

Van Didden, Gerard W (mainly from The Age website and CALM News 1997)



Migrated from Netherlands in 1954 at age 12. Graduated from Dwellingup Cadet School 1960. Joined Forest Department as a Forest Guard in 1961 at Mundaring. Based in Dwellingup in c1964-67. Was at the Dwellingup fire, see below. Technical Assistant at Manjimup in late 1970s. Involved with fire control in various positions, throughout his career. In the team that developed the "red book" fire behaviour tables. Part of the team that developed aerial surveillance. Helped develop incendiary machines. Was an incendiary machine operator in late 1960s-70s. In early 1980s a consultant to Bushfires Council of Northern Territory. Retired 1997. Has farmlet at Sawyers Valley.

Poignant stories from the front line of an inferno

The Age Saturday February 5, 2011 by ROBERT DREWE

Tempered by Fire, a book of personal stories from the firefighters and survivors of the 1961 West Australian bushfires centred on the old jarrah-forest town of Dwellingup, is as fascinating as it's relevant. (Here I'm happy to point out two coincidences: not only was I at school with the book's editor, Roger Underwood, an experienced forester, but my first out-of-town assignment in my first week as a cadet reporter on the West Australian was to cover the Dwellingup fire. I use the word "cover" advisedly. I was the sidekick to a senior reporter, Jim Dollimore, who drove us to the bushfires in the company Land-Rover, did 90 per cent of the reporting, and slept on the last available couch in the foyer of the amazingly spared Dwellingup Hotel. While remaining so unflappable and courteous that he was destined to leave newspapers and become Ambassador to Syria.) What's so compelling about *Tempered by Fire* is that it's like a series of poignant conversations with previously reticent acquaintances you've always suspected had important stories to tell, but had kept them close to their chests until now. The summer of 1961 was exceptionally hot and dry, and a series of fierce electrical storms ran north-to-south down the state's forests. The fires began as lightning bolts from the blue, striking long-dry bush that carried heavy fuels. More than 400,000 hectares of forest and farmland were burnt. Whole towns were burnt to the ground. As well as the victims' misfortune, it's interesting, for once, to hear from the firefighters. Some of them are vivid writers. **Gerard van Didden** was an 18-year-old forestry cadet straight out of school when he was assigned to save a row of houses. "I put on my heavy overcoat and took my leather motorcycle gloves. The wind was raging and intense showers of sparks were flowing through the air. Spot fires were starting on the walls and in the gutters. As I worked, moving from house to house and back it suddenly struck me that I was completely on my own. When the main front hit, the wave was very intense. Inside a washhouse I found a foil-lined tea chest and crouched down and pulled this over me." What I remember is losing all sense of time. Things were going on, but had no reality. My main feeling was being overcome by loneliness. It has done me good to tell my story." *Tempered by Fire* is published by the Bushfire Front, PO Box 1014, Subiaco, WA 6904.