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## Protecting lives and property



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# Heroic confined space rescue

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By the time Russell Gaul arrived on scene with two others in the Darnum-Ellinbank tanker, a desperate rescue was underway with a serious risk of four fatalities.

The scene was a dairy farm where a farmer had been attending to the bad smell coming from a tank holding corn starch. It was time to dump the product in the yard to send it down to the manure pond where it would be diluted and pumped onto paddocks as liquid fertiliser.

He set up a ladder and climbed into the tank where he was quickly overcome by fumes. It was a hot day, the corn starch was fermenting and producing carbon dioxide. This reduced the oxygen levels leading to asphyxiation.

The farmer's family saw him attempt to climb out of the tank before his head disappeared. One son climbed in after him and was overcome; a second son climbed in and was also overcome. A farm worker cut a hole in the side of the tank with an angle grinder before entering the tank. He was also overcome. The farmer's wife, the boys' mother, called Triple O.

Two Victoria Police officers were very fortunately only one minute away and were confronted by four people unconscious and apparently lifeless face up in the slurry.

Incident: Confined space rescue

District: 9

Date: 27 November 2013

Brigades: Darnum-Ellinbank, Traralgon, Morwell, Warragul, Yarragon

“The call changed from three people to four people trapped while we were on our way,” says Darnum-Ellinbank member Russell Gaul. “There were a few police and MICA [mobile intensive care ambulance] paramedics just getting the last one out of the tank when we arrived.”

In fact the first two responding police officers had just done something far above and beyond their duty. With no breathing apparatus on scene and understanding that the situation was desperate, one police officer went into the tank to drag out the victims while the other held onto his belt.

“If they hadn’t gone in, we would’ve had four deaths,” continues Russell. “They put their lives on the line and did what they thought had to be done. I take my hat off to them.

“The police were running the show and I took on a command role and worked with SES. The lead police officer was under pressure but he was doing an amazing job. We just said, ‘What can we do?’ We worked with SES and ambos to get the patients stabilised and onto stretchers. Each patient had three ambulance officers working on him and they were put into an induced coma.

“Within half an hour to three-quarters of an hour we had three air ambulances on scene; two from the La Trobe Valley and one from Melbourne. That’s where the next complication came in. They were covered in the corn slurry. We couldn’t put them in the confined space of the air ambulances and risk the fumes rising again. Under the guidance of the ambos, we gently washed them down using the water from our tanker.”

The four men were taken to hospital in a stable but critical condition. The two police officers were also taken to hospital.

Operations Officer Bill Alards was CFA liaison on scene.

“Early on the lead ambo, lead police officer and myself got together as an emergency management team and discussed what each agency was doing and what needed to be done,” says Bill. “We made an arrangement to meet again soon to keep each agency up to date with what was going on. SES also participated in the ongoing meetings and Russell participated in some. There was constant communication. Everyone was on the same page.”

Warragul hazmat took readings from around the scene and in the tank. The data was interpreted by Nick Perkins from MFB, the state’s rostered scientific officer, who fed information on the fermentation process back to Bill.

“We let the ambos and the hospital know what we’d found in the tank,” says Nick. “In fact they later had a contamination issue at the hospital with one doctor who worked on our patients reporting some ill effects and nurses required to wear masks around them.”

But back to the dairy farm: when the tank was cut open, some of the slurry flowed onto the ground very close to the rotary milking shed. The incident was called in at 12:43pm and by about 3:45pm, 400 Friesians were ready to be milked. With the levels in the shed spiking, WorkSafe declared that, unless the levels went down, milking couldn’t be carried out. The farmers’ lives and now their livelihood were at stake.

Emergency crews again sprang into action. With one fan from Russell’s property and fans already on site, the milking shed was ventilated. Milking went ahead that afternoon and again the next morning.

In the days and weeks following the incident, neighbours also sprang into action, doing the family’s silage and putting their fertiliser down.

Following the mid-December incident debrief, Bill circles back to the rescue by the two police officers.

“I have nothing but praise for them,” he says. “It came down to a split decision: on the one hand; on the other hand... The ambos were clear that we had been minutes away from multiple fatalities and the police acted on that urgency. They were damned if they did, from an occupational health and safety perspective, but they were damned if they didn’t from the life perspective of the victims.

“We wouldn’t recommend that anyone enter a confined space without breathing apparatus but in this case it was fortunate the police acted as they did.

“It was that close it wasn’t funny.”

A few days later, all four patients had been discharged from hospital and the farmer and his wife visited Russell to say thanks.

“He put his arm around me...” says Russell, struggling to describe the visit as the emotions well up.

“I’ve lived here for 61 years and know the family. They’ve farmed in the district for generations.

“I’ve been in CFA for 42 years and I’ve been to the alpine fires, Ash Wednesday and Black Saturday and through some horrific scenes but this is one of the most traumatic jobs I’ve ever done.

“It just worked like clockwork. I’ve never seen so many emergency services vehicles in one place. Police came from everywhere. I couldn’t get over how well everyone worked together. It was a team effort and one of the most gratifying outcomes – it made it all so worthwhile.”

The farmer spoke several weeks later on local radio. “I have to thank everyone for the fantastic job they did of rescuing us and putting their own lives at risk,” he said.

“It was a very very gallant effort by all of them.”

*Tank photo from Bill Alards*

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The hole in the tank



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Pause

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