

Huddled in their tanker, Peter Smith and his mates can thank the sad lesson

# We went into survival mode

## Scorcher warning

FRIDAY looms as a horror day for firefighters with the weather bureau tipping a hot shocker.

It has forecast a high of 38C with northerly winds and a southwesterly change.

Firefighters have only a couple of cooler days ahead to prepare. The bureau warned last night that Friday would be a critical fire day.

A wind change is expected about 6pm, which could bring showers and lightning strikes.

Melbourne continues its driest start to a year and long-term forecasts predict an even chance of drier than normal conditions ahead.

In January there was just 0.8mm of rain in Melbourne, with a further 1.6mm so far in February.



**Burned bare:** CFA officers inspect the bush track where three firefighters escaped death. Picture: TREVOR PINDER



**Lessons learnt:** five died in this fire truck in the 1998 Linton fires, above, but reflective shields helped save three CFA volunteers in this truck, below, at Belgrave Heights on Monday.



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## BELGRAVE HEIGHTS

Mark Buttler

THREE volunteer firefighters who survived by huddling in their CFA truck rejoiced when they came through alive.

"I can assure you there was a bit of hugging," Captain Peter Smith said after his men became trapped in a bushfire at Belgrave Heights.

"We went out as one and we came home as one," he said. "It was a good feeling at the end." Capt Smith, Mark Goodchild and Michael Pulford, from the Upper Ferntree Gully Brigade, raced to the scene as fire tore through the area on Monday.

They soon became surrounded by flames on Abrahams Track.

"It came straight at us," Capt Smith said.

"We were off the truck doing the firefight at that stage.

"It spotted everywhere around us. We looked over to each other and thought we couldn't hold it any more."

Capt Smith said their training saved their lives.

Better training was introduced after five volunteer firefighters from Geelong died in the Linton bushfire in 1998.

"We went into survival mode," he said.

They climbed into the truck, sent out mayday calls and turned on overhead sprinklers to protect the cabin.

They wound up the windows, pulled down reflective curtains to repel the radiant heat and wrapped themselves in fire-retarding blankets.

As the fire raged around them, the three men kept asking each other if they were all right.

"It seemed like an eternity, but it might have been seconds or minutes," Capt Smith said. "It's hard to put into words. We were scared but it was controlled."

The danger became extreme when the passenger-side window burst and flames started to lick past the reflective screen.

As the truck caught fire, acrid smoke began to fill the cabin. When the main fire front passed, the men jumped from the truck and calmly walked away.



**'It seemed like an eternity but it might have been seconds or minutes'**

— Capt PETER SMITH, above

They left behind a twisted mass of scorched metal, melted fixtures and disintegrated tyres.

But their day wasn't over. They joined another fire crew battling to save a house.

For 30 minutes they stood side by side with the Scoresby brigade to save the house, aided by water-bombing helicopters.

Three of the Scoresby crew were injured in the battle.

Capt Smith — who works as a school support officer at Glen Waverley Secondary College — said there was deep relief when their day was done. He said the men stuck to their training and refused to panic.

"It was a process," he said.

"The process we went through was the right one and that's what got us out.

"The training was worth its weight in gold."

CFA deputy chief fire officer Steve Warrington said he was happy the men had used their training and experience to escape. He did not share Capt Smith's regret over the destroyed truck.

"We couldn't give a continental about the truck," Mr Warrington said.

"We're glad they got out of it safe. It's a dangerous business. It's Mother Nature at work. They stuck to all protocols and procedures.

"You don't get on the truck unless you're properly trained."

# mode