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Neighbour's dam a life-saving shelter

BY VICTORIA MACDONALD

A NEIGHBOUR'S dam provided life-saving shelter for a group of Upper Murray men surrounded by fire on Thursday.

Tooma Station's Stewart Sutherland joined his father and some farmhands who were forced to retreat to the water's edge, sprinklers turned on their fire tankers to withstand the flames.

"We were in a neigh-

bour's property and we didn't know our way around that well," Mr Sutherland said.

"I thought I was going to be right but ... it was so fierce and so black, we couldn't see anything."

Mr Sutherland's truck made a dash for the dam.

The crew was stunned to find another small fire tanker and its crew seeking shelter at the water.

"We couldn't believe it. We've both wedged in

there and the fire just peeled around us on either side," he said.

One of the property's farmhands, a British traveller, had singed hair on his neck as a souvenir of the narrow escape.

As Mr Stewart and the crew fought the fire, his wife, Kate, and their daughters battled flames at the homestead.

"We lost our power and we had no means of communication (aside from

handheld radios) and that was really frightening," Mrs Stewart said.

"You feel you're ready but you're not really ready if you've never done it before."

But Mrs Stewart said in a stroke of great timing, about eight CFA fire trucks rolled up at the property to boost NSW Rural Fire Service's efforts just as aircraft came to bomb from above.

The family was lucky to

escape the fire with most of their stock and property intact; the most painful loss was the destruction of the farm's original 1800s shearing shed.

Mrs Stewart said she hadn't bargained for major bushfires when she'd moved to the Tooma region 25 years ago.

The English native joked the couple's wedding vows should have included: "For better, for worse and for fires".



● Stewart and Kate Sutherland escaped the blaze but lost an 1800s shed. Picture: PETER MERKESTEYN