



FIREFIGHTING veterans Gavin McCormack and Colleen Keating never anticipated their toughest day on the job would be kilometres from the front line.

On February 7 the fire-spotters arrived at the Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Tower, as is routine on high fire danger days.

[See a gallery of images inside the tower.](#)

But as the day unfolded both realised what they were seeing perched above the hills was nothing routine.

The pair, with more than 50 years experience in the CFA between them, spent the day straining their eyes and sometimes hardly believing them.

They searched the horizon through smoke, took bearings and liaised with the fire tower near Toolangi to estimate the location of fires, to supply crews on the front line vital information.

Mr McCormack said the fire fronts approached from different directions and produced spot fires so ferocious and so far away that they became fire fronts in their own right.

"The main fire initially started up near Wandong and progressed generally towards Mt Disappointment, from a northwesterly direction towards Kangaroo Ground," he said.

"You couldn't see the flames but you could see the smoke from the fire front; the smoke plume went thousands of feet up into the atmosphere and was ballooning over the top of the town.

"Then Colleen picked up the Murrindindi fire, which came through the edge of the National Park up there and the wind still kept blowing from the north.

"The fire created its own mini climate and started spotting east across to Christmas Hills."

The situation quickly turned to extreme levels when the wind changed, but didn't bring the cool that typically accompanies it.

"It changed to a southwesterly wind and the temperature dropped two degrees from 45 to 43 but it was still blowing at 75km/h-85km/h ... I knew there were firemen in that fire so I put out a red flag warning to let them know the wind change had come through and the ferocity of it," Mr McCormack said.

Ms Keating, a fire-spotter of six years, said the red flag warning was a matter of life or death for strike teams in the path of the fire.

The Kangaroo Ground tower has compass bearings 360 degrees around the roof and a string - "the plum line" - that hangs in the middle of the cabin.

Fire-spotters use binoculars to spot fire or smoke, and then line that up with the plum line to get the bearings.

When the two other towers in the area are operational - in Toolangi on Mt St Leonard's and on Mt Despair - they cross check their bearings, and it's possible to plot a fire within five metres of its location.

But Ms Keating said the pair had to rely completely on their local knowledge after the Toolangi tower was evacuated when fire spotted rapidly into the area.

"None of what we did that day was out of the ordinary; we just did what we always do," Ms Keating said.

"It was CFA and DSE crews who performed extraordinary deeds on the day."

Both fire-spotters have put their hands up for this next fire season, but the images and the feelings they foster after Black Saturday are well and truly burnt into their memories.

"There was one flame ball I saw that was about 200 feet high and about 100 feet wide and it hung there for 20-30 seconds," Mr McCormack said.

"You just feel so useless watching it happen - that's the biggest issue ... the fact you can't do anything about it."

THE Kangaroo Ground fire-spotting tower that was integral in firefighting efforts on Black Saturday is set to receive a major upgrade.

The tower, built in 1926 as a World War I memorial, will get a \$272,000 upgrade to boost its fire-spotting capabilities.

The improvements will include a new, larger and airconditioned cabin that will be built more than two metres higher than the present "hot box", which has been there since 1974.

The new cabin will also be fitted with new communication and mapping equipment by the start of December, and windows will be tilted to eliminate reflection.

Steep stairs inside the tower will also be replaced with a safer spiral staircase.

Project manager Neil Marshall, who oversees the tower's fire-spotting program, said that after 10 years of lobbying the tower's capabilities would finally reflect its necessity.

"It's done the job but it's been a difficult job so we're looking forward to air conditioning, the increased view and the enhanced equipment," Mr Marshall said



CFA fire spotters Gavin McCormack and Colleen Keating were spotting fires on Black Saturday from Kangaroo Ground War Memorial Tower, which has a fire observation room atop the structure. ANDY DREWITT



