winds forcing the fire along came from north-west, but it was variable and inconsistent. This made firefighting difficult and dangerous. With 30kph and higher wind speeds, flames would race ahead covering low ground then suddenly reaching up to the heat-vaporised eucalyptus oils from the leaves at the treetops and igniting in explosive clouds of flame. The fireground split from the entrance to Mt Wilson on the Bells Line of Road to the north and south. That led to the village sitting along the top of the ridge with fire consuming everything in its path just below the property fence lines on both sides. It was only magnificent, disciplined, well planned firefighting that saved the homes and infrastructure of Mt Wilson. The sister and brother leadership and planning by Captain Beth and Senior Deputy Captain Peter Raines was instrumental in the success of the operation. Sadly, Beth's home that her family had a long association with was one of two lost to the fire.

With fire to the north and south, so many fire trucks – big, small and water tankers – and firefighters everywhere, there still wasn't enough to bring the blazes under control. Air power was brought in with helicopters flying water buckets on long cables, dropping them into local dams then dumping the water on the fire. The state's Boeing 737 large air tanker fire retardant bomber capable of carrying more than 15,000 litres of the pink retardant was brought in to quell fire not that far south of the fire station.



What a sight! A small jet flies ahead of the big aircraft, lets off a puff of smoke above the precise location for the bombing as the big plane follows in its slipstream. On one run, low over the top of the fire station, it started its drop a little before the target site raining the pink watery liquid on the station roof and nearby cars, including mine. While the stuff is all washed off its trace marks are yet to come off.

Sunday the 15th leading into the Monday was a 38 hour day for me. I worked at the fire station with a team of 12 street coordinators, most off the mountain on the phone, each with about 12 to 15 resident contacts to report on whether they would stay, leave or come to the mountain to defend their property. Most residents were already away, or left or stayed away. Nearly all who remained were actively involved

with the fire brigade including a catering team that fed as many as 102 local and visiting firefighters at one time.

The firefighters were cool, calm and collected. Like war, firefighting involves a lot of waiting around for the fire to approach closely before it is battled. Experience shows where it is sensible and safe to be positioned to slow or stop the flames.

As the fire got closer to our property, Packwood, I returned home at about 3pm to prepare for the possible worst. Topping up the water in the downpipe-plugged gutters, washing down the roof tiles again, taking in the coir door mats, removing the last of winter's firewood from the veranda and refilling the generator with petrol was all there was left to do. We had had no power for more than 24 hours by then. The generator runs the pump very effectively for the house and garden and the many hoses all around the house. A high-pressure fire pump with a 30m fire hose and big nozzle puts out many times the pressure and volume of water. Ours was next to the concrete water tanks and we used about 15,000 litres in the next 18 hours.

It was about 2.30am when a NSW Fire and Rescue appliance and four-man crew turned up at Packwood with the firemen running hoses down the east side of the property. They used my pump and hose on the west side with me in the middle with three connected lengths of garden hose. The objective: keep the fire from coming up the slashed paddock to the garden-enclosing fence, then the house.

Just before 3am the backburning crew started to light-up on the private fire trail that runs across the bottom of our paddock. By 3.10am it was well alight (see first image above), heading east towards our neighbours and dramatically up trees and towards our common wire and star picket fence. After the fire had come up about 50 metres it was then time to let go with the water we had. We more or less stopped the fire by 5am. The firemen pulled out just before 6am leaving me to keep watch and put out flare ups. That happened twice with the second one out of my hose's reach in the western neighbour's bush. I raced out, found a fire truck not far away and they came down to put it out preventing fire burning higher towards their house.



Monday, December 2019 5.41 am: Where we brought the fire to a halt in our slashed paddock

With Packwood no longer facing immediate threat I returned to the fire station for what was my 14 hours-a-day regular job: being around for the 7am and 7pm shift changes, the operations' radios and the coming and goings of firefighters who knew what was happening on the various firegrounds. I'd put that information together, check with Beth or Peter, then it was distributed to the local people.

The 2019-2020 Special Fire Edition of The Mounts continues in Part Five.