

## THE FISKVILLE STORY

Firstly I would like to thank you for inviting me here today to share our story I say our story as for the last 4 years it has been like a roller coaster of emotions. Brian Vincent Potter my much loved husband that I shared his very fortunate life with.

Today I come with my support team the most wonderful thing that came out of Brian's and my life together. 3 of our 4 wonderful children. Paul who was born in Colac, Mark who was born in Seymour Meagan who was born in Wangaratta and Luke our 4<sup>th</sup> child was born in Wangaratta as well but he lives in Sydney so can't be with us today.

They went on to present us with 9 beautiful granddaughters and 1 spunky little grandson who up until Brian's passing was Brian's protector. The grand children had only ever known their grandfather as sick and they were so exceptive of the situation we had.

Recently Noah who is 6, made the Brian Potter newspaper. The heading he wrote was Brian Potter fights back one last time, his words. I have to wonder if there is some truth in there, was Brian guiding Noah and letting us know that he is fighting back.

I also have with me Gail and Geoff Donald. Geoff was working at the herald sun in distribution and over a pizza tea this story started. I will get back to that later I also have Justine Upton who was always wanting to put Brian's life story down on paper.

Now being from an old Country Fire Authority life when you would just receive a phone call from the then Chief Officer who would usually call to ask How you were going and then towards the end of the conversation he would then proceed to tell you that at the board meeting yesterday it was agreed that you will take over and I use as example region 12 at Seymour.

Well our life goes like this Brian and I marry in 1970 I have grown up with a fire background my dad was a volunteer resident officer at Colac Fire Brigade and that is where it all starts. Brian gets transferred to Colac he is looking for somewhere to live and my parents have a spare room at the fire station I met him on the eve of my 17th birthday and we had 43 wonderful years married.

After getting married Brian tells me we will probably be in Colac for about 10 years then have a move. In our 1<sup>st</sup> year of married life we have our 1<sup>st</sup> move

Pregnant with Paul we are of to Seymour tears from me who hasn't travelled very much and Seymour to me was the highway how could we live on the highway chief officer pitfield at the time agrees we can stay in Colac until Paul is born then move life was never all smooth.

Our 1st anniversary Brian has to attend a CFA function I look after the phones at Colac fire station while my parents go to a wedding 6week old baby packing to move to Seymour which I have now seen that there is a town beyond the highway get the drift of our CFA life which then went on for the next 25 years virtually in this same format 2 moves in Colac Seymour Wangaratta Fiskville 2 moves Wantirna so much for 10 years in Colac.

But then in those days you always got a house supplied and supported in your move. We have had some great times over the years in our CFA life we have travelled all over Victoria for functions and fire brigade demonstrations our children's holidays were mainly where ever we needed to be.

It was a bit of a family joke at the time Brian would appear in the media from time to time and on the old beta we would tape whenever he appeared so if Brian was having a very busy time I would say to the kids that we would have a remember dad time and sit and watch the recordings just so they could remember what he looked like.

Well onto the Fiskville story as you could imagine over the 17 years of Brian's ill health we had many opportunities to have many deep and meaningful. We didn't get to have the retirement years and enjoy travelling and spend quality time together after children our time was mainly spent in hospitals and doctors surgeries.

Just to get an idea I called a couple of Brian's hospitals 57 admissions to Belura private hospital 69 to peninsula private 10 to Frankston which as they had a discharge for him on the 12th February 2014 I had to think about that one.

Then found it to distressing to realise that was the day he died at golf Links road palliative care.

I gave that up then as I still had st Vincent's, Cabrini, the valley and Florence nightingale rehab to get numbers from I didn't need any more proof that I had lived the last 17 years with a very sick man.

It also made me realise the expenses we had had over the years and all the short falls in seeking his medical care. The amount of times I have sat with him in all the different hospitals wether it be intensive care or specialist wards.

Brian was such a humble man he would often tell me and apologise for the times I was with him and as I would reply to him reverse the situation and I know where you would be thankfuly he didn't remember a lot of the times in ICU but for myself and the family it was very hard to see someone you love suffer so much.

This is where you ask now could it have been avoided if only we had known the hardest part for me here is to find out when the story went to the media that the CFA in 1991 had been told to warn the people who had lived at Fiskville. That they had been exposed to dangerous chemicals to think that somewhere in the powers that be had hidden that information.

It may not have saved my beautiful man or our other friends who were living there that have either died or have been very sick but no one had the right to hold that information.

Brian was the chief officer at the time. His thoughts on that were that it didn't get passed on to him was because we had lived there.

Fiskville to me I cried the day I moved in because I didn't want to live there and cried the day I moved out because I didn't want to leave.

The 1st night at Fiskville I run a bath for the children. The water is brown, it turns out that is the normal colour for Ballan water at Fiskville, I then had to convince the kids that it is okay and they won't turn brown while putting more bubbles into it to try and disguise the colour.

We did have a water tank at the old house that came through the kitchen so we felt we had safe water to drink. I did often question why it had floaties in it with Brian assuring me it was okay, I would still boil it for drinking now one wonders what the floaties were.

When we moved into the newer house as it was just too expensive to stay in the old house. Brian would bring our water up from the cottage tanks, was it also contaminated.

It is probably hard for people to understand when I say it was too expensive to live in the old house. The original house on the property, it was very old and damp due to the cold and wet conditions there. Many a day the mist and fog would just not lift. Washing was a big problem as we battled the water problems, weather, smoke and windy conditions.

For our children living in Fiskville was a big adventure, freedom and to this day they still say out of all our moves Fiskville was the best. Climbing trees playing on drums, pallets and playing in the fire building riding there bikes all over the property even to a lot of places they shouldn't have been.

There was even an occasion when they tried to build a raft to sail on the dam thankfully that was aborted when one of the other Mums found them and stopped that adventure. I hope now I have given you a small window of life at Fiskville.

Back now to Brian's story, over the years as he battled his many health issues and we watched so many of his work colleagues sick and dying he would quite often bring up, we all have lived at Fiskville.

It was only when Brian was talking to his brother Terry who until the day he died was his best mate and confidant. Terry had mentioned that there was a lot of publicity about firefighters from America that were suffering rare diseases and cancers and a lot of them had been involved in 911. Brian always the deep thinker started doing some research on the net and suddenly could see scenarios similar to what was happening in our Fire Service.

We had an instance once with an anaesthetist after one of Brian's surgeries we found we were a couple of thousand out of pocket.

I happened to mention this to the surgeon who then went on to tell the anaesthetist Brian's story and all the surgeries he had had.

This resulted in a phone call from her to tell me that she hadn't realised all Brian's health issues and that the account was now closed and we were not to make a payment.

She then went on to ask me what Brian had done in his career life. When I answered a fire officer she answered straight away she now understood all his health problems as she also had been watching what was coming out of the states and had no doubt Brian was a victim.

After this call Brian when home started putting down on paper his concerns. One time when he was in hospital he mentioned that he would like to talk to someone at the CFA about his concerns. I then put a call into a board member and that started the ball rolling.

Unfortunately when an appointment was made to come and talk to Brian, they chose to not turn up. Brian was quite disappointed as he had written up a paper to hand over to them with all his research he had done. He was in hospital at this time but had agreed they would see him there, those who know Brian well the body was giving out but the brain was still very active.

We heard later, the reason they didn't turn up was that someone high up had said they were waiting for Brian to fall of the perch and they wouldn't have to deal with it. Very distressing for us. They also denied that they knew anything about Brian's concerns until the story broke, but the meeting had been organised 5 months prior to the media release.

Well the next part starts Geoff and Gail who are with me today. As I mentioned earlier, they came around for a visit. Brian heads of to bed as he tired very easy, round table discussion turns to how he can have so many health problems and the unfairness of life.

I then bring up the story of Fiskville and the CFA who don't care and won't listen to him. I then print out the paper Brian had prepared and give it to Geoff to take and read as by now the beer has kicked in.

Two weeks later Geoff calls me and asked me did I want him to give it to one of the journalists. Brian is really sick at the time and still very frustrated from no CFA contact and answers "do what you like with it."

That started the meeting with the wonderful Ruth Lampard who has worked so hard on this story. The CFA handling of the whole thing has been the biggest disappointment to a lot of people.

It is hard to believe that a chairperson and a CEO of such a large fire service could treat people like they have over this whole tragic event.

Every time anything came up about Fiskville I felt when Mick Burke referred to the historical time at Fiskville, he was saying Brian potter was a liar.

I even put a call in to the chairperson of CFA to ask could you ask him to show a bit of compassion as it was distressing to listen to his denial. As you would expect someone in that position would be supporting and not be trying to dispute the allegations.

The day after the story was announced in the media we had a visit from Mick Burke and Ewan Ferguson.

Mick was telling us that he had organised an independent inquiry and that he had appointed Prof Rob Joy to be the chair.

I could see Brian wasn't very happy with this and then went on to tell Mick Burke that he felt it was incestuous as the CFA were doing an inquiry on themselves and that he was also using an old workmate from EPA days.

I would like to say here that Brian's thoughts on EPA and burke coming from there and his constant denial of any problems.

Brian would question had there been something on Fiskville in burkes days at EPA that had been covered up that he didn't want exposed.

I would like to read you a statement that I found the other day on our computer which sums up Brian's feelings over the whole time.

### **Battle to clean up Fiskville**

It is some two years since I first tried to alert Country Fire Authority executive management of the link between the hazardous materials stored and burnt at Fiskville, the CFA training establishment and the deaths and illnesses of those who worked, trained and lived there. My initial attempt to publicise the danger to other officers was unsuccessful. However, the Herald Sun took up the issue in December, 2011 and the resultant publicity alerted serving and retired fire personnel throughout Australia of the potential danger from cancer to them.

The reaction by CFA was remarkable. It first sought to discredit me and my colleagues by insisting there was no link and then commissioned an expensive report which was skewed to ignore any related fire training activities at Fiskville since 1999. The word cancer was not mentioned anywhere in the report.

Subsequently, CFA has desperately tried to maintain that there are no dangers at Fiskville despite multiple reports identifying high levels of contamination in the run-off dams. CEO Mick Bourke claims the sludge is of “historical” significance only and has no effect on the safety of firefighters working at Fiskville today. The EPA obviously disagrees having served a notice to clean up the dams last month.

It is quite evident that there is a serious threat to the surrounding environment. Fiskville sits astride two water catchments – Geelong and Werribee. Any contaminated sludge that leaves the property potentially affects either city. In the event of heavy rain the dams will flood and contaminated water will spread to adjoining properties. Conversely, during the summer months when surrounding properties are short of water, the Fiskville dams are attractive sources of water during major fires in the Ballan – Mount Wallace area. A heli-tanker pilot desperately seeking water to attack a fast moving fire is not going to be able to differentiate between clean and contaminated water. A load taken from either dam and dumped on a farm property in the district will result in the contamination being spread over a much larger area.

Why take the risk? For at least six years, CFA has been warned it must remove the contaminated sludge from its property. The money it has spent on multiple investigations and reports would have removed the contaminated sludge.

The saddest aspect of the constant refusal by CFA's Mick Bourke to accept the reality of the situation is that the reputation of the finest practical fire training establishment in Australia is being sullied – not by those who are being criticised by Mick Bourke but by CFA itself.

Brian V Potter QFSM, FIFireE , retired Chief Officer

5 May, 2013

I feel as though dead man talking now over the 3 years from when this was first published till Brian's passing 12 February 2014. Brian had many calls from people some who can't be named telling him many wrong doings. One of the main ones that concerned him was from someone who couldn't speak out, they knew someone who worked for the company that were doing the investigation on the land. They were told areas that they were not to go into, one would believe it would have been open go. What were they hiding, he also heard from people who are sick but don't want to talk as they are frightened of their job prospects.

We have had to listen to many hurtful things. A senior CFA officer went over to the Afac office and proceeded to tell them that Brian was trying to blindside the authority.

For those that know Brian it would be the last thing he would do. I believe the Afac office has a room called the Foster Room that sits pretty hard as well as Brian believed he was one of the 2 CFA chairpersons from 90 till 93 were in the original cover up of this tragic story. Brian did a lot of work for Afac usually under someone else's name.

I hope through all of my stories I have been able to give you our insight. Where would I like it to go? Hopefully all the people that have been affected will be compensated for what we have gone through for many years. Brian through our solicitors put in 2 compensation claims through the CFA insurer's which were both declined I have now put in a dependant claim that is going through the system.

The hardest part for me being that I had to get a stat dec done to say that Brian and I were in a relationship when he died. One just waits for my claim to be knocked back as well.

I have to also live with the hurt caused by the insurer's doctor who was very supportive and sympathetic when seeing us and then wrote a report that said there was definitely no connection with chemicals and firefighting and that he couldn't support our claim.

There were a lot of firefighters who have had the same response from the same doctor.

I know that Brian would be wanting presumptive legislation to go through so that career and volunteer firefighters are all covered.

Yes Fiskville is a lot of our dangers but firefighting in a whole is. I also have to live with the fact that I lost my husband and I also lost my dad a retired resident officer from Colac fire brigade at 68.

Brian and dad both started with brother sister rare autoimmune diseases, no blood relationship but tyre factory fires arsenic treated pine fires train fires and Fiskville they shared together.

I will just Finish with a statement Brian made at a function we had 18 months before he died we called it a celebration of his life he called it a wake while he was awake.

I have had a aneurism of the aorta and angina which required a double bypass in 2000 I was burnt on the arms and face at major Gippsland fires in 1965 cancers have attacked my bladder, bowel, lymph nodes, liver.

I have had two major operations on my liver and there are now 3 cancerous tumours on my lungs. In 1999 I suffered a coronary which resulted in a stent being inserted.

I've had melanomas and skin cancers which ultimately resulted in much of my scalp being replaced with a flap from my thigh.

Osteoporosis has led to fractures of my pelvis ribs collar bones and shoulder I have had a stroke following open lung surgery in 1997 duodenal and gastric ulcers and Wegener's granulomatosis ,a vascular auto immune disease - and I am still here

Well today unfortunately he's not!