



Another wild tale from Paul Dann

Fires are nothing new when you wrote about them in 1962

There was something ominous about that day, from the moment I crawled out of the tent at sunrise.

Even along the swift-flowing mountain river the early morning air, which should have been crisp and sharp, was heavy with an unnatural warmth. The sun floated up over dull blue timbered ranges and shimmered through a vibrating grey haze, forecasting another day of mid-summer bushfires.

But the big trout in the river were rising well, and the oppressive heat was soon forgotten as I battled with a wily aquatic quarry.

This final morning was a gratifying conclusion to a few days' fishing in the wild, timbered mountains of southern New South Wales. The sport had been excellent and, satisfied, I scrambled the 4 rough miles to where my motorcycle was parked at the end of a bush track. Ahead of me lay 50 miles of rough bush track, across timbered ranges to the town of Tumut; once there, the remain-

der of the journey home was an easy ride on bitumen roads.

As the motorcycle crawled up from the valley bottom the air became noticeably hotter. It was a bad day for fires, sure enough; and from the crest of the first ridge I glanced at a vast sweep of contorted jumbled ranges and dull eucalypt forest, smudged with numerous distant wisps of grey smoke.

But not all those smoke plumes were in the distance — some seemed only miles away. And I decided to waste no time in getting to Tumut and out of that timbered wasteland.

For some miles the rutted track twisted between towering trunks of mountain trees, jolting and bouncing the roaring motorcycle, then it plunged into a steep little gully, where it was a shock to realise how cool was the air compared with that on the higher country.

Up out of the gully and the heat became throbbing oppression again, and I twisted the throttle open further.

Smoke began to drift across the track;

biting and acrid, stinging the eyes, it quickly thickened into a heavy pall, and for the first time I became really worried.

I recalled a fishing companion's advice — which I had scorned — not to travel on this lonely road. The roughness and isolation of the track did not worry me; but the one aspect which both he and I forgot was this danger of being trapped in a forest fire.

A distant crashing roar became apparent, strengthening in intensity like the thunder of an oncoming express train.

I stopped, and a crackling in the tree tops above sent a shiver of fear down my spine.

For leaping licks of flame were flickering over the tinder dry branches. Ap-

parently, the fire was lighting itself a mile, maybe more, ahead of the main wall of the conflagration. And I was trapped!

There was only one thing to do. Somehow the motorcycle was turned around and I was roaring back along the track. I travelled 20, 30, 40 miles per hour — as fast as it was possible to safely ride — and still the leaping treetop flames were ahead. Suddenly they halted temporarily, and with gratitude I thundered out of the suffocating pall of smoke.

The only hope of salvation — the little creek — loomed into view. Like a madman I hurtled down to the rickety bridge spanning it, and without a second thought pushed the motorcycle into the water, the hot metal hissing and steaming. No time to worry about a cracked engine — better than a charred mass of machinery.

There was only about two feet of water in the deepest hole along the creek, but I sat in this thankfully. I was saved! A laughing, burbling little stream, which had yielded many a fighting trout, was to be my salvation.

As the heat became more intense, other animals arrived to share my sanctuary: wallabies, wombats, snakes, even sev-

eral wily foxes, all showing, in the universal dread of a common enemy, no fear of the human.

Squealing balls of flame, darting over brittle litter and lighting little trails of fire, zig-zagged out of the trees — rabbits, their coats ablaze.

A huge old kangaroo, charred in great patches, tumbled into the water near me and lay groaning in agony; and the timber several hundred yards away exploded into searing flame.

But I was safe — or was I? Surely the water was becoming hotter; and with horror I realised it was necessary to lie lower to keep submerged.

Tales of the terrible 1939 fires which swept the country, killing scores of people, leaped to mind. Tales of mountain streams boiling dry, and of timber mill workers being cooked to death after

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leaping into household rainwater tanks to escape the flames.

The water seemed almost tepid, and I suddenly regretted the lightness of my clothing. Heavy garments, which could be kept damp longer, would afford a much better chance of survival, even if the creek dropped to a matter of inches — but these flimsy shorts and shirt were of little use.

And then I looked at the huge old kangaroo huddled in the water nearby, pain and terror rattling in its throat. A heavy, wet fresh kangaroo skin — it could mean life to me!

The ethics of killing a helpless being to save one's own life came momentarily but disturbingly to mind as I opened my pocketknife and crawled over to the gasping animal, but the instinct of survival was paramount.

And the responsibility of killing proved to be out of my hands anyhow, for as I reached the kangaroo it rasped out a sigh and subsided, dead, into the water.

In a frenzy of slashing, pulling and punching the hide was torn from the naked white sinewy body, and the two had barely parted before I was draped, blanket-wise, in the heavy wet skin.

One body for another. But the protection afforded by the kangaroo pelt was remarkable, and by rolling in the now hot water it was possible to withstand the searing heat as flames roared across the creek and up, out of the gully.

The scorching shock from the inferno began to lessen, almost imperceptibly. From the shelter of the kangaroo skin details of the surrounding area became distinguishable, as skeins of smoke were torn from the heavy grey curtain to reveal a weird picture of blackened earth and charred pillars of trees, glowing in flickering columns of incandescence.

The vanguard of the fire could be heard roaring away in the distance but the little gully became deathly quiet, disturbed only by the thud of a falling limb or tree tumbling down in a shower of sparks. There was still water in the stream, although it had ceased flowing — and steam appeared to be rising from the surface.

Gradually it became possible to leave the remnants of the creek, and I slowly clambered up to the pool where the motorcycle had been jettisoned.

But as I passed the dead kangaroo, I realised that the skin was still draped over my shoulders; and something impelled me to toss the hide over the pitiful naked body.

'Thanks', I muttered dazedly.