

HELL ON EARTH

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Late afternoon Saturday: This is the moment when Marysville residents first saw the inferno that reduced their town to ash

Where the hell is everyone?

The 30 minutes that killed a town



The Lolly Shop: Murchison St, Marysville as it was before the fires, and after.



Wiped out: the Marylands guest house, a popular destination in Marysville for many years, is completely destroyed. Main picture: KELLY BARNES

THE Marysville Bowls Club hums with chatter. It's open, finally, for the first time in 12 months. About 15 bowlers roll on the new drought-resistant grass. Colin Paul, 83, a crack fireman who served in World War II, watches. He is armed with walking sticks. A recent fall has slowed him down.

Paul is the oldest bowls club member. Like the youngest member, who is a year 9 student, he has less than eight hours to live.

The bowlers play a couple of games. It's 11am on Saturday. The sun is heating up.

John Cartwright, 78, goes home and gazes at the photo of his wife, Jean, on the lounge room wall. This is his daily ritual. She died a decade ago from cancer.

Jean is 19 in the shot, taken when they first met. Cartwright has never really recovered from her loss.

They were married in the 1950s, two locals in the "honeymoon town" to which Melburnians would bus for a weekend of tea and scones at English-style guesthouses.

The relics of the era endure. As does the mood.

Marysville, according to the official guff, is a "place to relax and unwind". Once a sawmilling town that was a gateway to forests of mountain ash and waterfalls, it has also come to embrace tourist lurks, such as arts and crafts.

Still, it sags in the wider rural malaise. No jobs for young people. The footy and tennis clubs are gone. The local CFA boasts a tanker, a pumper and about a dozen volunteers.

Once there were 14 timber mills, and a big bell in the middle of town that rung terror in children's imaginations when smoke was seen.

Nature has been kind to the hamlet. Even the 1939 fires flew over the leafy basin.

Now, there are no mills, and a CFA siren in Barton Ave that, for reasons not yet clear, will not be heard by many residents this afternoon.

Today, it's too hot for tourists or anyone else.

Leigh Jowett has been fixing a neighbour's slide door. The builder, 56, goes home to close the blinds and do some paperwork.

His son-in-law and a mate pop in to borrow something. He can't remember what. They walk out, then walk straight back in. It's about 4pm.

"Oh s---," they call.

"Come and look at this."

No one guesses at the twilight ahead. How could they? History offers no precedents.

The storm that will blow and burn Marysville's 146-year history to rubble, sparing only a crooked chimney here and there, a bakery, a motel, a cafe and the odd house, passes before many people grasp it has arrived.

PATRICK CARLYON

After bowls, Cartwright watches a Gregory Peck flick. He'd prefer the races, but the Caulfield meeting had been postponed until the next day. Damn heat.

About the same time, the town's doctor, Lachlan Fraser, has returned from puffing up a nearby hill.

Like all ultra-marathon runners, he's a bit mad — recently, he finished a 220km run to Mt Kosciuszko.

Fraser, 46 and "looking for a lady", is training for a 50km jaunt the following Sunday. His training partner, the blue heeler Indi, is starting to tire.

Fraser doesn't push. He, too, is feeling unnaturally hot for the morning.

The town's first resident doctor since it was founded in 1863, Fraser came to Marysville so he could be close to the snow.

He goes home. Reads a medical magazine. Measures the house — new insulation paid for by the Federal Government would be welcome on scorchers like today.

He flicks on a taped episode of *The Simpsons* but never finishes it.

"It was going to be another hot day, when you can't do much outside, much inside, and you don't want to eat anything," he says.

MARK Simmons, 48, the president of the bowls club, fills up the car with petrol then settles in at home.

He notices the smoke about 3pm, but it's a long way away. Still, he'll keep an eye on it and cancels a trip to Werribee. Just in case.

Local radio station UG-FM gives regular fire updates in the afternoon, interspersed between country music songs.

The playing of tunes frustrates Fraser — it lacks the requisite urgency demanded of the threat.

He drives to a higher point to gauge the smoke.

He rings the bushfire hotline and waits 20 minutes before someone comes on the line.

Murrindindi, maybe 30km northwest, officially starts burning at 2.57pm. Its flames fly southeast, towards Narbethong, fuelled by towering mountain ashes, thick undergrowth and wind that some say gusts to 120km/h.

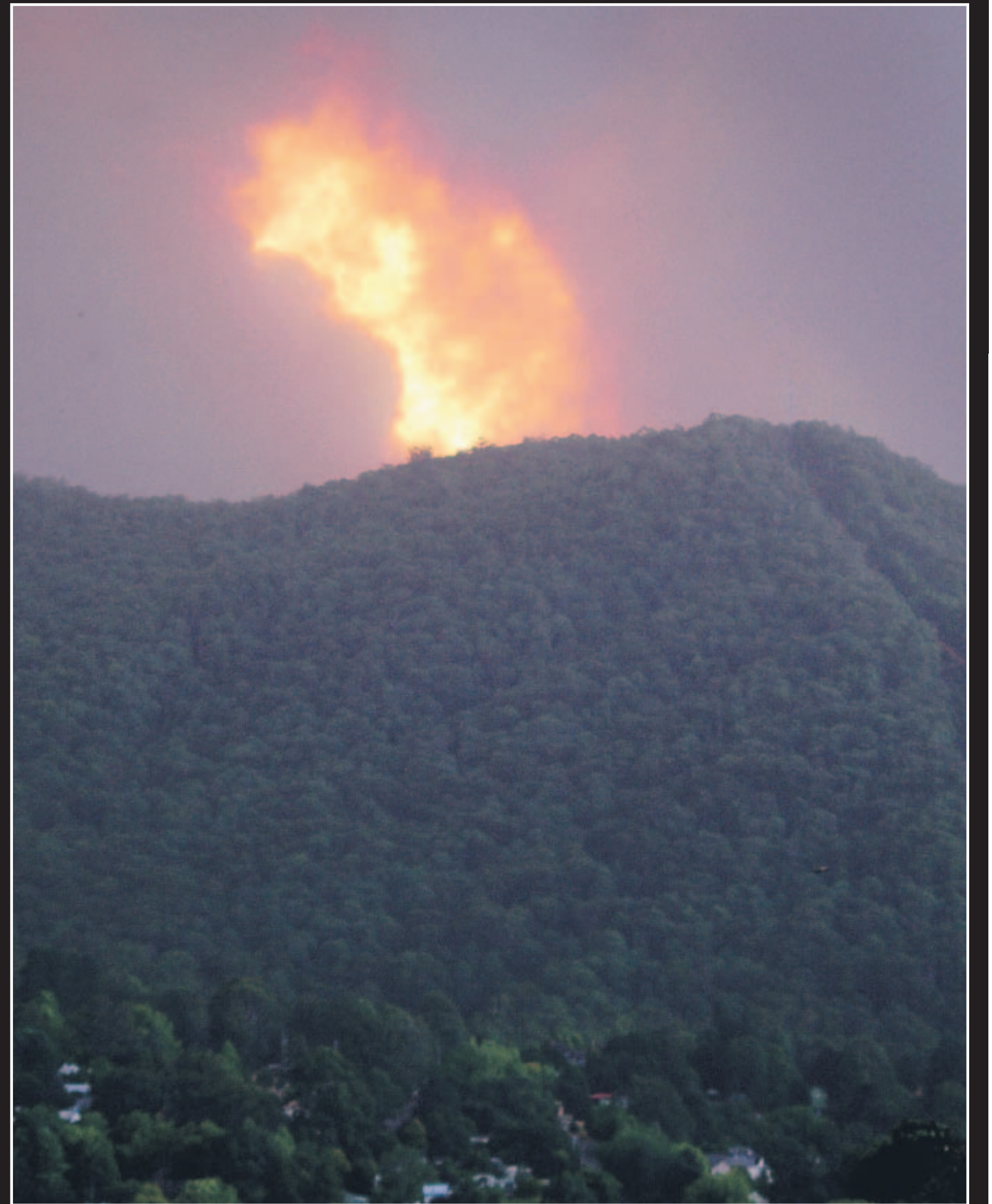
In Marysville, as the ex-CFA captain Cartwright suggests, people try to look on the bright side.

"You always believe that the worst will not happen," he says.

Others aren't as convinced. Fraser takes another drive after the power goes out about 5.15pm.

He has watched the Channel 10 news, which led the bulletin with the Bunyip fire.

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Fireball: Chris Doos is the son of the owner of Marysville Patisserie. He took this picture late on Saturday afternoon in the centre of Marysville before the family fled their home. A huge blaze looms over the ridge above Marysville. The real size of the blaze is partly obscured by clouds. Chris and his parents escaped with their lives, but lost their home and business. They have vowed to rebuild.

“They walk out, then walk straight back in. It's about 4pm. 'Oh s---,' they call. 'Come and look at this.' No one guesses at the twilight ahead. How could they? History offers no precedents. The storm that will blow and burn Marysville's 146-year history to rubble, sparing only a crooked chimney here and there, a bakery, a motel, a cafe and the odd house, passes before many people grasp it has arrived.”

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This wasn't a fire, this was an inferno.

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He looks across to Narbethong, about 12km away, from Keppel Falls Lookout, about 10 minutes from town. Narbethong is spotting with flames.

The wind rises in Marysville, hot and roaring, like a million hair dryers set on high.

Fraser returns to discover a road accident on the corner of Lyell and Sedgwick streets.

A gum tree has squashed Beverley McGearie's car. She's all right, but shocked — she keeps asking how she got here.

In the first of many dreadful ironies, Fraser notices the advertising on her car — "relaxation therapist".

Two masseurs stop at the scene, fresh from client jobs.

Fraser can't compute this. Fire threatens to zap a town surrounded by, and filled with, trees. And people are getting massages?

Marysville has had fire warnings, of course, but it appears that confusion shrouds the town before the smoke rolls in.

The FoodWorks supermarket, for example, remains open after authorities start plotting evacuation strategies.

Pauline Harrow, the CFA radio operator, has taken a call from the Mt Gordon spotter, 3km west, at about 4.30pm.

Flames are still three mountain ridges away, but it's suggested to Harrow that evacuations begin.

She relays this information to the local SES.

"I said to (the SES), 'you better start evacuating', but she had only three members there," Harrow says. "People could see smoke coming into the town and I think they were starting to evacuate their families."

How many get away is unknown, but Jowett says the SES and police get around to many residents, who head off north to Buxton.

BY 5.50pm, a convoy of cars is banked back into town. For the CFA's John Munday, of the nearby Acheron crew, it suggests people have, belatedly, decided to flee.

He glimpses a vision that will haunt him. A father standing in the middle of the road with two small children.

They wear shorts and T-shirts and expressions of utter bewilderment. Behind them, the smoke darkens and that orange glow everyone will talk about starts to show.

"It was pandemonium," Munday says.

A man in a 4WD stops his tanker and begs the crew to save an elderly couple trapped in their house up the hill.

Munday has to refuse. He knows the full blast is about to hit.

He cannot think about saving anyone else. Saving his crew will be tricky enough.

"This was just so far off the scale of anything," he says.

"It may be that this was the worst fire day in the history of the world, well, at least the history of Australia.

"Five hundred Elvies and 1000 tankers would have made absolutely no difference."

He says it was clear-cut that Marysville was doomed from the start. "There was no way anything was going to get through it," he said.

Harrow bunkers down with Marysville CFA chief Glen Fiske and seven others.

Fiske's son, Kellan, 18 or 19, is in a tanker crew that heads to Yea about 4.30pm.

The family are well-liked. Fiske's forebears, who date back to 1800s Marysville, used to run the Marylands guesthouse.

Married to Liz, with two sons and a daughter, Bronte, Glen



Devastation: there's little left of Marysville. In the eerie silence, just a chimney stands.

COUNTDOWN TO DESTRUCTION

2.57pm

Fire erupts at Murrindindi, about 30km northwest of Marysville

4pm

Billows of smoke are seen heading for Marysville

About 4.30pm

- Fire reaches Mt Gordon, about 3km west of Marysville
- Marysville CFA radio operator Pauline Harrow receives call to say town under genuine fire threat. Passes on advice to SES to evacuate

5pm-5.30pm

Wind shift to the southwest pushes flames towards Marysville

5.50pm

Evacuating residents clog road heading north to Buxton

6pm

Fire charges down hill from west and hits Marysville

6.20pm

Worst of blast passes. The township ablaze

6.30pm

Marysville destroyed

6.30pm onwards

A couple of dozen survivors scramble to the football ground at Gallipoli Park

works in an Alexandra timber mill. The family is known for its "s--- stirring" of one another. They're good people.

In the corrugated iron CFA building, cut into the hill, as smoke pours in, Harrow will peek from a window when "everything" catches fire in Barton Ave.

Her wider family will lose six houses in the next 15 minutes, including her daughter, Leah, who with husband Luke is supposed to move into a new home in Steavenson Close on Monday.

"I just started panicking," she says. "The urge to run was pretty strong. We did the best we could, but lives were lost, and obviously it wasn't good enough.

"(But) I don't think it would have mattered if we had had 100 trucks there. It wasn't going to stop it."

The sun is about to hide. Birds are about to fall out of the sky.

And something wicked is about to roll down the hill from the west, engulf Our Lady of the Snow Church, and rumble through a town so shaken it may never breathe again.

It arrives about the time that Jo Hall introduces the 6pm Channel 9 news, and leaves before she signs off.

TS roar will be likened to jet planes and freight trains.

There will be reports of the sorts of fireballs that visited Dresden and Tokyo in 1945.

Embers will swirl like lit matches in a clothes dryer.

Lawnmowers will explode. Tyres will pop, gas tanks will blow, and 30m gums a metre wide will be ripped out by the wind.

People will draw smoke for their

last breaths and perhaps wonder how and why they could be taken so fast.

Some, it seems, will fall where they stand, to resemble those petrified bodies at Pompeii.

What emerges in these tales of survival in Marysville is that no matter how thorough the preparation, no one could properly prepare for the fire ahead.

Something else becomes clear, too. Luck is not only handy; today, in Marysville, it is everything.

Untended houses still stand, defended houses burn down. And conventional advice, such as staying inside and filling baths with water, is shown to sometimes offer the thinnest veneer of protection.

Time. There isn't enough of it before the fire hits Marysville. And once the fire does, time distorts so that 10 minutes feels like a day,

and the rest of your life hinges entirely on getting that next bucket of water right bloody now.

"We knew it would be a bad day," Cartwright says. "Everyone was warned the day before. But if you took notice of every fire danger day, you'd be leaving every week in fire season.

"This wasn't a fire, this was an inferno. Fires and infernos are two different things."

ACHLAN Fraser has a methodical way. Patients like that in doctors.

He fills the bath, wheelie bin, sinks and bottles with water.

He is as prepared as he can be, yet his frantic efforts, which lead to a burned face and sliced tendons in his hand, will be futile.

He runs about with a bucket of water like a confused contestant on a game show.



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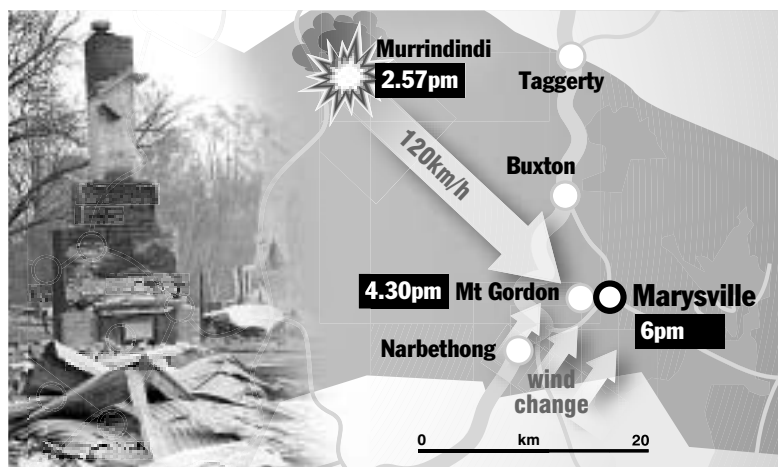
— CFA radio operator PAULINE HARROW

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Fires and infernos are two different things.



Investigation: forensic experts sift through the rubble of a Marysville house. Picture: AAP



Dousing spot fires, at the front and back, that spark and multiply when he puts them out and looks the other way.

The neighbour's place (they are away) erupts like a blowtorch. His dogs, Indi and Lani. He must save the dogs. He ties them to furniture inside.

He is armed with a hose when the jasmine trailing up the side of the neighbour's house catches light. Embers shower. He tries to splash the neighbour's home. Too late.

Suddenly, despite his panic, he realises he needs to relieve himself. He lets go in his pants, which helps keep him wet. "Two birds with one stone," he says.

Fraser's eaves catch alight. He slips on the veranda and puts his hand through a window. Toilet paper stems the flow of blood, but

he knows it will need surgery — assuming he survives.

He wets his windbreaker and breathes through it.

He grabs the dogs, telling them over the roar that they will survive.

And, right then, Fraser gives up on saving his house.

MARK Simmons, the bowls club president, leaves a tap running before ushering the family into the hallway and donning a tea towel like a baddie in a cowboy movie.

Mark, partner Sue, and his sons, Ben and Beau, get on the floor.

"It was like a foundry when it actually hit, the amount of embers and sparks, it was just like you see in the movies or working in a foundry," he says.

Continued next page



Checking: senior wildlife officer Geoff McClure hunts for injured animals. Picture: AFP

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I don't think it would have mattered if we had



Aid: Dr Lachlan Fraser rescued his dogs Indi and Lani and helped others despite a badly cut hand. Pictures: NICKI CONNOLLY

From Page 9

"You could hear the windows shaking and buckling at one point when it was really ferocious. I could see smoke coming off our drapes."

They play a waiting game. If the brick house withstands the blast outside long enough, they have a chance. If toxic fumes enter too soon, forcing them outside, they will die of radiant heat or smoke inhalation.

The fire box, an opening for gathering wood, becomes the fear. It burns and smoulders and, finally, after maybe 20 minutes, opens. Also, a window finally shatters.

They will die if they stay in the house. They will probably die if they dash for the lawn, where they can hose each other in water.

Simmons notices the neighbours' weatherboard house.

The couple are home, their daughter's not.

Well, notice isn't the right word. Simmons comprehends that the house is no longer there. Its raised floor presumably allowed ember surries to form underneath.

His quick summing up? Nothing anyone could have done.

His family takes turns spraying one another on the blackened lawn. Beau almost collapses, but revives. The house crackles to a pile.

They move to the horse paddock next door, chattering about the fate of others, and ready themselves for the next perceived threat — lightning.

It's raining. They're cold.

John Cartwright is hoping his good friends, the Simmons, will swing by to pick him up.

There is a problem — their three cars are destroyed, including Beau's 2004 Commodore, which presents the family with a fireworks display that all, except

maybe Beau, find rather intriguing.

Cartwright has stayed inside, watching fence palings flare like flaming matchsticks, one after the other. He ventures outside to put out the eaves — no outside water.

He rings Wayne, his son, as windows crack. Wayne tells him he can't survive in the house. Cartwright says he can't survive outside the house.

But it gets too hot. Ash whooshes in. Better to cook outside than inside. Cartwright is making it up as he goes along.

This is how it is when you're about to die, he thinks.

Or is it? He's never been about to die before.

Cartwright grabs a bucket of water and a tea towel, forgets his dodgy hip, and staggers through smoke to the empty swimming pool of the motel next door. He sits on the bottom step and wipes embers when they settle on him.

This is where he will be found four hours later.

Cartwright has watched his house burn down.

He has also pondered the loss of every photo he possesses of his late wife, Jean.

SIX days after the blast, Leigh Jowett, the builder, still will not have checked a Tattslot-to ticket he buys on Saturday.

He isn't hopeful of winning.

He reckons he has used up his good fortune.

"I don't think I have a chance as long as my bum points to the ground," he says.

His house survives the fire, perhaps because it is sheltered by a hill. He isn't there when the blast comes through.

Fearful of falling gum trees, he parks at the golf club and waits an "eternity" before the radiant heat dwindles enough to open the door.



He later sees the logging truck, abandoned beside him in the car park, melted to the ground.

The newly laid neighbouring bowls green, a lingering source of community kinship, is untouched. It's not much. It's something.

Jowett's cat, Old Taz, leaps from the car during the worst of the blast. Jowett gives up on him.

Three days later, Old Taz will turn up meowing at the door, looking for breakfast and sympathy for a burnt paw.

Lachlan Fraser sits on the road, hugs his dogs, and cries.

The house, the fruit trees, everything, is lost.

His phone rings. It's someone called Andrea asking about a planned group dinner in Melbourne tonight.

"The house is on fire, the town is on fire, speak to me next week,

bye," he tells her. It's unclear what Andrea makes of this.

A few hours later, Fraser rings his mother Barbara in Eltham on a satellite phone (all other communications are out).

"I'm alive," he tells her. "The dogs are alive. The house is gone. The town is gone."

"What?" replies Barbara.

Like the rest of Australia, she doesn't know that Marysville isn't there any more.

THROUGH busted fences and around fallen trees, survivors head to the football oval at Gallipoli Park.

It will be a long night of burning eyes and no sleep.

It stings to even blink.

Fraser treats people as well as he can. He has replaced the toilet paper on his wound with a bandage.

He checks the clinic — it's gone. He sees signs everywhere, signs marking piles of burning rubble. Television footage later shows a front door and nothing else, except a no-smoking sign hung on it.

These signs speak of a "before" that, regardless of rebuilding efforts, can never be recreated. But it's no time to start dwelling on the chances for an "after". Not yet.

Fraser makes do with the medical kit he carries for marathons in his glovebox. Eyedrops. Anti-nausea medication. Panadeine Forte.

He offers the worst piece of medical advice he will ever give to an overweight patient: "Eat as much as you like tonight."

Around the oval, gas cylinders keep exploding, such as the big one at Marylands guesthouse, which flames like the fiery geysers at Crown casino.

The pavilion smoulders.

Someone, somewhere, somehow, starts snoring.

Melbourne will not grasp the dimension of the tragedy here for days. Dozens, perhaps more, die in Marysville before Victoria knows they are gone.

And over the coming week, Marysville will loom as the site of most deaths. The name will take on a sinister echo.

The town is a morgue. How many dead bodies here lie untended under sheets of corrugated iron and on the sides of roads?

Its crime scene status, which quarantines the town from visitors, will allow ugly rumours to baste, such as the supposed death of 100 people in the Anglican church.



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had 100 trucks there. It wasn't going to stop it.

Yet right now, no one here at the oval munching on biscuits and cakes taken from the Marysville Bakery (the absent owners won't mind) is trying to grasp the magnitude of the disaster.

They can't make sense of it. Not now. Maybe never. They have lost their homes. They don't know where their friends are.

Everyone knows everyone in Marysville. There are about 20 or 30 people here (and a lot of dogs) from a permanent population of about 500.

Where is Kirstie Nilsson, 39, the cheery mother of two who runs the Christmas shop?

Where is Len Postlethwaite, once a champion woodcutter, who comes in heavier than 18 stone?

Where is Marie Walsh, the tree-changer who moved here with her retired dentist husband, Dan?

Where is Nicole Jefferson, the waiter two weeks from giving birth, and fiancé Jamie Bowker?

Where is the wife of one of the local policemen? She got in the car. But then what?

Where is everyone else? They must have moved "bloody fast", as Fraser puts it, to have got out before the flames. Or ...

Among the gathering are Glen Fiske and his son, Kellan.

Kellan is told about the death of his mother, Liz, and his brother, Dalton, in their Lyell St home.

Dalton, who is 14 or 15, is the bowling club's youngest member.

His brother falls to the ground. He cannot breathe.

"Two people trying to save their town, and losing part of their family," Cartwright says.

"And then to see the boy puffing to survive, but still there wanting to save more people.

"That's bravery, isn't it?"

It's perhaps 2am at the oval.

Earlier, Rod Liesfield had come in, distressed. He and his family took over Nanda Binya Lodge a week ago.

"He said to somebody: 'Liz and the kids are gone'," Fraser says.

"This person said: 'That's good'. And he said: 'No, they're gone.'"

It's unclear what has happened to his wife and their two boys, Matthew and James.

Liesfield is inconsolable.

In coming days, talk will move to a tree falling on the spa the family were huddling in.

It's after dawn on Sunday. Fraser wanders the Marysville streets. He's strangely curious. He wants to search for any relics of his home.

Others will later count — 32 houses stand where there were once a few hundred. He wonders how long the rebuilding will take — and there has to be a rebuilding.

Five years? Ten years?

Flames lick a couple of fence palings. Fraser kicks them over to stop a carport going up.

He walks past the Fiske home in Lyell St. Glen Fiske is in the driveway. He has been inside.

His wife and son, it's said, have been found arm in arm.

Fraser puts his arm around him. Fiske does not — cannot — say anything. Fraser, too, struggles for words.

"Oh God," he manages.

The only memento Fraser has found from his home is a Swiss cow bell, lying under ash about 10m from where it once hung in the kitchen.

He keeps walking, with the dogs, the cow bell clanging in rhythm to each step.

"It's this lonely, grey, ash landscape," he says.

"It's like a nuclear bomb has hit. And this cow bell keeps ringing. It's like *For Whom the Bell Tolls*."

Fraser turns the bell upside down and chokes the hammer.



1 Keppels Hotel



2 Cumberland Marysville & Villa Day Spa



3 Post office and estate agency



4 Petrol station



5 In Neutral cafe



6 FoodWorks



7 Anglican Church

Marysville: a little town lost



8 Shops, corner Marysville Rd and Murchison St



9 Medical clinic



10 Police station



11 Marysville Patisserie



12 Marysville Primary School



13 Cricket club rooms at the oval

Pictures: NORM OORLOFF, KEITH PAKENHAM CFA public affairs, NICOLE GARMSTON and KELLY BARNES

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Two people trying to save their town, and losing part of their family. And then to see the boy puffing to survive, but still there wanting to save more people. That's bravery, isn't it?

— Former CFA captain JOHN CARTWRIGHT, 78