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# Life half way to the top of a fire tower

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"When lightning strikes the tower you can tell because the phone 'tings'. Often there's a loud bang, but sometimes it feels like the tower's been shot. It seems to go rigid or tense. The tower is well earthed and any electrical discharge will preferably run straight to ground rather than overcome the resistance offered by my body. There have been occasions I've picked my time carefully and gone down the steel ladder rather more quickly than normal", said Wally.

Life at the top, more precisely, half way to the top, is not without its moments. The Telecom tower on 354 metre Mount Nowa Nowa is home during daylight hours for Wally Sady, fire tower officer.

Twenty-five metres about ground level, (half way to the top of the tower) Wally's "office" provides a 360 degree panoramic view. Crystal clear air makes possible views over a 100 kilometre radius.

Kingfish A, B and West oil rigs appear as dots on the Bass Strait horizon. Northwards, Nunniong and Gelantipy plateau areas are visible, while to the East, Mt. Ellery, Raymond, Cann and Murrungowar are visible, even Delegate Hill near the New South Wales Border.

To the West, Mt. Baldhead, Mt. Taylor and the Bainsdale Airport area form the middle ground together with the lakes, but the human eye can see as far as Wentworth river and Mt. Wellington regions. "I've got a birds eye view of Victoria's Riviera", says Wally.

Below, mid morning sun sparkles off Iron Bark, Stringy Bark and Brittle Gum leaves. Birds twitter and the ever present kookaburra laughingly reveals a presence. Eagles, hawks and falcons are common companions. "One eagle flew around the tower and looked me over", says Wally.

"A goanna used to come regularly and drink from the dripping tap at the bottom of the tower. I once left a dead rabbit for him. He took it away after a couple of days". Wally Sady loves his outdoor environment and affinity with the bird and wildlife.

East Gippsland and some parts of California are regarded as among the most fire prone areas in the world. Reasons for this primarily concern a combination of extremes.

**Mt Nowa Nowa Fire Tower officer Mr Wally Sady provides an early warning defence against bush fire. Numbers shown indicate compass bearings. Small black dymo labels identify topographical features. The wooden structure (middle left) is the old original fire tower, now used as a tourist lookout.**

Unpredictable hot winds and thick tinder dry bushland are always under threat from lightning strike and human intervention. As Wally explains this, thunderheads build-up over the mountains and to the west and take an added significance. Wally says things could get interesting during the afternoon.

Equipment supplied in a fire tower lookout is quite basic. A two-way V.H.F. radio provides essential communication. Binoculars hang at the ready. Maps and protractors lie on a table. Wally is lucky. He has mains power and can boil the jug for a "cuppa". He also has a phone.

Not everyone can cope with hours of solitude says Wally. Maintaining concentration can be difficult especially when fire risk is minimal. Some people could come up here and see very little. To be a good tower man requires an eye for detail plus familiarity with the countryside so that anything out of the ordinary pattern alerts you. Tell tale smoke is particularly difficult to detect in hazy conditions. Dust clouds caused by vehicles on dirt roads rise high in the air on still days and are easily recognised. According to Wally, vapour rising after a thunder storm can be tricky to differentiate from smoke.

Real skill, which stems from experience, is needed to pinpoint fire outbreaks. Hills often intrude on direct lines of sight, but an experienced tower man, totally familiar with his territory can achieve remarkable accuracy. Such experience takes time to develop.

Born in Melbourne, Wally always longed for the outdoor life. After leaving school he enjoyed a variety of jobs throughout Queensland before coming to Buchan to work in sawmills as a leverman for four years.

In 1979 Wally gained employment with the Forests Commission. For the past five fire seasons (November-March) he has manned the Mt. Nowa Nowa fire tower.

A cassette radio tuned to A.B.C. classical music complements nature's grand elements. When circumstances permit, "The Age" crossword is completed each day. A pile of National Geographic magazines together

with volumes by Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham await suitable reading time.

Wally's eyes scan 360 degrees of his world even while being interviewed. The eyes of a tower man are usually the first defence against fire. All the equipment in the world is useless if it can't quickly be brought to the right place.

On seeing "a smoke", Wally uses his two-way radio to notify the Nowa Nowa C.F.L. office and gives a precise bearing. When possible, other tower men provide bearings. By triangulation, an exact "fix" is possible.

At times Wally will act in a communications role, sometimes at night, even though there may not be any fires within the immediate area.

Wally gave high praise to firefighters who usually had to work in appalling conditions involving heat, smoke and rugged terrain. He admired the manner in which office-based fire personnel were able to direct operations, particularly during busy times, whilst maintaining a calm air of assurance and control.

"The Office" is a three metre by three metre louvre window enclosed box. Around the walls at head height are marked all 360 degrees of the

compass. Dymo labels indicate most topographical landmarks.

A vertical central stringline from ceiling to floor enables accurate compass bearings to be given when "a smoke" appears. By standing behind the stringline, compass degrees are aligned with the smoke sighting.

Many sawmills dot the landscape and are recognised by smoke plumes rising from boilers or waste disposal units. All mills are dutifully dymo labelled to avoid confusion with a real fire.

From Wally's lofty aerie, magnificent natural beauty spreads below in every direction. Coastal lowlands and hinterland appear deceptively flat. Farm clearings enjoy peaceful isolation.

Up in the tower, one appreciates the precarious nature of man's existence against one of nature's most fearsome elements, fire. Rising thunderheads suggest Wally won't be doing much reading on this particular afternoon.

**Telecom's radio telephone tower contains a fire-spotting station roughly half way up the structure. Sited on Mt Nowa Nowa, this fire lookout provides views up to 100 kilometres away, given suitable conditions.**



