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Issue
#3

November
2021



The BlazeAidPOST

A Quarterly Insight into the BlazeAid Organisation and its efforts to Rebuild. Communities Affected by Natural Disasters

Current Statistics

Total Volunteers:

33,847

Total Volunteer
Days:

346,350

Properties
worked on:

11,283

Fences cleared:

16,065km

Fences rebuilt:

15,709km

More than Mending a Fence



G'day! Meet Tim Thompson. You may recognise his face as he has made many YouTube Videos on a range of agricultural topics, including one featuring BlazeAid.

Tim has got quite an interesting story. His involvement with Blazeaid goes back to the Black Saturday fires in 2009 where he was teaching Agriculture in a year 9 program when the devastation of the fires touched the local community and some of his dearest of friends quite directly. "Teachers have the obligation, in my mind anyway, to seek opportunities for connection with the community and the wider world." Tim says.

Tim continues to educate a range of agricultural topics on YouTube. In times of trauma he believes that its critical that young people in particular have the chance to respond in a meaningful, purposeful manner.

With the help of the local Blazeaid coordinator and a supportive school leadership team, Tim quickly arranged a three-day camp to help with removal and construction of fences in Dixon's creek (Victoria). After the Beenak fires, he organised a group of 20 Young Farmers club members and parents to attend the recovery camp for two days. The motivated and enthusiastic little band worked alongside other volunteers removing and replacing fences (video of this on his YouTube channel). The effect on the parents and kids was profound. The ability to freely help those in the community with practical work is a rare thing in modern society.

"The camaraderie that had sprung from working together to get people back on their feet was once again unique in this modern world. Blazeaid is something special and needs to be treasured"



Only this year, Tim spent time with Philip Fraser and the volunteers from the Bruthen camp where they finished off some jobs and therefore was able to meet a great crew of local landowners and volunteers.

Tim says that the camaraderie that springs from working together to get people back on their feet is also unique in this modern world. "Blazeaid is something special and needs to be treasured. There are not many organisations like it, where people, regardless of ability can do something meaningful for others, without an agenda. We are truly a richer nation for the spirit that organisations like BlazeAid bring to the lives of others"

To watch Tim's videos, simply head to YouTube and search for Tim Thompson.

HONESTY

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Australians pride themselves on being fair. However, the zero home insurance phenomenon needs fixing now to ensure that.

Your home is your castle. Responsible homeowners pay their insurance premiums for decades and then get almost nothing from public Natural Disaster fundraising when their home is burnt to the ground.

Others (up to 75% in some 2019/2020 Black Summer rural areas) either deliberately or inadvertently play the odds - not paying their fair share of home insurance to protect their own castle. And when they lose their homes to fires or floods, up to 66% of public donations go towards helping them rebuild their lives, including their homes. This doesn't seem fair. We should equally support those who *'dig the well before they need the water'* as well as those that are under insured.

Compulsory home insurance, similar to the fire levy through the council rates or personal injury in road crashes through your car registration, needs to be mandated.

Why should the roof over your head not be treated as equally important?

With everyone's castle insured, public donations could be more reasonably distributed to everyone -in fair proportions -for fixtures and projects that are often not insured.

Here is a list to think about:

- Funding posts and wire to help replace fencing
- Funding volunteer labor costs (fuel and food) and tools/ equipment to help you rebuild your fencing
- Funding perennial grass seeds to replace burnt out pastures (GRAFFI)
- Funding more than 10 mental health visits to a psychologist
- Funding trees and tree planting establishment and plantation fencing
- Funding caravan hire on site while your home is being built
- Funding generator and water pumps supply
- Funding poly pipe replacement for garden and farm water
- Funding crushed rock for your new sheds base
- Finding site cleanup

We would love to hear your thoughts on the Home Under Insurance debacle
Find us on the socials



Volunteer in the Spotlight

If you have been in and around BlazeAid for a while, you would probably recognise this guy. His name is Steve, and he and his wife (Colleen) of 47 years have been 'BlazeAid-ing' since 2015.

Originally from South Australia, with over 9 camps under their belt, the couple have driven more than 2000kms across five states and territories to help with BlazeAid. Never having fenced before, the retired mathematics teacher wanted to help after a fire ripped through his community back in 2015. Luckily enough, his house was narrowly saved after a wind change caused the direction of the fire to spread away from his castle. After the devastation, he knew he wanted to volunteer and rebuild the community but found it so difficult to offer his assistance to other charities. Some had a three month wait to get in! After expressing his dissatisfaction on Facebook, someone suggested BlazeAid. And there begun his volunteering adventure. Steve and Colleen's longest stint was at Kangaroo Island in 2020, where they spent most of the year fencing and helping to cook for fellow volunteers. It was a up to 137 volunteers at one stage, from back packers to grey nomads.

The days started early, Steve said, "up at 6am where we had breakfast and the safety talk and then straight to the farms. Some farms were 60kms away". There were some challenging moments such as convincing farmers that there are now easier and faster ways to build fences, but they generally are so appreciative of BlazeAid. We had one 75-year-old farmer that said he drove down his 1 km driveway every morning to look at the fence that BlazeAid built.'



Steve and his wife Colleen.
(Photograph taken by the
Whitsunday Times)

Why do you think you and Colleen have continued to volunteer for such a long time with BlazeAid, we ask Steve, "because we are selfish, helping others makes us feel good. We also loving being apart a new community, both with fellow BlazeAiders and the farmers. Many times, we have called in to see a farmer we did some work for."

Steve and Colleen are planning to continue to help volunteer at BlazeAid camps around Australia once the Covid restrictions have eased.

Thank you to both Steve and Colleen for your many years of support and dedication towards helping our fellow Australians.



From the President

The BlazeAid story —memoirs by the founders



Chapter 2

What happens in a mega fire - you invariably fight it alone.

I had phoned and warned my friends Rob and Phil in Wandong and kept rechecking with my good neighbours Bob and Ellen who lived near the Hume freeway. Bob and Ellen finally relented and informed me that I'd better come over as the wind was now swinging Northwest to directly impact his home and buildings.

The police had a roadblock in place at Saunders Rd and they told me I couldn't get through to help him. Instead of arguing with people who had orders to follow, were unaware of the enormity of the present danger and unfamiliar with the lay of the land, I decided to cut cross country over four kilometres through neighbouring paddocks - Sullivan's and Beale's (whose house sadly burnt down two hours later).

When I arrived at Rob's, the fire was only 200 metres from his home. He had lost his phone and was uncontactable, so I felt relieved at my decision to come to his aid when I did. Looking for a way to help, I broke off a few black wattle branches to beat out the fire.

There were two things I had not experienced before - one was that I was running out of air constantly (the fire was taking it) and where I had beaten out the fire it often reignited a minute later. In what felt like only moments, the fire built up in its momentum, raging and hot, and I clung to Bob's concrete 20,000 litre water tank for dear life as it roared past me. I phoned Kilmore police and told them they had better organise fire trucks here - not realising that at that time the main front of the fire had hit Kinglake area and over a hundred people were dying or about to.

Real time information was absent altogether - we have learned so much since then. We were successful in stopping the fire that was burning around Bob and Ellen's cottage and Sue's next door when neighbours Gerard Kelly and Jenny Sullivan arrived towing a Landcare spray unit. I asked them to keep an eye on it in case the fire flared up once again. Crushing, it did, and an hour later, Sue's house was burnt to the ground as embers had got into the stumps.



Throughout the day, I kept in touch with my wife, Rhonda by mobile and we agreed that it was best for her to start the bore pump, so we had water to save our own house if need be.

The next hours were spent stopping the fire getting into Bob's outer buildings and sheds. Thankfully no more were lost. We saw our first fire truck at 4:30 pm and at 5:30. Bob and I surveyed the burnt area knowing that it could not burn any more. We were just so grateful that we were fine, and their house was not lost too. Meanwhile, I kept going back to my sheep and pushed them out of danger.

The fire was now heading North to The Kelly's - a family with three young children. I got to the Kelly's by 7 pm and spent the next four hours alone beating the fire out on their south side. It felt futile but there was the hope that help would come, but it never did.

At about 11 pm, I drove out and lots of fire trucks were parked near Kelly's house. I quickly stopped to greet and have a quick debrief with the fireies before moving on to re-check my sheep again. This time I was grateful to see that there were two or three Yea fire trucks nearby.

I led them up to the fire front and they were able to quickly put a one kilometre stretch out. From the top of quarry hill where I had started 12 hours earlier, the whole countryside was lit up in the dark with logs and trees burning - it looked so pretty.

I arrived home to Rhonda around midnight, who was waiting up worried (my mobile had gone flat a couple of hours earlier) and we talked for a few hours, debriefing.

I went to bed at 3 am, but kept on having fire nightmares and so I got up at five and spent the day bulldozing fallen trees off Nanny's Creek Rd.



The most profound feeling I had was the complete absence of law order and authorities to help amidst a paralysing disaster which seemed so incongruent to what we had been promised. Little did we know the extent of unpreparedness and the lack of communication systems and processes the Black Saturday fires would expose.

Next Issue: Chapter 3 - Fencing begins to prevent thousands of our sheep walking onto the Hume Freeway.

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Coordinator of the Quarter

Steve Matthews

If you have ever spoken or had the privilege to have met Steve Matthews, you would know what a stand-up guy he is! His energetic personality and optimistic outlook are only two of the many qualities that Steve possesses.

Steve has been coordinating Camp Tumbarumba (previously located at Adelong) since June. We interviewed Steve earlier this year.

BlazeAid: Why did you want to volunteer with BlazeAid?

Steve: After the bushfires last year, I was quite emotionally affected by the devastation, and I wanted to help. The Batlow area was very close to my heart as I was born there, in fact my family goes back to residing in the area for 3-4 generations. I spent my Christmas' there and most school holidays. In the height of the fires, I was listening to the radio broadcasts all day where Batlow was predicted to be completely wiped off the map! I simply googled how I could help the area and I stumbled across BlazeAid. They were opening a camp in Adelong only 20 minutes from Batlow.

BlazeAid: When did you start volunteering?

Steve: As soon as I saw Adelong was opening, I organised to get a week off work to help somehow. I had never fenced in my life. That was on the 18th of Jan, 2020 and I am still here! I got so much out of it, I just kept coming back. I would do two weeks and then come and go, whilst fitting it around a full-time job as a tourism researcher. I have two beautiful daughters in their twenties, Michaela and Tessa and we had organised to catch up and go fishing, but I convinced them to do a day of volunteering with me at BlazeAid. At one stage they did a whole month of volunteering at BlazeAid while I wasn't there, so safe to say that they loved the experience too.

BlazeAid: Did you live on the camp site?

Steve: Not initially. I was permanently based in Canberra working full time when the national lockdown hit in March 2020. That's about 2 hours away from camp Adelong. I packed up my stuff and relocated to the camp. I worked my full-time job at the camp during the week and then helped BlazeAid on the weekends. I slept in a swag to begin with and was upgraded to a camper trailer that was donated by a volunteer.



BlazeAid: From a volunteer that had never fenced before, how did you become a Coordinator of such a large camp?

Steve: The current coordinators, Chris and John Male put me forward.

They were being transferred to Coordinate another camp at Wauchope. I guess they saw some leadership qualities. They gave me a bit of training and I was on my way. I ran the camp from May to December 2020 as I needed to return to my full-time job. I quickly realised that there was nothing left for me in my current profession. It wasn't as fulfilling as BlazeAid was, so I made a bold call to leave my profession. So here I am, full time at BlazeAid.

BlazeAid: What is the most challenging part of Coordinating a camp?

Steve: We have had up to 45 people from all walks of life at one time at camp. That comes with a whole heap of diverse personalities, and it can sometimes be a challenge to manage the strong ones.

BlazeAid: And lastly, what do you think are your drivers when working with BlazeAid?

Steve: I just want everyone to have a good experience like I have had. That is always in the forefront of my mind. To put it simply its both the volunteers and the farmers. My fellow volunteers the most amazing people I have met. I have had volunteers leave in tears because they don't want to leave the camp. And equally so, are the farmers you meet. When you have a grown man ringing you up in tears saying that they "can't do it anymore" and you have the ability to say, 'let us help you'. It's incredibly fulfilling experience. I had another lady farmer with a broken wrist, and she had 5km of fencing to knock down before the contractors came. We completed the job for her in three days and one month later her fence was done. She told me she cried every single day before she rang Blazeaid!



Steve with Mark, Ron, John, Garry and Leonie

Steve's camp has finished up in September as the lack of volunteers coming through (mainly due to COVID) means that they can't finish all the farms registered. But he hopes to come back to BlazeAid and finish as soon as possible.

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BlazeAid's Support Partner



If you have ever volunteered at Blazeaid, you may have noticed range of BlazeAid branded Hi-Vis shirts, polo's, hats to just name a few. Fully Promoted (previously known as Embroid Me) has been working with BlazeAid producing our branded products for the last 10 years.

Located in Dandenong, Victoria, Andrew Leong is the company owner of Fully Promoted. He was so impressed with the difference that BlazeAid made in the community that he made the organisation his primary charity.

Andrew hasn't always owned his own business. In fact, he was first enlisted to the military at just 18 years of age. He worked hard to become an infantry officer and has seen overseas operational service in Afghanistan and Iraq.

He has also served on military assistance tasks to national disasters and health emergencies, including the 2019-20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic

With every order that BlazeAid has placed with Andrew, he has kindly donated special top up products, including on the most recent order with an additional \$1,000 worth of extra apparel.

"BlazeAid's volunteers undertake valuable work that provides both tangible results, such as the rebuilding of fences and rural structures, and intangible results that lift the spirits of those facing the daunting task of rebuilding their lives following natural disasters. "My mission is to ensure everyone can see the name being worn with pride."

A big thank you to Andrew and his team for the last 10 years of support towards BlazeAid.

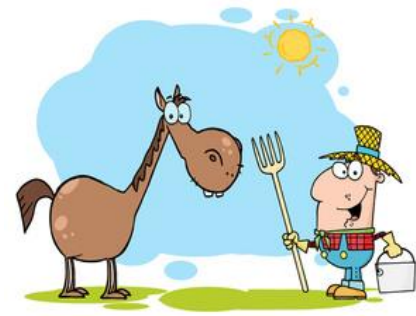


Andrew and his team at Fully Promoted.

Q: *How much (on average) does it cost to run a camp?*

A: *Anywhere from \$3,000- \$5,000 a week*

Costs include food, electricity, vehicle maintenance and fuel



Joke of the day

A farmer says to his wife "I have just passed my master's degree in fencing".

His wife replies, so now you are a 'postgraduate'.



Do you have a BlazeAid story to share about a person, place, or experience? If you do, drop us an email at admin@blazeaid.com.au or contact Melissa on 0436316955. We would love to hear from you!

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