

# STORM FIRES NATION'S OBSERVATORY

**CANBERRA.** — A devastating bushfire caused by a storm yesterday destroyed the workshop and equipment at the Government Observatory at Mount Stromlo worth approximately £100,000. The fire, which was the worst in Canberra's history, also destroyed two prefabricated houses and 500 acres of pine forest surrounding the observatory about seven miles from the city area.

At one stage the threat to the city itself was so great that the Minister for the Interior (Mr. Kent-Hughes) ordered the firefighters to fall back from the main centre of the fire and take positions to protect the city area.

The fire began shortly after mid-day after a dry electrical storm and within an hour had a strong hold.

Throughout the afternoon the national radio station repeated calls for volunteers to fight the fires and more than 1000 fighters went to the scene. To add to the danger, another fire broke out near Hall, a small A.C.T. township about 11 miles from Canberra on the other side to Stromlo, but this was brought under control after threatening several valuable wool grazing properties.

The workshop destroyed at Mount Stromlo was one of the most modern of its kind in the world and contained many valuable precision instruments.

Only the most strenuous efforts of the fire-fighters and a sudden change in wind saved the main section of the observatory, which contained sky-sweeping telescopes and time-measuring and other equipment valued at more than £1,000,000.

The two houses destroyed were on grazing land at the foot of Mount Stromlo hill

and on the other side of the road leading to the Canberra city area. When the fire was approaching the observatory officials evacuated houses in the area and residents took their furniture out into the open, but the fire was stopped before it reached them.

The fire also threatened sub-observatories which have been established by the American Yale and Columbia Universities.

Police sent special cars to a small settlement not far from Mount Stromlo where they evacuated 30 children and 15 women, but the settlement escaped the blaze.

The fire threat had been hanging over Canberra since early yesterday when weather was very hot with a strong north-easterly wind, conditions similar to those on "Black Friday" a fortnight ago when a big fire threatened legation homes. From early afternoon a heavy smoke pall hung over Canberra, with a strong odor of burning pine cones.