

TRIAL BY FIRE

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STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCING *TRIAL BY FIRE*

Trial by Fire provides an insight into the workings of Australia's volunteer fire-fighting brigades. It captures the humour, the adrenalin and the camaraderie that make Australia's country fire services unique.

During the summer of 2002/3 South East Australia was hit by the worst bushfire season for twenty years. An area the size of Scotland was burnt, five people died and over five hundred homes were destroyed. *Trial by Fire* follows one of the many volunteer fire brigades who played a vital role in containing what could easily have become a much more serious disaster.

The Woodend Brigade is responsible for the three thousand people who live in this Victorian country town and the fifty square kilometres of small farms, rural hamlets and dry eucalypt forest that surround it. With the fire season rapidly approaching they have to train their new members, run raffles to raise money for fire-fighting equipment and try to educate the new settlers from the city.

In the summer of 2003, lightning strikes start massive fires in the north east

of Victoria. As the fires escalate, the brigades resources are stretched to the limit as more vehicles and crews are sent north to defend the towns. At the same time, the weather is getting hotter and the fire conditions more extreme.

With about a quarter of the group in the North East, the twenty-fifth of January was stinking hot. The temperature reached thirty-six degrees by nine o'clock in the morning and the wind was gusting to twenty knots from the north. All that was needed was the smallest spark.



As the morning train heads toward Woodend a fire starts near the railway line. Within minutes it is tearing across the grassland towards houses. New recruit, Andrew Wilson-Annan is called on to help and is soon in the back seat of the captain's car helping to coordinate the fire-fight. When more fires start near the railway line, the brigade realizes that it is time to stop the train. With five fires running and the temperature approaching forty-five degrees, the brigade has a real fight on its hands.

Fortunately, they get the train fires under control before any serious damage is done, but the fires in the northeast are a different story. They take eight weeks to control and burn over a million hectares of bush and farmland. In the end, it's rain that puts the fire out.

USING *TRIAL BY FIRE* IN THE CLASSROOM

With themes of teamwork, responsibility

Cover: L-R: Kevin Anderson (Director), Mick Christie (captain), Laurie Thomson (ex-captain) and Laurie Lovell. This page from top: L-R: Mick Christie, Laurie Thomson, Kevin Anderson and Laurie Lovell • Nicole Healy (Lieutenant, Woodend CFA)



ity and rural communities, *Trial by Fire* follows the day-to-day activities of the Woodend Brigade of the CFA during the 2002-2003 bushfire season. The documentary concentrates on the commitment and courage of this dedicated team of firefighters, and brings the horror of bushfires into sharp focus. Using authentic news footage and interviews with members of the Woodend Brigade, the film builds a graphic picture of the bushfire danger that confronts Australians every summer.

Trial by Fire is suitable for a wide range of students from Upper Primary to Senior Secondary level.

The documentary is of specific interest

and relevance to teachers and students of:

- Studies of Society & Environment (SOSE/HSIE)
- Geography
- Science
- English

Learning outcomes

- Critically compare representations of people, events and issues.
- Explain how causes, motives and consequences may be related.
- Analyse the core values of groups and societies.
- Consider the context in which the text was created and how this is reflected in the text.

Before watching the documentary

- Draw on personal experiences and anecdotes to arouse interest. Introduce the topic of bushfires by discussing some of the following



questions with the class.

- What safety precautions do you take in your own home to protect it from fire?
- Have you ever seen a bushfire?
- Have you or your family ever been threatened by a bushfire?
- What do you know about the way bushfires start?
- Who fights bushfires when they occur?
- How could you help to prevent bushfires?

Glossary of key terms

An understanding of some of these terms prior to viewing will assist overall comprehension of the documentary:

Back burn—a fire that is deliberately



From top: Mick Christie and Kevin Anderson • Kerry Murphy (Group Officer, Madedon Group) • Fire along the railway line at Woodend, 25 Jan 2003



lit to reduce fuel load.

Crown fire—a fire that moves quickly through the tops of trees.

Fire break—a strip of cleared (or burned) land that provides no fuel for a bushfire.

Fire front—the leading edge of a bushfire.

Fuel load—dry vegetation that provides potential fuel for a fire.

Re-gen—regenerated growth of vegetation after previous fires.

Spot over—a new outbreak of fire away from the main one.

Turnout—brigade attendance at a fire.

AUSTRALIA ALIGHT

Australia—perhaps more than any other country in the world—has been shaped by fire. Not only has fire shaped the landscape, the flora and the history of Australia, it has also shaped the national psyche. Definitive Australian characteristics, such as mateship, practicality and the underdog spirit, have all been forged in the crucible of bushfire.

There is a lot of new work being produced on the symbiotic relationship between fire and the Australian flora. The reproductive cycle of many eucalypts and wattles is dependent on fire. As a regenerative force as well



From Top: Nicole Healy on the way to a fire near Swifts Creek, Jan 2003 • Andrew Wilson-Annan at first training, Nov 2002 • Nicole Healy • Mick Christie • Tony Wade (Lieutenant Gisborne CFA, Roster coordinator)

as a destructive one, bushfire has contributed to a massive proliferation of eucalypt species that dominate the Australian landscape.

The arrival of homo sapiens and the development of 'fire stick farming' deepened this relationship and increased the frequency of fire. Since European settlement, fires have become less frequent but far more damaging. Without the regular patchwork burning by the Aborigines, fuel loads accumulate and lead to major wild fires. (see **chart 01**)

TO STAY OR GO?

As a result of studies conducted after the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983 it was realized that most houses burn as a result of falling embers setting fire to leaf litter or vegetation. Many houses catch fire long after the fire front has passed.

Homeowners who are confronted by an approaching fire must make a critical

SOME MAJOR BUSHFIRES IN AUSTRALIA

Chart 01

DATE	PLACE	DAMAGE
13 Jan 1939 'Black Friday'	Victoria	Fires engulfed much of the State's Mountain Ash forests burning over two million hectares. Seventy-one people lost their lives across Victoria.
7 Feb 1967	Tasmania	A horrific fire incinerated suburbs in Hobart, Tasmania. 1300 houses were destroyed and sixty-two people died.
16 Feb 1983. 'Ash Wednesday'	Victoria and South Australia	Fires claimed seventy-one lives, destroyed some 2300 houses and killed 350,000 livestock. The best efforts of 558 fire brigades, 21,000 fire fighters and twenty-eight aircraft couldn't contain the destruction.
Xmas 2001 – Jan 2002	NSW	More than 100 serious bushfires raged across NSW. Vast stretches of forests were destroyed, including more than sixty per cent of the Royal National Park. More than 11,000 people were evacuated from their homes and 560,000 hectares were burnt out.
17 -18 January 2003	ACT	Canberra threatened; loss of Mt Stromlo Observatory; four lives also lost; destruction of more than 500 homes, and nearly a million hectares of national parklands and state forest.
January – February 2003	NE Victoria	Town of Omeo threatened. Over one million hectares of bush, 3000 kms of fencing, forty homes and 9000 head of stock destroyed. One firefighter drowned in a flash flood caused by storms that ended the fires.

decision. Should they stay and defend their homes or get out early? It is not a decision to be taken lightly and requires the right equipment, knowledge of what to expect, and good nerves.



In *Trial by Fire* we meet Geoff and Jackie Young who live in a bush setting but have taken some sensible precautions. They have installed fire pumps and sprinklers and even have their own little fire truck. Their advance strategies give them some degree of comfort but they are still aware of the huge destructive power of major bushfires. Despite their careful planning, they may still have to evacuate their home if it is threatened.

Top: Chart 01
Above: Kevin Anderson
Right: Mick Christie

Another couple, Steve and Bronwyn Rumble have recently moved to a new house on the outskirts of Woodend. Steve is very worried about the approaching bushfire season and feels he is under-prepared. However, the couple has a fire plan in place and Bronwyn plays an important role in that strategy. As a volunteer firefighter, Steve may be away from home when the fire comes so Bronwyn will have to make the decision of whether to stay or to take the children and go.

Activity—Community Fireguard & Bushfire Blitz





The Country Fire Authority has instituted two very successful programs called Community Fireguard and Bushfire Blitz. These are groups of residents who provide each other with support in defending their homes and properties.

Access the CFA web site (<http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/>) to read more details about these important schemes. You will need to click on the links: Residents>Community Programs.

You can also find out about the precautions you can take before the bushfire season. Go to Residents>Living in the Bush.

VOLUNTEERS

These days no one who wants to volunteer for fire-fighting is turned away. A job is found which suits that person's skills and experience. This allocation of tasks is shown clearly in the documentary as it follows the training of volunteer, Andrew Wilson-Annan. We also see Nicole Healy, the only female member of the Woodend Brigade, conducting the all-important training that will prepare the new recruits for the next bushfire season.

- What motivates people to join the CFA?
- Who trains the new recruits?



From top: CFA Woodend • Julie Wilson-Annan (wife of Andrew) • Andrew Wilson-Annan • Laurie Lovell, day of train fires, 25 Jan 2003

- What skills do the new fire-fighters have to learn?

One particularly interesting sequence shows a procedure called 'Make tanker safe'. This is a critically important practice for a tanker caught in the middle of a bushfire. Write a paragraph to describe how this procedure is carried out and explain some of the risks involved.

Activity: Roles and responsibilities

In *Trial by Fire* we see individuals assuming responsibility for various operations undertaken by the CFA. Although it is a generalized picture and by no means covers all the duties of those particular people, we get some idea of the command structure of the organization.

As you watch the documentary, take note of the tasks carried out by different people then match roles with responsibilities in **Chart 02**

The top level of CFA management



Chart 02

From top: Newham tanker 2 at train fires, 25 Jan 2003 • Chart 02 • Kerry Murphy (Group Officer), Cobaw fire April 2003 • Jaquie Young at bonfire to celebrate end of season, May 2003 • Mick Christie and Kerry Murphy at CFA Dinner, May 2003

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITIES
Group officer	Responsible for other team members during fire-fighting.
Divisional commander	Makes notes of events and communications during bushfires.
Chief Officer, CFA	Issues warnings to public; conducts news conferences.
Penciller	Controls all brigades within a single area.
Crew leader	Has overall command of all brigades during a bushfire.

is at the CFA State Control Centre in East Burwood. It is here that the Victoria-wide situation is monitored and managed. The control room has huge screens illuminated by high tech video projectors. The screens display maps of Victoria with the weather in forty-eight different locations displayed continuously. Fire incidents are also tracked and displayed so that the thirty or so people who work there have up-to-date information at a glance.

The CFA place great emphasis on keeping the public informed and the media liaison section is housed just off the control room. They regularly feed information to the scores of media outlets seeking information about the status of bushfires. During the northeast fires of 2003, these officers played a big role in keeping Victorians informed.



THE NORTHEAST FIRES

As 2002 came to a close, large areas of south east Australia had been declared drought affected. Water storages were at record lows and the expectation of ‘the worst bushfire season in twenty years had created an atmosphere of urgent activity.

In early January of 2003 over a hundred lightning strikes in the alpine areas of Victoria and New South Wales ignited a string of fires. Most of these were extinguished. However, several in difficult terrain got too large to contain. Within a few days more than fifteen thousand hectares of forest was destroyed.

In Victoria, a statewide response was initiated to try to bring these fires under control. Fire trucks from all over the state were dispatched to the north-east and volunteer crew rosters

established to operate them. Typically, a four-man crew would travel to the north-east for a four-day shift to use their tanker on the fire ground. Crews would be driven by their colleagues to a central depot where they would be briefed and bussed up to one of the fire areas.

As the alpine fires expanded, more trucks were sent to fight them. At the height of the Victorian fires more than 5000 firefighters, 600 vehicles and thirty-five aircraft were involved. As the fires spread, they combined into an enormous fire front over a hundred kilometres long. Over a million hectares of bush, three thousand kilometres of fencing and nine thousand head of stock were destroyed.

Although a number of towns were threatened, only forty-one homes were burnt and one firefighter killed—he was drowned in a storm that ended the fires eight weeks after they started.

Activity—Analyse a bushfire

After every major bushfire, the CFA analyses the event and evaluates the way the fire was fought. This assists them to achieve a better understanding and to identify better ways of fighting bushfires in the future.

Watch the segment of *Trial by Fire* where Group Officer Kerry Murphy explains what went wrong during the Ash Wednesday bushfires (you may have to watch it more than once).

- Make a list of the problems he mentions.
- Imagine you are Kerry Murphy and make some suggestions to improve the work of the fire services in the future.

COOPERATION AND TEAMWORK

Themes of cooperation and trust are evident throughout the documentary. Fighting a bushfire requires excellent logistics, highly efficient communication systems and a great deal of teamwork. If any one of these fails, disaster could follow. The CFA is necessarily

organized like an army with a hierarchy and structure of command: vital decisions have to be made at short notice and orders must be carried out immediately. A good example of this is the Woodend Brigade's attempt to stop the train that was causing fires along the track.

A notable feature of the CFA's teamwork is the range of communication devices it utilizes. Telephones and faxes, cell phones and pagers, scanners and wireless, are all used appropriately in particular situations. Understandably, volunteer firefighters have to develop a range of technical expertise.

While cooperation within the organization is essential, collaboration with other services is also important. We learn in the documentary that the CFA works closely with government forestry staff to exchange information and identify problems. As summer encroaches, they develop a detailed knowledge of terrain that will prove invaluable.

Activity—Do you have what it takes to be a firefighter?

One fire-fighter in *Trial by Fire* describes his team as 'bonded like a brotherhood'. Many of the volunteers interviewed for the documentary attempt to describe the reasons they join the CFA. The sense of mateship and loyalty is foremost among them. For some others it is the adrenalin-rush of driving a big truck and battling flames. However, membership of the CFA does not always involve exhausting fire-fighting and grim determination. There are also scenes of social events and spontaneous fun that indicate great friendships and a genuine sense of community.

Through class discussion, develop a list of skills and personal qualities needed by good firefighters. Write your suggestions on the board and rank them in order of importance. Now write a one-page application to join the CFA, addressing all the points you have identified. Be honest in your assessment. Perhaps you don't yet have all the skills and qualities needed, but you can always learn!

Do you have what it takes to be a firefighter?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Invite a member of your local CFA to speak to the class (alternatively, invite a local person who has experienced a bushfire at first hand). Before the visit, make up a list of questions to ask. Record the talk/class interview on audiocassette or video or take some photographs with a digital camera. These pictures can be displayed in the classroom or shared with other classes.

Make a PowerPoint presentation using digital photographs from the interview. It could be supplemented with photographs of recent bushfires (use the Internet resources below to download some of these). Play your presentation to other classes or burn it to CD. It can then be given to the school library, played to a group of parents or sent with an explanation to your local fire brigade.

Web sites & References

Country Fire Authority <http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/>

Museum of Victoria <http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/forest/fire/people.html>

Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires/

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