Grandpa’s story

I grew up in Cendiary, a small town in outback New South Wales. There were about 200 people, a wheat silo and about 20 farms.

It was a very dry town. There was no piped water but everybody had big rainwater tanks. A tanker used to deliver water to fill up the tanks.

Cendiary didn’t have a proper fire engine, but we did have a volunteer fire brigade. Nearly everyone in the town was a member, and we practised every second Sunday afternoon. It was a bit of a social occasion, too.

The boss of the fire brigade was Mack, the Postmaster. If a fire broke out, you rang the Post Office and he would sound the siren. Mack would jump in the firetruck, with about 100 tin buckets stacked in the back, and head for the fire.

Everyone followed Mack to the fire.
And Mack had worked out that if a fire had been going for 30 minutes before the first bucket of water was thrown, then it would take 175 buckets to put out the fire – and there wouldn’t be much left of the building by that time!

The number of buckets of water we needed depended on how big the blaze was. And the blaze got bigger the longer it was left to burn before the truck arrived.

Mack had worked out that it would take 75 buckets of water to put out a fire that had burned for 10 minutes before the truck arrived. (This was known as Mack’s Rule.)

And Mack had worked out that if a fire had been going for 30 minutes before the first bucket of water was thrown, then it would take 175 buckets to put out the fire – and there wouldn’t be much left of the building by that time!

Mack had even worked out the best way to space out the people in the human chain. Eight people per 10 metres was best. If they were too close, they’d bump into each other and spill too much water. If they were too far apart, they’d have to reach too far for the next bucket and get tired too quickly.