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The Mt Rouse fire tower

By [Jeremy Lee](#)

In these days of satellites and 3G networks it's funny to think someone sitting up a tower is still a highly effective way of helping to manage bushfires over the summer season.

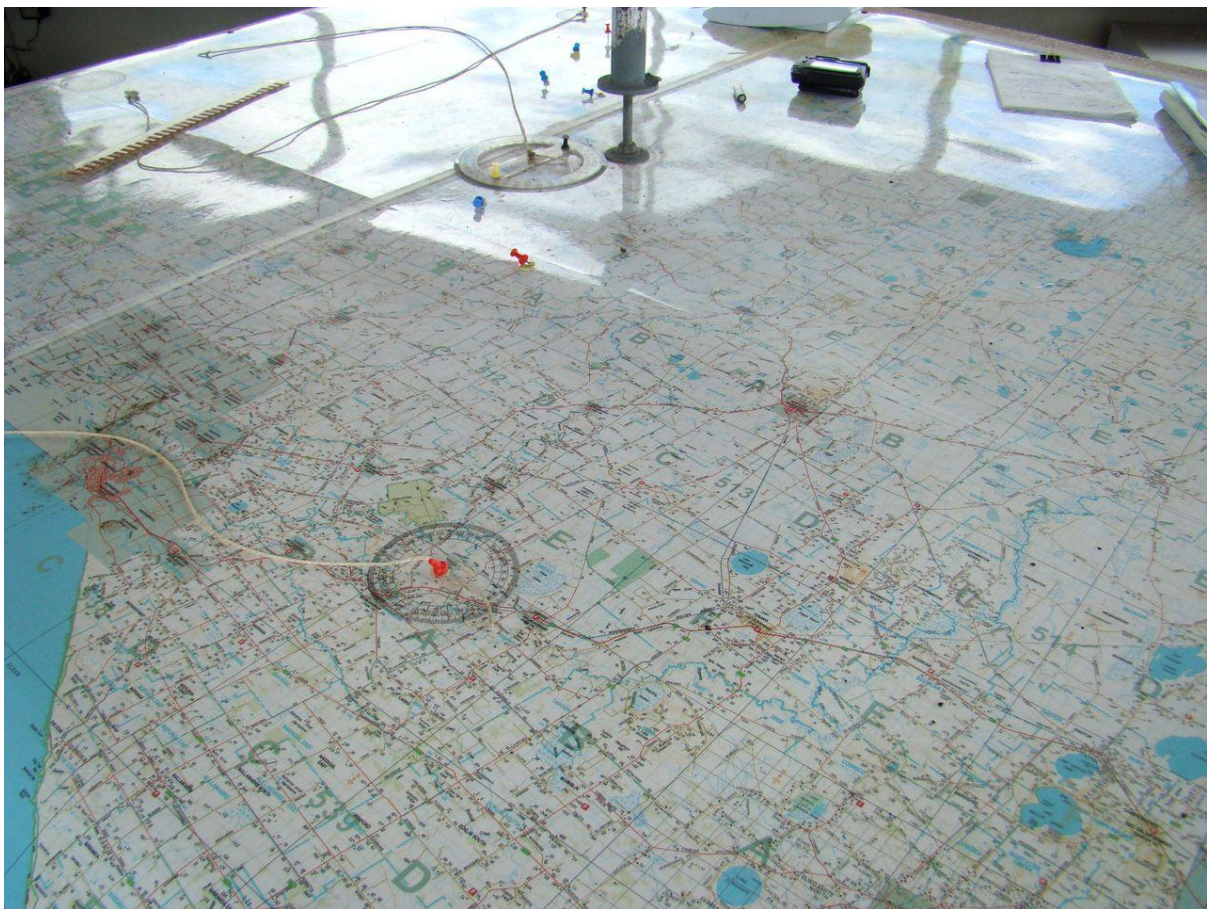


It takes 129 steps to climb from the Mt Rouse carpark to the fire tower, and then another 50 steps to reach the top of the tower itself, but once you get there you can really appreciate the role of this facility in the fire season.

Gazing across the landscape from the room at the top of the tower provides a commanding view of the relatively flat surroundings on all sides - on one side you can see across to the Grampians, and on the other, almost as far as the sea. Mt Rouse itself is 389 meters above sea level, and the tower puts you another 12 meters above that allowing you to see around 25 to 30k's in all directions on a clear day.

The tower is fairly exposed on top of the hill and apparently gets a bit of a wobble up in high winds. The tower is always manned on days of total fire ban, and can be manned at other times if the CFA's index suggests the conditions warrant having someone up there. A typical shift runs from 11am to around 6pm, although it can and will be manned for as long as necessary on particularly bad days. It also plays a weather role in times of fire danger,

passing on information about wind speeds and other things to help track fronts as they pass through the area.





Apart from the relatively new weather station, the rest of the tower's facilities are fairly basic - most of the room is taken up with a large laminated map on a table which mirrors the landscape below. A large old compass sits above the map. A couple of protractors are pinned to the map where this tower and the other towers around the area are, with a piece of string extending from the centre of each protractor. When a fire is spotted, it's cross referenced with another tower, the pieces of string are extended in the appropriate direction, and the fire is located where the strings meet. It's a surprisingly simple but accurate way of pinpointing fires to within 100meters which helps the crews get there fast.

Jim confesses sometimes things can get a little tedious up the tower but he resists the temptation to bury his head in a good book, preferring instead to distract himself with short things like newspaper articles. He says the really hot days tend to pass more quickly because everyone is more alert. He hasn't got the comfiest of surroundings either - a small bar fridge is tucked under the desk in one corner, and of the two chairs in the room - one could do with a serious bit of reupholstering, and the other, while offering more comfort, has probably seen better days. I didn't venture to ask him what happens when he needs to go to the toilet but I guess in those situations he makes his way down the 50 steps and back up again...!