



INTERLUDE

The View From The Shore

One of the locals that I talked to about the runaway ferries was Albie Ballantyne. Albie was the first NPWS Ranger in Dharug National Park, and he now works as Maintenance Manager at the big horse stud at *Muskoka* on the flat at Gunderman Creek. He saw the three ferries from the shore on their way downriver just as the anchor from No 26 was grabbing and snatching her away from the other two. Albie's reminiscences are interesting because, not only does he describe what he saw of the ferry incident, but in the process he gives us some idea of what it's like for local residents during floods. I've included most of what he had to say in this regard because it gives a broader backdrop against which to view the drama of the ferries on the flood.

Albie : "When the flood came in 1978 we were living in a shack on the block where our house is now. It's a waterfront block at Gunderman. The house itself wasn't finished and there were a lot of building materials lying around. The water kept coming up, so we decided to move the materials higher. As we were doing this we got a message through a friend of ours that there had been a landslide down at Hazel Dell and Bill and Gerry Winters' place was starting to slide down the hill, so we rushed around there and Bill and I worked pretty near non-stop for a day and a night to shore up the house. There were a few other people there too, off an on - John

Munns came in, and Alan Beves, and a few other locals, and they gave us a hand. The house had dropped about 8 or 10 inches in one corner where the piers had all washed away, and we had to make makeshift piers. This was all done in the rain, and the mud was sliding past. It was hard going, but in the end we saved the house.

“After that I raced home to check on my wharf. Because of the way the wind was blowing, it was piling up the debris on our shoreline, and I wanted to check that the wharf was OK. Just as I got there I saw the three ferries coming past. It was incredible how fast they were travelling. You could see everybody on board.

“They dropped the anchor on one of them just as they went past my place. There are some rock pinnacles that run out on an angle just downstream from us, and one of the ferries hooked onto that, which pulled it away from the other two. They tied it up further down the river, eventually. And the wooden one had already sunk, of course, off Laughtondale. They tried to pull it out with a couple of dozers after the flood had receded, but they bogged both of them. I used to drive that particular ferry myself years before, on weekends.

“The ferries had this huge raft of debris in behind them, and as they went past they took out the wharf next door. It went off like a cannon. Didn’t even slow ‘em down. They went past, clipped the corner and hit the 12x3 bearers and just took ‘em straight out. Then they continued careering on down the river. After they went out of sight, any news we got of what happened to them basically we got from the radio. There was a reasonable coverage of it from my recollection.

“During flood times people pillage the river. They go chasing drums of fuel and stuff. They’d stash ‘em in the mangroves, and people’d see where they were stashed, and when the stashers came back to get them the drums would be gone. Lots and lots of gas bottles come down, too, and they can be dangerous.

“During the 1978 flood a guy who lived in a little fibro shack on the waterfront opposite Hazel Dell was out pillaging the river. He had his little boat with an outboard, and he’s running around collecting drums of fuel and bits and pieces. He’d been working like an ant for quite some time. We could see him at it while we were propping up Gerry and Bill’s house. You’d see him sitting on the bank, then something would come past and he’d be out there, waiting for it. He’d snare it, then the current would grab him and



Wisemans Ferry township and environs during the flood of August 1990, showing ferries No 8 and No 55 securely tethered to piles. They appear to be well out in the river, but the piles are actually along the normal shoreline.

he'd have to work like crazy to get back to his wharf. He had all this stuff on his front lawn, like drums of fuel, small rowboats and all that sort of thing. He got a bit cunning after a while, and anything that was a bit light he'd lash to the back of his boat and stay out there.

"Anyway, this particular time he'd been out there for half an hour or so and he had this great line-up of stuff he was towing behind him. Suddenly he looked up, did a sort of double-take, then let all this stuff go in a helluva hurry. He'd seen the ferries coming, and he sped off towards them at a great rate. I dunno what he thought he was going to do with them. Maybe he thought he could salvage them, or else the just the sight of them surging down the river might've just given him a helluva fright."

There were many caravans swept away by the flood from all the

caravan parks around Wisemans Ferry and the Colo River. A week after the flood the *Hawkesbury/Richmond Gazette* reported that 220 caravans had been lost in the flood. It's not uncommon during floods to see people take their fishing boats up to a floating caravan, tie up to it, jump on the top, tear the vent lid off, then jump in and rip all the Portagas gear like stoves and fridges out of it, then let the rest go. They go right inside the vans, whose interior is almost completely full of water, while it's doing around fifteen knots down the river. Albie describes one that he saw:

"One of them went past our place with a bloke on the roof and the vent wasn't big enough to get the gear out of so he just hacked a hole in the roof with an axe. Most of the vans were floating with about 300-400 mm showing above the water - some were floating just under. They were full of water. What kept them floating was the styrofoam insulation in them. What annoyed me about it, though, was that there were places where the caravans could have been towed to, and tied up to a tree, so that they could have been salvaged, but these guys were just wrecking them and letting them go.

"When we were sitting back at home after fixing up the Winters' place, the current was going that strong that the mangroves had laid down and had disappeared. A whole house went past, and lots of surfboards, and more caravans, but the thing that stands out in my memory quite sharply is when a double bed came by. It was one of those with a wooden bed head and foot. The bed was made perfectly. The pillows were still on it. One corner of the sheets was actually turned back, and the bed just floated past majestically. My wife Di remembers it vividly as having blue sheets and pillowcases. You could almost see the slippers under it!

"We came in for a bit of criticism, too. Our two eldest boys Darren and Dale decided they wanted a surfboard and pulled a couple out as they went past. The other thing of interest that we saved was a wardrobe that Bill Winter and I wrestled ashore. It looked like a coffin as it came down - it was only just floating - which was what made us go and see what it was. We nearly got it ashore at Mill Creek, but the current took it away from us again. We were determined to get it, but we got swept into the whirlpool just below Mill Creek. The whirlpool was running fast enough that you could hear it, and the water level was about eighteen inches lower in the middle than at the outside.



A closer view of the tethered ferries at the Wisemans crossing during the 1990 floods. The piles they are tied to were renewed after the Easter 1978 flood.

“There are four major whirlpools that I know of that operate in the river between Wisemans and Spencer. They only work during floods. One is right opposite *Muskoka*. You can hear it from the workshop, it works that hard. It starts, and you can watch the current start to swell, then the centre drops down, then it works up against the current, in this eddy, until the current picks it up and flattens it. By the time it's flattened it, it has started up again. You can hear it roaring. There's another one down at Paddys Bight, near the big cave at Paddys. There's rocks that stick out there - that one's not quite so bad. Then there's one opposite what used to be Herbie O'Niell's, on the Spencer end of the Mill Creek settlement, which is a sensational one - it's about 150 metres across. The water's ninety feet deep in that section. The fourth one operates off Bowman's Corner - that's very deep water too.

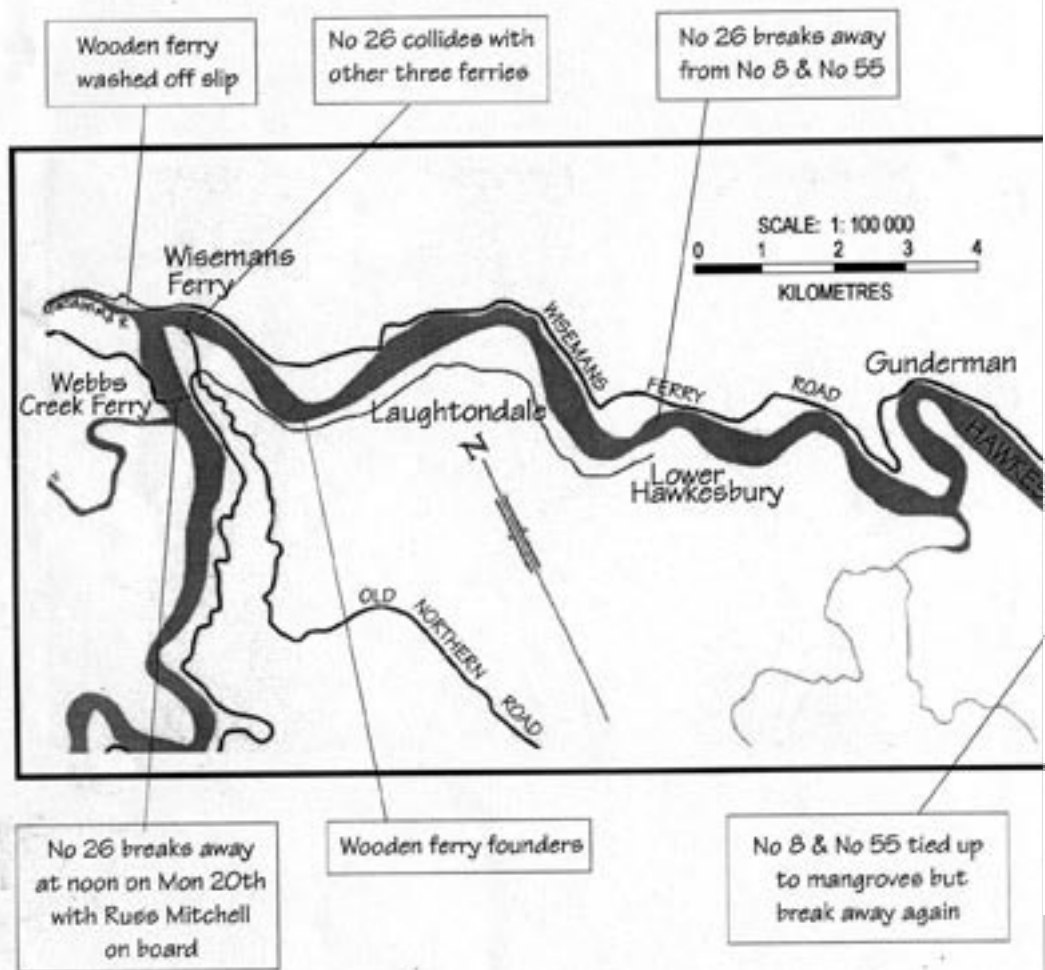
“We managed to motor and row and get out of the whirlpool, and we finally got the wardrobe ashore at The Willows, in the next group of houses before you get to Church Point, where the Wesleyan chapel is at Greens - you know, the one that belongs to the Historical Society now. The wardrobe was full of water ski gear. There were names on it, and we found the owner and rang him up to come and get it, but the police had closed all the roads and he couldn't get into the place. It turned out he was out doing a spot of pillaging himself at the time.

“The Ferrymaster's house from Sackville floated past, too. It made it all the way out to sea and was in the shipping lanes, they say. They ended up sinking it because it was a hazard, but I can't remember how they went about sinking it.

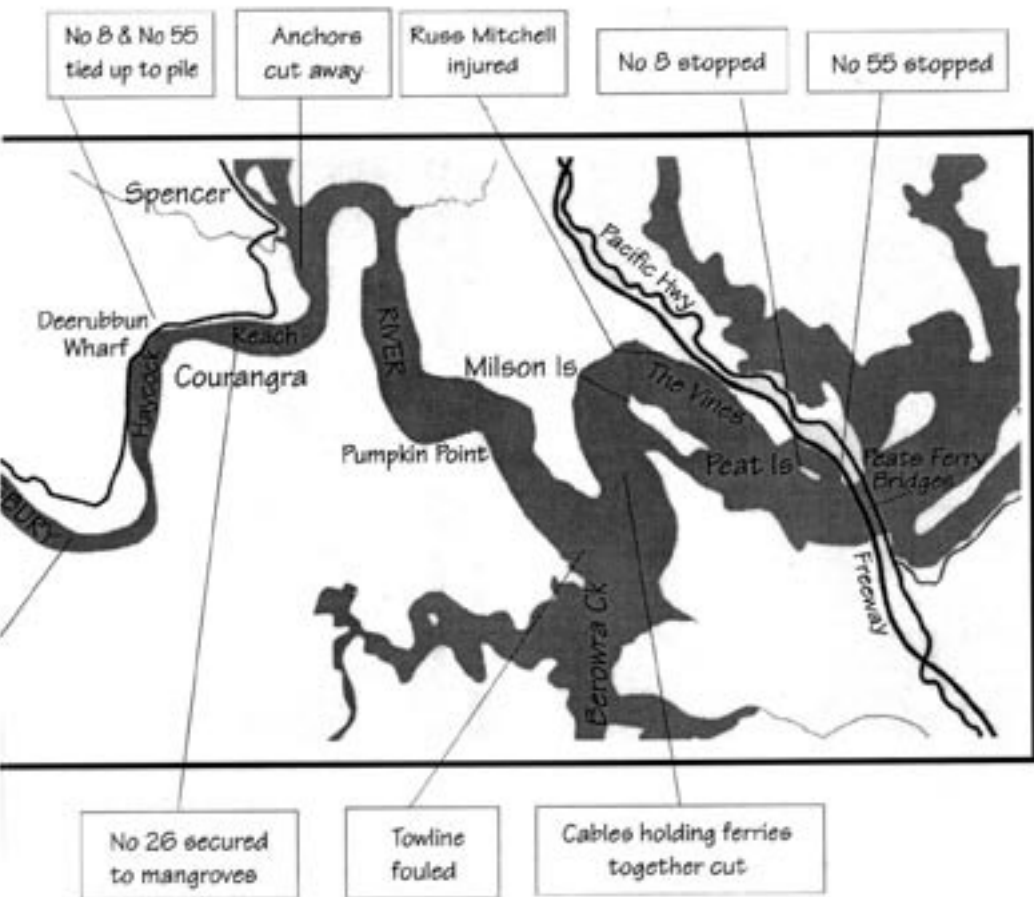
“We had an XY Falcon ute at the time that we used to do the mail run. It was the only vehicle that could get through the flood to Spencer. There was the stretch at the bottom of the hill past Wombat park, then Muskoka flat, and then Deerubbun and Allens Creek - they were the bad patches you had to get through to get to Spencer. We'd go there for provisions, like bread, milk and booze - mostly booze!

“We used to pile people in the back - up to ten people in the ute all up. As soon as we got to the water we'd stop, pull the fanbelt off, and the old V8 would never miss a beat - it'd plough straight through the water. The water would come in the doors, and at times it was nearly over the bonnet.

“We had helicopters dropping us supplies. They reckoned we were isolated, and the next thing we know there's a helicopter coming



LOCATION



OF EVENTS



Stock on a high point in a paddock near the confluence of the Hawkesbury and the Macdonald Rivers during the 1978 flood.

in with green garbage bags of food that they lowered down. It was mainly stuff you'd never want anyway, like tins of condensed milk, and Spam and crap like that. It was funny, but good."

Albie goes on to reminisce about other floods: "In the 1990 flood I went across the river to Wisemans to pick up milk, bread, mail and papers for people on this side. I went past the wharf where the Lady Hawkesbury tied up, across the football pitch - this is all in the boat - round the edge of the Bowling Club and tied up at the Bowling Club gate. I actually went up the road. The coppers bailed me up when I went ashore and gave me a good talking to. They reckoned I was being stupid and possibly endangering other people's lives. The way I looked at it, they were only in a fourteen foot tinnie that would rock every time they changed their minds,

while I was in a 21ft by 8ft oyster punt that you couldn't sink if you tried to.

"At *Muskoka* we got as many of the horses as we could up into the barns. Then we got horse floats in to take them away - as many as we could until the floats couldn't get through any more. The rest of the horses were on mounds that we'd built in the middle of the paddocks, and we used to feed those out of the boat. We did that for about a week. All the paddocks have got mounds about a metre high. We'd feed 'em there and hope that they'd stay there, but a lot of them walk off and stand in the water anyhow. But we can't do much about that - we can't nail 'em to the bloody ground. We didn't lose any, but a lot got greasy heel and very soft feet and we had to mollycoddle 'em a bit afterwards - put a lot of oil and stuff on their feet. A couple of 'em got colds, but overall we came out of it pretty well.

"Like any sort of natural catastrophe, the floods bring the community together. In those days everybody in the community knew everyone else, and if someone was in trouble you just pitched in and helped them. Good comes out of it.

"Up until about fifteen years ago it was common during floods for people to leave their car at Wisemans Ferry, and somebody'd be there with a boat who'd take them across, and they'd be able to get to work and home again that way. A lot of people commuted to Sydney like that during floods - one boatload at a time.

"I think it was the 1990 flood, too, when I saw a kid on a huge log. He had a little boat or a canoe or something tied up to it and he was just sitting on it - just having a ride! It was a huge tree.

"Back in 1978, when the flood came it took the power out for several days and the stuff in everybody's freezer was going off. We had these huge community BBQs to eat as much of it as we could before it went bad. That went on for two or three days. Whoever had the worst freezer, you'd eat their stuff first."

That should give you some sort of backdrop to what it's like when the Hawkesbury floods. Now, back to the action aboard the ferries...



Act Two: Scene One

No 26 Again

The ferries had been tied up at Deerubun Wharf for the night. Allen Curran takes up the story: "Russ has got an ordinary short sleeved shirt on that buttons up the front, and a pair of shorts. No shoes or socks, because you were wading in water all the time. I had on a pair of shorts and a shirt, and I had my overalls on over the top of them. Robin was in a tee-shirt and a long pair of brown pants. He always wore a buttercup yellow shirt and a pair of brown pants when he was driving the ferries - sort of like a uniform. And a pair of shoes. 'Look at my shoes!' I can remember him saying that night, 'a brand new pair of shoes. I paid fifty dollars for them only two weeks ago, and look at 'em now!'

“But the mosquitoes! I think we lost about a pint of blood each, that night, down in the mangroves. We were sitting there with all the windows and doors shut, smoking like mad to keep them out of the cabin. Russ is sitting there and he says: “A cup of tea’d go down well now.” So we decided to light a fire on the flap and make a billy out of something. Only trouble was, we had no tea! They kept nothing like that on the ferries.”

But now that they had the fireboats with them, the three men aboard the ferries saw the opportunity to get something to eat. Russ’ version of what they got differs a bit from Allen’s. Russ remembered it this way: “I had a couple of dollars in my pocket so I went in their boat to Spencer and brought three meat pies, three cans of Coke, a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. By the time I returned the pies were cold, but we were grateful to have something to eat and drink. Drifting is thirsty work.”

Allen Curran remembers it this way: “Russ went round to the shop at Spencer in the fireboat. All he had in his pockets was enough money for some Mars bars and a packet of cigarettes, so we all sits up to a big feast of a Mars bar and a cigarette each! The blokes in the fireboats didn’t have any money either - it was back at the shed with their clothes.”

But there wasn’t going to be a lot of sleeping done that night. Garry McCully snatched what sleep he could in his office beside the radio phone, which was normal practice during emergencies. He kept hourly contact in the early part of the night, then two-hourly contact after that. The Gosford Council employee was still at his relay post, and the men on the ferries tried to settle down for an uncomfortable zizz on No 55. (Denis Mitchell still works on the ferries, and remembers what sleeping on them was like: “Sometimes when we had to stay overnight we’d sleep on the ferries. We’d sleep on lifejackets piled in between the big ribs on the bottom of the ferry down underneath. It was like being in a submarine. You could hear everything that floated past and hit the ferry.”)

In the witching hour just before dawn one of the men got up for a pee. Peering blearily across the river through the gloom he caught sight of No 26 ferry from Webbs Creek slowly making its way down the other side of the river like a ghostly, ungainly *Marie Celeste*. It had broken away from where it had been held by its anchor further upstream. He roused the others, and the two fireboats, with Russ in one, went across to No 26 to try to make her fast again. By 7am they’d pushed her into the mangroves and secured her with three 1” steel cables.



The Webb's Creek ferry No 26 finally tied up to the mangroves at Haycock Reach.

Allen Curran: "They had a cable on board, and they picked out a good lump of mangroves and ran the cable around them, then brought the other end out and hooked it onto the ferry. The mangroves worked like a huge shock absorber. They all pulled in together, then opened back out again, and held the ferry. So she was tied up there, between Gunderman and Courangra - opposite Deerubbun Wharf."

Two down and two to go. Definitely, this time.

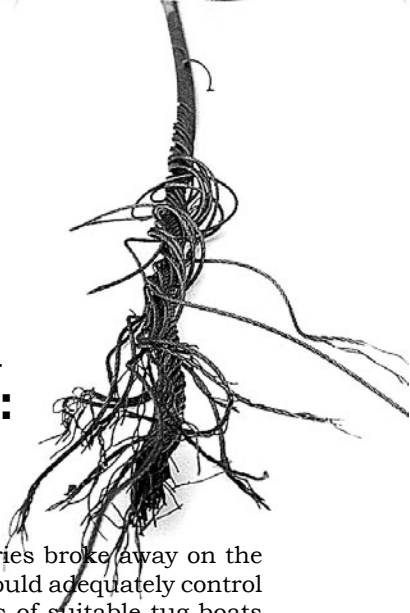
Act Two: Scene Two

Behind the Scenes again : Organising the Tugs

Russ Mitchell: "Immediately the three ferries broke away on the Monday it was recognised that only a tug could adequately control them in the flood conditions. The services of suitable tug boats could not be obtained from the fleets operating in Sydney Harbour because of the weather conditions in the open ocean between Sydney Harbour and Broken Bay. On the afternoon of Monday March 20, the Church Point Ferry Service, operating out of Pittwater, agreed to go upriver with two tugs and take the ferries in tow. Such a tow, under the conditions, required special equipment not normally carried by these tugs, and it was midnight before they finally got under way. By 6.30 am on the Tuesday morning the tugs were at Brooklyn on their way up river to the ferries."

Organising the tugs was Bill McIntyre's job. You'll remember that Bill was the Supervising Engineer at the DMR Central Workshop at the time. Bill recalls trying to arrange the towage: "On the afternoon of the 20th I was frantically ringing Sydney to try to get a tug to proceed up the river. The Sydney tug companies wouldn't do it for a couple of reasons, one being that there were very heavy seas at the time. The other reason was quite clearly stated by one company, that it wouldn't risk its vessels in the river with the amount of debris that was coming down. And that sort of sets the scene - makes you realise just what it was that Church Point Ferries were prepared to do.

"But although the Church Point people were prepared to send two vessels up the river, they had to be equipped with extra ropes and so on, and fuel up. By this stage it was early evening and they wanted us to arrange for fuel. So we got hold of one of our



fuel tankers that was set up for the fuelling of plant, and we got that to load up with fuel at the Thornleigh Works Office, and proceed across to Church Point. The tugs finally set off about midnight on the Monday.

The two tugs were the *Harport*, 13.7m long, 4.3m beam and 30.5 tonnes displacement, and the *Bringa*, 16.5m long, 3.8m beam and also 30.5 tonnes displacement. The *Bringa* was built in 1915. Each tug was powered by a 6/71 GM diesel engine developing 158kw, but even with this power the tugs could make only one knot against the current. The tugs met the two Wisemans ferry vessels early the next morning just above Spencer.”

Lawry Duff was skippering the *Bringa*, and he had two deckhands, Chris Cowper and Eric Schmeirer. Lawry’s father, Jim Duff, was behind the wheel of the *Harport* and his deckhand was David Baume Jr. (known to his mates as “Springhead”). This is how Lawry Duff remembers it all starting for them: “On the Monday the DMR phoned me to say that the ferries had broken away and that they couldn’t arrange towage for them out of Sydney Harbour because of the mountainous seas at the time. I said that if we were to go up and try to get them I’d need fuel, ropes and all that sort of thing, and that I’d have to know by five o’clock that afternoon. They rang me in the afternoon to say that they had secured them, and that we wouldn’t be needed.

“But at around seven o’clock on the Monday night I got another call from them to say that the ferries had broken away again, and could we help them. They said that whatever we needed to do the job they’d get for us. They sent a DMR tanker down to fuel the tugs, and they also offered to send a helicopter down to take me up so I could see what was occurring. Much as I would’ve liked a ride in a helicopter I thought that there wasn’t much I could’ve done sitting up there in the sky. I’d had no real experience of this type of thing - I’d towed barges and that type of thing in tidal estuaries, but I hadn’t done anything when the river was in full flood before.

“I was on an ex-harbour lighterage tug called the *Bringa*, and my father had just bought another lighterage tug, the *Harport*, with another chap. They were about to take it up to Iluka and convert it to a trawler. It was just coincidental that they happened to be in Pittwater at that particular time, as they were getting it ready for the trip north, but it meant that we had two tugs on hand.

“We got away at about midnight and the first thing we had to do

was to get around West Head. The seas were mountainous at the time, even in Broken Bay. We were about a couple of hundred yards apart, and the seas were so big that we'd lose sight of one another when one of us was in a trough. To get around West Head we had to get out to sea a bit before we turned to come up the river, and when we did it was a bit of a worry because rubbish was coming down the river that you couldn't actually see. We were in the dark, remember, doing all this.

"So we proceeded upriver and it wasn't any great drama, and we got to Brooklyn just on daylight. We landed at Brooklyn and they gave us an update on where the ferries were. I asked them what the procedure would be if I couldn't stop them, and they told me they'd have dynamite ready to blow 'em if I felt it was necessary."

As we shall see, this proved to be more than a little optimistic.

Although it was a relatively uneventful trip up the river, it was a pretty slow one. Chris Cowper recollects: "At one stage I was at the wheel of the *Bringa* going up the river, and I was looking ahead and concentrating on avoiding all the big logs and trees coming down. At one point Lawry said to me that I'd better give her a bit more power. When I asked him why, he pointed to the shore and said: 'Because we haven't moved for about ten minutes.'"

The Police launch from Brooklyn was a 32 ft twin screw job. Ron Evers was one of the officers on board: "We were battling the current going up, plus there were caravans floating just under the water, as well as timber and snags and melons and everything being washed down. A lot of the caravans float about a foot below the surface, and you can't see them till you're on top of them. The flood wiped out all the caravan parks at Wisemans Ferry and up the Colo. There were caravans floating down there for a week afterwards."

Now that they had the two tugs, the Police launch, the launch from Milson Island and the two fireboats from Berowra, things were looking up. Or so they thought.

Act Two: Scene Three

“Everything’s pointed in the right direction but the shore’s going the wrong way.”



It was mid-morning before the tugs met up with the ferries. But let's go back to when dawn broke on the Tuesday morning and get a few more details about what happened in between being moored at Deerubbun Wharf and making the rendezvous with the tugs.

It hadn't exactly been a comfortable night on the ferries, what with the snakes, spiders, mosquitoes, radio contact calls, lack of food, and the occasional passing runaway ferry needing to be corralled. Allen Curran picks up his account as dawn is breaking over Deerubbun Wharf: "Breakfast time was coming around, and we were still hungry. Russ says: 'Well, there's nothing we can do. But there's still two anchors. Let's get 'em over the side.' So we got them over the side. We had to cut holes in the debris again, but in the end we got 'em through. We moved everything across onto No 55 - that was our workboat that we were camped on. We did everything from that.

“The prison boat had stayed with us, and then the Police boat turned up again. They were discussing whether they should take us off again. Next thing we were told that some hours earlier the bigwigs at the Water Board had decided to open the floodgates on Warragamba Dam a bit more because too much water was building up behind the dam wall. They dumped another few million litres of water over the spillway, which raised the level of the river nine inches between half past three in the morning and daylight.

“We were moored hard up against the wharf post, with hemp ropes holding us onto the mangroves. When the water that they let out of Warragamba came down the river you could actually see the rise coming, real quick. We felt like we were in for more trouble. All of a sudden the ferry seemed to give a bit of a lurch, and the next thing the post we were moored to comes right out, and almost before we knew it we were off, being swept downstream again!

“The police boat said that if we cut all the drums free that I’d picked up earlier they’d try to push us into the mangroves, so we cut everything loose - but nothing moved. It just all sat there in this solid mass. The police pulled a couple of the drums clear, but by this time we were back in the main run of the river, rotating around. We were shedding debris, but at the same time there was more debris coming down. We lost the towers off No 55 when it hit a big overhanging gum tree which broke them off the deck and folded them back, which meant that the flap just hung straight down into the water.

“We kept going down, and when we got to the narrow part near Spencer the two ocean-going tugs from Church Point turned up. They said: ‘Oh, this’ll be a piece of cake. We’ll break you apart, and mother you down and into Berowra Creek.’

“One of the tugs backed off, then ploughed into the debris - and nothing happened. He backed off and rammed in again, and again nothing happened. Then he went round and got between us and the bank. He kept pushing us all the time, trying to get us across.

“There’s a set of cables down further that go across the river, and realising that the dragging anchors would probably rip them out, Russ had to get the oxy and cut all the anchor chains.”

It was nine in the morning when the ferries broke away from their overnight mooring at Deerubbun wharf. The *Elleroo*, one of the

boats that Reg Handy from Brooklyn had readied, arrived at the scene just as they broke away, and with the two fireboats they tried to beach the ferries in Paddys Bight, but again - no way.

It was at this stage that the decision was made to try to push the ferries across the river and into the calmer waters of Berowra Creek. The two tugs took control of the ferries, with a 200 hp oyster boat owned by Cobber Moxham of Brooklyn acting as a lead boat and steering the head of ferry No 8 by a long line. Reg Handy and his two boats were sent back to make sure that No 26 was secure, and to stay with her to prevent any further breakaways.

This is what Lawry Duff remembers about events as seen from the *Bringa's* wheelhouse: "We got to just up above Spencer and found them floating down wired together in a V-shape with debris packed in between them. The build-up of debris was unreal. I came up alongside the big car ferry, from memory, and just as I did a log or something jammed the propellor, and I found myself lashed to the car ferry with no engine. I'd become a part of the floating island, and we were all moving downstream fairly quick.

"We were floating past a sheer rock face on this particular section of the river and we were being swept towards it with the tug on the inside, about to be jammed between the ferries and the rocks. I figured that I could jump from the tug onto the car ferries at the last minute if I had to, so I kept trying to get the engine started again. For whatever reason it was, the thing that had jammed the propellor came free just in time and the engine started again. But we still couldn't hold the ferries, and it was lucky that the force of the floodwaters hitting the rock face was enough to push the whole caboodle back out and away from the rock, and we didn't actually make contact with it because of the volume of water.

"I had the *Harport* lash up alongside the big ferry, and I went around the other side. But all we could do was sort of steer them and keep them pointed in the right direction, because there wasn't anything else we could do at the time. We decided to try to steer them into Berowra Creek, and there was a small boat out in front with a fairly long towing line, and we kept trying to manoeuvre everything towards the Berowra Creek entrance. As we were approaching the entrance the Police launch came by and got tangled up with the towline somehow. I can't remember



*No 8 and No 55 under tow and heading for Berowra Creek with
the two tugs and the two fireboats in attendance and Cobber
Moxham's oyster boat with the lead towline*

exactly what happened, but there was a bit of a kerfuffle that meant that there was a delay before I could pick up the towline again and start pulling. That was a hiccup at a crucial point, and by the time I did have the line in place we were past the mouth of Berowra Creek. I was heading upstream pulling, and the other tug was at the back pushing, but we had no chance of making headway upstream against the current. It was just too strong. It was a terrible feeling, I can tell you.

“I could see that we weren’t going to get anywhere like that so I let the tow go. They had oxy on board, so we tried to cut the two ferries free of each other, thinking that we might have been able to do better if we handled one at a time. They cut all the wires, but everything was jammed together too tight. We pulled and tugged but they wouldn’t come apart.”

Here are Allen Curran's recollections of how they missed Berowra Creek: "So we're really floating free now, and the two tugs couldn't stop us. It was too much for them. They sat there with their engines on full revs, but they didn't have a hope in hell. All they could do was keep us straight in the river so we weren't going round and round all the time. All they could do was steer us, and they did a fantastic job.

"As we got further downriver we began to build up a bit more speed, but we still thought they might be able to nudge us into Berowra Creek. This turned out to be harder than we at first thought, because the river had spread out in the flood, and it wasn't clear just where the bank was. So they put two towlines onto us, hoping that they could swing up into Berowra Creek and we'd follow them. We're about to try this, when up come the Boys in Blue again, sirens and all - straight across the tow lines! Cut 'em both right through! You see, there was so much tension on the lines, towing 300-plus tonnes of ferries and the rest. Then the fun really started."

It's not clear exactly what happened about the severed towline - it's one of the areas where memories differ. You've read what Lawry Duff and Allen Curran had to say about it. When I mentioned the incident to Ron Evers, who was one of the officers on board the water police launch, he had no recollection of it. "We didn't cut any ropes. I can tell you that right now." Hal Gregge, in the DMR helicopter circling above said that he had heard about it, but hadn't actually seen what happened, even though they were circling overhead at the time. Back at the DMR Workshop Bill McIntyre heard that it had happened too, but as he said, "The report I heard was that the Police launch was buzzing around like a bee in a bottle not really knowing what needed to be done, and they accidentally ran across the rope and chopped it in two... but everybody was doing their best and it wouldn't be fair to rubbish them on that account"

Brian McKinlay reported it this way: " We passed Pumpkin Point about 10.30am, with the Police launch standing by. At this time the lead boat had water inlet problems caused by debris, but this was cleared as we approached Bar Point midstream. The larger of the two tugs, the *Harport*, then had part of a roof jammed between itself and ferry No 8. The other tug had to stand off and the

the Police boat went to assist, and in so doing crossed the towline to the lead boat. This had to be cut to save fouling the prop of the Police boat. At this time the gearbox of the Police boat apparently locked in neutral across the towline to the lead boat.”

Russ Mitchell’s account of events around Berowra Creek includes mention of the controversial severing: “The Wisemans ferry vessels were lashed together in the form of a shallow V when they broke away from the mooring, and it was not possible to draw them together against the force of the flood. The V became packed with flood debris collected on the journey down the river and while moored overnight. This debris could not be separated from the ferries, and was so tightly packed for about 10m out from the vessel that it formed a woven matrix able to carry the weight of a man right to the edge of it. You could walk around on it - no worries.

“We had both anchors out from the big ferry, and they were huge. Then we realised that we were approaching the point in the river where all the submarine phone lines connect Sydney with Brisbane. We had to use oxy-acetylene gear in a hurry to cut the anchors free. We had to get rid of the anchors or else we’d have torn out the whole phone system of NSW! The anchors are still somewhere at the bottom of the river.

“When that was done the tugs came alongside and assured us that all was under control with the tow. Happy with that, we got out a flask of tea, and someone brought out a plate of sandwiches, and we had our first snack since the whole thing had begun the night before.”

(And about time. I was beginning to think they were never going to get fed!)

Russ again: “As we were entering the area known as the Tideline at the entrance to Berowra Creek, one of the tugs fouled its propellor with the huge amount of debris that was there. The water inlet on the front boat fouled and about five minutes was lost before the boats were under way again. The Police launch *Lendrum* had returned and offered assistance, but in doing so they fouled the line to the lead workboat and to free the *Lendrum* the line had to be severed. “



On the way to Milson Island.

So by the time all of the vessels had got back under power and the lines reconnected, they'd missed Berowra Creek. When the ferries broke away from the tow near the entrance to Berowra Creek, the Bushfire Brigade received the laconic message over the radio phone from the ferries: "Everything is pointed in the right direction but the shore is going the wrong way."

So what to do now? They decided to try to push them into an area known as Grace's Shore, but couldn't. Next they tried to get them into the area known as The Gutter, but this attempt failed as well, so then they tried to go in the other direction - over towards where the wreck of the old *Parramatta* is in the area called The Vines.

Let's leave the ferries bumping down the rocky shore at The Vines and see what was going on backstage and elsewhere as it became clear that the ferries might not be able to be stopped before they hit the bridge(s) at Brooklyn.
