

Emergency at Tuggeranong

Written by ACT Bus

Sunday, 19 January 2003 09:55 - Last Updated Thursday, 04 November 2010 20:23

Shelton Newman, ACTION Transport Officer, tells of the events at Tuggeranong Depot during Canberra's worst natural disaster.

On Saturday 18 January 2003 I just happened to be the supervisor on duty, but no matter which officer was on duty would have been the same. I do feel, however, that this story should be told for the record ...

I first became alarmed quietly on Friday afternoon when a Tuggeranong driver who was on duty with the Tharwa Bush Fire Brigade phoned from where the Brigade was conducting operations in the Brindabella Ranges. His first words were 'Do you want to hear the bad news?'

This early notice indicated that the fire was out of control, racing through the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, and at that stage had crossed the Cotter Dam. Checking a map, I worked out that the fire was approximately 13 kilometres from the Tuggeranong Depot. There was nothing to stop it should the conditions be right.

I was on night shift on the Friday night, and I took time to go upstairs and keep an eye out on the far ridges where an ominous glow was developing. At approximately 2300 hours driver Colin Beckinsale phoned me to say he was now able to see flames from his balcony in Conder. Indeed, when I went upstairs and checked, there was flame on the far ridges and at this stage it was a little south of the depot. When I closed the depot at 0045 hours and walked to my vehicle, there was a long eerie glow extending from the north through to the south. A worrying sight.

The next day, Saturday, dawned with smoke haze in the Belconnen area where I live. From the suburb of Scullin it did not look too bad, however by 1100 hours I had a feeling in my stomach that all was not well. Not due to start work until 1500 hours, I was restless and wanted to know more.

I arrived at Tuggeranong Depot at 1200 hours and got out the binoculars. What I saw sent me into a spin. The southern suburbs of Banks and Conder were getting covered in a massive black cloud. It was weird. Drivers due in on Saturday shifts were beginning to phone, saying

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they would not be coming in, they wanted to protect their families and homes. No one questioned this; the scene was hotting up to say the least!

Acting Transport Officer Anthony Carew had his hands full and was desperately trying to cover shifts against an avalanche of drivers coming off the road. He was doing a sterling job under trying conditions. It should be remembered that his own family and house at this stage was under threat. I decided to telephone Chief Executive Guy Thurston, as I felt the scene was developing into something big.

I could see a line of flame approaching down the mountainside heading for the depot. My words to Guy were something like 'I do not want to create a panic but I think we are going to be in trouble soon'. I did not realise it but Guy was in Sydney and he passed on my thoughts to 2IC Peter Wallace. In the meantime I contacted our South Region Manager Malcolm Howard with a brief.

The pace at the depot was becoming frantic and Anthony Carew, much as he wanted to stay, had to leave to protect his home. The black cloud now moved north, enveloping the Tuggeranong area. At 1400 hours it was black, lights had to be put on and the bus sheds were in darkness. Working fast, I had to get help. I phoned my son Mark, who works as a casual on the wash with the night crew. He was able to come in and I needed him to move buses, prepare water, etc.

I anticipated that we would need to keep an eye on the back fence, the direction the fire was coming from. At this point John Gough from the Collector of Public Monies office, called in to see if he could assist. He helped move buses in the workshops area away from surrounding bushes. Bob Torresen (workshops and a casual driver) phoned in to see if help was needed. When he arrived it became apparent that we could not get into the workshops. He contacted the duty mechanic and when he arrived extra hoses were brought out and also the forklift to remove timber pallets which were stacked against the building. A great team effort!

All this while the phones were running hot. Drivers were coming off the road while others were getting to work to commence duty. Interchanges were beginning to request assistance, and emergency requests for buses for evacuation from nursing homes were being received from the headquarters of the Emergency Services Bureau.

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Colin Beckinsale had offered his services and he, together with Russell Manual and Graham Dingwall, was dispatched to the Police College at Weston to be on standby. They had their own stories to tell later. I was getting to brain overload and was about to phone Wayne Mead, Acting Depot Supervisor, when he phoned to ask if he could help. We badly needed to get our own command structure set up and his arrival helped immensely.

There was so much going on that it is hard to describe. At around 1530 I had Mark on the fences keeping watch and with Wayne on board I went to check the hoses in the sheds. At this point, although the idea of moving the buses away from Tuggeranong had been suggested, I felt firmly that we could protect them better by keeping the majority of them in the sheds. We have an excellent roof sprinkler system and the logistics of getting them moved against the growing numbers of people evacuating their homes and crowding the roads would have been a nightmare.

With the black sky turning to purple, then orange and then red, I took time to check outside. I could not find Mark as it was so smoky, then suddenly a huge wall of black smoke enveloped the rear of A Shed. My first thought was a bus had gone up in flames. Like an idiot I raced out, grabbed a hose, only to be beaten back by choking smoke. I could not breathe and for a moment I felt a panic as I made my way back to the Starter's Office, with my shirt pulled over my face. It was then I was nearly bowled over from a very strong wind gust. It was getting serious.

Inside the depot, every driver who was available automatically prepared to fight the fire at the back fence. We needed some sort of protection, so one of the men raced upstairs to the shower room and grabbed enough towels for all of us to wet and cover our faces, heads and shoulders.

These were a blessing. Without hesitation Anthony Moglia, Peter Hartley, John Murray, Paul McMullen and Mark Newman each grabbed a hose from the shed and dragged it as close as possible to the fence to wet it down and keep the flying embers at bay.

At the same time, Bob Torrensen and two workshops staff set up a defense around the workshops area. Off-duty driver Larry Kent called in to help and, spotting a fire across the road at National Capital Motors, grabbed a fire extinguisher from a bus and put it out. Later I contacted National Capital Motors to explain Larry's good deed; they were most impressed.

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During the melee I was still answering the phone. One of our Call Centre lasses became very distressed as she had been overwhelmed with frantic people calling regarding the buses and could not contact her own children, who were in the Belconnen suburb of Scullin. I tried to give her some confidence as I had been in touch with my partner in Scullin and was assured that this suburb was safe. I tried to get some assistance for her, and by some miracle at that moment 2IC Peter Wallace arrived. After hearing of the dilemma in the Call Centre he went in to assist, and let her go home. I must admit I also needed a minute to compose myself in all the confusion.

Any drivers now commencing duty were immediately sent to the Interchanges to assist people in getting home. The field supervisors at the Interchanges were obviously in the best position to delegate our resources at this time. Driver JoJo Vongphit phoned me on his mobile explaining he was heading to Woden Interchange along Athllon Drive and a huge gust of wind made the bus unstable, and at the same time a car ran into the back of the bus. A fire brigade team pulled up and told them all to get out of the area in a hurry. The people in the car ran off, hailed a passing taxi and left their damaged car to burn. JoJo himself had only a short time to get out before the firestorm hit. It was full on adrenalin.

Wayne and I decided to get a bus, fill it with shed fire extinguishers and fight the fire and embers from the road outside the depot as the hoses were struggling to reach the flames due to the wind. While I was driving out of the Depot Wayne was pulling the pin from an extinguisher, when POOF, instant Santa! I could not help but burst out laughing. No matter how serious things are there is always time for humour.

As we approached Athllon Drive behind the depot, we were intercepted by an unmarked police car with flashing lights. They were interested in what we were up to. I explained that this was the ACTION fire engine and with Wayne and myself having wet towels wrapped around us we must have looked like Taliban refugees. The police just shook their heads and disappeared into the smoke.

The scene outside was aptly described as Dante's Inferno. We were lucky we did not have forest on the other side of the road. Nevertheless the scene was darkness with strong gusty winds blowing rivers of embers towards the depot. As far as the eye could see there was flame. Amongst it all our people manning the hoses kept the fence line moist. Indeed, not one bush or tree caught alight around our perimeter. In the meantime, Wayne and I in the bus traveled the depot perimeter and put out spot fires as they started. Some were put out in Scollay Street in

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front of the depot. It was a miracle that the large grass paddock fronting Bunnings store did not go up in flames.

Calling back into the depot for more extinguishers, we checked that everyone was okay. The smoke was so thick that we were careful lest we ran into something or someone. It was that thick. Just when we thought things were calming down, and our extinguishers empty, Wayne and I observed the trees catch alight around the Archives Building across the road. This was a real worry as a fresh storm of embers would have enveloped the shed storing the articulated buses. Before we could react, however, a Bush Fire Brigade truck turned up and quickly put out this fire. Through the gloom as they left, mutual waves of thanks were given. A moving moment.

Back at the depot the threat had eased. All through the battle Wayne had thought he had lost his house. Reports during the afternoon filtered through that homes in Kambah, Duffy and Chapman were lost. We were told that the huge Centrelink Building was alight. Fortunately a lot of these reports proved incorrect. Wayne's house was intact, and we all now know the losses suffered throughout Canberra.

Wayne obviously needed to leave, and I wanted to have one more look at the southern perimeter of the depot. With Paul McMullen driving (it was still too hot to walk around), the bus gave a good viewing platform as it was high up. The fires across the road had burnt out all the paddocks, the fence posts were still alight, but the wind was blowing the embers past the depot. It looked okay. We went back to the Starter's Office to regroup.

When all the drivers were refreshed and cleaned up it was decided to dispatch them to various Interchanges to be on standby. I phoned all the Interchanges to get an overview of the situation from an operational aspect. Some services were still operating; others were being diverted as far away as the Monaro Highway in order to get to Woden!

Any person who needed a bus at this time really should not have been out and about. In saying this though, some people were trying to get to work, others were stranded away from home. The Interchanges did a grand job getting people to their destinations in trying conditions.

During the afternoon we had many anxious calls from drivers' wives and children. My

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understanding is that all ended well; any driver wishing to get home did so. Others without pressing needs filled the breach. At various times during the day visits were made by 2IC Peter Wallace and South Region Manager Malcolm Howard, and they were most welcome.

As the night went on we were still receiving requests from Greg Zakharoff, based at the Emergency Services Headquarters, for buses to evacuate. Just as I thought I was close to closing the depot a request came in for a wheelchair accessible bus. Driver Laurie Ovens changed buses and was off.

That was the attitude that had existed all afternoon. People jumped in and helped. Those who had to leave did so with regret, but they had their own battles to fight.

This is but one story, just an overview of what happened at the Tuggeranong Bus Depot on this momentous occasion. Others have their own tales. I will not forget listening to John Dunn manning the Radio Room, full on the whole time, and I could not get through to tell him our phones would not be manned while we were all hands to the fire. All I could do was broadcast a general message that the staff at Tuggeranong Depot were now fighting their own fire.