

1997 DANDENONG RANGES FIRES

INQUESTS INTO THE DEATHS OF
JENNIFER LOUISE LINDROTH, GRAHAM KINGSLEY LINDROTH
AND GENEVIEVE ERIN DURING A FIRE AT FERNY CREEK
AND FOUR OTHER FIRES IN THE DANDENONG RANGES
ON 21ST JANUARY 1997

Coronial Services Centre Kavanagh Street Southbank 3006

location developed into a running fire which travelled generally up the slope towards the residential areas at the western end of Janesdell Avenue and Mount View Road.

The eastern flank spread outwards along the Mountain Highway and also developed into a running fire which ultimately travelled towards Alpine Road. This front flanked further eastward towards the eastern end of Alpine Road.

It is not clear whether any of these fire fronts actually converged during the course of their travel up the slope.

However it is clear from the burn and char patterns that the hottest sections of the fire were in the area immediately north-north-west of the western end of Janesdell and north of residences at 16 and 18 Mount View Road...

On Seabreeze Avenue the fire front continued in a '*...direct south line and exiting at the point where houses were lost at number 27 and 29 Seabreeze Avenue.*' Then the fire:

'...crested the ridge on the south side of Seabreeze Avenue where the topography and reduced fuel combined with suppression activity reduced the intensity and arrested further spread.'

In reviewing all of the circumstances of the fires, Arson Squad Police completing the brief for the coroner, concluded:

'The investigation teams have concluded that human activity was found to be the cause of all whether that activity was deliberate, negligent or accidental. The teams have allowed for the possibility that 4 of the 5 fires could have been caused by hot metal fragments being emitted from a passing vehicle although they do concede that this is highly unlikely. The location and timing of these fires cause the police investigation team to believe that they have been deliberately lit by a person or persons unknown. There is sufficient time between the fires for a single person to have lit all 5 of the fires but police haven't discounted a 'copy cat' offender.'

The investigation into the fire destroying the house at 29 Seabreeze Avenue

The DNRE and CFA Investigation Team examined fire damage both to the grounds and building at 29 Seabreeze Avenue.

The significance of the Investigation is that it contains some indication of both the amount of and type of vegetation near to the house, which would tend to put the building at higher level of risk. Although it must be pointed out that, as a residence in the scenic area of the 'Dandenongs', 29 Seabreeze Avenue was not unusual in this regard.

The Investigation Team reported that the fire travelled up sloping ground from Mount View Road to the vicinity of 29 Seabreeze Avenue which had:

'....a stand of 30-40 eucalypts up to 30 m in height. The bark on all of these trees was burnt from ground level to tree top level. Leaves in the canopy were also burnt, but still attached to the trees. Fire damage to the bark was generally light. Heavier burning with some alligating was evident on the bark of trees within 6 m of the house, particularly on the south eastern side of the house. Tree ferns approximately 2m in height and standing within 4 m of the house showed signs of burning along the full length of the trunks. Fronds were also burnt, but still small leaf material remained attached.

Most small to medium shrubs on the property showed blackened bark and burnt leaves, but most small branches were not consumed by fire and leaves were still attached to the branches. Leaves were frozen on branches indicating the travel of the fire to be in a generally south westerly direction. Fire damage up into trees beyond the property did not extend any more than 30 m to the south across Seabreeze Avenue. The fire travelled on the ground into grass on neighbouring properties. Along the western side of the property up to 10 m from the fence line, fire damage was minimal. Light branches and leaves were still attached to shrubs. A collection of 50-60 125 mm plastic pots containing plants was largely undamaged by heat, with the plastic in only a few pots being melted or distorted.

A number of off cuts log sections from tree trunks approximately 30-40 cm in diameter were located on the ground in the garden within 10 m of the house. Where these were fire affected, damage was generally limited to burning of the outer bark, with alligating visible on only a few pieces. Many log off cuts on the northern side of the house were unburnt on some surfaces, particularly the south facing surface.'

And, significantly fire damage:

'...was less severe in the grounds on the western side of the property and into adjoining land at 27 Seabreeze Avenue which contained short mown grass and shrubs to a height of 3-5m. These shrubs sustained minimal damage. Fire in the adjoining property to the east at 31 Seabreeze Avenue to did not reach tree top height. Tree trunks exposed to fire showed blackening of bark to heights between 3-6 metres on the north facing surfaces.'

The house at 29 Seabreeze Avenue was extensively damaged by the fire. The external walls remained in place with the roof destroyed. The Investigation Team concluded that, as far as the external damage was concerned:

'...Few remains of framing timbers were evident. Most of the brick wall on the northern side of the house showed no carbon deposits from the fire. There were significant smoke deposits above the openings to the double garage on the eastern side of the house. Some smoke deposits were also

evident on external walls on the western end of the house. Much of the brickwork between windows and door openings was damaged or had collapsed.'

The internal fire damage was extensive:

'...In the central section of the house, which was supported on brick piers, almost none of the framing timber, flooring or ceiling materials remained. Most of the combustible materials in this section of the house, which included bedrooms, bathroom and laundry were consumed in the fire. Materials from this section of the house fell to ground level underneath the brick piers. Some smoke deposits were found in corners of brickwork at the lowest levels at ground level.'

Examples of the extent of the damage can be found in the Investigators' report of what was remaining in the main bedroom. The bedroom contained:

'...some partially intact timber framing material less than one metre in length. Timber hearers were burnt completely from the tops of concrete stumps. Aluminium framed windows melted and glass had melted outwards.'

The garage, ~~where the remains of Mr and Mrs. Lindroth and Ms. Lynn were found~~ was extensively fire effected.

'...Two motor vehicles, a lathe, an electric band saw and other equipment were extensively fire damaged. Viewed from the outside, the left garage showed signs of a hotter fire than the right side. The garage door was extensively heat affected and the electric steel door-opening track was buckled. With the exception of small areas in some corners, smoke residue in the garage was minimal. An unburnt towel was still in place where it had been placed under the tilt a door on the right garage. Brickwork above the window opening to an office in front of the garage and to a doorway leading outside the house had partially collapsed. A steel brownbuilt cupboard next to the office window opening was severely heat affected from a height of about 70 cm above floor level.'

The Investigators identified three alternative seats of fire in the house. However it could not be established precisely when each fire started and the relationship between each seat. The seats of fire were firstly, in the central section of the house (lounge, dining, bedrooms and bathroom); secondly the garage and finally the main bedroom.

The Investigators concluded that destruction of the house was *'...consistent with damage arising from the bushfire, but the cause of the house fire cannot be determined.'* To explain the latter comment on 'cause' the Investigators pointed to the fact that it was possible:

'...that the fire occurred as a result of either direct impingement of flame as the fire front came in contact with the house, or as a result of ember attack ahead of the fire. Either would have been possible under conditions which prevailed at the time.'

Significantly, the Investigators considered that:

'...The most likely cause of the fire is as a result of burning embers carried ahead of the main fire. This would be consistent with other indicators such as the minimal damage to plastic pot plant containers and the light intensity burning on many of the shrubs and ferns close to the house. A timber decked verandah attached to the northern side of the house would have provided a combustible base for any embers which lodged on it.'

The details of the history, construction and alterations to 29 Seabreeze Avenue are provide in a summary to the Police Arson Squad brief⁶ :

'The front of the house faces Seabreeze Avenue, with the driveway leading to the garage situated on the right hand side of the property. The rear of the building faced heavy foliage, which slopes downward to the rear of the Winn's property in Mount View Road. The rear of the lounge room, which faced the approaching fire, was mainly constructed from floor to ceiling glass. This was an addition to the original building with the enclosed glass area extending from the rear of the lounge room. This was added during the period of ownership by Derek COVILL and no other structural changes were carried out on the premises during their period of ownership.

Derek and Margaret COVILL purchased the property from Patricia and Michael CHATFIELD in 1974. Derek COVILL states that the area underneath the verandah was enclosed with green fibreglass sheeting and there was no access into the garage from this area. He further states that the area underneath the house had been dug out in an 'L' shape. This had a door to the garage which he believed was fire rated. He also believed that the concrete garage roof was also fire rated. Derek COVILL further stated that the area underneath the house had never been put forward as fire proof when he purchased the property or when he sold the property. Derek COVILL recalls attending a lecture after the Ash Wednesday bush fires where he was told that the area he lived in was the highest fire rated area in the Mt. Dandenong area.

The property was purchased from the COVILLS in March 1987, by Rodney and Lynette LINDROTH. They moved into the premises in May 1987 with their only son Graham Kingsley Lindroth (deceased). During Rod Lindroth's period of ownership he added another bedroom to the Western end of the

⁶ Prepared jointly by the 'Operation Hudson Investigation Team' - Detective Senior Sergeants Adrian Edwards and Colin Brockwell, Detective Senior Constable Robert Mitchelmore, Detective Senior Constables Alex Pratt, Peter Seiz, Darren Dean and Michael Corridan. See also comments of Messrs Lindroth and Covill under the sub heading 'The Circumstances.'