

**Title:** The Week From Hell

**Category:** Bushfire Support

**Club Name:** Club Narooma

**Entrant:** Tony Casu, General Manager

1. **Provide an outline of the program, project or cause that addresses each of the following aspects:**
  - a. **The program/project/cause objectives**
  - b. **The support the club provided, i.e. was it financial, in-kind, staff volunteers or use of club facilities?**
  - c. **A timeline of activities/events**
  - d. **Any developments made since implementation (for example: if the support spans multiple years, how has the program grown? Will the club provide support again? Will the program be enhanced in the future?)**

The Objective was simple - Survival for all - give people a place of refuge and survival.

New Year's Eve 2019 started like any other Tuesday, with the exception that there were a few extra cars in the carpark with people in them at about 8am.

The power went off at 9am and the few cars turned into a flood, so by 6pm we had about 450 camped on the club's floor and ready to bed down for the night.

No power and no phones and no mobile service with all roads along the coast cut off and closed.

This was the start of our "Week from Hell", but we did manage to feed everyone in the club that night, plus another 300 to 400 people camped next-door on the football oval, as we still had torches and gas stoves with only a handful of staff, and the legend of our "Mystery Meat" was born.

With only a handful of staff that were able to help out, the Salvos went up and confiscated meat from Woolworths to help us feed the masses. So with a torch Monica (Office Manager) and an apprentice chef headed out to the BBQ Hut and fired up the gas hotplate and a fryer. Everyone got a handful of chips, a dabble of gravy and lump on "Mystery Meat" in a cardboard container, as in the dark no-one knew what was what. Roo, Mutton, Pork, Beef???

Our week from Hell then extended over 6 days and 5 nights, to also include 20 residents, with no carers or nurses, from the local Nursing Home when it was evacuated.

The program was pretty simple, play it by ear and make decisions on the fly as the situation ebbed and flowed as the weather conditions changed and the different groups of people came and went. We just found a way to cope and survive with the different situations that came and went from day to day with no or little sleep.

We were able to get the local hardware store to open and get small lamps to stick to the walls of the toilets so people could use the facilities, The batteries needed changing every 3 hours making the nights very long.

We also fired up a gas stove and boiled water to put into a urn, thus people could have a hot cuppa, plus any biscuits we had out the back. Again manned all night as most people could not get comfortable sleeping on a club floor.

We had to stay awake all night with the torches to guide peoples movements in the dark as well as keeping people from laying down in a thoroughfare and becoming a trip hazard in the dark.

Little did we know that this was the first night of 5 all the same in the first week of January. We went at it over the Tuesday, Wednesday & Friday Saturday & Sunday nights & Day, with a Thursday off when the wind changed and everyone was allowed to go home.

2.30pm it could have been midnight as the smoke blacked out the sun and the glow of the fire turned the horizon orange.

The Tuesday & Wednesday was mostly people from Cobargo, Mystery Bay and holiday makers from the caravan parks south of the town, as they had been told to drop everything and flee now, so they had very little creature comforts with them, but we were able to get a few items from the local "St Vincent De Paul" to help try and make people a bit more comfortable.

The Weekend was mostly locals who were looking for safe haven as the fires were predicted to hit Narooma on the Saturday, but the roads were still blocked, so in they came.

As well as a club full of people, we also had their pets. We had Dogs & Cats, Birds and even a horse in the foyer at one stage. Still no power and still doing all nights with torches. Looking around my office while writing this I still have a torch sitting on the back cabinet behind my desk.

For that first week we managed to keep everyone fed and safe.

Then on Thursday 23rd January the wind changed and a few houses south of the town got burnt, the official evacuation center could not be opened, so another evacuation and another sleep over in the club, but this time we had power, its much easier to look after people when you can see what your doing.

On the 28th January the club was asked to look after 450 fire fights the next day, Breakfast, lunch & dinner for a five day period. where do you find the stock & manpower on a days notice in bush fire conditions and road closures in a country town.

Lots of trips to the local supermarkets, a daring dash along the fire road from the manager of Bidvest in Pambula to bring stock (1.5 hours away through the fires) and a call to arms from our Sporting Sub-Clubs for volunteers got the job done, not to mention Alex (Catering Manager) pulling double shifts for a week straight.

With one of my staff losing their house, and another losing his father in-law, it brought it home how dangerous the situation did get and what it meant to so many people to have a place of save haven they could turn to - Their Local Club.

- 2. Provide a brief insight into why this program, project or cause was supported by the club. In your answer, summarise:**

- a. **How the project, program or cause was first presented to the club. For example, did a member present it to the Board or Executive team, was it part of a ClubGRANTS submission, did it come from a local business or the community based on a need, was a survey conducted to identify areas of community need, etc.**
- b. **Why it was important to the club to support this community need.**

Supporting the community will always be a cause that the Narooma Sporting & Services Club will take up, such as:

At 1.30pm on the Friday afternoon 3rd January I was contacted by the "Evacuation Center" to reopen the club as they were about to evacuate the local Nursing Home, so at around 4pm they turned up and placed 20 mattresses on the floor, moved in 20 nursing home residents into the club and handed me a box of food, then all but me and the residents left.

I went across the road to the evacuation center to ask what happens next. I was told that the head of Emergencies NSW had just told them they are not allowed to give any help to the club, food or medical, as that would make the club an official evacuation center and they were not allowed to do that, "Tony we are not allowed to be responsible for the residents in the club, you are".

OK I thought, just trying to get over the last few days from hell, whats a few more.

I made the nursing home residents comfortable, Boiled up some water for the urn and cups of tea all round, found some bread, butter & cheese that I thought was still eatable (still no power) and everyone had cheese sandwich for dinner.

Again I spent all night with the torch getting people to the toilet, and often having to help them on and off the toilets in the dark.

When you have people as old as 103 on mattresses on the ground, no-one can get up off the floor, let alone get around in the dark or trip on something and break a bone or worse when you are held responsible for them. no-one was going anywhere that night without me and the trusty torch with them.

The next day saw a influx of locals looking for shelter from the forecast fire catastrophe that was expected to hit Narooma that day, thus I had plenty of volunteers to help.

After a phone call with the head of "NSW Disaster Relief" and a dummy spit, the club became an official evacuation center at 1pm on the Saturday and we were able to get ambulance medics to come and check over the nursing home residents.

When the community calls, the local club is always there, because that's what we do in the club industry.

### **3. Provide an outline of the positive impact the club's contribution had on the community.**

The Club received countless emails and messages from families that had taken shelter in the club during that first week in January 2020.



The club still receives thank you emails from people who sheltered in the club 12 months on, as the emotion of those events are still raw and still on people minds.

I have uploaded files that contain praise from the people who sheltered in the club, as well as the "Local Emergency Management Officer" and the local Mayor praising the club for our efforts and supporting our application for a Generator.

The countless times either myself or the Board Directors have been pulled up in the local shops and the club praised and thanked for our actions is evidence of the extra standing that the community has for the club.

See uploaded files.

#### **4. Add any credits here (optional).**

Tony Casu - General Manager

Monica Bird - Office Manager

Alex Hallam - Catering Manager

Adam Barrett - Duty Manager

Brendan Matters - Operations Manager

All the staff that helped out where they could, and the volunteers from the public.

The Many Fire Fighters that helped save the town.

#### **5. Supporting material:**

- *To request copies of the supporting documents, please email [events@clubsnsw.com.au](mailto:events@clubsnsw.com.au)*