

Tower Hill's Bob

A monumental life

Tower Hill's operator Bob has been a bit part movie star, a bulldozer operator, a cancer survivor and for the last 10 years, a fire tower operator. A considered and considerate man, he doesn't necessarily rate these experiences as one better than the other, but rather accepts them as the pieces that have made up his life.

Right now, being a fire tower operator is the best thing for him to do (even though he does talk with fondness about appearing as an extra in Reckless Kelly years ago with a then unknown Hugo Weaving!)

Bob was the first to spot the big Fingal fires that burned in January 2020. It was really bad conditions, he recalls, and as soon as he saw the smoke, he knew it was a bad one. He called it in right away, but the fire just took off and burned for about a week and torched the entire area ... taking out millions of dollars of working timber plantations, surrounding forest and threatening the local Fingal Valley and surrounding communities.

"I wasn't that surprised when it (Fingal fire) happened because we'd had about seven ignitions in the same area in the previous two weeks and we knew that there was a firebug working there that we needed to stop. But it was terrible. It's really hard on the community too. When you get a big fire like that everyone stops work – all the volunteer bush fire brigade folks stop to fight the fire... you have people stopping their critical jobs and livelihoods to fight the fire and not just for a day or 48 hours, we're talking about 2 or 3 weeks of non-stop fight.

"That's really the rationale for what we do here. We try to spot these things before they turn into conflagrations that go on for weeks. You see it, report it and get crews in early to stop it and nip it in the bud. It's an amazing early warning system, fire towers. It was just down to such terrible weather conditions that the Fingal fire got away."

Another - slightly smaller - fire that Bob was involved in was when he first started at Tower Hill 10 years ago. "We used to have a stove here in the hut, and a tea towel hanging above it. The very first

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day I was up here, I thought I'd make a cuppa tea, so I lit the stove and went outside to go and have a look around with my binoculars. Suddenly, I thought 'I can smell smoke' and thought I'd spotted a fire... I looked around and couldn't see anything. I soon realised the tea towel was on fire inside the tower. They changed the rules pretty quickly after that and now we don't have a stove up here!"

This is a job that Bob really enjoys, saying he really doesn't mind being on his own. "I have a National Geographic collection going back to 1928. As you get older you forget what you've read a couple of years ago, so I can just read them again and again. And it's all news to me."

But seriously. "I get a lot of satisfaction out of it: when you do spot a fire and get a crew out there and stop in one afternoon what might have taken a week or more of firefighting if it did get away. That happens about two or three times a year and you're thinking about all the fire fighters and the STT (Sustainable Timber Tasmania) guys who have to come from across Tasmania to fight them, being able to stop them quickly saves a lot of grief, I reckon.

"People don't really understand what we do. They don't know that you're up here and if they do they just think you are reading National Geographic (and I am!) but if a balloon of smoke comes up, we're here and we're ready to act."



Image: Tower Hill Fire Tower Operator Bob Oates



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Image: Tower Hill fire tower.



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