

CANBERRA BURNING

On 18 January 2003 a fire storm swept at 100 km per hour through the western outer suburbs of Canberra in its worst ever wildfire, taking four lives and destroying over 450 homes.

I was there for an Air Force reunion and although staying in one of those affected suburbs, Higgins was saved from the storm by a ridge of farm grassland. Duffy and other suburbs were devastated. Some of my friends lived in the affected areas and feared for their lives and homes. I did not experience the fire front, but captured these photos, taken at 3:00 – 4:00 pm in the central government/cultural area at Lake Burley Griffin and at Higgins. The sky became as black as night - it was an apocalyptic sight.

No one could have stopped the fire storm as it leapt across wide road reserves and sent embers several kilometres from the front to start spot fires in the western suburbs. It is a tribute to the fire fighters that so many homes were saved.

The planning lessons are still being distilled from the wreckage. However the primary lesson is to respect the power of wildfires and to plan a safe transitional interface between housing and natural areas.



Central Canberra sky at about 3pm 18 January 2003 from the airport



Captain Cook fountain at half mast bowing to the might of the firewind



The menacing fire front west of the city at 3:30 pm south of Higgins



An angry sky south of Higgins suburb at 4 pm on 18 January 2003