

02-25-2003 – Australia – Cheryl Barber-Fankhauser FF Flash Flood Auto**Police name firefighter killed in flash flood**

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-02-27/police-name-firefighter-killed-in-flash-flood/1222110>

26 Feb 2003, **MAP:** [Wandiligong 3744](#)

Police have released the name of a firefighter swept to her death in flash floods in north-east Victoria yesterday.

The body of 43-year-old Sheryl Barber-Fankhauser of Wandiligong was recovered from rugged terrain today.

She was with two other crew members when their four-wheel-drive was swept away by floodwaters. The two men survived.

Firefighter's body found after flash flood

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-02-27/firefighters-body-found-after-flash-flood/2690586>

26 Feb 2003 **MAP:** [Wodonga 3690](#)

The body of missing female firefighter swept away by flash floods has been found in Victoria's north-east.

A thunderstorm hit the Alpine National Park late yesterday afternoon sparking the flooding.

A four-wheel drive was swept from a bridge in the upper Buckland Valley and the firefighters inside managed to climb onto its roof before being washed into the rushing stream.

Two men managed to get out and are at the La Trobe Valley hospital with minor injuries, but their female colleague went missing.

A police search rescue team will be assisted by the police helicopter to recover the body from the rugged terrain at first light.

Max Coulter from the Department of Sustainability says he is awaiting positive identification.

"We have just had recent information from Victoria Police that the person who was [found] went missing last night, we believe they were sending in a team at first light now to recover a deceased female," he said.

Beaver County Times - Feb 27, 2003

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2002&dat=20030227&id=9uxVAAAIAJ&sjid=5UANAAAIAJ&pg=1233,7135937>

FIREFIGHTER DROWNS

An Australian firefighter who had been battling the remnants of a giant wild fire drowned after a storm hit the region and caused flash flooding that swept her vehicle away, police said Thursday.

The woman was with two other firefighters who managed to escape.

The three were extinguishing flames in Victoria state before the storm hit. Rescuers hunting through the night found her body, said police senior constable Allan Briggs.

Meanwhile, a man is recovering in the Albury Hospital after the water-bombing plane he was flying crashed into a ridge near Mt Buffalo. He has chest, arm and leg injuries.

Dead firefighter's friends vow memorial

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-02-28/dead-firefighters-friends-vow-memorial/1222282>

27 Feb 2003

Friends of a firefighter who lost her life in flash floods in Victoria's Alpine region on Wednesday want to organise a memorial in her honour.

Sheryl Barber Fankhauser, 43, from Wandiligong near Bright, was swept to her death in flash floods in the Buckland Valley during a fierce thunderstorm. Three other crewmembers were injured in the tragedy.

Neighbour Elaine O'Gorman says Ms Barber Fankhauser deserves to be remembered.

"It's ironic that she should die where ... she loves the Buckland Valley, so I hope we end up getting a plant there for her, it has to happen," she said.

Flood kills woman fighting fire

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1423353/News-in-brief.html>

28 Feb 2003

A woman fighting drought-induced bushfires in Australia was killed by a flash flood. Sheryl Barber-Fankhauser, 43, and two companions were trying to suppress smouldering patches remaining from forest fires that have devastated vast areas of north-eastern Victoria in recent weeks. They were caught in a violent thunderstorm and clambered on top of their four-wheel-drive vehicle, parked on a bridge.

The car was carried off by the raging floodwaters and was later found embedded in mud downstream. Her companions survived with multiple fractures.

Barbie Dutter, Sydney

Cruel irony claims firefighter

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/02/27/1046064166034.html>

February 28, 2003 By Jamie Berry, Seamus Bradley

"Thanks for bringing in clothes, you'll do for my Mum any time . . . Hopefully this fire will shortly be contained and we'll return to normal. Catch ya."

On Tuesday, Wandiligong resident Elaine O'Gorman found this note on her back door. Her neighbour, Cheryl Barber-Fankhauser, had left it there, before heading out to fight the bushfires still burning in north-eastern Victoria.

Mrs O'Gorman had promised to collect the eggs from her neighbour's chooks and watch over her dog, Rusty, while she was away.

Mrs Barber-Fankhauser was anticipating a quick return to normality but on Wednesday evening she died - in a flash flood.

Mrs Barber-Fankhauser and two firefighters were driving home about 6pm when they were trapped in a thunderstorm with torrential rain. A flash flood swept their 4WD off a bridge into a creek near Beveridge Station in the Upper Buckland Valley. The three clambered onto the back of the vehicle, but Ms Barber-Fankhauser, 43, was washed away in a two-metre wall of water.

Last night her husband, Graeme, was coming to terms with the terrible irony that his wife had spent weeks battling the state's worst bushfires in more than 60 years but had lost her life in a flood.

"You don't expect someone who goes out to fight fires to drown," he said. Mr Barber-Fankhauser said his wife was a great animal lover, whose passion for the environment had inspired her to become a firefighter. "She didn't deserve it," he said tearfully of her death.

His thoughts were echoed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment's chief fire officer Gary Morgan: "It is just unbelievable to think that this staff member lost her life in a flash flood as we are nearing the end of the worst and longest fire season we have had since 1939." A firefighter for eight years, Mrs Barber-Fankhauser loved Victoria's picturesque high country and the sheer physicality of battling blazes, said her friend Irene Grant, the Mayor of Wangaratta and a spokeswoman for the department.

Mrs O'Gorman described her neighbour as "a greenie from way back". "She loved the Buckland Valley," she said. "She loved animals, she loved the bush. I hope her spirit lives on."

Mrs Barber-Fankhauser's was the state's first fire-related death this summer. The two other DSE firefighters were flown from the accident to Traralgon's Latrobe Regional Hospital suffering multiple fractures.

It is believed they were trying to retrieve a burnt fire truck from the Upper Buckland Valley before the accident happened.

Meanwhile, a firefighting pilot is lucky to be alive after his plane crashed on Wednesday and burst into flames, seconds before he scrambled out.

Barry Foster was under sedation at his Leongatha home last night. On Wednesday, he had been dumping water on the north-eastern Victorian bushfires in an area



Firefighter and animal lover Cheryl Barber-Fankhauser pictured recently with television vet Dr Harry Cooper.

known as the Razor-Viking Wilderness. He was helping ground crews to control hotspots when caught in a thunderstorm.

His wife Margaret said he told her that when the plane crashed during the storm, "I got up and ran".

"He had already dumped one load of water and decided to do another run," Mrs Foster said.

"An air draught caught him and the aircraft wouldn't respond. He had to get rid of the load of water real quick."

The plane, a Dromader M18, dropped to the ground and burst into flames soon afterwards. Mr Foster was rescued after the pilot of another plane saw what happened and radioed for help.

Mrs Foster said her husband has been fighting fires under contract for the DSE since before the Ash Wednesday bushfires.

He suffered deep cuts and bruising but didn't appear shaken, she said. Last night, he was eager to get back up in the air and rejoin the fire fight.

WorkSafe Victoria is investigating Mrs Barber-Fankhauser's death and will interview the two other firefighters, who were discharged from hospital yesterday.

Superintendent Ken Lay, of Victoria Police, described it as an upsetting postscript to the bushfires "which have devastated this area over the past two months". The fires have razed 1.12 million hectares in the state's north-east.

Ms Grant said it was going to be hard for Ms Barber-Fankhauser's immediate colleagues to continue working after her death.

"For this to happen at this stage of the campaign is just devastating. Throughout the whole campaign, the emphasis has been on firefighter and community safety."

Mr Barber-Fankhauser said his wife was "a lovely lady" who was devoted to animals.

Indeed, while her husband lived in Wodonga, she lived in Wandiligong, near Bright, in order to care for her two horses, her chickens and Rusty.

Mrs O'Gorman said her neighbour had a "terrible job" fighting fires.

"I was being Mum collecting eggs from the chooks and putting the dog back on the chain to greet her when she returned home. I tried to help out in an awkward situation . . . to make life a bit more pleasant."

- with Andra Jackson, AAP

After the bushfires come the floods

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/03/10/1047144918602.html>

March 11 2003 By Wayne Miller

The waters that claimed the life of a firefighter in north-eastern Victoria have choked the Ovens River and are threatening the city of Wangaratta.

Recent rain falling on bushfire-affected catchments have washed a mix of soil and ash into streams and reservoirs, contaminating the water.

On Friday night the city of 18,000, north-east of Melbourne, was placed on emergency footing, with little clean water left.

The situation eased only slightly after 300,000 litres of water was brought in by truck from Benalla on Saturday.

Wandiligong CFA volunteer Cheryl Barber-Fankhauser, 43, died and two other firefighters were injured when a flash flood in the Buckland River swept their vehicle off a bridge on February 25.

Those waters oozed into Wangaratta via the Ovens River on Thursday.

By Friday, North-East Water's filters could not cope with the thick, putrid-smelling sludge. "We had to stop making fresh water and rely on what we had in storage, which was about four or five megalitres," North-East Water's business services manager John Morris said.

Water is pumped directly from the river into settling tanks before it is washed through anthracite, sand and gravel filters and then treated with chlorine.

But the water is so filthy it has cut the filters' effectiveness from producing 40 megalitres a day to yesterday's total of about 18 megalitres.

A back-up filtration system, which sits atop two semi-trailers and can treat two megalitres a day, is on its way by road to Wangaratta from Rockhampton in north Queensland.

Mr Morris said the town would be on high alert for at least five days - the time the waters are expected to remain - and possibly longer. "It's moving so slowly. If we get another rain event, we don't know what that will do, either," Mr Morris said. Of major concern is the amount of debris, ash and fire retardants that may wash into rivers in the north-east if more rain falls. "If it rains again where the fires were, we'll be bracing ourselves to see what the fallout is," Mr Morris said.



Picture: ALBURY BORDER MAIL
North-East Water's operations manager Bruce Gardiner with a bottle of river water.

Resident Wendy Jones, who grew up beside the Murray and has lived in Wangaratta for 14 years, said she had never seen the water so filthy.

Cheryl Leanne Barber-Fankhauser

<http://monumentaustralia.org.au/themes/people/tragedy/display/110044-cheryl-leanne-barber-fankhauser>

Mountain Queen is laid to rest By Neil Wilson

A monument commemorates Cheryl Barber- Fankhauser, a project firefighter who lost her life in a flash flood in the Buckland Valley in 2003.



Pioneer firefighter Cheryl Barber-Fankhauser now lies at peace -- buried at the foot of a boulder from a river she adored and which swept her life away. The 43-year-old ``superwoman'' once told her husband Graeme that should she die unexpectedly, the Buckland River -- flowing through the state's northeast alps -- should be her resting place. Yesterday at her funeral he told how he had journeyed with her firefighting mates to the Upper Buckland where she died to load the rock she now lies under.

Ms Barber-Fankhauser was the only fatality in Victoria's long summer of bushfires when her fire truck was caught in a flash flood nine days ago. Yesterday her husband wondered aloud at how her life was ended by a furious rush of water from welcome rains. ``There's been many ironies, many things over the past week that make you reflect on what life's about,'' he said.



The 500 mourners who had gathered in the mountain valley hamlet of Wandiligong, outside Bright, shared his pain and disbelief at the loss of a mate they knew as "Mofff ". "We will never understand why we lived 50 days having the potential for disaster then lost Cheryl in saving us from that disaster," said the Uniting Church's Reverend Pam Wyley. With the church overflowing, many stood or sat outside in the gentle autumn sun surrounded by fire-blackened mountains. "Lift up your eyes to the hills," Ms Wyley said as she began Psalm 121.

The running shoes placed on her casket had pounded over those hills as she revelled in long-distance running and cycling. A tribute from her mother Jan and sister Kerrin told how Ms Barber-Fankhauser was "Bright Queen of the Mountain" three years in a row, winning the gruelling race up three mountains in three days.

She gave up working in the local shire offices years ago to return to seasonal outdoors work and care for her beloved animals and pets. A tribute from friend and cycling partner Lynne Penny told of Ms Barber-Fankhauser's distress over the death and injury to so many birds and animals during the bushfire crisis.

Ms Barber-Fankhauser worked 40 days in the fire zone, with just three days off. She was among the crew that saved the historic Mt Buffalo Chalet. Ms Barber-Fankhauser applied for a summer job as a project firefighter with the Department of Sustainability and Environment eight years ago at the age 35. Fellow firefighters yesterday recalled how she won a position intended for a male aged 18 to 35. They said she led the men up the hills during training drills.

Environment Minister John Thwaites and DSE chiefs were among the mourners yesterday. Many of the 23 women who have since become firefighters in the region lined the church's steep grass driveway as Cheryl Barber-Fankhauser's casket was placed in a hearse for her final ride to the Bright cemetery.

Article from the Herald Sun, March 2003.

Inquest starts into firefighter death

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2004-06-03/inquest-starts-into-firefighter-death/1986204>

2 Jun 2004

A coronial inquest into last year's death of a Wandilagong firefighter swept away by flash flooding, will begin today in Wangaratta in Victoria's north-east.

Firefighter Sheryl Barber-Fankhauser, 43, died during flash flooding in north-eastern Victoria last year.

Ms Barber-Fankhauser was travelling in a Department of Sustainability and Environment four-wheel drive with two other firefighters, helping contain hot-spots sparked by bushfires in the area.

Driving home about 6:00pm, flash flooding washed their vehicle off a bridge in the Upper Buckland Valley.

They climbed on top of the four-wheel drive, but Ms Barber-Fankhauser was swept away by a two-metre wall of water.

The two other firefighters survived with multiple fractures - her body was recovered later that night.

Firefighter inquest expected to end today

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2004-06-04/firefighter-inquest-expected-to-end-today/1986802>

3 Jun 2004 **MAP:** [Wangaratta 3677](#)

A coronial inquest at Wangaratta into the death of a firefighter will continue today.

Wandiligong woman Sheryl Barber Fankhauser, 43, died in February last year in the Upper Buckland Valley.

The inquest heard yesterday that she was travelling in a Department of Sustainability and Environment four-wheel drive with two other firefighters when a rush of water pushed their vehicle off a bridge at Dingo Creek.

The court was told the death followed a freak storm that created a two metre wall of water travelling at more than 20 kilometres per hour.

The hearing is expected to finish today and the finding will be handed down at a date to be fixed.

Firefighter 'victim of freak storm'

<http://fddp.theage.com.au/articles/2004/06/03/1086203564105.html?from=storylhs>

June 4, 2004

A firefighter killed by a flash flood while battling Victoria's 2003 bushfires was the victim of a freak one-in-500-year deluge, an inquest was told yesterday.

Cheryl Barber-Fankhauser, 43, of Wandiligong, and two others were swept from a submerged bridge in the Buckland Valley in the north-east after being caught in a local storm that dumped up to 140 millimetres of rain in 20 minutes.

Mrs Barber-Fankhauser was driving a four-wheel-drive vehicle that became stuck on the Devils Creek bridge in about one metre of water as the three people returned from removing a burnt-out tanker about 5.30pm on February 26, 2003.

The Victorian Coroners Court heard she and fellow firefighter Wally Sinclair climbed on to the bonnet before mechanic Troy Campbell - a passenger in a second four-wheel-drive, waded in to help them to a raised gravel bar.

Mr Sinclair said Mrs Barber-Fankhauser was knocked into the river below as she tried to cross to the creek bank.

Seconds later, a two-metre wall of water, rocks and logs hit Mr Campbell and himself.

"I looked upstream to see a wall of debris coming down on us," Mr Sinclair said. "I thought I was going to die. She was swept away in a matter of seconds."

Mr Sinclair said he did not realise how quickly the river was rising, but believed Mrs Barber-Fankhauser was a poor bush driver and chose the wrong path to cross the bridge.

Keith Haire, who was driving the second four-wheel-drive, said he was concerned as he approached the bridge, which "didn't look right".

Weather expert Nurullah Ozbey, of Thiess Hydrographic Services, said the storm created a 25km/h flash flood without leaving a drop of rain at a recording station 10 kilometres upstream.



Cheryl Barber Fankhauser was knocked into the river as she tried to cross to the creek bank.

"It is so far above the limit I can't tell if it's a one-in-100, one-in-200 or one-in-500 (year event)," he said.

"Maybe we'll never see this sort of thing again."

Mrs Barber-Fankhauser had been a casual summer firefighter with the Department of Sustainability and Development for seven years.

She was the sole fatality during the bushfires, which razed more than 1 million hectares after being ignited by lightning on January 8, 2003. Mr Sinclair and Mr Campbell were rescued.

The inquest before coroner Peter Reardon continues today. AAP