



Act Three: Scene One

The View from Above

The DMR observer in the helicopter was Hal Gregge. He describes what it was like looking down from above: “Anything on a main road is our responsibility, so with a thing like the ferries, the buck stops with us. The helicopter pilot was called Noel and the fellow we were reporting to was Bill McIntyre who was running the workshop at Granville. That was our central workshop - we had all trades and 400 people working there then. We used to support all the ferries from there - they had riggers and people like that and we’d overhaul the ferry engines there. We used to have the patterns to cast the spider wheels, even. It’s all closed down now, though. Bill was organising ground support. He’s retired now.

“By the time the helicopter got up to Wisemans, we found nothing there. Noel is a very good pilot. He did his training all over the world and has been under fire and everything, so we were able to fly quite low at times when we needed to. We zoomed in around Webbs Creek. There was a set of piers there that they normally tie the ferry to, but of course they were empty. We went around the corner to the piles for the other two ferries, but they’d gone, too. So we just followed the river down at a reasonable height. It wasn’t a bad day on the Tuesday - the flood was well up, but the cloud and rain were gone. From our height you could still pick out where the river should be.

“We found one ferry tied up along one of the straights on the southern bank. There was at least one person on board. We did a couple of circuits quite low and it looked to be quite soundly secured. We couldn’t get any communication with the people on it - I don’t think they had any gear, so we radioed back to Sydney the location of that ferry. Then we followed down the river again to find the other two, and about the time we found them they were just upstream from Berowra Waters. The ferries were lashed together in a rough sort of a way, but the boats didn’t have enough power to do anything.

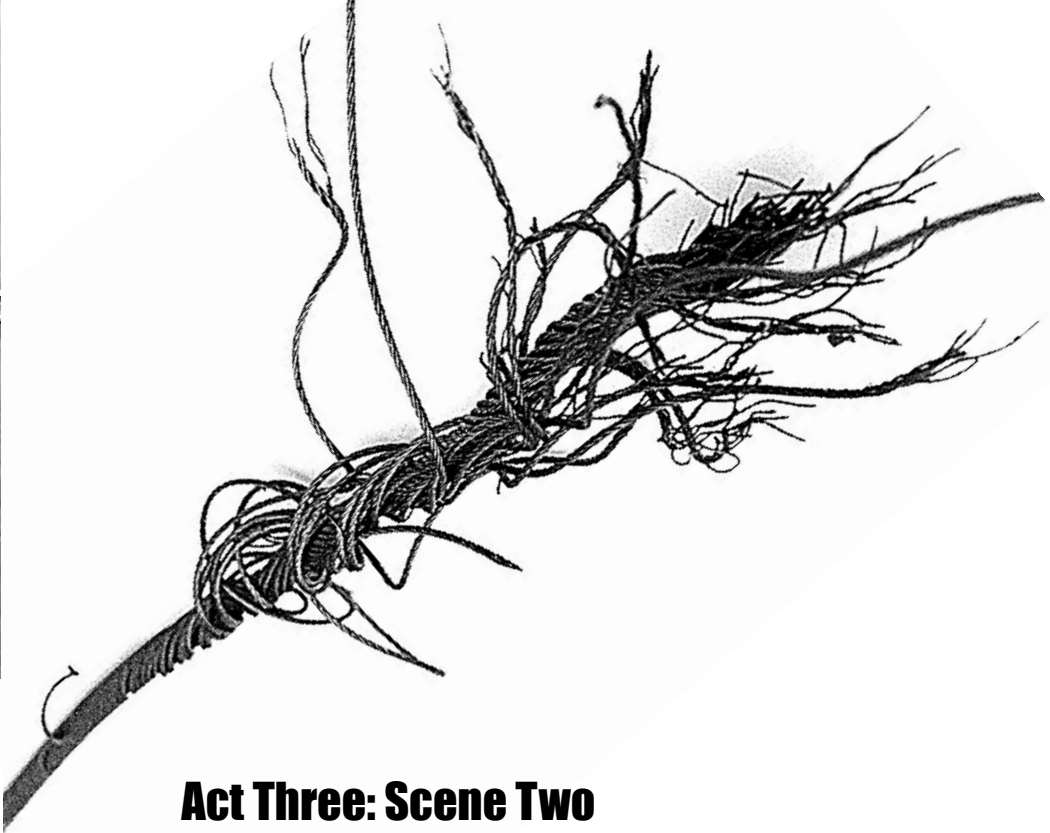


Near Berowra Creek

“We just watched them for a while heading towards Berowra, and the suggestion was that they try to get ‘em into Berowra Creek. I think the Police launch arrived around about then. There were tugs from Church Point that Bill McIntyre had organised to head up the river and help, and they arrived about then as well.

“As soon as the Police launch arrived we established communication with them. Noel could get on their frequency. The suggestion was to try to push them into Berowra, but if I remember rightly, the message came back that no one had enough power to push ‘em in there. The floodwaters had ‘em and that was that. They were unstoppable. All up there was more than 400 tonnes, moving at a great rate.

“So they missed Berowra, and they went around the corner and bounced along the shoreline. We were just circling. Noel said: ‘I’ll stay as long as I can. We’ve got three hours worth of fuel plus twenty minutes of emergency fuel.’ By law he wasn’t supposed to plan on using his emergency fuel, though. So we just kept circling and taking pictures.”



Act Three: Scene Two

Bouncing Down The Vines

Back to the ferries now, which we left bouncing down the rocky shore of The Vines.

Chris Cowper, the deckhand on the *Bringa* remembers: “The banks are pretty steep and rocky at that part of the river and we just kept ramming the ferries into the rocky bank - as hard as we could. It’s a terrible feeling deliberately destroying a boat like that. They’d hit quite hard, and there were clouds of smoke coming up from the steel and the rock striking each other.”

Here’s how Allen Curran remembers their progress along the shore at The Vines: “We’d missed Berowra, so they decided to try to push us onto Milson Island. But the water was circulating around Milson Island in such a way that we couldn’t get into the

channel. When the circulating current hit us, it pushed us right over to the mudflats near where the old *Parramatta* ran aground years ago. The tug boats kept us against the rocks, hoping they could punch a hole in us as we bumped down the shore.

“About this time they tried to get the Air Force in to blow a hole in us, but the Air Force couldn’t do it because they said they had to get government permission. So they tried the Navy, but they said the same, and that anyway it would take 24 hours before they could get there. So they investigated getting explosives to blow the bottom out of them.

“As we bumped our way down the shore Russ jumped off three times to try to tie us up, and I jumped off twice. We pulled a lot of trees out of the banks on the way down, I can tell you.

“At one stage when we were close to the shore, Russ jumped ashore with a rope and tied it to a big gum tree. He jumped from the back of the ferry - I jumped from the front. Russ had a two inch nylon rope with him, and he climbed up this bloody great gum tree, got it around the tree a couple of times, and managed to put a big knot in her. As the tension on the nylon rope took up I watched it slowly shrink from two inches in diameter to about one inch – and then she broke. It whipped back towards the tree and took Russ out of it like a beauty. Hit him on the elbow. Could have killed him.

“He fell out of the tree from about six feet up and landed on a flat rock covered with bloody oyster shells, then rolled down into the water! Poor old Russ was cut all over the place - his ears, his arms, his legs – everything. So he’s in the water, coming along in the current with us, but about a hundred yards behind. The Police boat’s sitting about fifty yards from the bank, and they were letting him go! I yelled out to them, and they said they’d throw him a lifejacket, and look after him, but it was a bloke who had a prawn lease over the other side of Milson Island who came flying across in his punt boat. He had a fifty horsepower Merc on it, and he came screaming across and pulled him out.

“By this time the ambulance had turned up on that bit of a reserve there near the bridge, so they took Russ down there and the ambos painted him from the top of his head right to his toes with bloody mercurochrome! We had to laugh – he looked so funny all red. But a lot of it wore off because we went back and made several more attempts to get the ferries to the bank.”

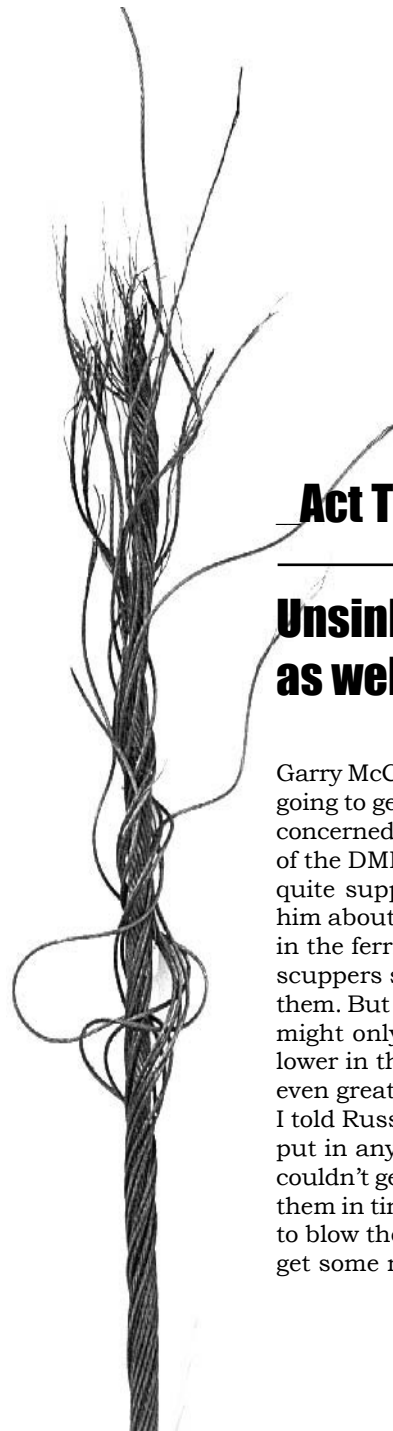
Lawry Duff remembered the events after missing Berowra Creek

this way: “By this time we’re being swept down towards Milson Island, but again the volume of water swept us out so that we couldn’t ground them and we were carried round the back of Milson Island, where we could see the traffic on Joll’s Bridge and the highway patrol in readiness to close the highway.

“I suggested that it was time that they got out the dynamite, but I was told by the DMR that they didn’t have any, despite what I’d been told at Brooklyn. Anyway, there was some sort of mix-up there and we weren’t able to blow them.

“Going down the back of Milson Island I used the steel shoe down the front of the tug to ram the ferries into the northern bank. I succeeded in doing this three or four times, and the blokes on the ferries were able to get some lines ashore, but each time they did the ropes kept snapping. They were brand new 30mm nylon ropes, too. One of the council blokes was injured when one of the snapping ropes hit him on the arm.”

By now things were getting serious. It was beginning to look as though the ferries really were unstoppable, and speculation began to mount about what might happen if the whole careering cavalcade did plough into the bridge.



Act Three: Scene Three

Unsinkable as well as unstoppable

Garry McCully: "When it became clear that we weren't going to get the ferries into Berowra we became really concerned about the bridges. The Divisional Engineer of the DMR was a guy called Don Medbury, who was quite supportive, and I had some discussions with him about getting some explosives out to blow a hole in the ferries. I checked with Russ about getting the scuppers sufficiently low to let the water in and sink them. But we were worried that trying to do it that way might only mean that we ended up with something lower in the water and heavier which would have an even greater impact on the bridge if it were to hit. So I told Russ to try not to let any more water in - not to put in any more mass than he already had. And we couldn't get explosives and expert personnel to install them in time. Anyway, it seemed too dangerous to try to blow them up at that stage. We would have had to get some military team there. Plus, from my discus

sion with Russ about the debris surrounding the ferries, even if we succeeded in blowing holes in them the mass of debris may have been sufficient to keep the whole thing still afloat.

“So we decided to make every effort to push them in to Peat Island. That was the last hope. The Police told me they were going to close the bridge. The DMR Engineers thought that the structural impact, while it probably wouldn’t have taken the bridge out altogether, could certainly make a mess of it.”

Back in the DMR Workshop at Granville Bill McIntyre was involved in the discussions about whether to try to scuttle them or not: “The largest ferry was, from memory, around 300 tonnes displacement and the smaller one was around 120 tonnes. The combined weight would have represented a pretty severe impact on the bridges, and it was suggested to me by Head Office that we should consider scuttling the vessels. But that wasn’t as simple to do as we thought, because unless you set off an explosion in the vessels, all you could do was to open the sea cock, and that would take quite a while for the vessel to fill. Then there were separate sealed compartments - so it would have been quite a deal. And if you didn’t succeed in fully sinking it, you’ve then got a vessel that, instead of three hundred tonnes is more like five hundred tonnes, because of all the water that would be in her as well. So that idea was abandoned.”

Here’s what it was like for Russ: “Now I had the privilege - well, I dunno if it was a privilege or not - but I was given a radio message to the effect that if the ferries passed Milson Island and were still out of control, I was to scuttle both of them. I had permission to sink over a million dollars worth of gear, if I could, which is something you don’t get a chance to do every day.

“I got back on the radio and pointed out that if this was the idea, then I should have been notified about three weeks beforehand, because all we had going into each engine compartment was a two inch sea connection, and it would have taken ages just to flood the engine compartment. The other complicating factor was that all the newer ferries have five watertight compartments. They were built to be unsinkable, so they’d be safe as vehicular ferries. When this became known, the authorities contacted the Fleet Air Arm, based at Nowra. The idea was that they were going to scramble planes from Nowra to fly up and bomb them! I politely asked that they give me time to get off!”

(Russ and Allen are the only ones who mention the idea of getting the Air Force or the Navy up to take the ferries out. All the other major players say that they didn't hear anything about it. Garry McCully had this to say about it: "No, that's an embellishment. In fact, the weather was so bad it wouldn't have been possible. All we looked at was the possibility of getting explosives on board. Councils and the DMR did have people who were qualified to work with explosives, but it probably would have been military personnel who would have done it. We'd have had to lay the charges, set the timing, then get everyone off.")

Russ continues: "At this time fears for the safety of the bridges over the Hawkesbury River became very real. The designers of both structures, and the railway bridge, wouldn't have designed them to withstand the impact of a fast-moving floating island of such dimensions. With the mass of the vessels, the debris holding them together, and the speed of the current, the substructure of the two road bridges became a target for a potentially destructive battering ram careering along on the crest of the flood. The combined weight of the two ferries was about 450 tonnes and it was estimated that about 200 tonnes of debris was packed underneath and around them. It was estimated that they were travelling at about 18 knots. It was doubted whether the piers of either road bridge would survive an impact of that magnitude."

The various estimates of the combined weight of the ferries and the debris aren't consistent, but guesstimates are like that. The main point of course, is that they were awfully bloody heavy and moving awfully bloody fast and were potentially awfully bloody destructive. And awfully bloody hard to sink.



Act Three: Scene Four

Capture!



By the time the ferries had reached The Vines, other boats arrived and joined in the fight to halt them - the *Denby*, a 54 ft workboat from Milson Island under the charge of Randall Ferrington together with a 20 ft boat from Brooklyn and two 18 ft launches. They all swarmed around the flotilla trying to push it ashore.

Russ Mitchell: “At about noon on Tuesday March 21 the two ferries, still bound together with debris, rounded the northern point of Milson Island. Shepherded by the tugs, fire boats, the Police launch, a launch owned by the Department of Corrective Services and several other small craft, attempts were made to shelter the ferries behind Peat Island but a mudbank across the opening prevented entry. You could hardly see the ferries for other boats, but even the combined efforts of all of them could not control the mass.

“The flood carried the ferries along the face of the mudbank towards Peat Island and the vessels were finally grounded on a rocky ledge on the western tip of the island. The shock of the impact when the ferries grounded broke up the debris binding them together. This enabled the larger ferry to be secured to a tree on the island. The velocity of the flood, however, dragged it heavily across the rock





Peat Island from the air, just after the capture of No 8 and the final breakaway of No 55.

ledge, causing hull seams to spring.”

Allen Curran: “The ferries did a half turn, which left them with the point of the V they made facing the shore. Then they ran onto an oyster lease just at the upriver end of Peat Island, and a lot of the rubbish tore away. Then the two ferries separated. The big one had the fireboat from Berowra, both tugs, and the boat from Milson Island pushing it. One of the boats threw us the last bit of rope they had. It was a hemp rope. We were close to shore by now, and we jumped off and wrapped this hemp rope around a tree in a last ditch attempt to finally hold her. It was our last chance, because the bridges were only hundreds of metres away.

“The tree we got the rope around that finally halted No 8 was a bigish river oak. Russ jumped ashore with the rope, threw it round the tree a couple of times and pulled it tight, then ran back and dropped it over the bollard on the ferry. ‘Cross your fingers’ he said. With that the rope took up and the ferry swung around



*The marks made by the rope in the trunk of the river oak
that finally held No 8 at Peat Island*

slowly, hit something hard, and stopped dead in her tracks. Later we found a big bubble in the bottom of the hull where she'd run up onto the rocks. It had sprung a seam as well.

"As it tightened, the rope cut deep into the tree, and left quite a scar about an inch and a half into the tree, effectively ringbarking it. As it took up it sounded like a buzz-saw going. It made a loud, squealing sound. Later the tree died, but they left the stump there and put a plaque on it to commemorate the event."

This is another place in the narrative where memories differ. Lawry Duff's account has his deckhand Chris Cowper getting the rope around the oak tree rather than Russ: "By now we're being swept toward Peat Island. We'd been joined by a smallish boat from Milson Island, the *Denby*, and I thought that if we could push them across onto the shoal above Peat Island, then we might stand a



No 8 securely tied up at Peat Island on the Tuesday morning.

chance of holding them, even if we had to run the tugs aground too in the process.

“As soon as it became clear that we were actually going to hit the island, I told Chris to hop ashore the first chance he got and get a rope around a tree several times and play it like a fish, to ease the strain and try to keep the rope from snapping. See, the lines that the council fellers on the ferries got to the shore were not very long, and they had to get ‘em around a tree and tie a knot in them, which is why they kept snapping, because the knot meant that they had no give in them.

“As we washed down onto the top of the Island Chris jumped straight off and took a line around a river oak a few times, and as the rope’s taking the tension he’s feeding it out and taking the snapping strain off it. His job wasn’t made any easier by some of the inmates of Peat Island crowding around and wanting to help, but in the end he was able to play out the rope till he got the ferries



No 55 high and dry just short of the bridge.

right on to the wharf, where blokes from the DMR were waiting to tie them up.”

Here’s what Chris Cowper himself remembers about it: “Lawry had a whole heap of inch and a half silver line on the tug, which we tied onto the big ferry. When we grounded on Peat Island I jumped ashore with the line and got a couple of turns around a tree growing near the shore. I could see the line stretching, and thinning, and it was slipping a bit, but it was just holding. But I was a bit anxious till we got some other lines onto her, because a rope like that can do some damage if it breaks.”

Hal Gregge describes how these events looked from the cockpit of the helicopter: “While they were bouncing down the wall, you could see people trying to run lines ashore, and they’d keep breaking. Our one last chance was to get them in behind Peat Island. By

that time we had a whole heap of boats helping, and there was an excellent chance of pushing them in there, but it turned out there was a mud bank in the way, and it was too shallow to push them in. They all lined up and pushed like blazes, but they were up against the mudbank, and bouncing off the face of it.

“It was about that time that we said to Bill McIntyre that perhaps the bridges should be closed, because we couldn’t risk having cars on the bridge if the ferries did hit it. They put a Highway Patrol car at either end of both the road bridges, ready to close them if they needed to.

“Because of the way they were pushing it, the big ferry then hit the end of Peat Island with its ramp up on the rock bank, and somebody - it looked like Russ - ran like a sprinter straight off the end of the ferry and up to the nearest tree and tied a rope on to it. All the other ropes had failed, but luckily this one held, and the ferry swung around onto the rocks - you could see all the smoke coming off it where it was hitting the rocks. It finished up laid alongside the island. With the debris gone the little ferry broke away and kept going, so every boat got onto that one and pushed it up on the mud - about fifty metres short of the bridge.

“By this time, we were ten minutes into our twenty minutes emergency fuel, which we weren’t supposed to use except in a very real emergency, and we were flying away as they were stopping her. We could tell things were going to be alright, and we radioed this as we flew back. They easily could have been unlucky and hit the bridge.”

Allen Curran: “One of the tugs and all the little boats stayed with the little ferry after it broke away – they all just packed onto it like a school of mud gudgeons after a piece of bread in the water, and soon they’d got No 55 pushed up onto the mud flat on the northern side just before the expressway bridge. They spun it around in such a way that the broken flap hanging down stuck in the mud and held her there. She finished up about forty yards from the bridge.”

Garry McCully : “At the finish, they were secured with only minutes to spare. Yet even towards the end there seemed to be no concern in the voices of the boys on board that they weren’t going to be able to stop it. That probably came after it was all over. It was only in the last couple of hours that it became a little traumatic in

everyone's mind. Nobody showed much emotion until afterwards. I suspect that many dramatic things that happen don't seem as dramatic to the participants at the time as they do afterwards. Often these things are pretty prosaic at the time they happen. You just get on with what you have to do."

Lawry Duff: "As they approached the wharf the smaller of the two ferries broke away, and I took the *Bringa* to push her into the shore while the *Harport* stayed with No 8. But by this time, with all the constant ramming, the lowered efficiency of the cooling system because of all the muck and rubbish in the water, and the high revs which were kept up for so long, the engine of the tug was starting to boil. I was joined by the *Denby* pushing the little ferry, and before long we got her close enough to the shore that we could get a wire to a DMR truck that was on the northern bank not far from the bridge, and that gave them enough time to secure her properly.

"As soon as I saw them get the wire to the truck I backed off, and as I took the tug round and back up into the flood again, the counterstern of the tug missed the pylon of the bridge by about ten or fifteen feet. It couldn't have been a much closer call.

"I'd been at the wheel of that boat for 25 hours. It had rod and chain steering and it was bloody heavy, and my back, neck and shoulders ached for days afterwards. But while the whole thing was going on I never had a chance to notice how I was feeling. Everything was concentrated in trying to stop them before they got to the bridge."

So now, at last, and just in the nick of time, it was four down... and none to go.



EPILOGUE:

Getting The Show Back On The Road

They might have stopped the ferries in the nick of time, but it wasn't over yet. Russ and Allen stayed on at Peat Island for several days to assist with the task of getting the ferries repaired, back up the river and into service again. This was a matter of urgency, as hundreds of local people and other road users were severely inconvenienced whenever they were out of service.

This is what Russ wrote about the aftermath in his report: "Over the Easter holiday period the flood subsided and the ferry caught on the rock ledge at Peat Island was floated off into deeper water against the Peat Island Wharf. Repairs to the vessels began immediately the flood began to subside, and early on Tuesday March 28, the day after the Easter Monday holiday, the Webbs Creek ferry from Haycock Reach and the larger of the two ferries from Wisemans were towed back upstream. The smaller of the two Wisemans Ferry crossing vessels was towed to the Department's slipway at Mortlake on the Parramatta River for extensive repairs. Personnel from Colo Shire Council and the Department's Central Workshop worked with such energy that the two ferry services were operating again, with one vessel at each crossing, by March 30th."

Allen Curran: "I stayed on Peat Island for about ten days afterwards, helping get the ferries ready to go back into service. First we had to get No 8 off the rock while the water was still coming up, and then slowly let it down the shore a bit to where we could tie it up to the wharf there. We had cables out from both ends going to the bank, but through the night we had to keep getting up to check the cables and let them off a bit when the tide was coming in and take them up a bit when the tide was going out. Somebody had to be there all the time to look after that."

Hal Gregge's involvement didn't stop when he left in the helicopter, either: "We flew back to Mascot. I was told to get in the car and go straight back up, which I did. By this time the ground support was starting to arrive. They didn't have any decent moorings or anything, so we'd arranged for some steel cables to come up on a truck. People were getting as many wires onto the ferries as they could because the river was still running very strongly - in fact there was a caravan went past while I was there.

"We were there till ten or eleven that night, and it was quite dark, and we were jumping from ferries to tugs and that, across the water. If you'd fallen in no one would have found you, because the flood was still up. It's just the foolhardy things you do in the heat of the moment.

"We all had a high regard for Russ Mitchell. I remember Russ coming up to me at one stage and he was very worried. He said: 'You know, these guys who have just arrived want to move this ferry from where it is around a bit further because they think it's a safer mooring. They don't realise what they're up against here with the flood the way it is.' So we made sure they didn't move anything - all we did was put more wire on. Having finally got them there, there was no way we were going to move them again for a few days till the flood had gone down.

"That was about the end of my part in the affair. A bloke called Martin Hayley then took over and got them repaired and back into service."

Garry McCully had this to say about the time spent getting the ferries ready for service again: "The flood occurred the weekend before Easter, and over the Easter weekend we were making arrangements to get them towed back upstream. Russ and the crew were a very competent team of guys so they got the ferries back

in service quite quickly. Nobody worried what hours were. I think we gave them a few days off when it was all over. We had to get some divers down to the wooden ferry we'd lost. With the amount of sand that had got into it we couldn't get it up. Luckily, of all the ferries, it was the cheapest - an old timber-hulled one.

"Soon after the 1978 flood the emergency procedures were reviewed, and now the ferries are taken off the run earlier rather than later. The flood moorings were redone in the following year too. The new procedures are not popular with some of the locals, who say that we shouldn't take the worst case, but the usual case, and leave the ferries on longer, because they have to travel the long way round when we take them off. The flood was so long ago now, and out of mind, and the locals think that our current emergency procedures are too conservative. But you only have to go through something like that once to know that it could happen again. If we'd lost the ferries completely we'd have had to build new ones, and you can imagine how much that would cost and how long that would take." Not to mention the almost inconceivable financial and human cost if the runaway ferries had taken out one (or more) of the bridges at Brooklyn.

Lawry Duff: "After it was all over they said that we were going to get some sort of commendation for our part in it, but nothing happened. Later on it did cross my mind that technically I had salvaged the ferries, and I wondered what would have happened if I'd put in a salvage claim. The DMR came to the party afterwards, though, and slipped the tug and paid for all the repairs needed to it."

I asked Allen Curran if he had been at all scared during the adventure: "Scared? Hmmm. Well, you never thought of yourself. It was a part of your job that you were expected to do. Well... we didn't know if we were expected to do it or not, I suppose, but we did it. The ferries had to be saved no matter what. They were our responsibility."

Perhaps it would be appropriate to close the curtains on this account with Russ' summary of the drama that concludes his report: "During the whole of these two dramatic days the three men from Colo Shire Council remained on board the runaway ferries. Their survival was often at considerable risk but they, together with others associated with the operation, fortunately sustained only minor injuries. The courage and fortitude of the people involved shows a contempt for danger when the lives and property of others

are in jeopardy. These people were well aware of the vagaries of the river which has been known to rise 1.5 metres in two hours. The many individuals in the organisations associated with this near-disaster deserve credit for their determination in attempting to beat the destructive forces of nature. Colo Shire is responsible for the operation of the ferries and the three men from Council accepted their responsibilities by staying with the ferries during their nightmare ride down the river.”

So a disaster costing millions of dollars and who knows how much suffering and inconvenience was averted at the eleventh hour, and everyone was grateful to those involved for what they'd done - well, grateful up to a point. Allen Curran: “Later, when we were putting No 8 back on service up at Wisemans the Deputy Commissioner of Police came and shook our hands and thanked us for what we'd done. He offered us a beer up at the pub, but we had to finish putting the ferry on. Then the head bloke at the DMR came up and we had to go and wash our hands to shake hands with him when he formally thanked us and offered to buy us lunch. But the Council — the people we actually worked for – the Council never officially even said thanks. That irked us a fair bit. But Councils have always been like that.”

Russ had a few days off after it was all over, recuperating from his injuries. Colo Shire Council paid him four hours a day overtime during his time off.
