

Act One: Scene One

The Build-up and the Breakaway

It was late afternoon on Sunday, March 19, 1978, and Garry McCully was in his office at Colo Shire Council. It had been raining steadily and heavily for the past three days. So far it had bucketed down 350 mm, and it looked pretty certain that the river was in for another big flood. The Shire Clerk, Garry's immediate boss, was out of town and Garry was in the decision-making hotseat.

Earlier that day there had been reports of considerable storm damage in the Macdonald Valley so Garry sent Jim Larkin, a Council Overseer, to check out the situation there. At this stage the advice from the Bureau of Meteorology was that minor flooding would develop along the Nepean River in the Camden district, and that the Nepean at Camden was expected to reach a height of 6.8 metres by 8pm that evening and 9 metres by 3 the next morning.

At half past seven Garry rang the Weather Bureau again and spoke to John North, seeking further weather information that might help him make a decision about the ferries. He didn't want to have

the ferries taken off their cables at night if it could be avoided. It would be more difficult and more dangerous. North confirmed the earlier forecast of probable minor flooding the next day, though this could happen earlier, he said, if there were sustained heavy falls that night.

Normally it takes about 150 mm of rain to cause a flood on the Hawkesbury, depending on prevailing conditions and what's falling in the catchments of the Macdonald and Colo and Grose Rivers, and from the way it had been raining it looked like the bridge at Windsor would be under water by midnight. Windsor Bridge is about 7 metres on the Australian Height Datum, and once the river reaches that height it usually means that the various vehicular ferries along that part of the Hawkesbury have to be taken out of service. Not only taken out of service, but taken off their cables, because if you just stop them running and tie them up to one bank, the debris that comes down with the flood piles up against the cables, which can be torn out by the weight of the accumulated rubbish.

The usual practice is to take the ferries off their cables, moor them to the bank and lower the cables to the bottom. (Denis Mitchell told me that during a flood in 1964 a very large tree which was being swept down the river picked up one of the cables which was lying on the bottom twenty feet or so below the surface, and within a few hours five acres of debris had built up.) Lamentably, it's not unknown for people to pile large amounts of refuse from their properties on the banks of the river, waiting for a flood to dispose of it for them, as floodwaters pick up everything in their path - trees, buildings, caravans, you name it.

Denis also had this to say about the process: " When they take the ferries off the cables, they let the cables down onto the bottom of the river. Sometimes they get so much mud and silt over them they can't get them back up again, and they have to put new cables back on when the flood goes down. If there's a build-up of debris and rubbish on the cables before you start to take them off - and that can include big logs and uprooted trees - might be tons of it - when you loosen the shackle bolts on the cable it gets pulled straight out of the ferry and the rubbish takes it and lays the cable right down along the rocks on the other side. It can be very dangerous. Usually they cut the cables with oxy when this happens."

But back to Garry McCully working late at the office. There was

no sign of the rain letting up. Usually the rain fell heaviest in the south, but on this occasion the rainfall in the Macdonald and Colo catchments was much heavier than usual. In those days the Macdonald and Colo catchments were unmonitored, and consequently the unexpectedly heavy falls in those areas were not able to be taken into account when calculations were being made to try to predict how high the flood might be. As a result, when it finally did come, the extent of the flood caught everyone unprepared. At 7pm that Sunday night the river at Windsor had a reading of 2.4 metres, and by 9.15pm it was up to 3.1 metres. (The river, by the way, eventually reached a height of 14.3 metres at Windsor Bridge.)

Unaware of how heavy the rain had been in the tributary catchments, Garry decided to set in train the normal emergency management procedures that Council followed whenever flooding is imminent, and at about 9.30 pm he began to phone around to inform those involved of his decision. One of the first people he phoned was Russ Mitchell. Russ worked for the Council, and his job was to look after the maintenance and repair of all the vehicular ferries in the area. He'd been doing the job for years, and floods and emergency procedures were nothing new to him. Russ' wife Elma was used to it, too. "When a flood was coming he'd take these top two ferries off first - that's the one at Lower Portland and the one at Sackville. Then he'd come home here and pack for a week and go to Wisemans. He wouldn't come back till the flood went down."

Russ and Jim Carver (another Council employee) took the ferry off at Sackville, and the Lower Portland ferryman removed his ferry himself. At 1am, after the top two ferries were safely secured, Garry and Russ talked about what to do about the ferries at Wisemans. They decided that Russ should go there at first light and organise their removal. This was what they'd done in the past once the river reached the heights that were current at Windsor at the time.

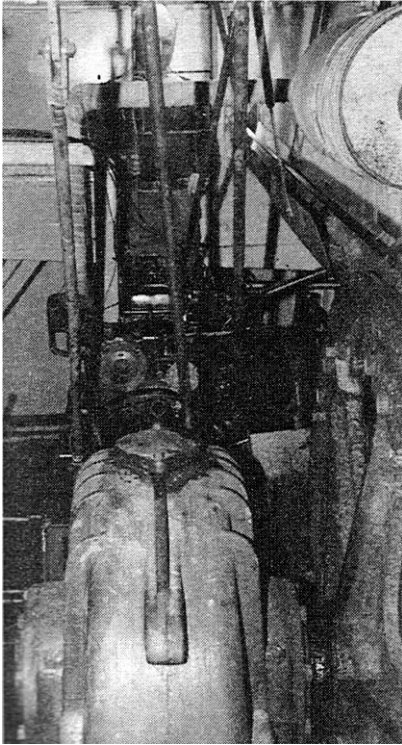
But because of the unusually widespread distribution of the torrential rain that year the rate of rise of the river was unprecedented, and soon most roads were cut by the rising waters. By the time Russ had helped with getting the ferries at Sackville and Lower Portland off their cables and safely tied up, the bridge at Windsor was well and truly submerged. This meant at to get to Wisemans, Russ would have to go all the way round through Kurrajong and Penrith, down through Baulkham Hills, Castle Hill and down to Wisemans that way - a drive of something over three hours.

At this stage we'll leave Russ making that drive in the deluge, and find out how the day got under way for Allen Curran, who, with Russ, made up the two-man team that looked after the ferries.

Allen Curran: "It had rained for so long I knew we were in for a decent sort of flood. About quarter past six that morning I got on the phone to Russ Mitchell who was over at Wilberforce Depot. He said: 'Go straight to Wiseman's Ferry. There's things happening down there - I don't know what. You'll be my eyes. I'm leaving here now'. But by this time everywhere was blocked by the flood. I knew he couldn't get through at Windsor and had to come round the long way, so I knew it'd be a while before he got to Wisemans.

"I went to Wisemans to look at ferries No 8 and No 55 first - No 8 is the big one and No 55 is the smaller spare one. No 55 was lying against No 8, and all the rubbish was packed around them. They were both on the northern side of the river. We'd never have got them back to the other side because the flood flow was too strong. Robin Pawsey was there, and I told him I'd go round to Webbs Creek to see how Billy White was going up there, and be back in about half an hour. Billy was the Webbs Creek ferry contractor.

"The Webbs Creek ferry had made a final run about half past six that morning, but it only made it part way across. When it was in mid-crossing there was about a three foot tidal wave came down the river out of the Colo. The water was like a surf wave, and it hit the Webbs Creek ferry full on. Now on one side of the ferry you've got two cast iron wheels that the drive rope goes around. One is the drive wheel. The spiders on the drive wheel broke under the strain, and the cable wrapped around the drive shaft. The spiders hold the cable rim on - five big spokes with a shoe right round the outside edge. So the ferry couldn't go anywhere. When I got there Billy White told me she was stuck fast and wouldn't move. He was on the ferry, about 75 yards out in the middle of the river. I suggested he row himself ashore in the ferry's boat while I got onto the DMR.



In the ferry engine room. The spider wheel is at bottom right.

"I rang the DMR and told them the situation. I said we needed a winch so we could winch the ferry in after we'd cut the cables with oxy. The DMR despatched a winch truck, which they thought would take about half an hour to get there. In the meantime Billy White had rowed ashore. I rowed out to the ferry to have a look, but there was nothing I could do till the winch got there, so we came back to the bank to wait.

"I figured I'd better go back round to Wisemans to check how things were going, and when I got there the rubbish had started building up in a big way around No 8 and No 55. The ferries are still on the cables at this stage. I told Robin Pawsey to get all the steel cable he could find, and lash both the ferries together.

All of a sudden, while we were discussing the situation, one of the posts that anchor the cable to the bank pulled right out of the ground, and the little ferry swung around so that the two ferries made a sort of arc facing into the bank.

"Just after that happened, a small wooden ferry that had been up on the slipway near the mouth of the Macdonald a few hundred metres further upriver floated off in the flood. She had a plank out of the bottom because she was on the slip being repaired. She came down in the current and bumped into No 55, and we grabbed her and tied her up. So at this stage we had all three ferries captured together, and they all made a C facing the bank. We ran ropes

round the gum trees that used to be there next to where the toilet block is on the north side of the river.

“By this time the rubbish had built up so much that the ferries were lifted up about three feet out of the water. The debris had worked its way underneath, and sort of put them up like on a big raft. Soon afterwards I heard the winch truck coming down the hill on the Wisemans side, so I said to Robin: ‘OK. You’re safe here now. Everything’s tied to the bank. I’ll get back to Webbs Creek’. By this time, the cables back to the Wisemans side are taut - like piano wires.

“I went back to Webbs Creek to see what we could do with the winch truck. When I got there, the DMR bloke said they couldn’t pull the ferry in because they had nothing to anchor to. They reckoned they’d need something at least as big as a D8 bulldozer with a ripper. I rang Brian Croney at Glenorie. He had a D8 with a decent-sized ripper on it, but he thought it would be about an hour before he could get it there. Next thing, Russ rings up from Katoomba, and I brought him up to date.”

While all this is going on, Garry McCully got onto Bill McCredie, who was the works engineer at Gosford Council and asked him to send any heavy earthmoving machinery he had available to the northern landing of the Wisemans Ferry crossing to help secure the two ferries there. It wasn’t long before he received a call to say that this wasn’t a goer because all the roads to Wisemans from the north were cut by floodwaters.

It was 10.30 before Russ got to the Webbs Creek crossing. As he came down the hill on the southern side he could see both ferries from the Wisemans Crossing moored on the Gosford side of the river, apparently secure. As he drove up to Webbs Creek there was a knot of men discussing the situation including the Deputy Shire Engineer, an engineer from the DMR, Martin Haley, and a rigger, also from the DMR.

Allen Curran takes up the story again: “Russ stuck his oxy in the boat and rowed out to the ferry and put it on the deck. While we’re all waiting there for the bulldozer Russ went and checked out the situation at Wisemans. When he got back he said that after we’d got the ferry secure at Webbs Creek we’d just let the cables go from the Wisemans ferries and let them lay along the bank. He thought we had them tied up to a pretty good spot to wait till the flood went down.



*The Hawkesbury River at the mouth of the Macdonald River
and the flooded river flats at Wisemans Ferry
on Tuesday morning, March 21 1978.*

“We’re checking that we’ve got everything ready that we might need, and then we heard the dozer coming down the hill on a float. This was around 11.45 am. I went back to check on how things were at Wisemans, and Russ went out onto the ferry to check that everything was secure.”

As they were preparing to get a line out from the recovery vehicle to Russ on the ferry things began to come unstuck. In a report of the event that he wrote afterwards, Russ described what happened: “At 11.55 am something gave on the St Albans side which was probably the anchor posts, and the ferry started to move. At this stage, as there was some concern for the aquavans downstream, and for the ferry itself, I dropped the anchor furthest from shore, cut the drive cable on the ferry and then dropped the anchor on the Wisemans Ferry side and cut the cable on that side.” However,

the anchors only held for a few minutes, and just on noon they both gave way and the ferry was swept away by the floodwaters with Russ on board.

While this was happening Allen Curran had gone back to the two ferries at the north side of the Wisemans crossing : “When I got to Wisemans Bill Kenny, the local copper, took me across in the police boat to where ferries 8 and 55 were lashed together, along with the small wooden ferry. No 55 and No 26 ferries both had two-way radios, which kept us in contact with each other and with the Depot at Wilberforce. I radioed Russ to see how things were going. He was just saying that things looked like they were going to be OK, that the dozer was just getting into position, then he yelled: ‘Uh Oh! The anchors haven’t held. Looks like I’ll be around there with you in about five minutes!’ The anchors were no match against the weight of the built-up debris. I said to him to try to keep out of the main run of the river, but the cable that pulled out of the bank spun No 26 around and out into the main run, which goes past where the other ferries were tied as it swings round the bend. So he was adrift on No 26 on his own.”

This was an unexpected development, but nobody was particularly perturbed by it. As Garry McCully explained to me: “The whole event was quite calm at that stage. The Webbs Creek ferry had come loose, and was proceeding downstream with Russ on board, but there was no particular concern for anyone’s safety. We thought that, given the meanderings of the river, the ferry would just fetch up on the bank somewhere before long. We thought we’d just catch the ferry and tie it up, and that would be an end to it.”

But things were only just beginning. Russ Mitchell’s report laconically describes the next episode in the unfolding drama: “The torrent of the flood swept the ferry around the bend in the river to the Wisemans Ferry crossing where it collided with the three ferries tethered there. These ferries were broken away from their moorings by the force of the collision and the four ferries in company were carried downstream on the flood.”

Allen Curran’s recollection is more detailed: “We’ve got all three of the other ferries lashed together, and held onto the trees on the bank by eight ropes. I saw the Webbs Creek ferry coming round the bend with Russ on it, and I figured that if we could catch it we could tie it up along with all the others. I reckoned that I could chuck him a rope as he went past, hook it onto the ferries, and



The Wisemans Ferry Caravan park in the 1978 flood

that should swing him round into the bank. I yell this out to Russ, who agrees, and we decide to give it a go.

“Robin is there with me, and he’s wondering which side of our ferries Russ is going to come up on. I told him to be ready with a wire rope on the far corner. He gets his rope ready, puts it on the bollard of No 8, and I hooked mine to the bollard of No 55. We’re waiting for Russ to come down the outside in the main run. But just a bit before he reached us one of the flaps on Russ’ ferry hit the rock wall as he came round and spun him round a half turn. This then turned him in against the bank, so he ended up coming down point first on the inside of the three captured ferries, between them and the bank.

“As the Webbs Creek ferry closed in on our group of moored ferries, all the ropes that were tied to the big trees on the bank got all hooked up in the big posts at the front of it - the posts that hold the flaps in position. Before we knew it, all the gum trees simply pulled out of the bank! All the trees, and the ropes and everything! The drive cables started to smoke in the wheels as they pulled through - they were screaming. Next thing, a post came up right out of the ground, and twang! ... this post 20 ft long just fired into the air like it was shot out of a cannon! We were ducking for cover left, right and centre.

And so we were off! All four ferries. Careering down the river.”

Just as the flotilla took off trailing ropes, wire cables and uprooted trees, the Deputy Engineer from Colo Shire Council arrived at the bank waving \$20 worth of fish and chips and other goodies. He'd gone away earlier to chase up some food for the men, only to see them drifting away just as he got back. Food - or more precisely - the lack of it, was to become a recurrent theme throughout the adventure that was about to ensue.



Act One: Scene Two

One Down...

Alan Curran mentioned the wooden ferry that they had snared and lashed to ferries 8 and 55 after it was washed away from the slipway by the rising flood. The slipway is situated just downstream from where the Macdonald River enters the Hawkesbury. This slip was used (and still is) to carry out repairs to the smaller wooden ferries from Sackville and Lower Portland.

Denis Mitchell told me that the ferry on the slip at the time was No 66 from Lower Portland - a Colo Shire ferry, not a DMR one. He explained further: "The slipway is still in use. Years ago, when the ferries were all made of wood, there used to be a ferry on the slipway all the time. There used to be a little house near the slipway, and a blacksmith and a carpenter - three or four different fellows that all used to work on maintaining the ferries. It was a full going concern there once, with the wooden ferries. But you can't get

the steel ones slipped there. They have to go to either Mortlake in Sydney, or else do a 35 hour sea tow up to Port Macquarie. They were towing one back once when heavy seas came up, and a big wave came over the top and she went down like a submarine and was lost. Now they take the flaps off them and seal them up if they're doing a sea-tow."

It's only a few hundred metres from the slip to the northern landing of the Wisemans ferry crossing, so when it was swept off the slip the wooden ferry was still floating when it reached the two Wisemans ferries even though it had a plank out of the bottom. It remained afloat there because the debris had been pushed up and under the ferries, so that it acted as a supporting raft.

(With a ferry some 40 feet wide, 100 feet long, and with a flat bottom, there is a tremendous upward pressure on the hull from underneath. In his talk, Russ mentioned that over the years several people have thought it a lark to swim underneath one of the ferries as they plied the crossing, and he maintains that they were lucky to survive, because if you weren't swimming deep enough the pressure of the water would simply push you up flat against the bottom of the ferry, and that's where you'd stay. That's what had happened with all the debris.)

As the floating island made by the four ferries and their associated debris took off on the flood the whole thing began to spin slowly. As it did this, large chunks of the banked up rubbish floated away, including most of the debris that had been keeping the wooden ferry afloat. With the support of the debris gone, and a missing plank, she began to sink. "Quick! Get the oxy!" yelled Russ, "we've got to let that bugger go or she'll pull us all down!" They quickly cut it free and watched as it parted company from the main flotilla.

It floated off on its own, getting lower in the water all the way, and eventually foundered a few kilometres downriver near Laughtondale. About this sinking Russ Mitchell had this to say: "The estimated cost of recovery of this unit was as follows: Council costs in an unsuccessful salvage attempt was \$10,000, the quote for salvage by private enterprise was \$30,000 and the estimate for the cost of repairs was \$30,000. Council resolved to abandon the ferry. There is a red and white pile marker in the river opposite the Wesleyan Chapel at Greens, and about 250 feet out from that the ferry has been lying upside down on the bottom ever since, and fishermen still complain about snagging their nets on it."

So it was one down (literally) and three to go.

Most of the ferries had been equipped with radio phones the year before. As the floating island took off downstream they were in contact with Garry McCully back at the Council offices, but soon the radio contact became intermittent. The radio frequency was shared with Gosford Council, which turned out to be helpful. As Garry said: "I didn't find out till some weeks later, but there was a foreman from Gosford Council who actually went in his ute to park on the top of Mangrove Mountain somewhere, and he served as the relay station for the next 36 hours or so." Allen Curran also pays tribute to the Gosford radio relay man: "After we'd gone only about four or five miles from Wisemans that morning we lost radio contact with Colo Council, but we did have contact with Gosford Council, who were on the same wavelength. There's some poor bugger lives along the river there somewhere, I don't know exactly where. I've never ever met the man but I'd love to meet him and thank him for what he did. He sat by that radio till the run stopped. He sat there and relayed everything back."

Here's some more about this stage of the proceedings from Garry McCully: "It was an amazing time. The weather was so bad and the fog was so low that we couldn't get a helicopter to Wisemans Ferry to monitor them. We couldn't get a tug from Sydney - Sydney Harbour was closed and nothing could get out. We knew we'd need a tug eventually to tow the ferries back after it was all over, but at this point we were just waiting for them to ground themselves on a bank somewhere."

In Russ' words: "Although we were at the mercy of the elements, not one of us considered it to be dangerous. Hairy at times, but not dangerous. We never thought of bailing out."

Allen Curran: "We weren't all that troubled at this stage. We knew the ferries wouldn't sink in five minutes, but we also were aware that they could capsize. They're not very wide - they're like a pencil on the river. The thing that keeps them upright is the cables."

Russ Mitchell's wife Elma told me: "That night Jimmy Larkin (Russ' Overseer) came and knocked on the door and told me that Russ wouldn't be home that night. This wasn't unusual, since when the

floods were on I wouldn't see him at home for a week sometimes. Jimmy told me that Russ and Alan Curran were floating down the river on a ferry, but I didn't realise it was anything out of the ordinary. I think everyone just thought they'd stop it somewhere sooner or later. I didn't know anything about all the things that were happening."

Garry McCully again: "We didn't have mobile telephones then, and I was relaying what was happening to the guys' wives by ordinary phone. I was telling them that everything was OK - that the guys had just gone for a bit of an unintended ride down the river - you know, they'll be home a bit late for breakfast sort of thing. Things didn't start to get a bit dramatic till much later."



Act One: Scene Three

No 26 Parts Company

Allen Curran goes on to fill us in a bit on how they passed that Monday afternoon: “We got down the river a few Ks and the rubbish was really starting to build up. Some fuel tanks came down the river so I got a rope onto them because I thought that a good round buoy would be good to hang onto. I tied them all to a flap of the ferry, thinking that if these things do happen to go over, we’d have a sort of raft and somewhere to get onto.

“I was in contact with Council all the time on the radio. Russ and Robin were tying everything up and all that. We tried a couple of shots to the bank with our steel ropes. We’d chuck ‘em ashore, jump in and get the turn-buckle on ‘em, jump back on the ferry and wait till the rope took up, then twang!... the rope would break. So we’d try again the next chance we got.

“All that afternoon we just bounced down the river bank. Where we could get ourselves out of the main run we did. If we couldn’t get out of the main run we’d just sit down and wait. The Police boat from Wisemans followed us downstream for four or five miles, then went back. There wasn’t anything it could do. It didn’t ever come back again, so we had no chance of ever getting the food the Council bloke had for us! Seems he had a good day at the Wisemans Ferry pub after we took off - and the night, too, from what we could gather.”

Not long after the wooden ferry went its own way the Webbs Creek ferry also parted company from the main raft. In his talk, Russ described it like this: “When the three ferries broke away, the men on board the Webbs Creek vessel, while attempting to lash the two Wisemans Ferry vessels together, lost contact with the ferry from Webbs Creek. When this happened all three men were on board the ferries from the Wisemans Ferry crossing (Nos 8 and 55). The Webbs Creek ferry (No 26), with its anchor dragging, stopped for a short while at Laughtondale, a short distance downstream from Wisemans. It remained there from early afternoon on March 20 till 7 pm that night. The dragging anchor had lodged in the rocks, but the flood debris kept building up against the ferry till finally it broke its anchor chain. (To give you an idea of the amount of tension that must have been on the chain — it was a $\frac{3}{4}$ x 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inch link chain, and I salvaged about 25 feet of it. The strain had pulled the links that tight - it was that stiff - that you could stand it straight up in the air. A bloke was trying to buy it off me to make mailbox stands out of.) “

But the Webbs Creek ferry was only waiting in the wings. It returns to centre stage in Act Two.

This is Allen Curran’s description of how No 26 parted company from the other ferries: “We’d got down as far as Lower Hawkesbury. No 26 had a long anchor, and it was the only one we had out, as No 8’s anchor was only short. But we thought we might as well have two going for us as well as one, so we decided we’d drop No 8’s anchor over as well. We had to drag it the length of the ferry and drop it over off the flap. It was so bloody heavy the three of us could hardly shift it. We had to inch it along the deck with a crowbar. We finally got it to the edge, and heaved it over. It just flopped onto the compacted debris and sat there! So then we had to get the axes and chainsaws and crowbars and cut a hole in the rubbish so the anchor would go through.

“We’re down to our waist in all this stuff trying to get a hole through it, when just then No 26’s anchor grabbed and pulled No 26 up dead cold. She stopped and the other two ferries kept going, which ripped and broke all the cables away that were holding her to the other ferries, which were now drifting free again. This didn’t trouble us too much, and we thought: ‘Bloody beauty! She’s anchored there. Righto, that’s her taken care of.’ We figured we’d just pick her up and tow her back into service once the flood had gone down.”

So, with the wooden ferry sunk at Loughtondale and No 26’s anchor holding, it was now two down, and two to go. Or at least that’s how it looked.

The men went back to the job of cutting a hole through the debris. This was difficult enough under the circumstances, but it was further complicated by the fact that the debris was being used as a refuge by considerable numbers of snakes, spiders, and other victims of the flood.

Allen Curran takes up the story again: “It took us about an hour and a half to get the hole through, when suddenly the anchor just went - swoosh! - down the hole. We jumped back up on the flap and let her go, and all the chain’s running out, and running out, and we’re thinking “Beauty!” Next thing we know the bloody winch comes thundering straight down the deck and over the edge, and follows the anchor and chain straight down the hole! The winch was only held down by two bolts and a whole heap of paint! And nobody knew! If anyone had’ve been standing there looking where the chain went over it would have taken them down through the hole as well.”

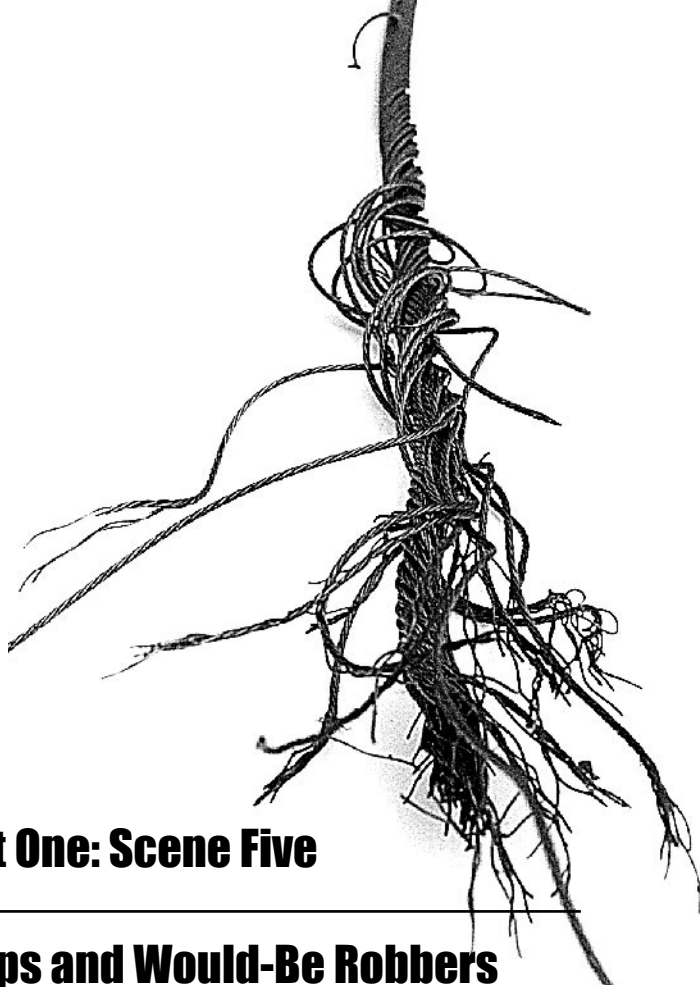
Act One: Scene Four

Behind The Scenes - Getting Some Help

Meanwhile, back at his Council office, Garry phoned Reg Handy. Reg operated tugs out of Brooklyn. As luck would have it, Reg's largest tug was on the slipway and couldn't be readied for at least 48 hours, but he also had two smaller tugs and he reckoned he could have them ready for service in about twelve hours. Garry asked him to get them up and running as soon as he could and to take them upriver and see what they could do to help with the car ferries. Garry also contacted the police, who undertook to send a police launch from Brooklyn upriver to the ferries as well.

Not content with that, he also rang one of the Council's surveyors, Brian Mackinlay, to see if he could take one of Hornsby Council's patrol boats from Berowra Waters to the ferries to check on the safety of the men and to see if they could assist with radio communication. He also asked Brian to check out whether there were any fishing trawlers or other vessels in the vicinity that might be called upon to help. The first thing Brian did was to request assistance from the Department of Corrective Services on Milson Island, who despatched their 23ft Trojan to go up to meet the ferries. Then he took two boats from Berowra Waters - one a 21ft Trojan Jet Boat and the other a 17½ ft Hercules Patrol Boat fitted with a 70 hp outboard motor. He also contacted Ray Wishart, who was Captain of Brooklyn Bushfire Brigade and an oysterman with a good knowledge of the river. He told Ray what was happening with the ferries and Ray set out to go up to meet the ferries just before five in the afternoon.

Just on six o'clock Brian McKinlay got away from Berowra Waters in the patrol boat with a portable VHF radio. G. Barnett and K. Simpson, two other members of the Brigade, followed in the Trojan.



Act One: Scene Five

Cops and Would-Be Robbers

At around 6.30, when he'd got as far as Pumpkin Point Inlet on his way up to meet up with the ferries, Brian McKinlay saw Ray Wishart on his way back to Brooklyn in a fishing trawler. Ray told him that the ferries were tied up to some mangroves about two to three miles upstream from Spencer, and that there was a Maritime Services Board launch with them. Brian continued on upstream towards the reach where he'd been told the ferries were moored, but things were starting to get a bit dodgy. It was pretty dark by now, and this, coupled with the fact that it was still raining heavily made it difficult to see either bank, and dangerous to keep going in the invisible flood debris. So he decided to turn into Spencer and wait for the Trojan, (which had been delayed by

problems with the debris), to catch him up. On his way to Spencer he met the Maritime Services launch, and who should be on board it but Russ Mitchell.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. When last heard of, Russ was on the car ferries, late in the afternoon. The two ferries, and attendant debris, had continued on downriver all afternoon despite all efforts to halt them, until they reached some slacker water beside some mangroves about three or four miles above Spencer, and here they managed to tether them.

While they were moored in the mangroves the Corrective Services boat from Milson Island arrived, and the coxwain told them that they all had to be taken off the ferries. There were fears for the safety of the men and they were to be taken to Milson Island. On their way to Milson Island they'd got to just off the mouth of Mangrove Creek when they met up with the water police launch from Brooklyn, the *Lendrum*. After talking things over with the Sergeant in Command it was decided that Russ would return to the ferries on the *Lendrum*, while Allen Curran and Robin Pawsey were to continue on to Milson Island in the Corrective Services launch. Russ went back to the two ferries on the police cruiser, to where they were moored near Sentry Box Reach, and when they got there they found two men on board - apparently about to salvage whatever they could remove from them.

It was getting towards dusk by this. Then two more boats arrived in quick succession. One was the Maritime Services boat, and the other was much smaller and had Allen Curran and Robin Pawsey on board. They'd been sent back from Milson Island and returned to spend the night on the ferries.

Allen describes what happened to him and Robin Pawsey: "We hadn't been tied up in the mangroves all that long when the boat from Milson Island, the prison island, turns up looking like Luna Park with all its bloody lights flashing. It pulls up beside us, and a voice says : 'We've got orders to take you off. We consider it unsafe.' So they took us off. They raced us down to Milson Island, and when they heard that we'd had nothing to eat all day and night they started to cook us up a meal. Beauty!

"Being on the Island we had phone contact again back to Colo. When we rang them and told them where we were they said to us: 'Jesus! Don't get off them ferries! Get back on 'em! If somebody else gets on to 'em they'll rip 'em off! They can claim salvage rights

on 'em. Get back to them as quick as you can!' So we all load up and go back and get on the ferries again. And still we didn't get any dinner!

When we got back, sure enough, there was a bunch of blokes on the ferries, just about to strip them of the radios and stuff like that. When we told them to bugger off they tried to claim salvage rights, but Russ told them that they couldn't claim salvage rights till they were three miles out to sea. When the cops backed us up they took off."

Radio reception wasn't good from their position in the Mangroves, and with nightfall the Maritime Services boat took Russ to Spencer to make contact with the Shire and to try to drum up some more cables and ropes. They were about half a mile out from Spencer on the way back when they encountered Brian McKinlay in the fireboat, who you'll remember was making his way into Spencer to wait for the Trojan to join him. The rain had slackened off, and you could see just enough to proceed, so they transferred Russ' Spencer purchases to Brian's patrol boat, the MSB boat went back to Brooklyn, and Brian took Russ and the supplies back to the ferries where they attached the wire he'd got from Spencer. Not long after they'd finished doing this the Trojan fireboat arrived to join them.

For about 20 minutes things looked like they were going to be OK, then without warning, at 8:20pm all the moorings simply pulled away and they found themselves adrift once more. But they'd only gone about 400 yds when they managed to pull them up again. Allen Curran: "We drifted down to a place called Deerubbun Wharf. We had all our little pieces of wire rope made up into one rope, and we made a lasso out of it. When we came past the wharf, we decided that since we didn't want to take this bloke's wharf out, we'd go for the standing post beside it. We were out of the main run here, and not going that fast, so we dropped the rope over the post as we went past. We slowly came to a stop, and we figured we'd got them at last. This was where we'd anchor them. And we did, and settled down for the night."

Or so he thought.

We'll leave the main protagonists there for the moment, contemplating a well-earned rest, while we see how the progress of the ferries downriver appeared from the shore.
