

sunday[extra]

THE DAY CHRISTMAS BURNT

The resort spot of
Wye River becomes a
wild inferno on
Christmas Day.
Picture: TONY MALY

JUST AS HOLIDAYMAKERS WERE SITTING DOWN TO A FESTIVE LUNCH, MANY
HAD TO FLEE TO THE COAST AS FLAMES ROARED THROUGH THE BUSH

It started with a bolt from the sky. As the mercury soared beyond 40C last Saturday, thunderstorms raged over the Great Otway National Park.

Jolts of lightning battered the area, including a single strike on the Jamieson Track — about 8km west of Lorne — that sparked a bushfire.

Initially, the flames did not spread too far. By Christmas Eve, the fire had razed just 250ha of forest, a small area compared to many bushfires.

But the hilly terrain was proving to be a nightmare for firefighters.

They called in waterbombing aircraft to help as they watched the

TOM MINEAR

weather forecasts and worried about the winds picking up.

By Christmas morning, their worst fears were realised.

Embers started spotting beyond containment lines, and within minutes the bushfire had turned into Victoria's most destructive blaze since Black Saturday.

Fire authorities made the call to evacuate Wye River and Separation Creek at midday.

Just as holidaymakers and permanent residents were taking their turkeys out of the oven, police started knocking on their doors

with dire warnings. An evacuation plan had been in the works for several days, but once it was put into action, there was no time to waste, lunch or not.

Tom Jacobs was one of those to quickly jump into his car and head for safety.

"We were about to have lunch and then we saw smoke behind the property," Mr Jacobs said.

"It kept on coming up bigger and bigger, and then it turned into a war zone with four choppers bombing directly overhead.

"It had all been perfectly fine and then it went dark and it was like volcano skies."

He made several videos on the road out of Separation Creek, posting them on Twitter on Friday afternoon.

The spectacular beachside town was blanketed in a huge cloud of thick black smoke and surrounded by intense flames.

Mr Jacobs later shared videos of the desperate waterbombing mission to save the towns, and at 10.30pm he found out that his home was still standing.

Dozens of others were not so lucky.

While weekend visitors sped home to Melbourne, those who live in Wye River and Separation Creek

took shelter at relief centres in Apollo Bay and Torquay.

Instead of Christmas leftovers, they tucked into pizza and water for dinner. They slept in beds provided by the Salvation Army.

And when they woke up on Boxing Day, they wondered if they would ever see their homes again.

CRAIG Lapsley says Wye River is a beautiful beachside getaway, and he is not alone in that opinion. But the Emergency Management Commissioner's visit to it on Christmas Eve was strictly business.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

sunday[extra]

'I WALKED OUT WITH ABOUT FIVE ITEMS OF CLOTHING, MY WEDDING RINGS, PHONE AND CHARGERS - EVERYTHING ELSE IS GONE'

WE LOST

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

"I was briefed by the captain of the fire brigade about exactly what the fire would do," Mr Lapsley said. "It was a matter of which day it was going to do it."

Christmas Day was clearly going to be hot. But while total fire bans were in place, Mr Lapsley said the fire danger did not appear to be extreme, and he was happy with the control work done by firefighters.

"However, they said it will all be about wind," Mr Lapsley recalled.

"It'll be about wind that picks up a fire, picks up an ember and puts it over the control lines ... That actually happened on Friday."

"It was a little bit premature in the sense that we expected it not to be on a day that it was 32C with wind speeds of 40, 50, 60km/h. We thought it would have been a day of 40+C with 80, 90, 100km/h winds. But it happened."

By 9am, the temperature had already topped 27C and northerly winds reached 33km/h.

Spot fires started beyond the containment lines and the bushfire blew wildly out of hand. By Christmas night, the CFA said the blaze was so powerful that it was creating its own weather conditions.

Fire authorities now believe it's a bushfire that could still be burning in February.

While fires have ravaged the Otway Ranges before — particularly on Ash Wednesday — Wye River had escaped unscathed for decades.

Mr Lapsley said the only significant fires that



impacted the township were in 1939 and 1962.

Now 2015 has been added to the history books.

BUILDING records show there are 334 homes in Wye River and Separation Creek.

But only 80 properties are permanent households and

one of them belonged to the Maly family.

Tony Maly built his Durumbil Ave home with his father in 1957. The family used the property as a holiday getaway for decades until he and wife Lesley moved in permanently two years ago.

They were set to enjoy Christmas lunch together this

year with their pet dog Occy and cat Muppet.

But Mr Maly is a CFA volunteer. And like so many others, he gave up his Christmas Day to fight the fire on the front line.

Little did he know that he would watch the home he built from scratch go up in flames. "We've lost everything,"

Mrs Maly said. "I walked out with about five items of clothing, my wedding rings, phone and chargers — everything else is gone."

"I had just put the turkey in the oven when we were told to evacuate. It was surreal ... I was walking down the driveway just thinking, this could be the last time I see my house."

Her husband made the "gut-wrenching" phone call yesterday morning to tell his wife the fate of their home.

Occy escaped with Mrs Maly but Muppet was lost. Priceless sentimental items, including the couple's wedding photos, could not be salvaged.

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EVERYTHING



Lesley Maly and Occy stayed safe in Apollo Bay as husband Tony, a CFA volunteer, battled the blaze that destroyed their home. He also took these photos (above left and right). Main picture: MITCH BEAR

the hill above Wye River, at least another dozen homes were destroyed.

The *Sunday Herald Sun* visited yesterday as firefighters continued to extinguish spot fires in the smouldering street.

Burnt gum trees and branches were still falling, sending loud cracks echoing through the deserted streets.



Broken power lines littered the roads and ash embers flew through the air.

A koala lay dead at the foot of one driveway after the tree it was hiding in caught alight and crashed to the ground.

Such was the sheer intensity of the heat that it was hard to see anything beyond twisted iron roofing and collapsed brickwork in the devastated properties.

Residents had fled in a hurry but it wasn't hard to imagine what they had left behind.

Children's toys melted into an unrecognisable mess before they were even unwrapped.

Hams scorched before they were carved. Bonbons burnt before families could crack them and swap jokes.

Three Metropolitan Fire Brigade crews roamed the area yesterday, fulfilling the

demoralising duty of assessing which homes had withstood the carnage.

By late yesterday, Mr Lapsley confirmed at least 116 homes destroyed — 98 properties had been destroyed at Wye River and 18 at Separation Creek.

The Insurance Council of Victoria declared the Great Ocean Rd fire to be a catastrophe and said it anticipated claims of more than \$25 million.

But as the extent of the damage emerged, authorities confirmed that no lives had been lost and just three firefighters injured.

In the face of such destruction, it was cause for celebration.

"We always say primacy of life is the critical issue in the state," Mr Lapsley said.

"They've walked away from



a fire that had every potential to be a killer. That's success."

Premier Daniel Andrews expressed similar sentiments when he met with locals at the Apollo Bay relief centre.

"We've had no loss of life," Mr Andrews said. "That's something that we can be very proud of. We can rebuild houses, of course, but things can be much worse than that."

FOR much of Christmas Day, it looked like the bushfire was going to burn all the way to Lorne.

A haunting emergency siren rang out on the deserted foreshore as those who had packed the popular town raced to safety.

Those emergency warnings were lifted on Boxing Day when heavy rain gave firefighters the boost they needed, slowing the flames.

The moment the skies opened brought relief — but Mr Lapsley warned it would only be temporary.

"This fire doesn't go away," Mr Lapsley said. "This fire is a fire that will remain with potential to burn in January and February."

"The forecast for a long, hot, dry summer is there. The fact that we've had rain today across the state will not dramatically change anything. It'll be a short-term relief for fire conditions."

Fire authorities met with the concerned organisers of the popular Falls Festival yesterday as they sought to decide if the popular music event should go ahead in Erskine Falls above Lorne. A decision was due last evening.

The mercury is expected to soar beyond 30C again on New Year's Eve but early

forecasts suggest there won't be strong winds to cause another extreme fire day.

Thousands of other Victorians weighed up their holiday travel plans to the surf coast as Mr Lapsley asked for care and caution.

"Everything is available to burn and that will be the critical period," he said.

"Don't underestimate what that means for Victoria on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day."

"We have fire in the landscape that will not be extinguished in its totality and on the wrong day with the wrong conditions it will impact on other communities."

Incident controller Alistair Drayton also preached caution at a community meeting in Torquay, but he encouraged holidaymakers not to abandon the area.

"Lorne is open for business," Mr Drayton said. "It's summer, it's tourism."

We're very conscious of trying to reinstate Lorne as quickly as we could."

YOU can't mistake the smells of Christmas Day.

There's the memorable scent of pine that fills your nostrils as your family tears open presents around the tree.

There's aroma of the turkey when you take it out of the oven. The mouth-watering pudding that you can't resist, no matter how many second helpings you had during main course.

But for thousands of Victorians, this year's Christmas will be remembered by the acrid smell of smoke.

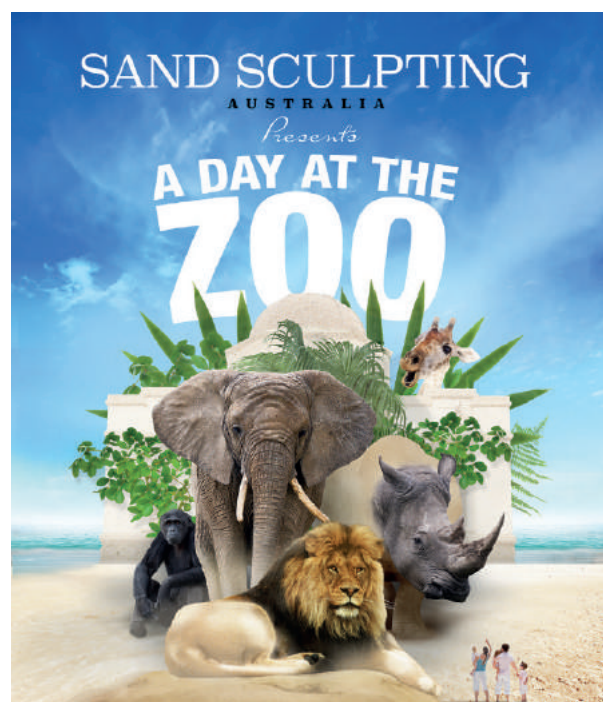
Where there was smoke, there was fire.

And where there was fire, there was a 2200ha path of devastation that will forever scar the picturesque Great Ocean Rd coastline.

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Twitter: @tminear

ADDITIONAL REPORTING FROM
ANDREA HAMBLIN, LUCIE MORRIS-MARR, MARGARET LINLEY



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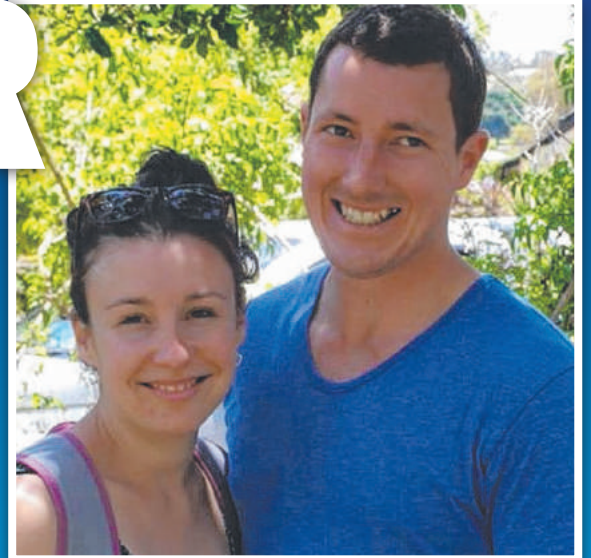
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Herald Sun

MURDER OF A BRIDE

SPECIAL
REPORTS,
PAGES 6-9



ACCUSED KILLER A
SCHOOL CLEANER
AND A LONER

POLICE
SEARCH
FOR BODY

TEARS AND
GRIEF FOR LOST
STEPHANIE



Heartbroken dad says mum wouldn't have deliberately hurt their children, declaring ...

SHE LOVED OUR KIDS

THE heartbroken dad of the three children who died when a car driven by their mum plunged into a lake has come to her defence, saying: "They were her world."

Devastated Joseph Manyang said his partner, Akon Guode — who is in police custody and who was interviewed by homicide squad detectives last night — was a good mum who loved her children.

"She is a very good mother," he said.

"She loved the kids. She took care of the kids. I don't think she planned to do anything."

**REBEKAH CAVANAGH, WES
HOSKING AND JON KAILA**

"Exactly what has happened, we don't know. I'm still believing she's innocent."

Last night CCTV footage emerged of the family's car heading north on Manor Lakes Boulevard in Wyndham Vale before making a U-turn, going closer to the lake.

The victims on Wednesday afternoon were named as son Bol, aged 1, four-year-old son Madit and his twin sister, Anger.

CONTINUED PAGE 2



Akon Guode (left) with daughter Awel as a baby; twins Anger and Madit (above), and baby Bol (below).

TEAMS, TIPS AND SUPERCOACH



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WEATHER PAGE 36

TODAY
MIN 9
MAX 20
Mostly sunny



TOMORROW
MAX 21
Partly cloudy



SUNDAY
MAX 18
Possible morning drizzle

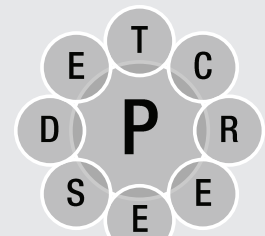


MONDAY
MAX 20
Sunny



WEDNESDAY LOTTO:
Draw 3441. 24, 33, 20, 16, 30, 42.
Supps: 41, 1. Div 1: Jackpots to \$1 million.
Div 2: \$8,800.05. Div 3: \$553.90. Div 4: \$29.10. Div 5: \$17.90. Div 6: \$12.70.

ARE YOU A QUIZ MASTER?



In making a word each letter may be used only once, and the centre letter must be included. No slang, hyphens, apostrophes or plurals ending in 's'. Minimum four letters. Good 17, Very good 27, Excellent 37

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION
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TRAGEDY IN A LAKE



A devoted mum

Relatives tell of struggles to cope

TOM MINEAR

THE mum who drove into the lake had a tough life but was devoted to her children, friends said yesterday.

Akon Guode, 35, from north Sudan, married there and had three children to her first husband — Akoi Chabiet, 18, Ayan Chabiet, 14, and Ellie Chabiet, 12. But, tragedy struck when her husband, a soldier, was killed fighting in the brutal civil war.

Magdalena Acieny, the niece of Ms Guode's second partner, Joseph Manyang, said Ms Guode had battled through that period of her life.

"She's had a really difficult life, it's been hard," the 24-year-old said.

Ms Guode decided to move to Kenya after her husband's death. Then, with the help of her brother-in-law, Dieu Paul, she came to Australia in 2005.

She originally settled in Sydney before moving to Melbourne, where her aunt lived alongside other members of the Sudanese community.

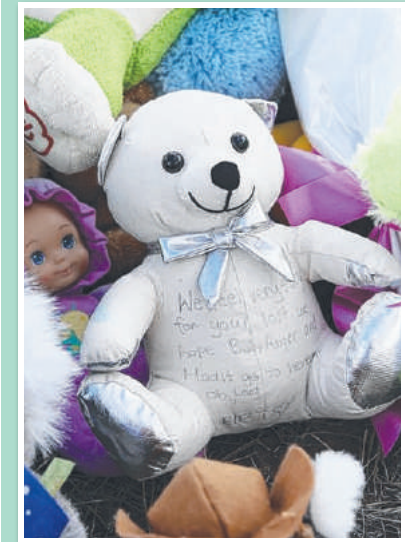
Ms Guode started a relationship with Mr Manyang in Sunshine in 2008. He is a distant cousin of her first husband. Relatives said their relationship had been arranged as part of a cultural tradition.

They had four children together, who were in the car when it ploughed into the lake: Awel, 5, twins Madit and Anger, 4, and Bol, 1.

Awel — the sole surviving child from the lake plunge — was last night in a serious condition in the Royal Children's Hospital.

Relatives said Mr Manyang worked as a postman and described him as a supportive and caring father who loved his children.

His niece, Amani Alier, 16, said the family could do nothing to console him. "He's shattered, he couldn't stop crying, his nose was bleeding," Ms Alier said.



Friends and relatives (top) gather at the Guode family home. Many people left tributes at the scene of the tragedy (above) as Awel Guode (right) remains in hospital. Pictures: MARK STEWART, PAUL LOUGHNAN

The traumatised father briefly visited the lake yesterday as police worked to pull the family's Toyota Kluger out.

Ms Alier said the children were rarely seen without their beaming smiles.

"He loved those kids."

"They were such happy kids, especially the twins," Ms

Alier said. "Whenever we came over, they'd always run to the door to see us."

She said they loved to play soccer and to draw, leaving their colourful drawings littered around the family home.

"They were so close to each other. It's going to be too much for her (Awel)," Ms Alier said.

Ms Acieny, Mr Manyang's niece, said the family were praying for Awel.

"I don't know how to explain this to my children," she said.

She said Ms Guode, a stay-at-home mum, had struggled

in recent times, but she did not elaborate.

"She's been happy. She was just OK," Ms Acieny said.

"She loved her children. Maybe she was depressed for other things but she loved her children."

Missy Wiw, Ms Guode's sister-in-law, said: "They're (the children) in a better place now."

She said the shocked family were trying to understand how and why Ms Guode's car ended up in the lake.

"We're trying to find out how she lost control of the car

and what really happened," Ms Wiw said. "No one really knows, only the driver does."

Dozens of relatives and members of the local Sudanese community visited Ms Guode's Wyndham Vale home yesterday, 2km from the lake where the disaster occurred.

Upset neighbours told of hearing wailing from the home in the hours after the tragic crash. Madol Padem, a local Sudanese religious leader, said the family were well known in the close-knit local African community.

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Residents ponder horror too close to home

TOM MINEAR

SHOCKED Wyndham Vale residents stood at the lake's edge yesterday, trying to understand how a car travelling on a quiet suburban road had ended up in the water.

Some placed flowers and teddy bears at a makeshift shrine. Others fought back tears as they clutched their children a little bit tighter.

Some simply stared at the partially submerged Toyota Kluger, before police extracted it, and shook their heads.

Kris Dumesny was driving

to pick up his 18-month-old son, Edward, from daycare on Wednesday afternoon when he heard about the incident on the radio. He had planned to take Edward to the lake on Manor Lakes Boulevard, as they did every week to feed the ducks together.

"It's going to be hard coming back here now," he said.

Clutching flowers in one hand and Edward in the other, Mr Dumesny said it was "an

absolute tragedy", which he was struggling to comprehend.

Mark England, 42, was among a crowd who watched the tragedy unfold. He went to the lake after hearing sirens.

"I thought it might have been a hoon driver so it was a bit shocking to realise it was a family," Mr England said.

He said at least four firefighters leapt into the water after realising children were trapped.

"The fireys were starting to resuscitate some people and I

could tell they were children," he said. "Then they must have realised somehow that there was another missing person and they started looking and opening the doors of the car."

His neighbour, who is also a firefighter, found another child floating in the water.

The Wyndham Vale resident, himself a father of two young children, said the area was full of young families.

"We're a small, growing community with lots of families. Everyone is affected

because most people have kids around here," he said.

Earle Boulter visited the scene early yesterday morning as he walked his dogs.

"I've got a four-year-old. I gave my son a little extra cuddle this morning," he said.

Kiera Sieh laid flowers at the makeshift shrine with her two sons, aged 4 and 6, to pay her respects to the three children who died.

Another weeping woman came to leave flowers, telling police: "You're amazing."