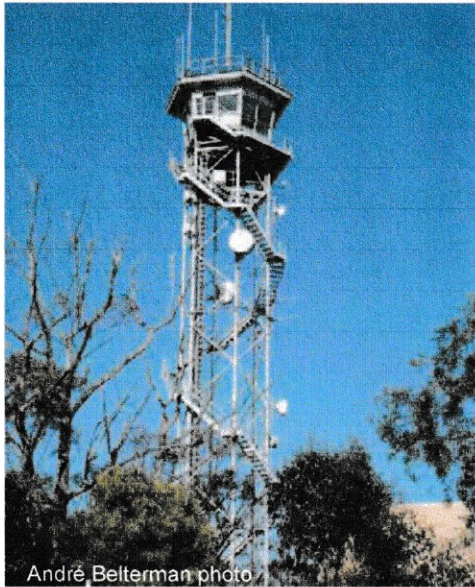




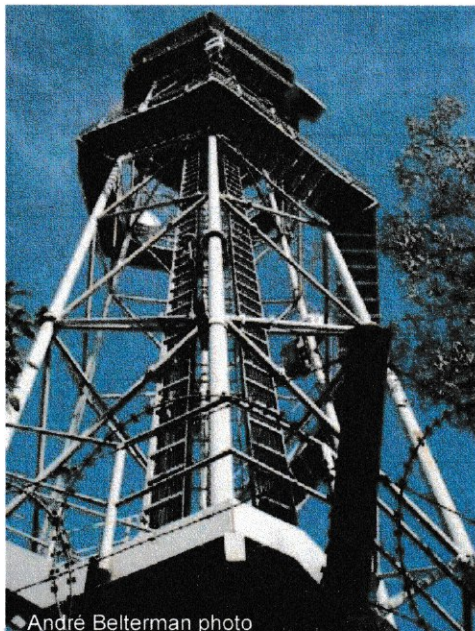
# Reflections from the Fishbowl: Mount Lofty Firetower

by Kev Jordan

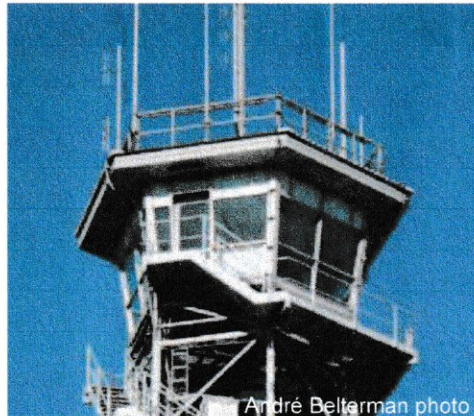


André Belterman photo

Spending two fire seasons (December 01 – April 30) as a spotter in the Mount Lofty Firetower, I came to know this unique perch above the Adelaide Hills. My days began before dawn, winding up Greenhill Road in my wallowing 2-speed Cruise-O-Matic Ford Zephyr, an experience not unlike driving a well-loved lounge chair through the cool and still morning air. The ascent up the 35-metre spiral staircase was its own ritual—the metal steps echoing dully, providing the bass rhythm to the slowly loudening dawn chorus. On good mornings, if I was feeling energetic, I'd challenge myself to run up, trying to better my time of before. This would seriously get the Tower responding, swaying back and forth.



André Belterman photo



André Belterman photo

Into the Fishbowl at the top, I watch daybreak spill over the canopy of gum trees [common name for eucalyptus trees in Australia] and flow across the Adelaide Plains, windows of tall city buildings reflecting the first light of a new day. To the south, the tide of light would slowly flood along the Fleurieu Peninsula, across the ocean stretching out toward distant shores, Kangaroo Island emerging on the horizon. Yorke Peninsula appeared from the ocean to the west, and on particularly clear days, even the coast of Eyre Peninsula would become visible above the horizon, occasionally forming a mirage accentuated by the heat haze of summer. Life played out below - koalas ascending to the canopy to slumber the day away in a stoned stupor, kangaroos moving deeper into the bush to do likewise, early joggers, walkers, and couples sharing secret rendezvous, entirely unaware of the Eyes of the Sky above.

Settling in with my co-worker for ten hours or more, depending on the day's Fire Rating, I do a quick mental refresh of landmarks, distances and general orientation. Then with binoculars in hand, I scan 360 for any telltale wisps of smoke. All good at this hour but with a North wind and mid-40C forecasted I need to be extra-vigilant today. I know to distinguish by colour whether a sighting is a Dust-devil, grass or bush fire, rubbish or car fire. Once sighted, bearings are taken, distance determined using known landmarks and topographic maps. This information is then radioed to CFS Command Centre who in turn dispatch a fire crew.

Depending on the season, up to 250 incidents may be reported - everything from backyard barbecues

gone smoky to the first wisp of a fire that could turn catastrophic in a matter of minutes. I remember one occasion being ordered to stand down and evacuate ahead of an advancing fire front whose origins we'd spotted in Mt Osmond. The winds drove this fire at great speed towards Mt Lofty. We could see gumtrees 100m ahead of the fire front spontaneously burst into flame as their oils heated. Visibility was greatly reduced by dust and smoke. "Leave everything and get out and off the mountain now", came over the radio. We returned later to find the steel tower scorched, the 2000o C rated windows of our fishbowl shattered and all contents melted.

On any day, the hours may pass quickly or slowly scanning for signs, watching wedgies [wedge-tailed eagles] float up from below to peer eye-to-eye - a unique perspective provided from our vantage point, waiting for that storm front we've seen advancing from the SW over the past couple of hours knowing that when the wind hits we will be rocking and oscillating like clinging to the mast of a ship in a restless and confused sea. Though many people below may not realize we were above them looking out over a huge swathe of our region, we were recognised by many local businesses - a three-course Christmas meal and beer sent up from the Crafers Pub, the local radio station dedicating "All Along The Watchtower" to those keeping vigil above.

As the sun headed to the horizon and the threat of the day's heat diminished, I'd don my gloves and accept the dare to slide down all 35 metres of the handrail, wobble dizzily to the Zephyr and float home down Greenhill Road.

## Addendum - November 2025

(by Warren Netherton)

While touring Australia this past November I was delighted to visit Mt. Lofty, located in Cleland National Park. Unfortunately, there was no view that foggy morning, but I could make out the Mt. Lofty Fire Tower. It is impressive to say the least, 35m (115 ft.) tall and constructed of structural pipe.

A locked chain link fence prevents curiosity seekers or lookout enthusiasts from gaining access. In fact, the picture from earlier years shows razor wire



Mt. Lofty is located 9 miles SE of the Adelaide city center. The circle is the approximate huge viewing area from which fires were observed and called in from Mt. Lofty.

topping the fence. It's undoubtedly necessary as the tower is only nine miles from Adelaide, population 1.4 million.

By chance, a few days later I met Kev Jordan who worked as a lookout on Mt. Lofty in 1982 and 1984 when employed with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Summer in Australia is opposite of summer in the US. and his season on the tower was November to April. So most of the 1982 season, for instance, occurred in 1983.

It was quite interesting to learn about the tower and his time on it. The cab is air conditioned; windows slant and do not open. Of course it sways. In Kev's words, *"The sway was likely negligible in terms of measurement (probably <math><0.5\text{m}</math>), but the motion made it feel significant."*

Mt. Lofty is not a live-in tower, though two people worked in it at the same time. *"There were three people (including myself) contracted for the fire season. Two would be rostered on each day. Hours per day could be variable depending on weather conditions and forecasted fire rating."*

I inquired about the tremendous view 200 km (125mi.) x 300 km (186 mi.)! *"Within the ~200km radius, accuracy for fire locations was pretty good. Once beyond that radius, though we could still often spot the signs of fire, pin-pointing location was often not as accurate. Obviously the daily weather conditions (e.g., heat haze, dust, etc.) at times obstructed the clarity of the view."*

It's fun to be a ham radio operator on a lookout and I was curious if he was one too. Not anymore, but surprisingly it was a requirement when he worked on Mt. Lofty. *"Yes, we were licensed operators. I think there were four radios in all - one for CFS (Country Fire Service), one for National Parks, one for Emergency Services (Police, etc.), one*

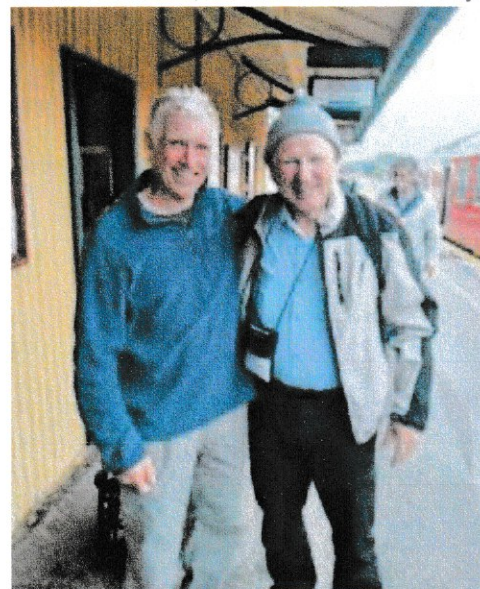
*that was used for communication between all agencies in emergency events."*

The fire described when he evacuated Mt. Lofty was the Ash Wednesday II bushfire of February 1983. The devastation statistics are staggering: Lost - 75 people, 3700 buildings, 340,000 sheep, 18,000 cattle, incalculable wildlife. 1.3 million acres burned.

I was curious if that fire ended his season on the lookout after everything in the cab was destroyed. Kev said, *"After a Safety Inspection on the structure itself, the Tower was back in operation within a day or two. Damaged equipment necessary for operation was quickly replaced."*

Today the tower is operated on high fire risk days by Country Fire Service volunteers.

After employment with the National Park and Wildlife Service, Kev made his living erecting all manners of platforms, walkways, and other such structures high in tree canopies around the world. They are used for scientific, recreational, and filming pursuits. Today he resides at home in Goolwa, South Australia, 50 miles from Mt. Lofty.



Former lookouts an ocean apart exchange notes on tower life. Kev Jordan of Mt. Lofty, South Australia (left), Warren Netherton, Spot Mountain, Idaho (right).

In gathering material for this article I contacted André Belterman, FFLA member in Australia, who provided the Mt. Lofty pictures from his very detailed website, where he chronicles data and information on Australian lookouts: [www.firelookoutsdownunder.com](http://www.firelookoutsdownunder.com).

**Warren Netherton**  
Spot Mountain Lookout, 2025  
Bitterroot National Forest, Idaho