



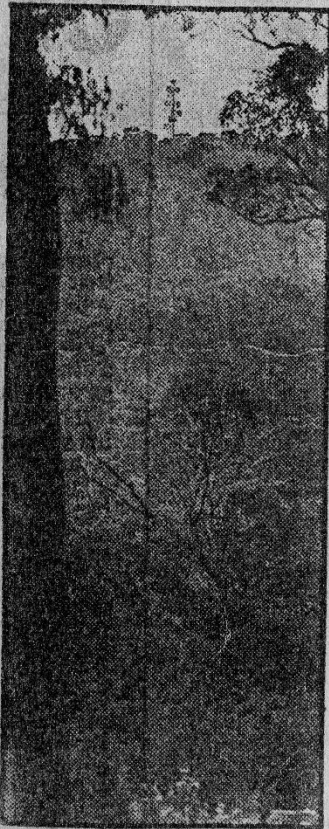
Firespotter Wally Sady . . . "I really enjoy it. The solitude tends to agree with me.

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PICTURES: PETER WARD

# Watcher on a bush balcony

BY ALLISON HARDING



The firetower high on a hilltop

There's no doubt that the view from the firetower at Nowa Nowa, 47 km east of Bairnsdale, is spectacular.

But it takes a special sort of person to look at it for eight hours a day, seven days a week, from December until April.

Firespotter Wally Sady, 33, of Lakes Entrance, is just such a person.

"I really enjoy it," he said. "The solitude tends to agree with me."

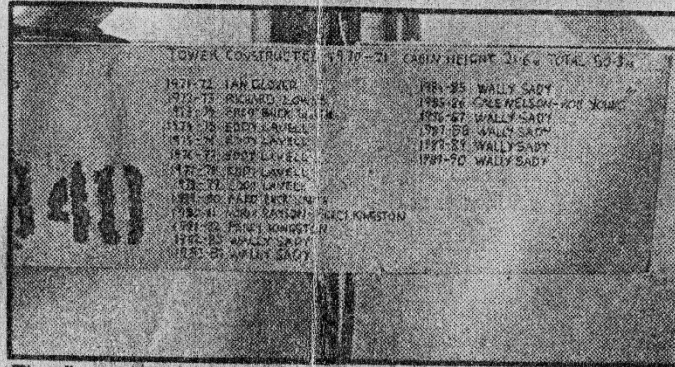
Mr Sady has perched on top of the 20-metre tower for seven summers now, comfortable in his square box encased by windows.

He's made quite a home for himself — piles of newspapers in the corner, sandwiches wrapped in plastic, a vacuum flask and a radio playing classical music.

He, and other firespotters around Victoria, is employed by the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands.

Mr Greg Larkins from the department's Nowa Nowa office described the job of a firespotter as very specialised.

"Those guys are really valu-



The firespotters' honor board.

able to us," he said. "If a fire starts in their area, they have to let us know quickly so the whole process can begin. It's better if they've been with us for a few years because they get to know the departmental jargon."

Mr Larkins said the collapse of the NSCA was a "big kick in the backside" for fire-fighters in East Gippsland. The loss of equipment, including helicopters, has put them back about 10 years.

"It's going to be awkward for us getting to fires slower than we used to with the NSCA."

If Mr Sady spots billowing smoke from his tower, he

radios the Nowa Nowa office and gives a grid reference. The office contacts other towers to pinpoint the fire and gets a fire-fighting crew in as soon as possible.

Mr Sady literally had a baptism of fire in his first season — a bushfire, "moving like an express train", nearly wiped out the town of Nowa Nowa (population 260). Mr Larkins recalls the fire vividly.

"Nowa Nowa is always under threat from fire — that time the locals got out and fought like mad. We ended up losing a couple of cars but nothing else," he said.

Mr Sady and Mr. Larkins

agreed that the potential for a bad fire was constant. "All you need is a few hot days to dry out the fuel in the bush, a lightning strike, a hot wind, and it's off," Mr Larkins said.

Mr Sady admitted he could go for months without seeing a fire, but recognised the absolute importance of having somebody up there all the time.

"Early detection is the only way to beat bushfires," he said.

Reading is a favorite pastime — he collects books during winter to read during summer.

"I do lots of reading. I think it's essential or I'd go mad with boredom," he said.

"Of course I don't have my nose in a book constantly."

Mr Sady, who described himself as a "real greenie at heart", understands the loggers depend on the forestry industry for their livelihood.

"I have sympathy for the greenies, but there's a lot of ratbags out there," he said.

He has no desire to leave East Gippsland and return to Melbourne, where he grew up.

"I'd throw myself under a tram first," he said.