

Fire-spotting at Mt Useful

John Farnan VK6AFA
RAOTC member No 1409

This short article does not have a lot of radio content but it should give readers an idea of how forest fires were detected and reported on in Victoria in the 1950s. I had successfully built a ten valve, multi band receiver with plug-in coils from a *Radio and Hobbies* circuit when I was at high school, but there is no doubt that the ability to use a transceiver while fire-spotting whetted my appetite to get my amateur radio licence in the future.

As a 20 year old engineering student my university fees and some other expenses were met by a Commonwealth scholarship. Other living expenses had to be met by my family. I had learned of well paid summer jobs fire-spotting for the Forests Commission of Victoria so I successfully applied for a job based at Heyfield in Gippsland, commencing in December 1952.

I discovered that my job location was to be on 4,700 ft (1,433 m) Mt Useful on the southern edge of the Great Dividing Range, about 160 km east of Melbourne, and I was to be the first resident fire-spotter at that site. My friend Aub and I packed up our luggage for about a 10 week stay, and caught a train to Rosedale where we were picked up in a truck and driven to Heyfield.

Aub was going to Mt Skene which was about 60 km further north of Mt Useful. We were told we could not go to the site on that day. I am not sure what happened to Aub, but I was dropped off at an empty hut outside the town to spend the night. They may have decided that this skinny looking 'uni' student did not look tough enough, or was not mentally prepared for what was ahead, so it might well have been a test.

There was only a chain wire mesh bed in the hut with no straw palliasse or pillow. It was so uncomfortable on the bed that I slept that night on the wooden floor with my knapsack as a pillow. The next day we loaded up all my gear, plus a similar bed, a palliasse, and numerous tools, into a Land Rover. The resident Forest Officer, Val Cleary, who was the boss of the office, then drove the 50 km with me to set up the fire-spotting station at Mt Useful for the first time.

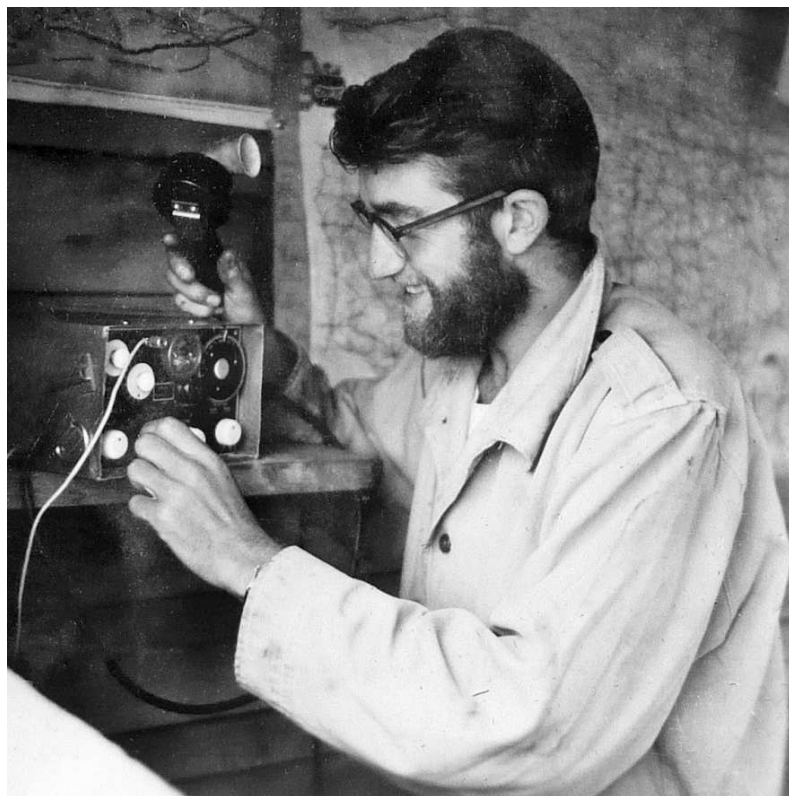
We passed through forest which showed evidence of the 1939 bushfires. The last few kilometres of the trip was a very steep and slippery jeep track with broken shale, and I was asked to get out and sit on the front mudguard to hold the wheel in better contact with the track (there were no occupational health and safety regulations then). At another point we could not get traction at all and had to use the electric winch on the front of the vehicle to pull us past a particularly steep point.

The top of the peak had been bulldozed to remove the snow gums to improve visibility, and the accommodation was a one roomed hut with an open fire for cooking and keeping warm, with a sheet metal hearth chimney at one end. There was plenty of snow gum firewood from the site clearing but there was no stove. Lighting was by kerosene pressure lantern, and there was a tank for rain water.

There was no tower and the lookout point was a wooden post on top of a cairn of stones about 2 m high located 20 m from the hut. There was also an ex-coast watcher's telescope which could be taken out of the hut and screwed onto a base to allow bearings to be taken on fires.

The 30 metre long horizontal wire radio antenna had blown down in the snows and storms of the previous winter, so Val Cleary climbed each of the two masts to a height of about 10 m with a hammer and a fistful of 125 mm nails, hammering them in one by one to use as footrests as he climbed.

Two way communications with the base at Heyfield was by a Forests Commission designed¹ high frequency radio supplied with power by a very large and heavy dry battery. The specially designed battery contained a 1.4 volt section for the valve filaments, and a 90 volt section for the high tension supply. It had one



A youthful John Farnan operating the Forests Commission HF radio at Mt Useful. Note the war disposals' carbon microphone in John's right hand.



The one-roomed fire watcher's hut on Mt Useful in 1952. The photos for this article were taken with a Kodak box camera.

cable and plug to connect it to the transceiver which had a front panel about 12 cm x 20 cm and was about 20 cm deep. There was a built-in loudspeaker, and the carbon microphone looked like an army disposals' unit.

The set was crystal controlled and transmitted an amplitude modulated signal on 2.612 MHz. The antenna could be loaded with one knob on the front panel. The radio also had limited short wave reception capability so I later discovered it was possible to receive ABC radio and also the Voice of America at good strength. I enjoyed the news and fine music session presented by Dr A E Floyd on the ABC on

Sunday nights, and a weekly jazz session by presenter Willis Conover from the Voice of America. I also found out that in the early morning I could sometimes have short chats with another friend who was also working as a fire spotter near Tallangatta, 200 km to the north.

The job required me to scan the surrounding forest area and report every two hours in daylight, weekends included, if there was a fire risk. There was no requirement to report fires in the area out on the plains under the responsibility of the Country Fire Authority. My visual horizon at sea level was about 95 miles (153 km).

I worked most weekends and was paid penalty rates. Food which I ordered and paid for was delivered weekly on Fridays, together with the mail. However, as there was no refrigeration, I used up most of my meat in the two or three days immediately after the delivery.

Most of the fires in my area were due to lightning strikes and were located by triangulation using a report from Mt Skene.

I reported on many fires, and enjoyed the solitude of my ten week stay.

Note

1. I was told that the transceiver was designed by Mr Geoff Weste, a Forester with the Forests Commission.

ar