

Flowerdale fishermen hooked on sensitivity

By CHRIS JOHNSTON

THE men of Flowerdale — the forgotten town of Black Saturday — look rough, not sensitive. But sensitive is what they are. These men survived a kind of hell and then intuitively began to talk through the pain.

This weekend, they're on the third of three men-only, sons-welcome weekend fishing trips to faraway Bemm River in East Gippsland, funded and organised by Centacare, a Catholic welfare service. The idea is to fish and talk, about whatever, but inevitably about the fires that changed their lives.

"The topic comes up," says Mark "Chop" Sawyer. "It always comes up."

Chop works in a prison and has plenty of ink, including a full Southern Cross, etched across his torso. He started his process of catharsis straight away, well before the fishing trips; his mates responded so well they've kept at it, chipping away at the demons.

"Personally, myself, I started on the Monday," he says, meaning February 9, two days after the fires. "I knew I had to rely on my mates as a listening post. They knew what I had been through and they're my mates, so bad luck. I needed things off my chest." One of the first he turned to was Jim "Jimbo" McGuire. Jim didn't lose his house like many — like Chop and like local publican Steve Phelan — but tanks, pipes and windows exploded.



Flowerdale's men have talked — and fished — through the pain. PICTURE: MICHAEL RAYNER

"Jimbo and I have shed many tears together," says Chop. "It's like: 'Hey, I know you don't want a cuddle but you're getting one.' And then — boom! — the tears come." Jimbo says: "I can look at him and he can look at me and that's it, there you go." He says the talking is not to "get over it" because they never will.

Steve Phelan is in a difficult position because he reluctantly became a de facto community leader. People leaned on him for answers and help but after co-ordinating an effort to save the pub from burning down with 40 people sheltering inside, at least one badly burned, he wanted to shrink away and be anonymous.

"I might run the pub," he says, "but I'm not the bloody Pope."

The men, like most in the rugged bushfire affected areas,

distrusted "shrinks" and counsellors and psychologists. Their attitude was why would they open up to a stranger? So they unconsciously opened up to each other and slowly out of that and out of similar aftermaths detected by Centacare in Strathewen, Marysville, St Andrews and Kinglake came the fishing trips. The idea was hatched in Strathewen.

What the Flowerdale men found was that having talked a lot already, it was valuable to go far away from home, to near water, to relax. For men, fishing can be about a lot of things other than fish but they caught plenty, which was a bonus.

Still, deep wounds remain.

The men still cry a lot. Small things trigger them: dust and smoke, loud noise, certain smells. Janet Cribbes, Centacare's

bushfire recovery co-ordinator, says emotions from post-traumatic stress will peak next year. The men's immediate hurdle now is the Black Saturday first anniversary on February 7, 2010. They're scared of it.

Why are they still so emotional? Because of what they saw and what they feared. Jimbo was one of a group who stayed to defend the pub. He sent his wife and two kids to Yea then drove back alone "to do what I had to do", chainsawing through burning logs.

He didn't see them again until the Thursday. They thought he was dead. His little son Anthony is only five.

Chop — well, Chop is in the CFA and he ended up around Marysville, Kinglake and Flowerdale on the day, fighting the fire and recovering dead, burnt bodies. The way he describes that — the limbs, the skin, the smell — is horrible but that's what he did.

In the bush at the height of it he thought he would die right there. His son, Nathan, 12, lives with Chop's ex-wife in Melbourne. Nathan knew his father was in the fire zone but couldn't reach him.

Nathan went on the second of the fishing trips with Chop last weekend. They shared a moment, with their rods.

"He said he thought I had died," says Chop.

"I told him he was my best friend. He said he loved me . . . He opened up, mate. Opened up."

PICTURE: REBECCA HALLAS

