

Former soldier says he must simply battle on

STEVE RICE

BEN Whiteway could be forgiven for feeling angry or sad at losing his Kersbrook home in the Sampson Flat bushfire.

But the former British soldier says his loss needs to be put into perspective.

"I went through some major bombings in Ireland and I went to Bosnia and saw people living for six or eight months at a time with nothing," he said.

"For me, this is a setback, it's nothing permanent. The building is replaceable but lives are not."

The Devils Gully Rd home of Mr Whiteway, his wife Vicky, and their children Ella, 13, and Sam, 11, was one of the first to be levelled.

Their home of 18 months is among 12 houses confirmed to have been destroyed by the fire, which has burned about 13,000ha.

Mr Whiteway said the family had gone fishing at Walker Flat on Friday, but returned in the afternoon after hearing about the impending fire.

He said they headed to a dam on his property but left about 5pm as the flames approached his house.

"We looked up and saw big plumes of smoke so we got the final packing done and evacuated to the Kersbrook CFS station," he said.

He said he first knew his home had been destroyed when a neighbour, who also lost his house, rang him after fleeing the fire.

"When he said his was gone I knew mine was gone. The CFS had no hope. Once it's got



PLANS TO REBUILD: Ben Whiteway amid the ruins of his house on Devils Gully Road, Kersbrook.

Picture: TAIT SCHMAAL

THE DEVASTATION

those legs it's gone," he said. Mr Whiteway said he had packed paperwork, electrical items and "the kids' school clothes because they are so expensive".

He said that although he had prepared his property by clearing trees, the fire moved too quickly and in too many di-

rections through the gully and towards his house. "We had a party just before Christmas and an architect friend came up and he said 'You need to trim those trees down and you will have million dollar views,'" he said.

"Well, we have got million dollar views now."

Mr Whiteway said he would rebuild a house on the same

block and add bushfire fighting systems to defend his house from any future fires.

"That was the plan for this year. Next year we would probably have stayed," he said.

"If we had a suppression system up and been actively defending it we would have been able to take that corner because it would have only been on one front."

Mr Whiteway said strong community spirit would help people recover.

"There is no point dwelling on 'Oh, I can't' do anything because my place is burnt," he said.

"You need to get on and help other people because you don't want to lose other stuff."

"As they say in Australia 'Build a bridge and get over it'."

Forced to flee but wise, early efforts save house



WELL PREPARED: John McMahon lost his shed and a vehicle.

Picture: TOM HUNTLEY

SAM KELTON

INGLEWOOD resident John McMahon lost a shed and a vehicle to the blaze.

But his house was left standing after making one of the toughest decisions of his life — should he stay and defend or should he evacuate the path of the approaching fire front?

"I did as much as I could but I reached the point where I had to leave," Mr McMahon said yesterday as he surveyed his property.

"Living in the Hills — these are the risks you take."

Mr McMahon's house was saved by preparedness and making his home as ready as possible.

Clearing vegetation and ensuring his sprinkler systems were on — Mr McMahon's plan worked.

"I ended up leaving around 3am," he said.

"I planned to stay but it was coming in from about three

different sides. It was a hard decision but definitely a good one."

Mr McMahon was alerted the next morning by the Mt Torrens CFS that his property was safe — a huge relief for him.

The CFS attributed the house being saved to Mr McMahon's earlier efforts.

"If you live in the Hills — enjoy it but you've got to take precautions," he said.

"Follow what's on the CFS website, prepare your place so you can live there the next day."



WHAT THEY ARE SAYING

“ There will undoubtedly be ... (an) inquiry, and if that inquiry establishes that fire was caused through a negligent act, then there would be the possibility of a (class action) claim.

– **Duncan Basheer**
Hannon managing partner
Peter Humphries

“ They (volunteers) got possibility hundreds of horses out of there and took them to various locations — those people kicked it up and got them out — they're the real heroes.

– **Adelaide Plains Equine Clinic owner Elizabeth Herbert**

“ It may take a week or more before insurers have an idea of the extent of the damage and the number of policyholders affected — once they're (property owners) back at their properties they should contact their insurance companies or their insurance broker as soon as they can.

– **Insurance Council of Australia spokesman Campbell Fuller**

“ For farmers who have lost their infrastructure, their livestock — it takes a lifetime to put that all together so it's truly devastating.

– **Livestock SA president Geoff Power**

“ I've been amazed by the support people are willing to give, from offering their paddocks, to opening up their homes for those affected to stay — I guess people feel they can help in that way because they're not out there fighting the fire.

– **Ali Mitchell, creator of the Sampson Flat Fire Updates South Australia Facebook page which has close to 36,000 likes**