

Risks of flight or flee were known

Gary Hughes

THE Victorian Government was repeatedly warned of potentially fatal problems with its "stay or go" bushfire policy, including that people planning to go would not leave early enough and that those preparing to defend their homes were badly informed and ill-prepared.

Even the Country Fire Authority's own research before Black Saturday showed a "significant proportion" of people in bushfire-prone areas had not adequately planned how to respond to a fire.

Problems with the stay or go policy, which encourages people to stay and defend their properties or leave early on days of focused threat, will be a prime focus of the Victorian bushfires royal commission.

Counsel assisting the commission, Jack Rush QC, has flagged that forced evacuations in areas considered indefensible might have to replace the policy after it apparently failed on February 7 when 173 people were killed.

Mr Rush told the opening of the inquiry on Monday that the stay or go policy was potentially confusing and open to misunderstanding.

An inquiry into bushfire preparedness by Victoria's auditor-general warned that many people in fire-prone areas were poorly informed about risks, had dangerous misconceptions and were not ready to face a bushfire.

"A significant number of residents in wildfire-prone areas have not undertaken essential preparedness steps, have potentially dangerous knowledge gaps about fire behaviour and are planning inappropriate survival strategies," the auditor-general concluded.

The inquiry found CFA advice to residents planning to go that they should leave before 10am on days of high fire danger was being widely ignored, with fewer than 5 per cent saying they planned to

leave that early. About 25 per cent of residents said they would wait until told to leave by emergency services, despite the fact that emergency services did not give such warnings during bushfires.

"If residents are relying on emergency services to tell them when to evacuate, this could be a fatal misunderstanding," the auditor-general warned.

The report handed to the government in 2003 also found that in some areas many residents "held incorrect beliefs or knowledge that may lead them to make household survival plans that could place them in danger".

Research commissioned by the CFA before the 2007-08 fire season found 56 per cent of residents wrongly believed a fire truck would be there to defend their homes and 51 per cent thought a firefighting aircraft would come to their aid.

Those "unrealistic" beliefs persisted, despite the CFA giving public warnings that it could not guarantee such help.

"Data relating to plans and intended action during a bushfire indicates that a significant proportion of respondents have not adequately planned how to respond," researchers found.

An inquiry by Victoria's emergency services commissioner following bushfires in 2003 also warned that CFA advice to leave early under the stay or go policy was being widely disregarded.

"Residents in fire-prone areas are not aware of the conditions that they will face as a result of a decision to leave at an inappropriate time," it said.

In 2005, the emergency services commissioner again warned that the stay or go policy "has not yet penetrated fully into all people's actual plans, despite the efforts of the CFA and its partners".

Many of those who died on Black Saturday were trying to flee at the last minute ahead of the firefronts.

Soil was alight on Black Saturday

Asa Wahlquist
Rural writer

THE climatic conditions leading to the Black Saturday bushfires were so extreme that fuel reduction would not have made any difference, a leading scientist has said.

David Karoly, from the School of Earth Sciences at Melbourne University, told a seminar last night the climatic conditions experienced in Victoria on February 7 were unprecedented, with temperatures so high the soil caught on fire.

Professor Karoly said the devastated area northeast of Melbourne had experienced a 12-year drought before the fires, which had already reduced the fuel load. "But fuel reduction burning would have made no difference. The fires would have been uncontrollable with minimal amounts of fuel."

He said the fire was so intense that bare soil burnt in some places, and there were reports of the humus in ploughed ground burning.

"We had record high temperatures, a record heatwave two weeks earlier and record low rainfall. We also had record low humidity," he said.

The previous three years had been so dry the region had effectively missed one year's rain. The area was also experiencing an unprecedented sequence of days without rain.

"The preceding heatwave from the 28th to the 30th of January, when Melbourne had

three days above 43C, was also unprecedented," Professor Karoly said. "That heatwave would have kiln-dried everything."

On the McArthur fire danger index, Black Friday 1939 was rated 100. Ash Wednesday in 1983 was rated 120, but in southern Victoria on February 7 this year there were unprecedented ratings of between 120 and 190.

The unprecedented climatic conditions of February 7 also showed up the shortcomings of bushfire modelling.

Kevin Tolhurst, from the School of Land and Environment at the University of Melbourne, said: "One of the things that has been shown to us with the February 7 case is our understanding of the propagation of wildfire is not well-described."

He told the seminar that while they predicted the extent of the fire "pretty well" using their models, "it is the mechanism of how they get there that is not well understood."

He said that information was imperative for everything from planning the design of houses to the decisions people make on whether to leave or stay and fight a bushfire.

Dr Tolhurst said fire modelling had been two-dimensional, but fire was a three-dimensional process. "The way the fire interacts with the atmospheric conditions isn't currently accounted for in an adequate way in our fire behaviour models."



War relic: Squadron Leader John Cotterell, front, and Major Jack Thurgar at the crash site in Quang Nam Province of a RAAF Canberra bomber

Picture: Department of Defence

Our last Vietnam MIAs may have been found

Mark Dodd

POOR weather was reported over the target when Flying Officer Michael Herbert and Pilot Officer Robert Carver took off from Phang Ran base in South Vietnam in their RAAF Canberra bomber on November 3, 1970.

They had completed their mission and were returning home when their aircraft, A84-231, suddenly disappeared from the radar controller's screen while over hostile country near the rugged Viet-Lao border.

The alarm was sounded and all No 2 Squadron missions were cancelled the following day as a desperate search was launched involving RAAF and US Air Force planes.

It failed to find any wreckage or evidence of the fate of the two fliers and the bomber was listed as "lost without trace".

It was the second and last Australian Canberra bomber to be lost in the Vietnam conflict. That was more than 38 years ago.

No trace was ever found of the plane, although suspicions remained the bomber had fallen victim to a Soviet SAM-2 surface-to-air missile.

Yesterday came the stunning news that wreckage of the bomber had been located in rugged jungle terrain in Vietnam's south-central Quang Nam province.

Hopes have now been raised that some remains of Herbert and Carver, the last two members of the Australian Defence Force missing in Vietnam, might also be found.

"The Australian Defence In-



Missing: Flying Officer Michael Herbert at home on leave

vestigation Team are confident they have located the Royal Australian Air Force Canberra bomber wreckage in thick jungle in an extremely rugged, remote and sparsely populated area of Quang Nam province near the Laotian border."

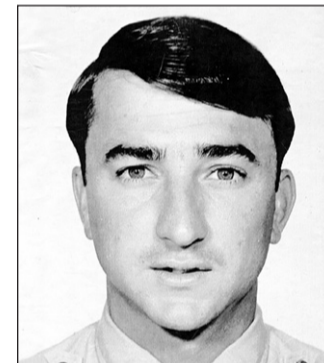
Defence Science and Personnel Minister Warren Snowdon said yesterday. "These brave airmen gave their lives in the service of their

nation, and locating the crash site is an important step in accounting for them. Relatives of the two crewmen have been advised of the discovery and air force will continue to keep them updated."

Details of the find remain sketchy but Mr Snowdon said a defence team had spent a week in the province gaining information and then hiking to the wreck site. The recovery team reached the



War bird: A Canberra bomber in camouflage war paint



Missing: Robert Carver

crucial in finding the crash site, Mr Snowdon said.

"Invaluable assistance has also been given by a number of former North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers and their commanders as well as local villagers, and their compassion and commitment in assisting us is humbling," he said.

Celebrated Vietnam war photographer Tim Page, now living in Brisbane, told *The Australian* the area where the bomber went down was almost always hostile and well defended with anti-aircraft guns.

"We never owned it. We put in the 101st (US airborne division), the Cav, the Marines and it was still feral — it was just awful country. It was Charlie's (Viet Cong) back door, sitting right over the Ho Chi Minh trail," he said.

A total of 500 Australians were killed in the Vietnam War, including 14 RAAF personnel.

Parents blame me for death: teacher

Caroline Overington

SYDNEY Grammar School teacher Jim Forbes believes the parents of David Iredale hold him responsible for the death of their 17-year-old son during a bushwalk in the Blue Mountains in December 2006.

"I read in the newspapers that they blamed me for it," Mr Forbes yesterday told a coroner's inquest into David's death. "I couldn't handle it."

Mr Forbes, who was David's chemistry teacher, was in 2006 the co-ordinator of Sydney Grammar's Duke of Edinburgh program, which encourages boys to take hiking trips to demonstrate self-sufficiency.

He told the inquest that he had no problem with mature and reliable boys hiking in groups of four or more without adult supervision.

He had sanctioned at least



Forbes

three such walks, including one that David had planned to take in the June before he died.

"I felt, in my view, there wasn't a problem with it," he said. As for staying in touch with boys walking through the mountains, and staying overnight, he thought it was "discretionary" or something to be done "where possible".

The June walk was cancelled because of bad weather. Mr Forbes, who arrived at the inquest alone and barely spoke above a mumble, said he neither knew of or would have approved, David's plan to do the walk in the summer months, because of the risk of bushfires in the Blue Mountains.

In any case, he thought it was

up to parents to give their sons permission to undertake walks that were not supervised by an adult.

Mr Forbes told of his sorrow in a letter to David's parents, written two months after their son died on the second day of a three-day trek, having become separated from his companions.

"I'm sorry that it has taken this long for me to send you a letter," he said in the handwritten note, dated February 6, 2007.

"David's death has distressed me greatly and it is only now that I feel that I can sit down and write.

"So many questions remained unanswered and this makes the situation still more difficult.

"I remember with fondness the walks I took with David. His cadet boots gave him blisters on the Watagan track but he loved the scenery in Bungonia!

"It is a terrible loss; you, Tom

and Christopher (David's brothers) are all in my thoughts."

The inquest had earlier heard from an assistant to the school's principal, Rita Finn, who said David would not have been given permission to take an unaccompanied, three-day bushwalk without adult supervision.

She said such walks were "not allowed" although it was now clear from Mr Forbes' testimony that they took place.

Ms Finn agreed that the Duke of Edinburgh scheme encouraged self-sufficiency and independence among boys and that the guidelines said that, in most cases, "this will mean being unaccompanied on the journey".

The guidelines also say a trained supervisor should oversee the maps and the planning and "make contact with the group at least once a day".

It was her understanding that Mr Forbes "went with all the boys".

Bites offer hope for Humphrey

Gavin Lowner

THERE may be hope for Humphrey yet, as several parties have approached the man charged with selling him off.

Marius Rudaks, liquidator of the company behind Humphrey B Bear, has been fielding interest in the licence for the Australian children's television icon, but how much it might be worth is still unknown.

Mr Rudaks said he hoped someone would buy the licence to the *Here's Humphrey* series after the Supreme Court last week ordered the licence holder, Adelaide firm Banksia Productions, to wind up over an alleged debt of \$50,102 to Channel Nine South Australia.

He would not reveal who had inquired about Humphrey's licence but said no figures had been suggested.

"I hope there will be a purchaser to keep Humphrey going," Mr Rudaks, of Maris Rudaks and Associates, said. "I think in the long run someone will buy it."

Mr Rudaks said Banksia Productions director John Lamb had told him the estimated total liabilities of the company were between \$800,000 and \$900,000.

Mr Rudaks said most of the money was owed to Lamb family companies.

Humphrey made his first appearance on Australian television in 1965 on the afternoon children's program *The Channel Niners*. He had been created by the Adelaide station's program director, Rex Heading, as a replacement for a clown character that went to Channel Ten and

Chinese hackers steal JSF secrets

Mark Dodd

CHINESE computer spies are suspected of having cracked the Pentagon's \$500 billion Joint Strike Fighter program, accessing top-secret files containing details of the aircraft's stealth design and electronics.

Details of the brazen break-in were reported yesterday in *The Wall Street Journal* newspaper, citing current and former US government officials.

The Royal Australian Air Force has placed a tentative order for 100 of the F-35 JSFs for about \$16 billion, easily making it Australia's biggest defence purchase.

Last night, Defence confirmed it was aware of the report and was seeking more information. "Defence has seen the US reports and will discuss the issues raised with the JSF Program office in due course," it said in a written response to questions from *The Australian*.

A Canberra-based spokesman for the JSF's maker, Lockheed Martin, said a statement was expected today from head office in the US.

The JSF program is the US Defence Department's costliest, and according to the *WSJ*, the spies were able to siphon off "terabytes of data related to design and electronics systems", potentially making it easier to defend against the stealth-protected aircraft.

"Former US officials say the attacks appear to have originated in China. However, it can be extremely difficult to determine the true origin because it is easy to mask identities online," the *WSJ* said.

Unnamed US officials are quoted as saying cyber attacks on military projects appear to have escalated in the past six months.

According to the *WSJ*, a Pentagon report issued last month warned that the Chinese military had made "steady progress" in developing online-warfare techniques.

China hopes its computer skills can help it compensate for an underdeveloped military, it said.

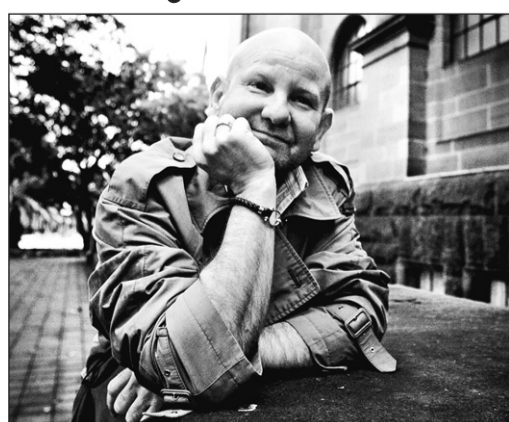
The F-35 JSF has proved a contentious buy, with critics saying the Rudd Government should have been more forceful in trying to persuade the US to sell the RAAF the more expensive F-22 Raptor.

Unlike the JSF, the Raptor is operational but prohibited from export.

The JSF is intended to replace the ageing fleet of F-111 strike aircraft and the frontline F/A-18 jet fighters.

While Australia can expect to retain a technology edge over its immediate neighbours in Southeast Asia, China will acquire 500-600 advanced fighter bombers over the next 30 years and is expected to surpass the US as the leading air power in East Asia.

Early treatment gives hepatitis C patients the all-clear



New start: James Kellner was successfully treated

Leigh Dayton
Science writer

THERE is good news for people with hepatitis C, say medical researchers who have found that with early treatment up to 70 per cent of patients will be cured of the debilitating infection.

What's more, the international team showed that, overall, when treating the blood-borne virus, the standard combination drug treatment was as effective as a stronger regimen, which caused more serious side effects.

According to the advocacy body Hepatitis Australia, more than

200,000 Australians have chronic hepatitis C. Nationwide, more than 278,000 are exposed to the virus, primarily through use of needles with traces of infected blood. The group estimates that less than 2 per cent of infected people receive treatment.

Without treatment people would eventually develop serious liver disease, said research leader, hepatologist Stuart Roberts, director of gastroenterology and hepatology at The Alfred hospital in Melbourne.

"A cure will prevent the development of liver disease," he said.

Professor Roberts said hepatitis C was the main reason for liver transplants in Australia, "is a health

burden and (causes) loss of time at work and an impaired quality of life".

The new results come from the so-called CHARIOT study, an international randomised control trial involving 702 Australian patients and 194 from New Zealand, Canada, Thailand, Argentina and Mexico. All had the most difficult type of hepatitis C to treat, hepatitis C genotype 1.

James Kellner, 42, was one of the Australian patients. Having learned that a bone marrow transplant and blood transfusions for leukemia had left him with the virus, he volunteered for the trial. He is now cured.

"The 11-month treatment was quite hard but it was definitely worth it to

know the disease is gone," he said.

Professor Roberts said that because the disease could have no symptoms, anyone who engaged in risky behaviour or had been treated with blood products prior to 1990 should be tested. He said Mr Kellner's good outcome reflected the CHARIOT finding that early treatment with a combination of interferon, to slow viral replication, and the antiviral drug ribavirin, was effective.

Professor Roberts will present the findings next Saturday at the congress of the European Association for the Study of the Liver, in Copenhagen. Details will be published in the journal *Hepatology*.



Still kicking: Humphrey

a chimpanzee that bit a host. Mr Heading has described Humphrey as Australia's answer to Mickey Mouse, and said there was no reason he could not continue on television.

The future of Humphrey is up in the air, but his old rival, Fat Cat, is still a fixture on television in Western Australia, where he appears on Channel Seven.

Fat Cat retreated to Perth after his show *Fat Cat and Friends*, first aired in 1977, was ordered off television by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal in 1992.

The tribunal found Fat Cat was not "clearly defined" and might confuse young viewers. It also found the show had poor production values, poor direction and lacked new scripts.

Despite his axing, Fat Cat, whose rights are owned by the Channel Seven Television Trust, remains a television identity in Perth, where he appears daily at 7.30pm, just before many children's bedtime.

Trust manager Nicola Bedwood said there was "no chance" of Fat Cat going into liquidation. "He's much loved in Perth," she said.