

# The Tasman Fires

## *Heroics and true grit*

New Zealand recently faced its largest forest fire since 1955, yet not a single life was lost thanks to the true grit of 150 firefighters, 23 helicopter pilots and countless volunteers.





**T**wo wildfires, 20km apart, started on the afternoon of February 5, 2019, in New Zealand's Nelson and Tasman District. By the next day, a state of emergency had been declared and thousands of residents were being evacuated from its path.

Prevailing drought, high temperatures and strong winds created a perfect storm – after a week the fires had blackened 2300 hectares, the country's largest fire since 1955.

Around 150 firefighters and 45 support crew travelled from the far north to the deep south, joined by countless volunteers. Thousands of hours were spent trying to contain the blaze, with up to 100 personnel fighting the fires through the night. Twenty-three helicopters were enlisted to help drench the fires from above, making it New Zealand's largest ever aerial firefight.

Past president of the Rotary Club of Richmond, NZ, Bob Dickinson was one of the many called to evacuate by police sounding the alarm at his front door. He and his wife Jill quickly packed valuables into two vehicles, leaving one by the dam, where it was most likely to be untouched, and left. Fortunately, the fire did not get near the house, but came onto their property and burnt the already cut over forestry block.

The Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) and Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) staff rushed between properties where possible to feed and water stranded livestock or, in one case, set trapped pigs free from a flaming pen to escape the inferno. Hundreds of evacuated animals, from birds to chickens to cats and dogs, were cared for at the Richmond Showgrounds by MPI, SPCA and animal charity Huha.

Smoke from the wildfires was visible as far as New Zealand's Kapatī Coast in the North Island, and even from satellites in outer space.

"Fortunately, no lives have been lost, but it has been a traumatic time for many in the community, especially those forced to evacuate their homes," Rotarian John Lloyd said.

# ROTARY MOBILE EMERGENCY FOOD CARAVAN

The Rotary Club of Richmond quickly started up its food caravan to provide meals and refreshments to support firefighters, pilots and other emergency crews.

They operated from the base and refuelling field for all helicopters, near the Moutere Highway. Some of the challenges entailed coordinating volunteers, maintaining constant dialogue with food suppliers, rapid changes in requirements, and long hours.

The Rotarian crew started at 5:30am (the first time many had seen the sun rise for a long time) and finished duty after the last helicopter landed around 9pm. The gruelling schedule continued for 12 days. The menu included bacon, venison and hoki fillets – with Army pilots informing Rotarians it was much better than normal Army fare!

# ARMY BAND FUNDRAISER

Due to the high fire risk, the Rotary Club of Richmond was forced to cancel its major annual fundraiser, the Nelson Wine & Food Festival, set to be held on Sunday, February 17.

However, the New Zealand Army Band, which was booked to perform, was already on its way. It took club members no time at all to start planning a free public event to lift the spirits of the local community at a fire-safe venue.

Civil Defence required a thorough event management plan be put together to the satisfaction of authorities, adding to the workload of cobbling together a large event at such short notice.

The Army Band show at Saxton field, Stoke, proved a resounding success, with up to 1500 people of all ages attending the family event. Members served as parking and traffic wardens, while others collected donations from the public. A total of \$6858 was raised for the Mayoral Disaster Relief Fund.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Helicopters in action as homes are threatened by flames; Rotary Club of Richmond members hand out lunches at the fire fighting helicopter site; The NZ Army Band provided a free concert for people in the Nelson and Tasman area.





# OUR ROTARY HERO

Susan Schuler

*By Karen Stade,  
Rotary Club of Whakatu, NZ*

Although the Tasman fires were some 30km south of Nelson City, smoke hung over the city on the morning of Friday, February 8, blotting out the sun. Tension was in the air as the fire's continual spread meant further evacuations seemed likely.

At that morning's Rotary Club of Whakatu meeting, Susan Schuler's son Daniel had been co-guest speaker as a recent RYLA returnee and Susan gave the parting thought. In light of the raging Tasman forest fires and the speed with which people were being evacuated from their homes, she urged members to get their own homes in order and sort out what they would need to take if they ever had to be evacuated. Members discussed ways of protecting their homes and what they would and wouldn't take.

The discussion could not have come at a better time, as Susan found herself in the middle of a fire emergency that very afternoon. Having driven Daniel home later in the morning to their home north of the city, she decided to return in the middle of the afternoon and settle down to a late work session.

It was while driving along Atawhai Drive by Founders Heritage Park in The Wood that she noticed flames racing through the tinder dry hillside above the road. Stopping and getting out of

her car, she found herself with several other people looking up at the flames. But as others remained watching, Susan and one other man decided residents in the homes on Iwa Road – a steep, narrow, no-exit road in the path of the flames – needed to be alerted. Together, they ran up a flight of steps to the street and began banging on doors.

As you can imagine, those at home got the shock of their lives to see flames racing along the hillside above and behind their homes. Susan kept residents calm and helped several people make decisions on what to pack in case of evacuation. After assisting a number of residents to leave safely, she elected to stay on and help further.

Fortunately, helicopters and monsoon buckets already on the job fighting the Tasman forest fires happened to be at nearby Nelson Airport refuelling, when multiple 111 calls started coming in about the city fire. As Susan stood at the back of one home spraying water from a garden hose in the face of encroaching flames, the first helicopter swooped overhead and dropped its bucket of water, collected from nearby Nelson Haven, onto the flames. With police directive, it was time for Susan and the remaining homeowners to leave.

Unable to get her car out, which was now trapped within a police and

fire cordon, Susan sought refuge with fellow club members Karen Stade and Martin de Ruyter. Martin was already involved with the fire. As a visual journalist for the *Nelson Mail*, he had spent a long day in the Tasman region photographing the Tasman fire response. He had only been home a few minutes when he was called back on duty to photograph the fire spreading quickly on the hillside two blocks behind his house.

The quick response to the Iwa Road fire from citizens like Susan, and from emergency services and the aerial team of five helicopters and two fixed-wing aircraft, meant only a shed was destroyed. But the fire came scarily close to the rear of the Iwa Road homes and took several hours to put out from the air and then by ground crews. Residents were evacuated overnight and allowed to return the following day, their homes safe, but many trees and plants, if not burnt, were nonetheless destroyed by the sea water used to douse the flames. Not that anyone is complaining!

Susan shrugged off her efforts that afternoon, saying adrenalin had kicked in and she had only done what anyone else would have done given the circumstances. But not everyone would have done what she did. In true Rotary tradition, she put *Service Above Self*. She is our Rotary hero.