

FIRE
AUSTRALIA

Fighting fire from the middle of nowhere

EVERY day at 10 am for the past four summers, Dean Wheeler has emerged from a humble two-room hut and climbed a 30 metre steel tower atop Mount Useful in the southern Victorian alps.

From his perch high above the treeline of the 1434-metre mountain his job is to carefully scan the full 360 degree view at least once every 15 minutes over the next eight hours. Without thinking he will look many more times. He is, of course, watching for smoke.

Mount Useful is one of 87 fire spotting towers controlled by the Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). In an age when fire fighting hardware is becoming increasingly sophisticated, when computer and satellite technologies are play-

ing a greater role in urban and rural fire suppression, the idea of someone sitting up a pole looking for smoke seems almost anachronistic.

But according to the DCNR's chief fire officer, Rod Incoll, Victoria's network of fire spotting towers is integral to the department's ability to combat fire. In Victoria, a combination of towers and aircraft is currently used. The use of satellite fire spotting is also being examined.

Mr Incoll says that Western Australian authorities had abandoned towers in favour of aircraft spotting alone in recent years. "They are now saying that they cannot rely on aircraft alone," he says. "We are convinced at this stage that the air-plus-tower mix is appropriate."

Not all of the DCNR's towers are

staffed for the entire summer and only a couple of observers actually live on site. Most are within easy driving distance of a town and are often only occupied on high fire danger days.

Dean Wheeler goes up his tower seven days a week until the fire season has passed. It is lonely and, at times, dull work. While conceding that "nothing very spectacular happens up here", Mr Wheeler, 26, says the job is what you make of it. "If you want it to be boring, it will be boring," he says.

The one thing you could never tire of is the spectacular view from his "office". From the tower, you can see some of the most spectacular country in Victoria. To the west is Lake Mountain, near Marysville, north is Mount Buller, to the east are the gas rigs out in Bass Strait and south is Wilsons Promontory. Dean concedes that after looking at it closely day in, day out for several months, "you sort of take it for granted for a while".

Mount Useful, an hour's drive into the mountains north of Heyfield, near Traralgon in Gippsland, is one of the more remote fire towers operated by DCNR. Above the snow line, it is on the track miners took last century from Port Albert across the mountains to the Walthalla-Aberfeldy goldfields.

Dean Wheeler's nearest accessible neighbour is 50 kilometres away down a dusty dirt road. Aside from the "tucker run" once a week, he will be lucky to see anyone for several days. Occasionally he makes the long drive down to Heyfield for an overnight stay before heading back out first thing in the morning to go up the tower for another shift. Last year only about 20 people visited the site over the three months it was occupied.

But Dean says he is far from lonely. The Mount Useful tower is the central radio clearing station of the area. The radio chatters away most of the day, carrying messages from other towers and department bases and vehicles.

In the course of a few minutes he



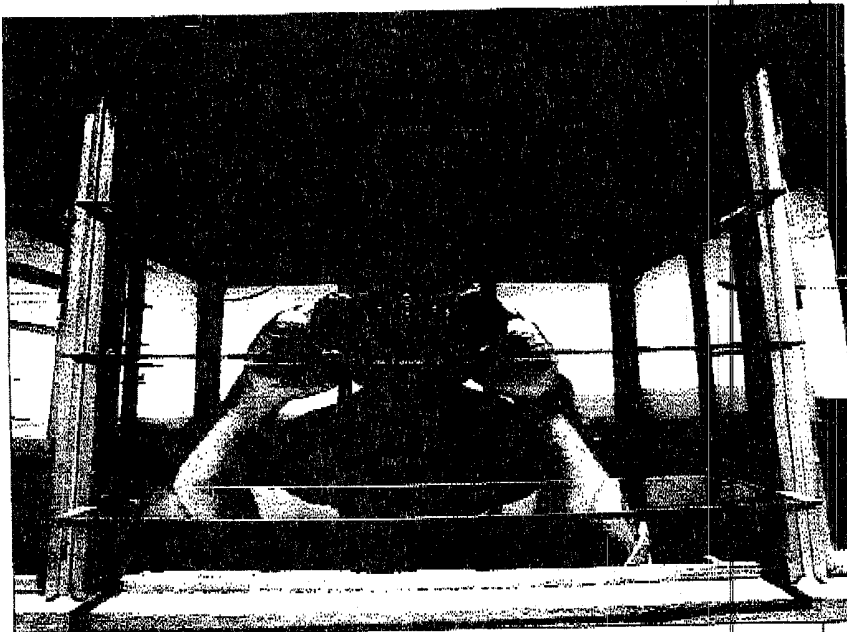
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talks to a fire tower at Mount Matlock, near Woods Point, another at the Pinnacles, near Dargo, and a DCNR base at Briagolong near Sale. "There is always something to do here because this is the main fire tower for the area," Mr Wheeler says.

When he is not on duty, he spends some of his time bushwalking or fly fishing in the nearby streams. Aside from the hut, a nearby dugout is provided for his own protection should a fire burn up towards the peak.

Dean Wheeler lives locally and his knowledge of the surrounding area is intimate. He has walked through much of it. He can readily identify locations and the difference between smoke and dust cloud thrown up by a distant vehicle.

During the 1993-94 season, he spotted a mere nine fires in three months. In his first two days up the tower for the 1994-95 season, he spotted three. One was in a remote part of the Wonnangatta valley, west of Dargo. Helicopters ferried department fire-



fighters in and the blaze, believed to have been started by deer shooters, was quickly extinguished.

The fire spotter's tools of trade are simple enough: maps, a compass and a simple plumb line hanging from the ceiling of the tower hut to help take the bearing. A second tower, notified by radio, takes another bearing of any sighting. "Where our bearings cross, theoretically that is where the fire is," Dean explains.

Conditions up the tower are rudimentary. There is an enclosed hut, radio, map table and chair. There is also a transistor and pile of magazines. Mr Wheeler takes his lunch up with him and this year has added a mo-

bile telephone (recharged from a solar panel) to his weaponry against tedium. On the walls are recorded the names and work dates of previous observers. Visitors brave enough to scale the tower are also encouraged to pencil an entry on the wall in "Visitors' Corner".

While the temperature up the tower remains mild on even the hottest of days, wind is a problem. Wind speeds of up to 120 kilometres an hour have been recorded.

But lightning is the tower observer's greatest fear - a prosaic notice on the inside of the tower hut door advises that "without fail this tower is to be vacated by the observer when lightning occurs within one mile of the tower". Last season Dean was up the tower when an unheralded lightning bolt struck a clump of trees within a few metres of the tower base. "It was the scariest thing that has happened to me up here," he says.

It is after a lightning storm that fire spotting from a tower comes into its own. Often several hours after the storm has passed, the tell-tale puffs of smoke will rise from a shattered tree on a remote mountain. And on another mountain, someone up a tower will be taking a bearing ...

John Schauble

John Schauble is a journalist with The Sunday Age newspaper in Melbourne.

Photographs courtesy of Craig Sillitoe, The Sunday Age.

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