

Memories of the great flood of 2004

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Monday Feb 16th 2004

Well we are having a bit of an adventure. It started yesterday when we had a lot of rain and high wind. I had to go to Tangimoana for a Coastal Care meeting and was dubious about going but people were depending on me. On my return I only just made it into Turakina before a tree fell across State Highway 5 just at the top of the hill north of the school. On my return it had become so cold that Peter had lit the fire! During the night the storm got worse. It was so loud at times that I thought the house was blowing apart.

We got up this morning to find there was no power. The storm was still so loud we could hardly hear the battery radio telling us that there was widespread flooding throughout Whanganui, Rangitikei and Manawatu. There were Civil Defence emergencies in Marton, Bulls and Feilding. And so many main roads were closed that the central north island was virtually impassable. In Marton and Feilding there had been substantial evacuation in the middle of the night. Many shops and houses were flooded.

There was also news of school closures and while I listened to see if Wanganui Girls College was on the list, Peter drove to see if we could get out of the village. On his first attempt, he was stopped by a tree across the road. But he met another villager coming back who said that the stream at Tunnel Hill was well up over the road so we could not get through.

Peter just managed to phone Girls College to say he couldn't get into work before the phone went dead. He and the rest of the fire party went round the village securing roofs and flying things. The wind had abated slightly but was still quite strong. There was a couple in the camp site who needed to get to Wellington so some of the fire party took the fire engine to see if there was a path through the forest to Bulls, but there were many trees across the forest roads.

And so we were marooned – there was no leaving the village, no phone, no internet, no power, no mail, no rubbish collection, and only battery radios for information from the outside, and that information indicated that the authorities would be fully occupied with the larger centres and we would have to manage by ourselves for a few days.

With the tree removed from the road, we drove up to Tunnel Hill to see the extent of the flooding. The two streams under the one way bridges which are 4 kms apart, and the Turakina River which you usually can't see from the road, had all burst their banks and merged into one huge lake as far as the eye could see.

Richard Redmayne said according to his family farm records there hadn't been a flood like this since 1913 – the 100 year flood! We could see a few steers stranded on a little island, trying desperately to stay on land. I took some good video shots while I could, aware that I may not be able to recharge the batteries.

As the day progressed the water rose. The great inland flood lake linked up with the existing lagoon on the sea side and the flood water reached the children's playground and entered one low lying garage. By tea time the water about us was so high we were wishing we had a second storey to put things in. Jack and Rea Lawrie next door who are a whole house depth lower than us were all packed and ready to evacuate.

Then, to everyone's relief – just before dark - the lagoon burst through at the old river mouth and the water started going down. The phones came back on so we could reassure people that we were OK.

Tuesday Feb 17th

Last night was as still and quiet as Sunday night had been cacophonous so I caught up on some much needed sleep. We awoke to a still morning. And although the water level had dropped to a point that was no longer alarming, the great lake across the middle of Beach Road was still there.

Both of us phoned work to update them on our situation. News went round the village that there was free milk at the Hall. The tankers were unable to drive down to the dairy farm so Alex, the local dairy farmer, brought some in churns to the hall which was very kind in view of everything else he had to deal with. I got some video footage before my battery gave up.

Wednesday Feb 18th

This morning we were told that the forest road was cleared by soldiers who had come through in a Unimog bringing bread and milk. In return they asked us if we had any emergency clothing for the people of Scotts Ferry who had been evacuated in their night clothes. The people of Bulls had already had an emergency collection for the people of Tangimoana. There were a lot of refugees in Bulls! We gathered what we had to hand.

The forestry workers must have worked day and night to clear all that debris and it was much appreciated. But as there were still a lot of main road closures, there wasn't any where to go from Bulls. Still it meant we could get food and pharmaceuticals.

Not only were most of us locked in the village, some were locked out. Alison Jermy, who was the only one who got out to work on Monday morning, couldn't get back from Whanganui until Wed.

It became evident that we were not going to get power on for some time. The linesmen were fully stretched and obviously had to start where they could bring most power back to most homes.

Tom Dooney kindly let us all have bursts of his generator to have showers and top up our fridges and freezers - any time but 7.30 pm - nothing was going to come between Trish and Coro Street!

We had a 5-7 pm slot during which we cooked a fry up and watched the 6 o'clock news. What devastation – right through the Manawatu and Rangitikei – dead stock everywhere.

Thursday Feb 19th

The day started bright and sunny but windy – just what we needed to dry things out. Peter set off for work through the forest. After hanging out washing, villagers got together to compare notes and share information. It was strange knowing you *were* the news but weren't able to watch it. We were also amazed how long food stayed frozen if you don't open the freezer door. But we knew we were running out of time and we started to plan a pot luck freezer barbie.

Went down to the beach for the first time . It was covered in onions, pumpkins and turnips and more driftwood than I had ever seen in one go. And I had no video or still camera working!

Friday Feb 20th

State highway 3 was opened, with traffic going over the Whangaehu bridge one lane at a time. Peter got a ride in early so that I could have the car to go in later. I drove through the forest awestruck at the number and size of the trees the forest workers had moved to clear the road for us.

The flood damage had brought almost everything to a halt at the DOC office. One of our staff had lost her home completely and another had lost most of her possessions. The board room was covered in her soggy photographs and clothes. One staff member was dealing with consents for irrigation schemes – suddenly farmers had more than they wanted! I tried to do a quick phone round of my ‘coastal neighbours’ groups. Scotts Ferry and Tangimoana had been completely evacuated and there were no phones or no one answering at Waiinu and Mowhanau, Himitungi and Foxton Beach. I had a six month contract as a Coastal Conservation Ranger, but it was likely that for the duration of my contract my district was going to be more concerned with preservation than conservation.

News came through that they were going to close SH3 at the Whangaehu Bridge at 11 am and those of us living south of it were told to go home. I had just taken an hour and a half to drive 63 kms to work (normally 30kms) and now I had to turn straight round and do it all again. I had taken my video camera and phone to recharge, and a change of clothes for a shower – no chance! I had to gather up my things and leave.

Whangaehu looked like a disaster area - a huge mudscape strewn with dead cars and dead animals. I was glad I couldn't video it. It would have felt wrong – and anyway the police were keeping the traffic moving. I saw Tariana Turia. She may be the Associate Minister of Maori Affairs but this is her home and she was out there in her gumboots delivering kai to volunteers.

The sight at the Turakina bridge was less dramatic but great banks of mud marked how high the river had risen. And so to Turakina and a catch up with Noeline and Adrian at the service station. They didn't get flooded but they had been closed for 3 days because they had no power and no customers due to the road closures.

I filled up with petrol and bought a few essentials as we had another storm warning. At this point I am 8 kms from home but I've got to drive nearly 40 kms via Bulls and the forest road to get there. The return journey did not seem as straightforward as the outward one and I got lost twice. Once I was helped by a kind forest worker, but the second time I encountered some very officious volunteers who suspected me of trying to get to Scotts Ferry to loot or rubberneck!

I got home to find that the Beach Road had just re-opened!

And the power was back on –it was quite novel being able to run the taps and flush the toilet again.

I went down to the beach to video all the vegetables but they had gone. Later I heard they were travelling down the coast – last seen at Foxton.

And so, dried out and recharged we battened down the hatches for another storm. It came after dark. Now we had the TV back but we couldn't hear it for the torrential rain. Hey ho – off to bed wondering what the morning would bring.

Sat Feb 21st

It was a short storm. We woke to a calm day, and reassurance from the radio that no one's situation seemed to have worsened. It was chilly so we lit the fire. Peter went with the fire party to clean out the house of our local councillor Bob Major. It had been badly flooded and is now full of silt and mud.

And so the emergency was over – except for the mud.

There had been great concern about the old people. It's interesting to note that in many ways us oldies coped better than the young ones. We remember the days before we had electric appliances and remember camping with no facilities. We had sensible things in the cupboard for emergencies – tins of fish, fruit and vegetables, (and non-electric tin openers) powdered milk, batteries, candles and camp stoves. We know how to do our washing by hand and have a strip wash. And we were all prepared to flush the toilet with buckets of water from the garden tank.

And we weren't the ones whinging 'where is Civil defence?' In an isolated community you *are* civil defence. I wonder if this experience will see more younger volunteers.

Peter came back from cleaning Bob Major's. I could hardly see his face and you wouldn't know what colour the car is. Tomorrow they are going up to the Marae to do it all again.

At last – a normal evening – we had showers and an oven cooked casserole. And then our first complete evening of catching up with TV – what's this? An extended news item about the floods – ***oh please!***