

SURVIVOR

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Bushfires

As the deadly February 7 bushfires north-east of Melbourne closed in, Jason Lynn decided to “stay and defend”. How the father of two emerged alive from hell’s inferno

beggars belief. This is his remarkable story

BY JAMES KNIGHT

With shoulders hunched, he shuffles to his makeshift bed like a man whose strongest years are a sepia memory. He eases his thin, battered body into a comfortable position. Then he speaks as forcefully as he can. Little more than a whisper comes out: “I feel sorry for people. They say, ‘Oh well, good on you mate, you made it, but what about us? We lost...’”

The rest of the sentence is choked by tears before the voice returns, wavering in a higher pitch.

“Yeah, I’m embarrassed to be alive.”

He settles down to tell his story, one that is punctuated with tears, long pauses, and sips of water and Sustagen. His recollections are not unusual; too many others are burdened with similar pain. He is not a hero; he was simply doing what he thought was best on the day Australia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, described as “a tragedy beyond belief, beyond precedent, and really beyond words.” You, the reader, may consider him lucky, but he the survivor, a born-again Christian, says he is blessed.

When 35-year-old Jason Lynn walked outside his home on the morning of Saturday February 7, 2009, he saw high

Jason Lynn, 35, takes refuge in Pastor Shane Lepp’s Whittlesea home after losing his house and possessions – but not his faith and spirit

clouds of smoke to the north-west. This wasn't unexpected. Bushfires had been burning in various parts of tinder-dry Victoria for weeks, and with forecasts that Saturday of temperatures in the mid-40s and northerly winds of up to 100kmh, common sense told everyone in rural areas to be alert.

Jason, his wife Ruth and their children – Joshua, five, and Julia, three – lived on a 72-hectare property. Part of it was covered in bush and, although cleared, paddocks and fruit trees surrounded their western cedar house. There were also garden beds lined with red gum chips, and several old wooden buildings stood wearily nearby. Certainly there were fire risks, but Jason was confident he was prepared. He had a pump, a generator and other equipment he'd checked and cleaned fastidiously at Christmas; some considerable water supplies including a large dam and two 35,000-litre tanks; and on a recent inspection a Country Fire Authority (CFA) official had approved of his fire plan.

But nature pays heed to no-one. The day grew hotter, the winds fiercer. Ruth monitored the movement of fires in the region via the internet. There were no warnings for Kinglake West.

"But they're close!" stressed Jason, who'd been watching the thickening swirls of looming danger.

Ruth was the local fire guard representative, and under the emergency plan, she was meant to receive a phone call if action needed to be taken.

Nothing had come. The husband and wife surveyed the skies together.

They knew the drill: if the fire is far away you have to decide whether to stay or go; if it is close you stay because fleeing carries too many risks.

"We should leave," pleaded Ruth.

"I'm not."

Urgency and uncertainty aren't good foundations for sound decisions, and the pair, married for eight years, chose a dire time to argue. Neither would be swayed. Somewhere in the rush of one putting the children in the car, and the other anchoring himself with stubbornness and belief, Jason answered his mobile phone. The call came from his boss, who – from his home 30km away in Whittlesea – had been watching the fires rampage through the Mount Disappointment ranges to the north-west of the Lynn's property.

"Get out. This is an animal. It's moving fast!" said Ziad Ghobril.

Jason wouldn't change his mind.

"Well, at least get Ruth and the kids to come here."

It was the only compromise husband and wife made.

As Ruth drove away, Jason, an electrician, sprinted off to connect his fire pump to his dam and a ring-main around his house that included three 36m fire hoses. He fixed his generator to his bore pump and turned on sprinklers that were attached under the eaves of his home. While he was doing this, a CFA vehicle drove past. The brakes slammed, and the 4WD reversed until an officer was close enough to speak to Jason.

"Do you realise what this fire's like?"

"What?"



A Google Maps view of 325 Coombs Road taken in greener times. The house is marked (A), the main shed (B), and the dam (C)

"It's ugly. It's everywhere."

"How long until it's here?"

"Three to five minutes."

After a few more hasty words, wrapped in an eerie sense of finality, the vehicle sped off, and Jason was left wondering if he would be under attack so soon. He couldn't even see any flames, but he noticed the sun had turned a brilliant red – a natural warning beacon. He had no idea of the time. Perhaps it was early afternoon.

Meanwhile, Ruth had hit problems on the main route to Whittlesea. The smoke was so thick she could barely see the markings in the middle of the road. Ahead of her, the traffic was heavy. She decided to turn back and drove past her home as she headed for the nearby settlement of Yea. It probably saved her life and those of

her children; as burnt-out cars and the horrors they contained were discovered on the road in the aftermath.

If Ruth had stopped to try to persuade her husband to leave, he would have still refused, for the sole remaining resident at 325 Coombs Road thought he was safe when the wind suddenly died. It was a false calm.

Minutes later, he saw the first flames leaping across treetops 20m and more above the ground. They'd "come from nowhere".

Then it all happened so quickly. Too quickly. The wind roared to life again, animals howled, a mob of horses galloped straight into a ground fire, and a house across the road exploded. Jason remained confident he could save his buildings. Wearing a heavy woollen jacket, overalls, leather gloves,

thick socks, boots, a broad-brimmed leather hat and a paper breathing mask, he hurried around hosing his home and everything near it.

He believed he was winning until the flames beggared belief and catapulted through the air from the other side of Coombs Road “like they were part of a tornado”, passing over a pad-dock and landing on the far side of the Lynn home. Jason hurried there to find grass and fruit trees on fire. He hosed down burning ferns and moved on, only to turn back seconds later and see the ferns alight again.

The wind whipped the trees, branches fell, fist-sized embers rained down in a dark-red sky, and Jason swears he saw flashes of lightning. He kept moving, chasing fires every which way. Whenever he felt a rush of extreme heat scuttling towards him, he turned his back, held his hose at full power over his shoulder, and hoped.

His hayshed and stables erupted into flames. He knew any attempt to save them was useless: 400 bales of fuel were too much to fight. Another explosion pierced the air, and a neighbour’s tin roof lifted off and hovered like a piece of paper being toyed with by a playful breath. For the first time, Jason regretted staying. This fire was not what he’d expected. He’d seen the safety videos, attended the lectures, but no-one had warned him he’d be in a “nuclear attack”.

The old carport housing his earth-digger was next to surrender. Jason kept his focus on his house, thinking, *Everything else might go, but at least*

we’ll have somewhere to live.

Then the water stopped.

A sprint towards the dam answered the obvious question: the pump was on fire, shooting flames “like a Roman candle”. Jason hurried back to the house. More bad news: the sprinklers had stopped working, and the generator was burning. The garden, too, was well alight: green trees, red-gum sleepers, lavender plants – everything.

Using 25-litre buckets, he took water from his tanks and headed to his main carport, where flames licked at two gas bottles. He hurled the water on them and rushed away for more supplies. His absence was timely, for an explosion and ensuing flares towering higher than his house told of efforts in vain, but extremely good fortune.

Jason knew his house would be next. Growing tired and barely able to see in the smoky gloom, he was swept along by adrenaline. He reached the back decking, where there was an inflatable pool. His hopes of reaching this new water supply were dashed by the sight and stench of melted rubber. Moments later, he crashed through the floor. He leapt up and saw the fire devouring his house and about to start on the granny flat.

He shifted his attention to his Holden work ute, a large Colorbond shed and its contents. He dashed to his vehicle, and could feel the heat through his gloved hands when he touched a door handle. Forced to keep his head outside the oven-like cab, he drove his ute into the shed. He collected more buckets of water, and just

as he was about to climb a ladder to begin his defence of the last building standing, he heard one of the most heart-wrenching noises of all. In the desperate commotion, he’d forgotten to let the family’s three dogs out of their compound. He kicked down a burning gate, and the yelping pets scampered into the darkness.

Jason was now struggling to breathe. He took off his mask and saw its outside was layered in black. He threw this protection away, and climbed to the top of the shed, where he frantically tossed water. Steam sizzled off the tin. Then another unexpected noise: a stuck car horn. Jason looked at the old Toyota below him. It was wrapped in flames.

Crash! A fibreglass roofing sheet blew out from the shed. Jason staggered backwards. For a moment he thought of the treasures below him: his speedway sprint car and the hand-made tools his father, Alan, had given him before he died from cancer eight years earlier. But among the sentiment was danger: alcohol fuel, gas bottles, kerosene and paint.

Jason dared not jump. In his weak state, the 6m drop was too daunting for him. Unable to find the ladder, he reached down and held onto the shed’s guttering, but it yielded to his weight and peeled away like a zipper. He landed gently enough and contemplated what to do next. Perhaps there

Before and after the fires that demolished the Lynn family’s home on Coombs Road in Kinglake West



was part of a paddock that had already been burnt out, or the dam? Yes, the dam. It was only 70m away.

He hobbled off, and was soon snagged in a fence. He couldn't see a thing. Except black. He unhooked himself and continued. He fell over and crawled. For the first time he smelled the burnt wool of his jacket. His back stung. Minutes passed, a blur of reality, delusions, and a fading in and out of consciousness.

The phone rang. Jason mumbled an answer.

"How are you going?" asked Ziad Ghobril.

"Can you tell my wife and kids and my mum that I love them."

Jason believed he was going to die, but Ziad refused to hear such talk, and encouraged Jason to reach the dam. He rushed to CFA headquarters in Whittlesea to tell officers: "There's a bloke up there in Kinglake West. We've got to get him somehow."

Rightfully, those he spoke to said it was too dangerous. Ziad's desperation mounted when he couldn't reconnect with Jason. He rang again and again. At the same time, teenager Bethany Lepp arrived with some sandwiches for the volunteers. Bethany listened to Ziad's pleas and became curious when she heard the Lynn name mentioned.

"Are you talking about Ruth and Jason?" she asked. She knew them. They were members of her father's New Horizons Assembly of God Church. She also pled with the CFA.

In one last attempt, Ziad tried his phone again. Finally success, but he

heard only whispers. Jason had made it to the dam. Fearing he'd drown if he went in head first, he backed himself into the water, and lay down with his head resting on the bank and his phone pressed against an ear.

He gasped for air, then he started breathing slowly. He shook violently. And all the while embers fell, and the cracks and booms of explosions reminded him a tortured landscape was all around him.

It was then that Pastor Shane Lepp arrived at CFA headquarters and, with the phone on loudspeaker, he prayed with the man who said he was feeling very alone. There were long periods of silence, groaning and indecipherable mutterings. The pastor acknowledged afterwards, "It was a very emotional and traumatic time."

No-one involved in the drama knows how much time actually passed. It doesn't matter to them. The only seconds that counted were the ones when Jason thought he heard a horn and felt a hand on his head. At CFA headquarters, the unfamiliar voice of a volunteer boomed through a phone's loudspeaker: "Yeah, we've got him."

In the minutes that followed, Jason was cradled in a vehicle by a stranger who assured him: "If you've made it this far, you're going to survive now."

At the time of writing, the CFA volunteers who risked their lives to make the rescue at 325 Coombs Road aren't known to Jason. It may take months for them to be found, for they have their own issues to deal with. After

"CAN YOU TELL MY WIFE AND KIDS AND MY MUM THAT I LOVE THEM"

working for a week with little rest, some of them returned to find their own homes destroyed, and be told of the deaths of friends.

"They are the heroes," croaks Jason from his bed in the home of Pastor Lepp. "They saved my life. And my wife and my kids and my mum still have me."

Ruth was reunited with her husband the night after the fire. Such private moments need no words here.

Jason spent three days in hospital. He suffered minor burns and eye and respiratory injuries. His body remains weak, and the '80s mullet his workmates joke about is now a bit shorter. He also has to deal with the demons of a horrific day. He has to live with the decisions he made. Other people made similar ones but died by theirs.

And so Jason suffers from guilt. It is a common feeling among survivors in such tragedies.

All the buildings at 325 Coombs Road were destroyed. Few possessions will be salvaged from the rubble. One of the family's seven beef cattle was put down, and some goats were killed. Thankfully the dogs, Bruno, Kara and Dozer, survived.



Safely reunited: Ruth Lynn embraces Jason and their children Julia and Joshua

Jason bought his bush paradise 12 years ago. Originally from Melbourne, he moved to the mountains because there was space and the people there "would help you pull a cow out of a dam at one o'clock in the morning without a second thought".

But will he roll the dice again? The answer came five days after the fire, when his mother took him back to survey the ruins.

"How do you feel?" asked Karen Lynn, as her son leant against her.

"Mum, there's nothing here, but I know this is our home." ■