

**"STAY AND DEFEND OR FLEE"** is another chapter of my proposed book, **"SURVIVING THE FIRESTORM AND ITS AFTERMATH"** that recounts my experiences during and after the 2007 Witch Creek Blaze. This firestorm burnt large swaths of San Diego County destroying over 400 homes and killing ten people.

## **STAY AND DEFEND OR FLEE**

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Jason, a fellow fire-survivor of the 2007 Witch Creek Inferno, was fighting mad. “Never, never again! No, next time I’m not going to depend on the fire department to save my house” His dwelling and some 400 others were lost in the huge Santa Ana induced conflagration. Jason’s home in Escondido was located near Lake Hodges. Fire trucks from his town and other communities were passing by his and other homes that were ablaze to draw water from the lake then returning to their own localities without stopping to put out these fires. The Escondido fire crews were overwhelmed fighting their own battles to save the more congested areas. My fellow survivor’s home was not in the triage area, the perimeter of defense that the overwhelmed Fire Department had staked out to allow maximum use of its limited facilities and work force.

I asked Jason what he intended to do in the next firestorm when the call for mandatory evacuation is issued.

“You and the others can flee, but I’m staying-put to save my home! I can count on no one but myself! I’m not going thru this hell again.”

I must admit that my friend was spry for his sixty odd years, but I doubt that he could outrun flames blown by 80 miles per hour sustained winds such as we experienced in the October 2007 blaze.

He continued, “The Australians have a better idea. They train the homeowners to stay and defend their property in cooperation with fire fighters. That’s what I’m going to do! Stay and Defend.”

His sentiments were common to many of my fellow victims who had also lost their homes in the recent blaze. Moreover, there were even some in our fire-fighting community who decided to take a second look at the question of civilians helping the firefighters by protecting their own homes. In Australia, they have developed a program of intensive training of the civilian homeowners so they can cooperate with firefighters in defending against the large brush fires that periodically destroy large areas of the bush, not unlike the huge firestorms that devastate our California communities. First and foremost is preparing the house and property to be fire resistant. This must be done long before the fires begin. Above all one must clear all of the readily combustible brush in area 100 feet around the dwelling to provide a defensible perimeter. Next, it is necessary to eliminate wooden fences and other easily burnable material within this space, which could allow the flames to reach your house. Roofs and walls must be designed to withstand embers blown by the winds. Equipment will have to be installed to allow water to be pumped from cisterns and swimming pools to hoses in order to fight the fire. Back-up auxiliary pumping equipment may be necessary to keep the water flowing if the electrical power is cut-off.

I asked Jason if he is preparing to do all of this.

“Damn right well, I’ll do all of this and more. I’m not going to let my house go up in flames again!”

The Aussies like the Americans, may be brave, but they both have been negligent about preparing their homes and property for the next blaze.

Key to the Australian defense is the concept of the making the house a fortress against the flames and a haven to be used for safety, if the fire envelopes the surrounding area. When all else fails the Aussies maintain that you will find safe refuge inside your house! I can tell you that this was not true of my house and the other dwellings, which were completely consumed in the Witch Creek Inferno. They would have become funeral pyres and certainly not safe-havens for those who sought protection within their walls. We, who never have been caught in the path of the hellish flames of a windstorm driven inferno, such as in the last few Santa Ana induced blazes, do not fully comprehend the danger and death that await the unprotected civilian. These fires have killed fully protected and trained fire fighters. Remember eight of the 10 deaths in the Witch Creek combustion were our brave firemen. You can’t out run the fierce wind-driven flames. Furthermore, they are often preceded by hot winds that can scorch the lungs. The badly injured survivors clinging to life after sustaining damage to their lungs and burns on their body will look upon those who died in the inferno as the lucky ones.

The movement to start an Australian Stay and Defend program in Southern California received a major setback after the recent enormous wildfire that destroyed a large area near the capitol of Melbourne in the Aussie state of Victoria. Over 750 houses were destroyed. 1200 square miles of forest and towns were incinerated, and over 173 people lost their lives; many while attempting to escape at the last minute. To quote Gary Hughes a longtime reporter for the

Australian Press: "It comes at you like a run-away train. One minute you are preparing. The next you are fighting for your home. Then you are fighting for your life." After this Down-under conflagration, plans to initiate similar training programs for residents to "Stay and Defend" were shelved in both San Diego and six other California counties.

If you wish to increase the chances of saving your home in the next Santa Ana, induced firestorm there is much that can be done without putting your life on the line. You have choices beyond Stay and Defend or Flee. We can learn much from both the Australian and our own fire fighters in decreasing the chances of our homes going up in flames. As discussed above, preparing your property not as a safe haven, but one that is less likely to catch fire is the first step. In rebuilding our house, we insisted on enclosing the eaves with flame resistant stucco, using highly tempered glass that will resist breaking during the fires, and installing special O'Hagin roof vents to prevent embers from entering our attic. Despite the fact that our house was lost in the 2007 fire, we were not required to do any of these things in the amended 2008 fire code. One rebuilder in the Westwood section of Rancho Benardo chose to erect a concrete structure, which will be even more likely to resist the Santa Ana firestorms. New concepts were tested in 2007 to further enhance fire-protection. The Chubb insurance company hired special crews to spray jelly-like fire retardant on several of their multi-million-dollar insured homes in Rancho Santa Fe. None of these were lost. However, the degree of fire danger to which they were exposed has not been reported. To enhance protection special chemicals are being tested which can be sprayed on their houses by the owners prior to evacuation. All of this and much more can be done to save your home without placing your life in jeopardy.

I was looking forward to discussing these ideas on improving home defense with my fellow survivor Jason at the second meeting of the Stay and Defend training program cosponsored by

the fire departments and the survivors group. The second meeting, which had been scheduled a week after the fires down under, was cancelled. Not only the Australians but also, we Californians are in the process of rethinking the concepts underlying Stay and Defend. At least one concept everyone says is critical: Early warning! In addition, when the call for mandatory evacuation is given, get out of possible harm's way as quickly as possible.

It reminds me of the old Jack Benny story. He was accosted by a robber who put a gun in his ribs saying "Your wallet or your life!" After a few moments of silence, the thief shoved the pistol in deeper and again demanded: "Your wallet or your life!" Jack Benny responded, "Wait, I'm thinking." My advice is don't waste time thinking! When you get the message to evacuate, leave quickly! You may lose your house, but you will save your life! We should all heed this advice, including Jason.