

Changing Winds

The cacophony of sound coming from the CFA pager demanded attention as it jiggled and danced on the outdoor table. Several conversations stopped mid sentence as the alarm blasted for five long seconds. Eddie pressed the button to make it stop, but the collective relief lasted only until Eddie put down his three-year-old granddaughter and stood, declaring he had to go.

A chorus of voices mildly protested, the loudest of which was his wife Harriet's.

'Are you sure? Can't you let others handle this one? It's your birthday!'

'Tom and Jackie are out of town so they'll need me to drive the truck. There's thousands of campers around this weekend, they'll want a good turn out.'

'Where is it, Dad?' his oldest daughter asked.

'Towards the mountains to the east, about seven k's from here. They've called five brigades.'

Eddie's children and their spouses and grandchildren, as well as several dogs, milled around the long table under the shade of the dense mop-top tree, lazing away the warm afternoon. Homemade and home-grown morsels covered the table; dips, olives, crusty bread, juicy berries. Several of the grandchildren played cricket on the grass, hampered by one of the dogs occasionally stealing the dirty tennis ball.

It was early autumn, but still there were summer-like conditions in north eastern Victoria. The surrounding hills were a dry, pale, brown, dotted with trees that drooped in exhaustion. A thirsty looking dam was surrounded by a small herd of dusty steers. Any small fire had the potential to be dangerous, and as much as Eddie's family lamented the need for him to leave his own birthday party, they understood.

Eddie moved as quickly as his ageing frame allowed, grabbed his car keys and wallet, and made the short drive to the station. He was right; although five other volunteers had arrived, there was no one who had the training and experience to drive the truck. Even though his eyesight was going and his reactions slower than they used to be, he was still their best driver.

'Happy birthday, Eddie.' Eddie's good friend and neighbour, Wally, shook his hand. 'Three quarters of a century!'

'Yep. Only twenty five years to go.'

'Are we still on for drinks tomorrow?'

'The club at five!'

'We'll be there. Hey, didn't you have your family coming today?'

'Yes. Hopefully I'll be back in time to eat the roast lamb we marinated overnight.'

'I'm sure they'll save you some,' Wally laughed.

Eddie changed into the heavy, fire resistant suit and hoisted himself awkwardly into the driver's seat of their almost brand new tanker. Years of dedication to fundraising and applying for grants by a small group of passionate community members had finally paid off. It was one of the small town's biggest collective achievements. Hard won, too, since Marion was still not speaking to John and poor Frank's heart attack at a CFA Auxiliary meeting was the talk of the town.

Eddie turned the key, delighting in the deep purr of the engine as it came to life. He waited the two minutes it took for the well-trained volunteers to pack provisions into the truck and jump in.

‘Lights and sirens folks?’ Eddie called out with a mischievous grin.

‘Sure Eddie, why not. Let the town know we’re on the job,’ Wally called from the back seat. Eddie glanced down at the dash and flipped the lights and sirens on. This was definitely his favourite part of the job! Eddie’s five-year-old inner self grinned as he steered the red fire engine onto the main road.

Pulling up the truck at the fire site, Eddie took in the smokey scene. Embers swirled overhead. A line of low flames stretched across the paddock, already a few hundred metres long. Not a big fire, but one that had potential, especially since the eucalypt covered foothills were close enough to make out the leaves swirling in the wind.

Seven trucks were there already and a swarm of yellow uniformed CFA volunteers moved busily in different directions, intent on the roles they’d trained for. Eddie jumped out of the truck. His heavy boots dropped onto the dusty soil, crunching on a clump of straw-coloured grass. He spotted the Incident Controller and approached, awaiting orders.

‘Margaret Bay! Great, you’ve arrived. We need you on the east flank with Scottsdale. They’re setting a fire break and backburn at the base of the hill over there. Hopefully it’ll stay in the grass and we can aerial bomb it when the choppers get here. But we’ve gotta stop this thing from hitting the hills, or it’ll be a whole other ball game.’

Eddie and his crew idled over the bumpy paddock towards the base of the hill. He had to stop a few times while billows of thick smoke blew over. He spotted flashes of another red engine and followed Scottsdale into the thicker bush. Eddie jumped out, reflecting on the relative serenity, but he knew it was an illusion.

‘Scottsdale! How are you?’ Eddie called as he shook hands with the crew of the nearby truck. He’d never met any of them before, but that didn’t matter; out there they were all best mates.

‘Margaret Bay, thanks for backing up us. We thought they’d left us alone in the firing line.’

‘No worries mate, happy to lend a hand.’

They set about clearing some scrub from either side of the track as the Scottsdale crew tended a small backburn designed to stop the march of a fire front as it ran out of fuel to burn.

‘Hey Eddie, want a hand with that?’ Wally quipped as Eddie grabbed an axe.

‘No thanks Wally, I’m not too old to wield an axe just yet. Aren’t you supposed to be laying out that hose?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Where do you want me?’ asked nineteen-year-old Trudy, the baby of the bunch. She was high on enthusiasm, but a little rash. She seemed too young, but it was a changing world and Eddie knew he was the dinosaur.

‘OK Trudy, you’re on hose. Dampen the area between the truck and the backburn, just in case this thing gets too close.’

An hour later, sweat dripped down Eddie’s back, gravel slobbered under his eyelids and he could taste the smoke at the back of his nose. He was sitting in the truck, ordered in by Wally for a short break. They’d successfully held their ground. The bulk of the front was still heading south and they’d stalled the eastern flank. He drank warm water from a plastic drink bottle that tasted like kerosene and mud.

‘Agh, yuck! There’s gotta be a way to keep water cold here.’

He was contemplating the benefits of installing a fridge in the new truck when the sky darkened and people started yelling. A sudden south westerly was picking up and embers started showering the truck.

He grabbed the radio.

‘Margaret Bay here, we’ve got incoming. Can we have back up?’

‘Margaret Bay, copy that. We’re sending tankers three in your direction, hold on.’

Ash rained so thick their uniforms turned deep grey. Wearing full personal protective gear, the Margaret Bay and Scottsdale crews stood side by side, hoses and shovels in hand, barely able to make out the person next to them and the trucks behind.

‘Where’s Elvis when you need him?’ Trudy’s older brother Jasper yelled as he looked up for the fire bomber helicopter.

‘Probably too busy eating his peanut butter and jelly sandwich,’ quipped Trudy.

A nearby tree burst into flames.

‘Shit,’ the siblings shouted in unison as they raised the hose.

It was no good. There was no point trying to be heroes.

Eddie called retreat.

‘We’re out of here. Drop and detach the hose. Get in, get in!’

Eddie jumped in the driver’s seat, started the engine, threw the gear stick into reverse and turned the truck onto what he thought was the track.

But he couldn’t see a thing through the black smoke and raining embers.

‘Damn, damn, damn,’ he whispered.

He was faced with the choice of driving into a tree or ditch, or waiting until they were burned-over by the approaching front. He peered out the windows frantically, crawling along at walking pace.

Another shrub burst into flames a few metres to his right. There was no escaping this fire now.

The protocol had been seared into his brain through years of training. He’d been lucky in that he’d never had to use it. Until now; with adrenalin running high, full personal protective gear slowing his movements and five other terrified volunteers looking to him for guidance.

He spoke clearly, precisely, hoping he sounded like he knew what he was doing. Hoping that he could alleviate at least some of the fear in the others, especially young Trudy and Jasper.

Under his direction, they sealed the cabin, turned on their emergency lights, relayed messages to the Incident Controller as per protocol and readied the fire blankets. All the while the air in the cabin was heating up, despite the air conditioner running on full blast.

Emergency sprinklers sprayed water over the truck but from within the cabin, the drips on the windows were barely visible in the thick darkness. As the crackle of flames escalated to a roar, the volunteers crouched under their fire blankets and breathed thick, hot air through their masks.

Eddie tried to catch Trudy’s eyes in the flashes of light from the surrounding flames and truck lights. Her head was down, but he was relieved to see Jasper’s arm around her shoulders.

As the air became so stifling he could barely complete a breath, his heartbeat pounded like a drum and his hips screamed in protest, a strange sense of calm descended. He decided with absolute certainty that they would all die.

Headlines flashed before his eyes; Six Die in Burnover, Brave Volunteers Sacrifice Lives. He hoped that his granddaughter would have at least a vague, fond memory of her Pop.

But as he was waiting for the windows to shatter and his skin to sear, Jasper shouted 'It's passing! We're gonna be OK!'

Eddie's heart gave a couple of extra heavy thumps in the realisation that Jasper was right. The noise had quietened slightly and the flashes of flames were less intense.

He moved his fire blanket and peeked out. Acrid air filled the interior of the cabin, fumes rising from the plastics and upholstery. With relief he noticed that gaps were appearing through the billowing smoke outside the truck.

'Alright folks, it's time to get out of here.'

Eddie moved as quickly as his stiff hips would allow and exited the truck with gloved hands on the red-hot door handle. He removed his mask, breathed in the singed air and swallowed a rasping cough.

Everything was black; the bare ground, shrivelled bushes and tree trunks. High in the trees, leaves had turned brown but were still intact. He and Wally shared a knowing look. That was way too close for comfort, they were lucky to be alive.

'Everyone OK?' Eddie croaked through his raw throat. He patted Trudy's shoulder, 'You alright love?'

'Yeah,' she whispered, wide eyed.

Flashing lights caught his eye as another three firetrucks appeared. The rotating red beams eerily lit the blackened landscape. Dozens of firefighter volunteers jumped out of the trucks and surrounded the survivors, patting them on the backs, shaking their hands.

Eddie asked about Scottsdale. They'd escaped the brunt of the fire front and were all OK. For once, he enjoyed being the centre of attention and was silently pleased when the Incident Controller singled him out and shook his still trembling hand.

'I believe it's your birthday,' he said.

Eddie nodded.

'Well, I think it's you who's been giving out the presents. These young recruits were lucky to have you around. You can drive my truck any time, Eddie.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'I believe it's drinks at the club tomorrow?'

'Yes, you're welcome to come.'

'I think you'll find a few of us happy to take up the invitation!'

Two hours later, Eddie had showered and was sitting back at the table in the garden with his children and grandchildren, beer in hand, the stench of smoke still in his nostrils.

Harriet called them for a late dinner. 'Imagine having to go out to a fire on your birthday! No rest for the wicked. Did they put it out safely, love?'

'Yep, no problem.'

'That's good. But why you don't retire and leave it to the young ones is beyond me.'

Eddie smiled and winked at his youngest granddaughter, who had crawled up onto his lap again.

'Maybe one day.'

