

# Resident's experiences of the 2003 Canberra bushfire

Amalie Tibbits

RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria ; Bushfire CRC

Raphaela Blanche

CSIRO CMIT, Highett, Victoria ; Bushfire CRC

A. Malcolm Gill

CSIRO PI (Honorary); ANU SRES (Honorary), Canberra, ACT ; Bushfire CRC

## Introduction

Two and a half years after the Canberra bushfires (2003) 17 formal interviews were carried out with residents in the suburb of Chapman, a suburb heavily impacted by the bushfire. The object was to develop a narrative of people's experiences just-before, during and after the fire event.

The interviews were conducted as a scoping study to identify some of the key themes that arose for people when making the decision to either stay and defend their properties or evacuate from the area.

## Methodology

Interviews were qualitative and semi-structured and responses were used to develop a narrative of the events on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2003. Although all people interviewed were from Chapman, some were exposed to a strong-wind vortex as well as fire, others were not; some lost their homes, others did not; some left their homes when the fires struck, others stayed.

The interviews centred on information relating to house preparedness, observation of bushfire impact, how the event unfolded, what actions people took to defend their properties, what was considered to be the crucial decision making factors affecting whether they stay and defend or evacuate, and advice for others faced with a similar circumstance.

Interviewees ranged in age from the mid 30s to the 70s plus. Some were single, most had partners, some had small children; many people were retired. The sample did not include those who elected not to return to their properties after the fire.

The area is a medium-density suburb abutting paddocks, public grassland and woodland. Gardens were mainly of European style with lawns and shrubberies.

## Key themes

Four themes requiring further investigation were identified in the interviews

### *Low Awareness of Bushfire Threat to Homes*

Many people were unaware of the threat to their properties despite the smoke and flames that were visible in the hills on previous days and nights and the strong hot wind blowing across their suburb on the day.

- Some interviewees were completely unaware that the fire was approaching or could reach them.
- The only local fires previously known to some were low intensity grass fires.

*“About 1 o'clock I went for a walk up on the hill to have a look. I could see the fire was getting closer, and I could see the smoke and the halo from the fire, not the live flame but the light of the flame, once again I wasn't overly concerned, ... (long way to come) and would have to come over open grass land. Chance of that happening was not very great. Once it hit the grassland, it wouldn't pose that much of a threat to this street because it would be just a grassfire”*

- There was a belief by some that living in a suburb (urban fringe area) offers protection from bushfires and that roads would act as a fire break.

Phone calls to homes from friends and relatives concerned about resident's safety were common but few heeded the implicit warning. Some interviewees (mostly women) tuned to ABC local radio and were listening for warnings and information regarding house preparedness.

### Last Minute Preparedness

- Most interviewees implemented the preparedness advice they heard if tuned to local ABC radio.

*“We had to fill the bath, buckets and wet towels and get hoses ready and stay with our homes...I did all that was asked and then suggested we get into thicker more suitable clothes if we were going to be putting out fires. This we did.”*

- Many interviewees implemented actions advised by neighbours, as well as imitating what neighbours were doing.
- Although there was a lack of fire awareness and preparedness, most interviewees showed a high level of initiative and resourcefulness in their actions to defend their properties.
- Most interviewees displayed a high level of focus on practical defence, reducing their level of panic and distress during their event.

*“I was so focussed on the moment I haven’t registered that the family room was a shamble, (the windows have blown).”*

- Health and physical ability limited what action interviewees were able to take.

*“Noticed (neighbour) on his roof clearing the gutters. We were not able to do this”*

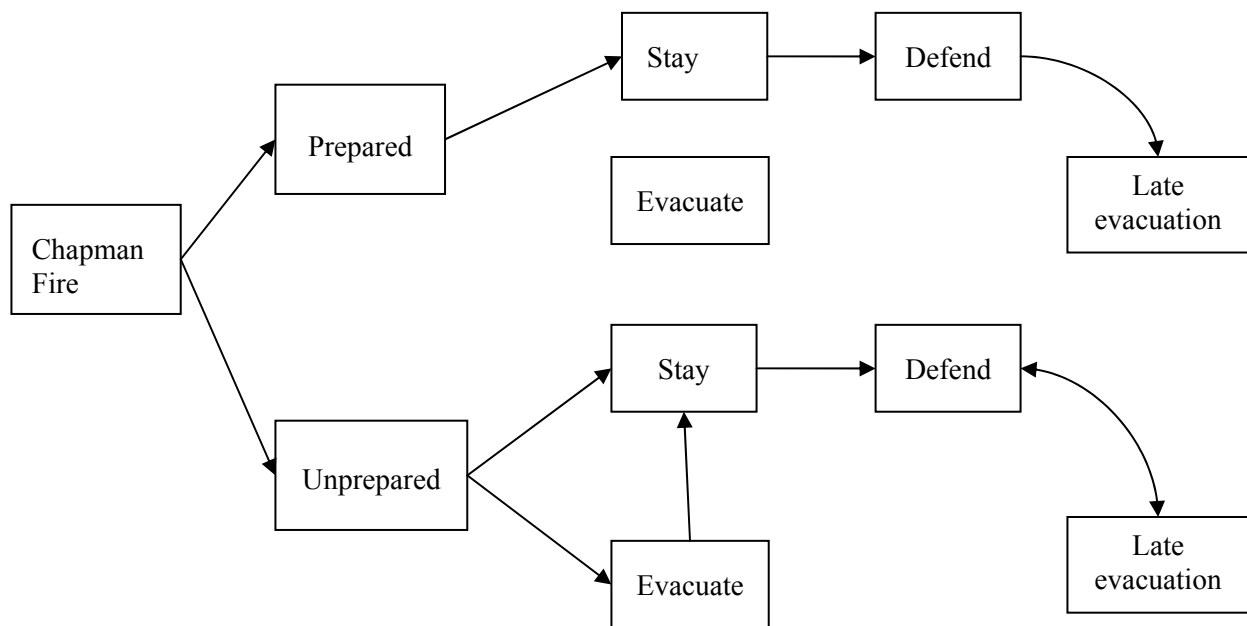
### The decision to stay and defend or evacuate

A significant finding was that ‘stay or go’ was not a simple issue. Of the 17 interviews, nine stayed and defended their properties throughout the fire, whilst the other eight evacuated at some time during or after the fire. The decisions were made on the day and were generally not firm, but were highly changeable and made in response to the immediate situation.

A summary of interviewee’s actions is shown in Figure 1. Some people evacuated, but did so just before or during the fire front (the most dangerous time to do so). Some householders attempted evacuation just prior to or during the passage of the fire front, but were prevented from doing so by the prevailing conditions (smoke, flames, power poles on roads and in one case, tornado-like winds). Other householders stayed and defended their property during the passage of the fire front, then evacuated. For several households, this evacuation was prompted by police orders.

*“...a policeman appeared out of the smoke. He said ‘Lady you are about to explode, the whole area is about to explode’. He took the hose from me and hosed me down, front and back, and told me to go and get into that police car.”*

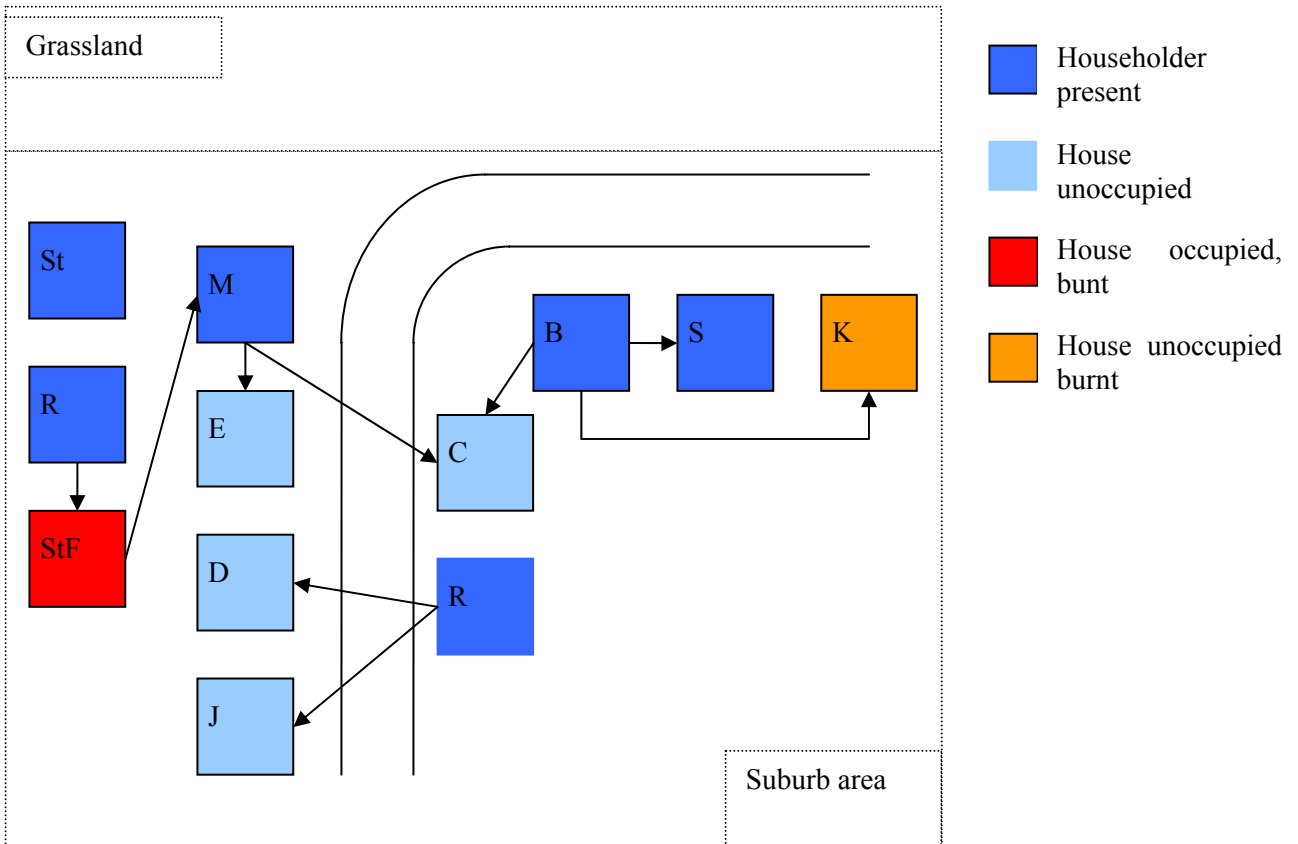
The ability to stay and defend was affected by a felt-responsibility to care for others (eg parents, children and pets).



**Figure 1: Actions of interviewees to stay and defend or evacuate (based on AFAC policy)**

## People Movement

There was a flux of people into, around and out of the fire-affected area before, during and after the fire. These people included householders, friends, neighbours, anonymous helpers, sight-seers, media, police, and the fire brigade. Neighbours tried to save nearby unoccupied houses. Figure 2 shows the movement of householders in one of the case study areas.



**Figure 2 Movement of people**

### Lessons for the future

People responded quickly and effectively when practical advice was provided

When asked, most people stated that they would be prepared to stay and defend in a similar situation. Some interviewees suggested there were a minimum number of people required to defend their property. Others preferred to manage the situation on their own.

Property preparedness was the most significant change interviewees would like to make in the future. Interviewees felt that changes to vegetation, installation of steel fences and a sufficient water supply were important aspects for making a house safer.

Personal preparedness was also considered crucial. Many interviewees cited a need for masks and goggles, to reduce the health impact of smoke and heat from the fire.