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The date: early December 2019, the start of the horrendous bushfires now known as Australia's Black Summer. The place: Braidwood, an hour's drive east of Canberra.

Exhausted RFS veteran Matthew Hulse was explaining to locals the hell he and his crew had just survived.

"Matty was whacked," artist John R. Walker recalls. "They'd been fighting fires out at Foxs Elbow. They reversed their truck as close as they could to the houses. When the flames got too intense, they'd jumped into the cab and hightailed it.

"Once the flames died down, they reversed into the fire zone and resumed the fight. They zigzagged like this for hours. Matty was just running on adrenaline."

The result is *Fireground* - an exhibition of landscape paintings inspired by "the summer which burnt Australia".

For Matty H is a form of pictorial journalism, Walker insists: "It's what I saw in Matty's eyes that day."

Likewise, *For Bruce R* is Walker's interpretation of what another Braidwood resident recalled about watching fires surround his property.

Walker and wife, Anne, recognised it was going to be a bad bushfire season when snow fell on NSW's ski resorts in November, so prepared their property for the worst.

"From our front veranda, the skyline was just red," Walker recalls. "Guys were driving road graders, creating fire breaks, hurtling them around like they were Ferraris."

Walker painted frenetically, depicting the fast-approaching apocalypse. In his studio, "I heard this big plane go over. I raced outside and saw it drop fire retardant over Mount Gillamatong."

By December 4, Braidwood was well protected.

During that summer, the Walkers life assumed a very different rhythm.

“The local volunteer radio station became our version of *London Calling*,” Walker says, referring to the BBC’s wartime broadcasts to Nazi-occupied Europe. “We turned on the radio every hour to hear where the fires were.”

Fireground interprets an extraordinary crisis since eclipsed by COVID-19.

However, two paintings in Walker’s fiery exhibition are optimistic. Returning from Bega just days after the Black Summer had burnt to a halt, Walker stopped to record the rejuvenation in the bush.

“It’s the natural completion of the cycle,” Walker says. “Instead of the trees having a flame running up their trunks, there was greenery. Eucalypts are fire lovers. Fire is part of their life cycle. What we’ve witnessed is a wonderful rebirth.”

Fireground by John R. Walker is at Utopia Art Sydney until July 25, 2020