

'Mayday! Mayday!'

A daring rescue on the firefront

By SANDY BURGOYNE

Around 4pm on Black Saturday, North Warrandyte tanker No. 1 started to climb the mountain to Kinglake and moved from gloom into darkness. Ash, leaves and dust swirled about the truck's cabin.

"We couldn't see...it was very surreal, we couldn't see more than a metre in front of the truck," Rohan Thornton, North brigade's captain, told the *Diary*.

"It's hard to describe, because you could see fire in quite a substantial amount in the front, but you couldn't see the road a metre in front of the truck. I still can't quite find a way of describing it. Nothing like I've seen. I deal in light as a professional and...I couldn't create that environment artificially if I tried."

The five-man crew had been at St Andrews fire station when a call came through that a family was trapped in a house nearby.

"The crew decided that we really couldn't sit there and do nothing, so we decided to go in and see if we could get them out," Mr Thornton said.

Tanker No. 1 drove about 400 metres into the fire front, but on arriving at the house found it empty. The crew members realised they couldn't go back to St Andrews and decided their best route was to continue up to Kinglake.

"We just kept driving and ... drove in the fire for the 12 kilometres up the hill.

"We were just concentrating on the white line. We could just see the white line in front of the truck. Mick, who was driving, was concentrating on what was on the road and we, the crew, were concentrating on the left and right borders of the road. So with everyone contributing we got up the mountain. Occasionally we'd get to a point where light would come through and we'd think, 'yeah we are nearly out of this', then it would get dark again," Rohan Thornton said.

Driving conditions were not improving and the crew put out a PAN (possible assistance needed) call to alert the radio control room to their predicament.

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"As we got into Kinglake we believe it was about the time the service station went up. A ute came through, I guess from the direction of the service station and we collided with it," Mr Thornton said.

The ute did not stop, but turned down an intersecting road. North's tanker was on the Kinglake roundabout, but visibility was so poor that the crew didn't realise that at the time.

"We came around the corner and down what we thought was the Healesville road, but again we couldn't see where we were going and we headed down Victoria Road instead," he said.

"We realised we'd gone the wrong way and we were trying to come back. And then a tree came down, just missing the truck and it took our windscreen out. In order to avoid the tree we came off the road on the opposite side into a ditch, into a fence and that's ... the crash. We couldn't move from there and we put out a 'mayday' call because we knew we couldn't get out and we were stuck there."

Chris Spring, Warrandyte CFA's 4th lieutenant, was at the Warrandyte fire station when the call came through.

"The one thing that catches



Braced for the future: North Warrandyte CFA captain Rohan Thornton. (Picture by Sandy Burgoyne)



everyone's attention is the three calls of 'mayday' coming over the radio. It's never a pleasant thing to hear that.

"The conditions were probably the worst that they've ever been. I suppose that everybody just stopped what they were doing and listened intently to the radio for further traffic and further details," he told the *Diary*.

The North Warrandyte crew members could give only a vague description of where they were.

"We knew we were in Kinglake somewhere, but we really had no idea where we were. We just kept pumping information in that we thought would help. I remember when we went down (the road) we hit some speed humps and I remember thinking what a stupid place for speed humps," Rohan Thornton said.

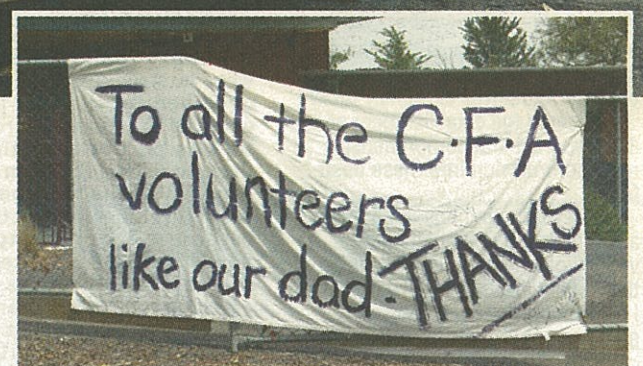
Meanwhile the North firefighters had gone into crew protection mode. They had covered themselves with blan-

kets and turned on the truck's water sprays.

Wonga Park's pumper-tanker was in the vicinity and the crew responded to the emergency.

"The North Warrandyte crew were not able to give an accurate description of their exact location but did reply to questions from Lt Andrew Wright over the truck radios. He asked: 'have you been over speed humps?', 'have you been through a roundabout?', 'can you hear our sirens now?'," Wonga Park 3rd lieutenant Gary McQuade said.

"Driving conditions could only be described as horrendous and very dangerous. Visibility was almost nil because



of the thick smoke and a lot of bush was burning on either side of the vehicle. There were limbs of trees across the road, which they had to avoid along with several wrecked cars."

"There was great relief in our radio room and no doubt at North Warrandyte when the response came from Wonga Park crew they'd found the tanker and have all crew members safely on board Wonga Park's vehicle!," Garry McQuade said.

Remarkably after that long afternoon in February only one firefighter was injured. Rohan Thornton, North's

captain, had sustained back injuries during the tanker's crash.

He was taken to hospital, but is now home and expected to make a full recovery.

Wonga Park brigade is justifiably proud of the members who effected the rescue: 1st lieutenant Andrew Wright, Luke Thomas, Tim Cochrane, Andrew Oxley and Rhys Doughty-Cowell.

"My eternal thanks go to the crew at Wonga Park who didn't have to come in and get us. They put their own lives at risk to come in and get us," Rohan Thornton said.