

Joy and Lyn at Hobbs

Fires on the horizon

From Mt Hobbs fire tower, looking out at Hobbs Lagoon, Joy and Lyn both assess the smoke they can see in the air and decide that it's just the farmer over the ridge burning off before the dry "fire season" really starts. In fact, Lyn adds, it could very likely be a member of her family who works the farm. Nevertheless, they will follow the process and call it in to the on call STT Fire Duty Officer.

Knowing their local community so well and having that insight into what is going on in the world rolling below them is a huge benefit to the role of fire tower operator. It's not just being able to read the landscape and detect changes with an informed eye – it's the ability to provide context and understanding, while maintaining and enforcing the guidelines that keep the community safe, that make the network of fire towers and their operators so effective in the fight against bushfires over the summer months.

Joy admits that the view – the height and the vastness proudly displaying more of Tasmania than not – gives her a sense of place and highlights the importance of the role that the towers play in that community. But of course, the two women underplay their own importance; they are pragmatic farming women who take matters in their stride. And as pragmatic women they value having active fire towers.

Joy recalls: "when they were fighting the battle in Fingal Valley in early 2020, we were up here and able to tell them back at base when the conditions changed. Because we send the condition reports back every hour, and we are watching, we can get a message to the firefighters if anything changes."

Lyn adds, "This means that firefighters can respond ahead of time and it can save them. They won't get caught by a fire."

What the ladies don't really emphasise is just how incredible and, well, heroic this is. If firefighters are fighting a fire and the wind changes suddenly, they can be stuck in what's called a 'dead man zone' – they are literally looking at no way out with fire hurling towards them and a near certain death. The fact that these two ladies – and in fact all fire tower operators – are able to provide early information about wind changes is a true lifesaving act.

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“When there is going to be a wind change everything stops for a second. We know that means it could turn a fire in a moment and suddenly the people on the ground need to be ready to move. We are watching for that and we let them know to be ready for a change. We are ready with the message: ‘Get ready guys’,” Joy explains. Phew.

The only thing to do when things are that dramatic, the women say, is your job. Follow the process, take the readings, pass it on and trust that it helps. “And you just stay here and watch and don’t leave until you’re told to go,” Lyn says.

But most of the time, apart from greeting the occasional motorbike or horse riders, it’s a matter of waiting. And reading lots of novels. “But really light-hearted ones so they’re not too engrossing, because most of all you have to be paying attention and always looking for smoke and fires on the horizon.”



Image: Operator Lyn at Mt Hobbs Tower, East Coast Tasmania



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