

## ***The Fire with Nine Lives***

*By Viv Forbes*

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The disastrous Millennium Drought, our worst of both centuries, continues to desiccate our lives. From its epicentre in Southern Queensland, it has now spread so far that even the politicians in Brisbane and Canberra have heard of it. And the city folk are now forced to have water habits that are normal living for us. I guess we will soon get a visit from a politician or one of their counselors - (Judy hopes they brings some hay in a brown paper bag - it is \$12 a bale in town).

We look out at a horizon of grey, blurred with smoke, and watch every angry smoke signal upwind of us. Down along the dry Bremer River, our neighbours hand feed hungry milkers with expensive fodder so they can produce milk for half the price they got years ago. On our hills, gaunt cattle and sheep stalk the dusty slopes for a stalk of dry grass. Baby calves with raw sunburnt noses, totter along beside their weak mother hoping for a drink before she gets stuck again in the mud in the bottom of the last dam in the paddock.

One Sunday was so dry, windy and hot we decided to stay in our cool cave beneath the house. So we shut the cool air in at dawn and closed every door, window and curtain for an office day. What a pleasure - even Judy thought filing was not so bad after all.

Then, being Sunday, we retired for siesta after lunch. About afternoon tea time, we saw smoke rising to the east behind the mountain. Then the phone rang "Viv, there's a fire in Ruthenberg's and it is headed your way."

The fire started from a spark from the exhaust of a tractor, and with the wind behind it, was not going to stop easily.

About 2 years ago, we bought a beaut new fire pump and a poly tank. But, as seems to be the way of the world, the good guys are never really prepared for invasion when it arrives on their doorstep.

So we hopped in the car to go and see just what was happening. It was stirring to see the mobilisation of the Rosevale Bush Fire Brigade – our shiny new yellow fire brigade with lights flashing and burly neighbours in yellow overalls clinging on the back. Then the Mount Walker Brigade arrived. Then the blokes from Warrill View. Plus utes with knapsacks, cars of amateurs with bags and lawn rakes, farmers with tractors and boom sprays, all pouring onto the road like angry meat ants, and heading east.

Of course bureaucracy lent a hand. Regulations say that the fire truck cannot be taken out without authorisation. But the three volunteers ready to take it had no

authorisation, and those with authority could not be contacted (they were probably smart and took the phone off the hook). But, being independent farmers with plenty of initiative, they took it anyway.

With all that waterpower, and a narrow front, the fire was put out before the Sherana Platoon of the brigade got its weaponry assembled.

So we continued preparation for the problem that had already been fixed (bit like the bureaucracy here too). Then we went to bed.

At 8.30pm the phone rang. I answered, much to Judy's surprise (I usually ignore the phone after 8 pm). It was another neighbour "The fire has started again". So we joined the fray this time. It was now so close to Sherana, that we got there before the main force. Soon there were four little yellow fire engines, about 30 men and one woman (Mother of All Things, of course, protecting her flocks and herds). By 1.30 am we had it out and blacked down. In the process we found a few deficiencies in the privately financed equipment of the Sherana Fire Platoon.

We also discovered that Public funded fire trucks are a bit like rental cars - they will go places that private vehicles will never dare. In the dark, on land they did not know, they drove down near vertical slopes studded with stumps, rocks and logs without knowing what was at the bottom. All this with 4-6 men on the back, swaying with the bumps and clinging onto anything that looked fixed. I decided I would not ride the fire truck - walking was safer.

We all went home about 1.30 am (except one tractor, who got left behind without lights, drove into a gully and then got lost). He was found later and got home at 5.30am (just in time to come back again, as it turned out).

Next morning, I went to town for a few needed parts, and Judy went up to watch the sleeping fire. Even though she got there not long after dawn, the monster was burning again. So she called the brigades on the mobile phone while engaging in a fighting retreat until they arrived. Before they all got there the enemy broke out at another spot, so now there were two fires.

By 11am they were both beaten into sullen smoking submission again. I got back from town to find Judy, on watch, all alone on the mountain, sitting by the ute while the fire glared back at her with dozens of malevolent blood-shot eyes from under every burning log and heap of dry cow dung.

The cease-fire line was now 50 metres from our eastern boundary.

Judy had the Sherana fire engine (our Toyota ute), and I came in the forward scout vehicle, the VW Bush Buggy.

All looked quiet, so we decided to sit down and have a picnic lunch under a big

ironbark tree. After lunch, I decided to walk the burnt edge before we left. Just over the first hill, I could see a column of thick smoke rising from a gully on the other side. Luckily the mobile phone worked down in the gully, so I made a quick call for the little yellow engine.

As I turned around to go back to Judy, all I could see was another wall of flames – in the midday heat, with a little breeze, it had leapt up instantly my back was turned – it had been playing possum waiting for the right moment. Thru the clouds of smoke blowing towards her, I could see Judy frantically moving our vehicles onto burnt ground. She just managed that before the advance guard of the fire consumed our lunch spot.

So we made quick calls for another little yellow engine. Judy and I now had to hold the line for half an hour. We felt a bit like the outnumbered and poorly armed Poms in 1941, trying to buy time while the good guys across the Atlantic mobilised and armed.

This time we staged a strategic withdrawal, and the invader entered Sherana. We retreated to our mountain road and made a stand there staggering in the heat and smoke, armed with 4 gallon knapsacks of water (a bit like the shotguns the British were training with in 1941, before the donated American sporting rifles arrived).

Again it beat us, but, with me knocking it down and Judy mopping up behind me, we managed to halt it as the first neighbour arrived. We then got the tongue of the fire out in Sherana, but the main front was still crackling towards us in the rough steep bush of the neighbouring block. By then two engines had arrived and a third one was fighting the other blaze, on the second front.

We collapsed and let the fresh (well relatively fresh) GI's take over, and in a couple of hours, the fire was beaten into submission again.

The brigades then had to rush off to another fire threatening a house, so with a couple of neighbours, we went around bayoneting surviving bits of wounded fire and drowning baby sparks hiding under logs and cow dung. A few sparks had invaded dead trees and were multiplying so we cut them down with my (unlicensed) chainsaw and drowned them viciously.

Judy and the neighbours had animals to look after, so I stayed, kicking dead bodies of fire until dark.

By now we knew the enemy, so Judy and I were up there patrolling as dawn broke. I cleaned up our burnt area while Judy checked around the burn line for signs of outbreak. All morning we watched the unconscious monster for signs of life, then had lunch and came home in mid afternoon.

Next morning I had to go to Brisbane. We thought we were pretty safe as the invader had been unconscious for over 24 hours. But, about 11 am I got a buzz on my pager as I sat in a meeting in an air conditioned room on the 26<sup>th</sup> Floor of AMP Place, by the river in Brisbane. The message was from Judy, who had the magic mobiliser on her belt: "Fire broke out again. I have called the brigade".

Even if I left immediately, it would take 2 hours before I could help, so there was no point in panicking. But my mind was not fully on the meeting from then on; I brought it to a speedy close and headed west towards the smoke.

I was just getting out of Brisbane, only slightly above the speed limit, with no phone, when the pager buzzed again - "Brigades are here, fire did not get back into Sherana".

By the time I got home, there was a message there saying "Fire is out". (Judy takes after her bushman father who was a man of few words).

Boy, did we bludgeon all wounded parts of that fire - merciless beatings and drowning were occurring all over the place.

This was followed by yet another day of patrolling by Watchman Judy. Again the fire laid low. So, we then had many brown paddocks, and one black one. This gave the cows some variety, but less food.

Next day, we guarded it again, but its energy was spent and it expired. We must have used up its nine lives.

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