

Note: All times in this statement cut out by 1 hour due to daylight saving

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DOUG STELEY

I Doug Steley, of Heyfield, Victoria, state as follows:

Background

1. I have lived in the Latrobe Valley since 2010, having moved from Queensland with my wife. We live in Heyfield but lived in Cowwar while we built our home.
2. I am retired. I was previously a professional photographer employed by the Australian Air Force and at the University of Central Queensland.
3. I am a member of the Cowwar CFA brigade which is part of the Thompson Group. As I live in Heyfield, I also respond with the Heyfield brigade.
4. When I joined the CFA in 2010, I did the 'Minimum Skills' course which is mandatory for all CFA volunteers before going out on the tanker. I did not do any training in relation to fighting brown coal fires. I have not done any training at the Hazelwood mine.

Involvement in fighting the Hazelwood Mine fire

5. On 9 February 2014, I was on call for the CFA. I was on reserve duty at the Heyfield fire station during the day and listened to the reports that were coming in about the fires in the region.
6. I became aware of the fire in the Hazelwood mine sometime during the afternoon.
7. I received a call to come into the Traralgon fire station at 8pm. I was part of a strike team with a team from Flynn that was to go to the Hazelwood mine to fight the fires with two tankers.
8. Shortly after 10pm, we proceeded to the main entrance of the Hazelwood mine. When we arrived at the main entrance, we went to the assembly area and announced that we were there. It was chaos. The power was out so there were no lights on and people were running all over the place with torches.
9. We were told to wait at the assembly point until directed further.
10. We waited for about 20 to 30 minutes. We were then given a briefing by someone from the Hazelwood mine during which time they drew a mud map on a piece of A3 paper. They did not have a proper map to show us.

11. We were then told to wait for an escort to take us into the mine. We were deployed to the area north-east of the mine near the briquette factory. We were tasked to fight the burning power poles that I believe were supplying power to the pumps in the operational part of the mine. The power had gone out as result of the fire.
12. I took with me my Nikon D700 DSLR camera and I took photos during the time when I was at the Hazelwood Mine. Image 1 (taken at 12.45 am on 10 February 2014) was taken as we were leaving the assembly point and driving to the northern area of the mine. This picture is taken facing north-west and you can see the northern batters alight, the eastern batters in the forefront of the photo also alight and the lights of Morwell in the background. Image 2 is taken looking north and shows the eastern batters alight with the Morwell town lights in the background.



Image 1



Image 2

Image 3 is similar to Image 1 but taken closer to the eastern batters, again showing the northern batters alight and the Morwell town lights in the background. All 3 images were taken at roughly the same time.



Image 3

13. We put out the fires around the power poles and checked the damage. We also put out spot fires around that area.
14. When driving around that area, we almost ran into power lines that were down over the road. We assessed the situation to determine whether or not

- the power was still live. We then waited about 20 to 30 minutes for an electrician to come out.
15. When we were putting out the spot fires in the area to the north-east of the mine, we ran into difficulties because of the terrain and fences. We also passed a fire burning under a bridge that we poured water onto as well as a burning sign. There was evidence of grass about 2-3 feet high, clumps of overgrown blackberry bushes, other small shrubs and trees. The area seemed unkempt. Running hoses was difficult as a result. There were also burning logs and burnt out vehicles around. Whilst trying to put out fires in power poles, we were unable to get close to the power poles due to fencing in the way so we had to put our water on full pressure just to reach the fire.
 16. We had an escort of two Hazelwood mine employees who stayed in their ute the entire time we were fighting the fires.
 17. Our UHF radio communications was not working that night and so we were not able to contact the Flynn tanker, let alone any of the other CFA strike team command at the mine.
 18. We then returned back to the assembly point. I think it was about 1 am or 2 am. The power was back on in the buildings. At this time, we could clearly see the bank of the Mine on fire.
 19. We waited at the assembly point for about 1.5 to 2 hours. . We talked with mine workers coming in for a shift change – they were not fighting the fire to my knowledge. The mine workers were complaining that fire should never have happened and that it was an accident waiting to happen. Several mine workers said that if the Mine hadn't pulled out the suppression sprinklers, then they would not have had this problem. Others said that the company had promised to cover the bank in clay but because it was closing down, it was too expensive and left it. Other mine workers said there was no clearing of fire breaks.
 20. At about dawn, our crew was told to follow an escort around the operational part of the mine to the north east part of the mine. I took Image 4 (taken at 4.00 am on 10 February 2014) as we were leaving the assembly point. It is the same angle as Image 2.



Image 4.

21. When we got there, there were 5 tankers in that position. Our escort then left with the 5 tankers leaving us there. We were not told what we were supposed to be doing and we could not see any fire or fire risks. There were sprinklers running in that area. We drove as far up to the edge of the mine as we could and we could see clearly that the northern batters of the mine were on fire but there was nothing that we could do about that fire. We only had 3500L of water. There was nothing for us to do in this location.
22. Image 5 (taken at 4.23 am on 10 February 2014) is taken from the north-western side of the mine looking back to the power station. Image 6 (taken at 4.30 am on 10 February 2014) is taken from the north-western side of the mine down one coal level.



Image 5



Image 6

23. We still had no UHF radio communications. There was still no control and command centre set up.
24. We then decided to make our way back the assembly point. It took us a little while as we got lost a couple of times. We did not have an escort as it had left when we arrived at the designated location.
25. When we arrived back at the assembly point, we told the mine personnel that we were going to leave. They told us to wait. We waited for about an hour.

26. We were then told that the clean water pumps at the base of the mine needed to be defended. Again we waited for an escort, when they arrived we followed them into the mine. When we reached the clean water pump, the escort left.
27. Image 7 (taken at 6.40am on 10 February 2014) was taken whilst we were following the escort into the mine. We were travelling towards the northern batters.



Image 7

28. There was a large fire to the south of the clean water pump but no fires threatening the clean water pump. There were two tankers owned by the mine operating in the area. They seemed to be putting out spot fires as necessary (see Image 8 taken at 7.08 am on 10 February 2014). At one stage, there was a large plume of black smoke coming from an area at the base of the mine which looked like a pile of tyres was burning (see Image 9 taken at 6.50 am on 10 February 2014).



Image 8



Image 9

29. There was no water point at the base of the mine. I was surprised that the clean water pump had no fixed defensive sprays. There was no hydrant that we could use to refill with water at the clean water pump.

30. All around the clean water pump was scrubby vegetation and it looked shoddy. Image 10 (taken at 6.50 am on 10 February 2014) is a photo taken on top of the clean water pump looking towards the northern batters.



Image 10

31. We sat at the base of the mine at the clean water pump for about an hour doing nothing as there was nothing to do. By this stage, our radio was working and we were called by Incident Control who told us that crews were coming to relieve us. After about 30 minutes, the crews arrived and we gave them whatever drinks and ration packs we had before leaving.
32. We then drove the tankers back to the Traralgon fire station. It was 10am. We were all exhausted. We were not offered transport to get back home after such a long shift.
33. On Tuesday, 11 February 2014, I attended a debrief at the Heyfield fire station. I remember seeing on the whiteboard a message that said that no member of the Heyfield CFA would be going back to the mine to fight the mine fire. I think six brigade members had suspected carbon monoxide poisoning. I heard that one of the CFA members of the Cowwar brigade was admitted to the hospital for oxygen which he received in a chair and not a bed. He was told he was okay but given oxygen as a precaution. A couple of crew were complaining of headaches and symptoms. I had mild headaches, but it could have been exhaustion.

34. That day, I had a bit of a headache. I went to the hospital to get checked out just in case. I was given the all clear. A couple of crew were complaining of headaches and symptoms. I had mild headaches but it could have been exhaustion.
35. There was discussion at the debrief that it was a nightmare from start to finish. There was no plan in place to fight the fire but we had done the best we could. There was discussion about the conditions on the night including the lack of equipment, lack of organisation, lack of effective fire breaks, that the mine was unprepared, and that the CFA equipment was spread too thin.
36. I did not go back to the Hazelwood mine to fight the fire.

Effect of the Hazelwood mine

37. Over the next few weeks, we could smell the mine fire most mornings from our house that is approximately 50km away. It was stronger on some mornings than others. On some mornings, you could taste a yucky taste in the air. We could also see the brown smoke and ash. We could see fine ash and dust in our home and on most flat surfaces.
38. When we got up in mornings and looked to the south-west, the sky would be a brown smudge. You could see the smoke and ash in the sky.
39. During the first week, we stayed out of Morwell and minimised trips to Traralgon.
40. In the second week of the mine fire, we had heard that the Morwell businesses were being affected and so we decided to show our support and do our shopping there. It smelt really bad and the stores were pretty revolting from the ash. By the time when returned home from Morwell, my wife had a really bad headache from the trip and we had only been there for about an hour.

Submission

41. As a result of my experience in fighting the fire in the Hazelwood mine, I have concerns about the preparedness of the CFA and the Hazelwood mine to fight fires in the mine. I put these concerns in a submission to the Inquiry which is attached at "DS-1".

DOUG STELEY