

# JOURNAL

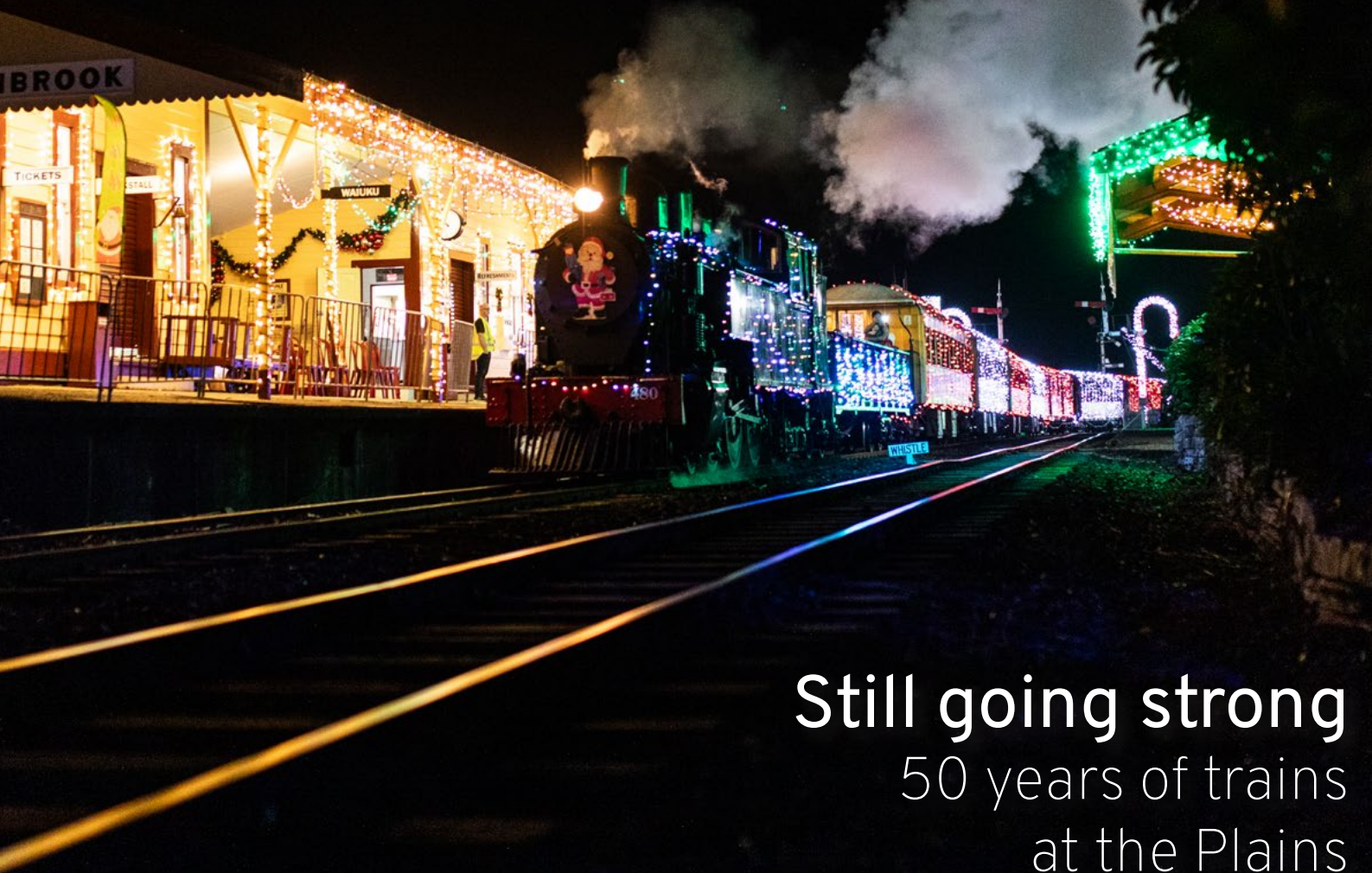
December 25, 2023  
Issue CCXXXIV

## Remembering Tangiwai

*Special feature*

## Rollercoaster

*HTC chair reflects  
on 2023*



**Still going strong**  
50 years of trains  
at the Plains



Image: Jeff Tollan





The magnificent Manawatū Gorge, seen during Steam Incorporated's October 29 excursion to Takapau, which featured DA 1410 and Glenbrook Vintage Railway's DBR 1254. Photo: FRONZ

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### ***Editor's note***

Thank you to all members who contributed to this edition and took time to share your stories.

Please continue to send your updates and high-resolution photos to [journal@fronz.org.nz](mailto:journal@fronz.org.nz) so we can promote the great work you're doing.

Journal is now being published every second month, so expect the next edition in mid-to-late February.

### ***Corrections***

The previous edition was labelled #232. It was actually #233, which makes this #234, and makes me dismal with counting.

The Blenheim conference was 2015.

The group bus trip to Ashburton was 1979, not '75 as stated.



# President's ramble

**Grant Craig, FRONZ President**

Merry Christmas, one and all!

The festive season is on us and has come around fast. This time of year is a busy one for our member groups and, with good weather (well it's supposed to be!), bringing people out and about and looking for things to do. What better than a train or tram ride and if you're travelling to other parts of the country on holiday?

Many of you have been celebrating anniversaries, running excursions, continuing the preservation of rolling stock and generating the income that allows us to continue to do what we do. The dollars disappear fast with the increased cost of things, especially fuel and coal, but hopefully things get better.

The new Government is a bit of an unknown when it comes to what it will do with railways, in funding or legislation but we will be monitoring this to see that we don't receive any surprises.

FRONZ has been busy also, with a weekend in November specifically concentrating on how we will move forward into the next 50 years and how we

can best help and support you, our members.

Some good ideas came out of the meeting, and some of those outcomes are detailed on the next page.

On this note, we do need to you to support us by keeping us informed what you are doing, and advising us of any actual or perceived issues – we can't help you effectively if we are out of the loop when you're struggling with something! Forewarned is forearmed.

Planning is under way for the 2024 conference in Palmerston North, with some great side tours and speakers. After that, 2025 is the big one – FRONZ's 50th anniversary – and will be based around Ferrymead railway in Christchurch. A large weekend is planned, and I strongly urge your groups to consider coming along.

We would love to hear from you if your group has any ideas or wants to be involved in the celebrations.

And finally, the FRONZ Executive and I wish you a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year.



Gabriel's crew embrace the festive spirit at the Bay of Islands Vintage Railway. Photo: BOIVR



# From the Secretary's desk

**Jeff Tollan**

For the first couple of weeks of December, I was in Auckland for Glenbrook Vintage Railway's Christmas Lights event (pictured above).

I can't say I've ever experienced anything like this on such a scale before, seen as many strings of lights, nor the mountains of extension cords. The endless hours of set-up were something to behold, but the end result was jaw-dropping.

I can't thank the GVR team enough for making me feel like part of the family.

Joining me on the roster were volunteers from other groups and it really shows the strength of the sector when we're working together like that (and it was so much fun).

On November 18, the Executive met in Wellington to take a critical look at how FRONZ operates. The discussions focused on where the Executive can do better, how we can provide more support for you, making

FRONZ more resilient, and drafting additional changes to the Constitution.

We'll be reviewing this work early in the New Year and formalising the outcomes, including:

- Creating a youth/Nex Gen Convenor role, to help young members network and build relationships with other groups.
- Introduce term limits for executive members (six years, with the longest-serving exec member standing down every two years), and the president (a seven-year term).
- Holding Exec meetings every two months instead of monthly, and publishing Journal in the alternate months.
- The implementation of a mission statement to answer the questions "What does FRONZ do, and why?"





- Increasing engagement with members, including on-site visits and more Zoom sessions to better understand what's happening on the ground.
- Getting younger members to conference and making a bespoke experience outside the formal programme that allows them to network and build relationships.

You can [read the full document here](#) or by scanning the QR code.

We welcome any thoughts or observations - email them to [secretary@fronz.org.nz](mailto:secretary@fronz.org.nz).

Work is ongoing with the Constitution changes, and we will circulate the draft with you in the New Year, once changes from the November meeting are incorporated.

I'd like to thank those of you who have so far reached out with thoughts and suggestions about the Consitution.



You'll be hearing from me soon regarding next year's conference, but until then, have a fantastic break, where ever you are and whatever you're doing.

Jeff



The Glenbrook Vintage Railway team after the final trip of their Christmas Lights event. Photo: GVR



# Safety alert for Manco vehicles

- **FRONZ**

In Australia, the Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator (ONRSR) has issued a safety alert regarding rollaway issues with Manco high-rail fitted vehicles.

It notes four incidents since July 2022, three of which occurred since July 2023.

The incidents resulted in a trailer running away, an elevated work platform running away, a mechanical failure that ejected workers from the bucket and an uncontrolled movement that saw a worker get injured.

The incidents are under investigation,



however ONRSR is advising anyone with these Manco vehicles to review the information to determine whether it applies to their operations, and if so, take the necessary steps to ensure safe use.

[More information can be found here.](#)

## Top safety management tips and reminders:

**Donald Ross, RAIL**

1. Does your organisation have a documented safety policy, and is it reviewed regularly and communicated to all?
2. Are safety responsibilities documented and allocated.
3. Do all personnel understand their safety obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 and Railways Act 2005.
4. Are standards, rules and codes fit for purpose and reviewed regularly?
5. Does your organisation hold regular safety operational training and refreshers?
6. Is operational training current and up to date?
7. Are equipment and infrastructure safety inspections up to date, to the standard specified in your safety system, and documented?
8. Is your risk assessment document regularly reviewed to check if there are any new risks, or any new controls to reduce risk so far as is reasonably practical?
9. Does all your team know the process within your organisation to report a hazard, incident, or accident?
10. Are incidents and accidents investigated, and appropriate corrective action taken where required?
11. Has your organisation set safety goals/measures, and are these regularly reviewed?
12. Are internal safety system audits completed regularly, and corrective actions or recommendations address in a timely manner.

# Challenging, but rewarding year for the HTC

## **Michael Hobbs, HTC Chair**

Christmas and the holiday season is upon us again so I wanted to take the time to give a personal thanks to those who contributed to the HTC in 2023.

It's been a tough year for our committee with many changes. The sad passing of Mike Anderson and the loss of David Webb, Stewart Gutsell and Mike Bradshaw from the committee left a big hole, not only in terms of the knowledge base of the committee but also in the relationship and dynamic of the committee. We were grateful however to welcome Matt Hermann, Mike Wilcox, Craig Baikie, Chris Wakeling and Alex Raue to the committee during the year and it's fantastic to see the culture of the HTC continue to evolve as we strive to continue to uphold the professional standards passed onto us from the previous committee members.

The committee has made progress in a number of areas in 2023. During the course of the year:

- We held five meetings including the first joint meeting between HTC and the Heritage Operating Committee since the reset.
- We have transferred our online communications to dedicated email and google chats channels and are in the process of moving our vehicle documentation to google drive. Using the Fronz google suite will allow us to reduce the cost of these services to our operators while maintaining the visibility required.
- We certified six additional heritage vehicles, Ww644, Uc686, Ag49, A1962, A1975 and Ag239. Looking ahead to the new year we have 8 re-registrations for Mainline

- 
- Steam vehicles with Section 28 notices coming up which is a major milestone both for HTC and MSHT.
- We have reviewed four pre-registration packages and six engineering change requests for the network fleet.
- We have commenced a full review of the FRONZ technical codes and inspection forms.
- We have continued to develop a formal training programme for our Heritage vehicle inspectors.

This doesn't happen by itself and I'd like to give a huge thank you to those who have been along with us for the journey, especially:

- The HTC members and supporters for all your hard work this year.
- The FRONZ and HOC committees for continuing to support and work alongside the HTC.
- The team at KiwiRail (particularly Karen, Alex, Chris, Paul, Janene, Soren & Rufat) for their ongoing support of Heritage Operations.
- Our main line operators
- Margaret Gordon for your work as FRONZ Executive Officer

Additionally a big thank you to all the Heritage operators, both network and non-network, who engaged with HTC over the past year. I hope all of you have a Merry Christmas and a relaxing holiday break and I look forward to working with you all in 2024.

# Merry Christmas, from TrackSAFE

As the year comes to a close, TrackSAFE would like to thank all the FRONZ organisations that assist us in getting out public rail safety messages every year.

“It’s not always easy for a small organisation like TrackSAFE to communicate safety messages to everyone in the country, so we appreciate any efforts, big or small, that FRONZ members make to help us remind the public about safe behaviour at our level crossings,” says Foundation Manager Megan Drayton.

“There are a range of ways you can be involved in rail safety promotion - whether it’s by supporting Rail Safety Week each year, or even just linking to our website from your own sites. We have a “proud supporter” icon that you can place on your website, so please let us know if you would like one.

“Failing that – it’s always helpful if we can share each other’s social media messages, which many of you do already and for which we are very grateful,” says Megan.



Megan Drayton

TrackSAFE has also recently had new primary schools safety posters designed. “If any organisations would like some of these to give away at events or excursions please let us know and we can pop some on a courier.

“We wish everyone a safe and happy festive season and look forward to seeing many of you at conference in June.”

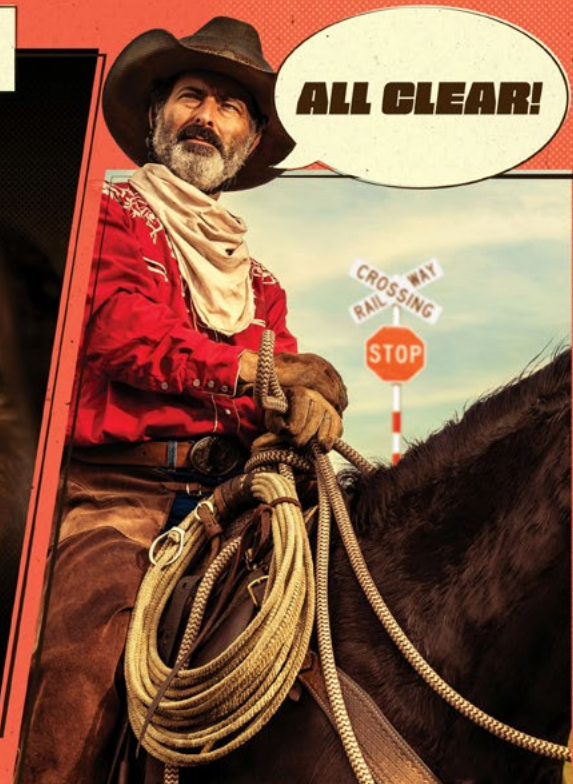
**STEELY STARE...**



**STEELY STARE...**



**ALL CLEAR!**



**ALWAYS LOOK FOR TRAINS**





# Christmas at MOTAT

**Mike Rutherford, Motorman**

The team have just spent the past three weeks on “Night Shift” at MOTAT (Museum of Transport and Technology), crewing our heritage trams for the Christmas Lights displays.

The display ran for four nights a week and sold out in a matter of days. It had to be limited to 5000 visitors a night, so over three weeks we will have had approximately 60,000 visitors.

The tram rides on our light-decorated trams are hugely popular and each tram departs full for the duration of the night. Each of the four trams does approximately 14 runs per night.

Among them is Tram 248, which I’ve been on for all but one of the nights. 248 is an 85-year-old Auckland tram and was one of the last trams to run on the Auckland tracks in 1956 after which they were replaced by trolley buses.



248 departs for another trip during MOTAT’s Christmas Lights event. Photo: Albert Chan





Some 60,000 people will have visited MOTAT for its popular Christmas Lights event.  
Photo: Albert Chan

MOTAT continues to operate the Dockline Tram on the Auckland Waterfront in Wynyard Quarter, although it's about to be in hiatus for six weeks from January 8 to February 24 due to roadworks on Halsey Street. The service will take to the Wynyard Loop once again on Sunday 25 February.

The team plan to end their summer on a high note, with both trams running on the final Sunday (January 7) and the band "Twistin' the Swing" entertaining visitors and crew on Tram 881 from 1pm to 3pm, with their unique gypsy-style rhythmic music!



**Middle image:** #466 in Daldy Street with the Pohutukawa in bloom. **Bottom image:** #466 turns from Galsey St into Gaunt St. Photos: Kyza Beazley.





Photos: David Oakley

# Plains celebrates 50 years

There was cake, coal smoke and a big crowd to help the Ashburton Railway & Preservation Society celebrate its half-century.

A64, K88 and Ja1260, along with RM50 spent November 18 and 19 shuttling visitors along the near-3 kilometres of track that formed the

start of the Mt Somers Branch. In true Canterbury style, the weather played ball and allowed for some spectacular shots of the event.

Congratulations to all involved, and best of luck for the next 50 years!







**Above:** Ashburton Mayor Neil Brown joins Jake Tate, the youngest active member, and Mike Ross the oldest active member. Mike has been involved with the Ashburton Railway Preservation Society for the whole 50 years. **Below:** The mayor and Plains President Lorayne Oakley. Photos: Tony Cameron







The dedicated team involved in the weekend's celebrations. Photos: Tony Cameron.





# In memory

## Ian Jenner

### *FRONZ*

Ian passed away in Dunedin Hospital on December 5, but leaves a legacy of service among the heritage sector and beyond.

Ian was a mainstay of the Bush Tramway Club at Pukemiro, a talented railway photographer, business entrepreneur, and an all-round nice bloke.

Among Ian's contributions to the sector were the restoration of two Mamaku jiggers, which will stand as a tribute to his skills. Ian also donated two Tr shunting locos, one of which is in frequent use at Bush Tramway Club. Colin notes he was a man of many parts and will be really missed by BTC members.

Our thoughts are with his family and friends, who are mourning the loss of a very talented and caring individual this Christmas.

## Cran Julian

### *Niall Robertson*

Cran was a prominent figure and ran the last of the truly rail enthusiast excursions. As Hamish Horn said, your seat was more to store your gear, as much of the time you were out taking photographs.

For at least a couple of decades, Cran ran trips where enthusiasts spent much of the day getting off trains, jumping fences and ditches and climbing up and down all manner of terrain to get a huge variety of photographs in a number of very picturesque scenes. Looking back through my notes, I see that on one trip from Napier to Gisborne and back, we had 18 photostops going up and six on the return trip, before we lost the light.

Cran had a zest for life. He was always good company and had a great sense of humour. He certainly captured some of the essence of the New Zealand railway scene of the time in his publications. I'm sure his masters can't have read a lot of his work, as I don't think he was ever censored by them.

Cran was a rail enthusiast of his time, a time many of us older people remember very fondly, as we also all remember Cran. In a sense, Cran is the end of an era.

## Ray Mathewson

### *FRONZ*

Ray passed away in early December. A well-known rail photographer and keen moddler of Rio Grand, Ray is another great loss for the heritage movement. Among his many beautiful photos are shots that capture the magical scenes of trains through Central Otago.

Our thoughts are with these rail icons, and all the members we have lost over the year.





**Above:** Cran on Dx2643, hauling 630, the express goods. The train was about to head back to Taihape with driver Phil "Teapot" Wagner. April 5, 1979. **Below:** As Da656 on R51 crosses the 634 express, Cran is seen talking to (possibly) David Pryor. Taken on Sunday, February 9, 1986. Images by Niall Robertson.





A new life  
for old  
semaphores





### ***Bryan Blanchard, President***

Among the jobs being crossed off at Pleasant Point Museum and Railway has been one to restore the signal post at Keane's Crossing.

Originally from the Timaru yard, near the number 2 wharf, one arm was taken off in 1970, following the closure of the Fairlie Branch, and the signals were in use up right up to 1986. After being decommissioned, a member kindly purchased the signal and donated it to Pleasant Point, where it was installed on display.

Over several months, Stewart Frew has been cutting out the rotten wood, dealing to the rust and making it look as good as new. The post was reinstalled in a new position in early December, and boy, it looks good.



## ***Seasons greetings from Feilding and District Steam Rail Society***

Projects are progressing at a steady pace, including the restoration of the first of four carriages. This includes rebuilding its bogies before seeing if it's ready for re-certification and main line use again!

WAB794 is making progress as well. As of November, a dry pipe issue was in the process of being remedied prior to a hydro test.

At the FSR AGM in September, Life Membership, was bestowed on four of our long-term and current active members for their valued contribution over a long period of time.

They are pictured, from left to right: Keith Jacob, John Tremain, founding member Merv Hodgson, and Kevin de Rose.



Congratulations!

## ***Your FRONZ Executive:***

### **Committee:**

- President - Grant Craig
- Treasurer - Bruce Shalders
- Secretary - Jeff Tollan
- Interim Exec Officer - Jeff Tollan
- Guy Wellwood
- Alan Verry
- Courtney Kilner

### **RAIL:**

- Director - Clark Simmonds

### **Convenors:**

- Sustainability - Dan Armstrong
- Track - Robert Storm
- Health and Safety - Donald Ross
- Tramways - Henry Brittain
- Mainline - TBC
- Non-Mainline Groups and Museums Convenor - Guy Wellwood

### **Contact:**

- [secretary@fronz.org.nz](mailto:secretary@fronz.org.nz)
- [journal@fronz.org.nz](mailto:journal@fronz.org.nz)



of Taihape, who was killed  
freeman whose fate has not  
been ascertained, a guard,  
W. Inglis, of Ngaho, Wellington,  
who is safe, and a guard's as-  
sistant from Palmerston North,  
is not yet accounted for.







# The night was clear, the weather fine

70 years since the Tangiwai railway disaster



Alexander Turnbull Library

- This article was originally published on [andrebrettp.com](https://andrebrettp.com), and is republished with permission.

*Dr André Brett is an historian, researcher and writer.*

*I have written about Tangiwai before, for an academic [journal](#) and a [blog](#), and to [publish](#) Ted Brett's account in the Stuff newspapers on the 60th anniversary. This piece for the 70th anniversary is an experiment in narrative history. I have focused specifically on individuals for whom I have personal accounts, seeking to integrate them together. There are, naturally, so many other stories of bravery and tragedy that go unmentioned here, but this is hopefully a glimpse into how those involved in Tangiwai experienced that night.*

*I take especial interest in this disaster as Ted Brett was my grandfather. At the end is a list of primary sources and a brief discussion of them. All quotes of direct speech are as they were remembered by the people who spoke or heard them; they are not my creations.*





Wellington Railway Station, January 1, 1937. Photo: Photographic Archive, Alexander Turnbull Library

Christmas Eve, Thursday 24 December 1953. Wellington railway station was bustling in the mid-afternoon. Announcements directed passengers to electric multiple units for Johnsonville, Paekākāriki, and Taitā, steam-hauled local trains for Upper Hutt and other lower North Island destinations, and to platform nine for the 3pm express to Auckland.

Oil-burning steam locomotive KA 949 sat at the front of the eleven-carriage express, train number 626 on the working timetable supplied to staff of New Zealand Railways (NZR). Behind the engine were five second-class carriages, four first-class carriages, a guard's van, and finally a Railways Travelling Post Office van. It was one of multiple trains laid on that day for holidaymakers travelling the North Island Main Trunk between New Zealand's capital and its largest city.

1953 had the makings of a very special Christmas: Queen Elizabeth II had arrived in Auckland on 23 December and many travellers hoped to see this first visit of a reigning monarch to New Zealand. The popular young queen captivated a country in the midst of economic golden weather and postwar optimism for the future. As the clock ticked towards

3pm, the last passengers said their goodbyes and hastened aboard, excited for what lay ahead.

A couple of hours later, 18-year-old Ted Brett waited for the express to arrive in Palmerston North—not at today's station on the edge of town, but at the original station located centrally on Main Street a couple of blocks over from The Square. His birth certificate gave his name as Richard Edward Brett, but to everyone he was simply Ted, son of John and Edith of 100 South Road, Masterton. He had arrived in Palmerston North earlier that day aboard a rail-car with his best friend, 17-year-old John Cockburn, John's 12-year-old brother Douglas, and other travellers from the Wairarapa.

Not long after 5:30pm, Ted caught sight of "the mighty beast" KA 949 leading the train. In the cab were Charlie Parker, an experienced driver, and Lance Redman, a similarly respected fireman. In the guard's van, William Inglis did not have to look after tickets, small lots of goods, and the train's general safety all by himself: he had an assistant, Hemi Ransfield, while car attendant William Allaway aided passengers. In the postal van, meanwhile, Malcolm Kay and Ronald "Junior" Price busily sorted and distributed last-minute Christmas mail.



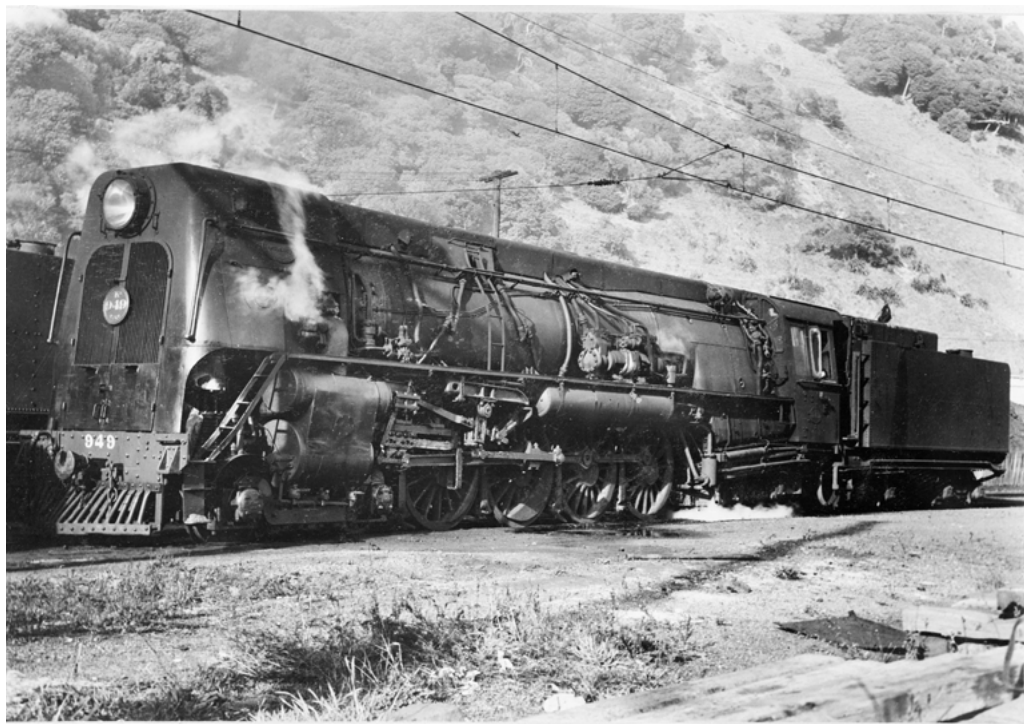
After some confusion about Ted, John, and Douglas's seats, guard Inglis directed them to the second carriage behind the locomotive. The express had a ten-minute stop at Palmerston North and then resumed working its way up the island, passing through Feilding, Marton, and Taihape. At Waiōuru, eight people disembarked and one boarded, bringing the total aboard to 285: 176 second-class passengers, 102 first-class passengers, five railway crew, and two postal agents.

The train steamed out of Waiōuru on time at 10:09pm and Parker and Redman began building up speed. From here to Ohakune, the train could travel at up to 50mph (80km/h) across the Central Plateau south of Mount Ruapehu, fast by the standards of the time. After winding through a series of curves, the Main Trunk entered a straight near the village of Tangiwai, where it crosses a road we know today as State Highway 49. Both road and railway then cross the Whangaehu River about 1.5km west of Tangiwai railway station, the railway just north of the road.

The express passed Tangiwai at 10:20pm. Most passengers had settled in for the night. John and Douglas were dozing in the second carriage, like the mothers and young children seated near them. Ted, though, was still awake. An enthusiastic photographer, he hoped to make a movie of Mount Ruapehu at night, and, luckily for him, the night was clear and the weather fine.

**A**t Tangiwai, the locomotive crew exchanged a tablet to permit travel on the next stretch of line. A mechanical tablet exchanger enabled this safeworking procedure to be performed without slowing the train. Parker and Redman received the tablet authorising their onward passage while the station agent observed the express. The headlight was on full, as were other safety lights, and the train was travelling slightly below maximum line speed, closer to 40mph (65km/h) than the permitted 50mph. All seemed well: the train was on time, the night was clear, and the weather fine.

Around five minutes earlier, however, two men in a car found something perplexing and ominous.



Ka 949, photographed c1947-49, after being equipped for oil firing. Photo: Godber Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library

**R**obert Somerville and Trevor Wildbore were driving from Ohakune in the opposite direction to the train, and when they approached the Whangaehu River, they were surprised to find the road covered by a noisy torrent of water. Ahead of them, a car with a caravan had pulled up too late and it was now stuck. Two occupants called for help with a third who had become faint, with the water rushing above their knees. The Whangaehu was usually shallow and this flood made no sense, because the night was clear and the weather fine.

On the other side of the river, driving a truck in the same direction as the train, 27-year-old Taihape postal clerk Cyril Ellis made a similar discovery while on a journey to visit his parents for Christmas. At about 10:15pm, he, his wife, and his mother-in-law found their passage blocked by “turbulent, yellow water” across the road bridge. Ellis parked at a safe distance, then got out to investigate. The Whangaehu was roaring over the road bridge: all he could see in the beam of his powerful torch was the top wooden side rail as the river rose and fell. When Ellis turned towards Waiōuru, he spotted a powerful light a mile back at the Tangiwai level crossing—the headlight of KA 949. After all, the night was clear and the weather fine.

Ellis's torch could not illuminate the railway bridge, but he feared the worst. The railway line was about fifty metres from where he had stopped, so, leaping a barbed wire fence, he sprinted to the track and ran towards the locomotive, waving his torch. As





the train barrelled past him, Ellis yelled to the crew but could not tell if Parker or Redman saw him. Maybe they saw Ellis or maybe the headlight of KA 949 illuminated the river: they braked a couple of hundred metres from the bridge.

**T**he night was clear and the weather fine, but what nobody aboard train number 626 nor on the road west of Tangiwai knew was that a tephra dam containing the crater lake of Mount Ruapehu had collapsed a few hours earlier. This unleashed a torrent of mud, water, and volcanic ash known as a lahar. There had been lahars in the Whangaehu before, but only one since the Main Trunk was opened, which in 1925 scoured pier 4 but did not destroy the bridge. It was repaired, and numerous inspections in the following 28 years deemed the bridge structurally sound. This time, however, the lahar was too strong and pier 4 could not resist it. Nor could the road bridge, which collapsed at the Waiōuru end.

On the Ohakune side of the river, another car heading towards Waiōuru found its passage blocked and stopped alongside those already there. The driver hopped out and both he and Wildbore spotted the

headlight of the express.

“I wonder whether the rail bridge has gone”, remarked Wildbore.

***“The engine simply nose-dived”***

“We shall soon see”, replied the other man, possibly Arthur Dewar Bell.

Wildbore had a torch but he could not even get close to casting light on the bridge. Both men watched helplessly, as did Ellis on the other bank. Parker and Redman desperately tried to stop the train, and in the second carriage Ted Brett heard a “terrible screeching of metal on metal” as the emergency brakes took effect. The sparks were visible to Wildbore on the opposite bank.

It was not enough. “The engine simply nose-dived”, recalled Ellis a couple of days later. It entered the river with a “bellowing splash”. The carriages, in Wildbore’s words, “appeared to topple into the river”. Joan Karam, a passenger aboard the third carriage, felt the train rattle and lurch before being “dumped into space with unbelievable violence”.

Ted, in the second carriage, tried to wake John as





A labelled press photo, with Mount Ruapehu in the background. Credit: Archives New Zealand.

the train swayed and rose upwards. Then, in his words, “everything just seemed to be folding back on itself. We seemed to be sliding, rising, twisting, turning—then we seemed to drop.” The carriage plunged into a whirlpool of ice-cold sulphuric water.

Immersion. Destruction. Pure unrelenting horror.

**K**A 949 nearly hit the opposite bank, as did the first carriage. The third carriage was torn in two. The torrent carried the fourth carriage across the road, dumping it past the road bridge, one set of wheels atop the twisted remains. The fifth carriage was swept further: its remnants came to rest 2.5km downstream. The sixth carriage, the leading first-class carriage, teetered precariously on the edge of the shattered bridge. As for the second carriage, it was shredded into an unrecognisable lump of metal. Ted smashed at a window and forced his way out as the carriage disintegrated around him.

The rear half of the train remained on the track. Cyril Ellis, frantic, ran towards the guard’s van. A confused William Inglis hopped out to investigate

why his train had stopped unexpectedly, fortuitously doing so on the same side of the train as Ellis.

“I tried to stop him! I tried to stop him!” yelled Ellis frantically. “I tried to stop him, but he was going too fast. Half your train is in the river!”

“No!” replied a disbelieving Inglis.

“It is! It is!” insisted Ellis, as they hurried towards the front of the train.

Both men entered the sixth carriage, whose lights were still burning, and advised the passengers to remain calm. Inglis walked to the front of the carriage and looked out the door. All he could see were a few feet of broken rails in empty air above a swollen river. He and Ellis, independent of each other, later recounted the words that came from his mouth: “Good God, there is an engine and five cars in there!”

It was about to be six. The coupler holding the sixth carriage to the rest of the train suddenly snapped, everything tilted, the lights went out, and the carriage toppled off the bridge. Most passengers had



been standing, ready to evacuate, and Inglis shouted for everyone to hold onto the luggage racks as the carriage bobbed in the river. He was standing on a seat, water up to his armpit, when the carriage rolled onto its side and came to rest on the riverbank.

There was only about a foot of air between the windows and the water level inside the sixth carriage, and floating large items of luggage made things all the more hazardous. Inglis wriggled out a smashed window. Ellis broke another with his elbow and feet, and helped a passenger, John Holman, rescue his wife.

Ellis and Holman then plunged back into the carriage and, in Inglis's words, "did all that was humanly possible to assist". A young woman, Suzanne Kennedy, was trapped under other people and broken seats and drowned before the carriage came to rest, but the other 21 passengers escaped, including Kennedy's sister.

As the last people were lifted through the windows, Ellis stood on the side of the carriage, his energy spent: "I can't do any more, I am exhausted." By this point, more motorists had arrived on the scene and

the waters had receded far enough that they could form a human chain to bring people to safety. Ellis reflected later that "I cannot explain what we went through, but somehow in the stress of the moment John and I seemed to have terrific strength."

Those in the front half of the train were much less fortunate. Of the two locomotive crew and 176 second-class passengers who fell into the river, just 28 survived. KA 949 struck and shattered pier 3 of the bridge on its way to the riverbed. Charlie Parker's family identified the body of the engine driver, but fireman Lance Redman was swept away, never to be found. The locomotive's tender burst, adding oil to the cocktail of the lahar. Passengers in the river screamed for help, not knowing if anyone could hear them.

Ted Brett, blood coursing down his arms from forcing his way out of the second carriage, feared he accidentally kicked away other people in his desperation to escape. He did, however, probably save at least one life: he bumped against something small, and he clung to it, especially after it appeared to move. Late in life, Ted described it as a "pillow", too humble to take any greater credit as he was blinded in the water.



Wreckage of the First Class car 'Z'. Photo: Archives New Zealand





Rescue workers carry a stretcher at the scene of the Tangiwai disaster. Photo: Morrie Peacock of 20th Century Photography (N.Z) Limited/Alexander Turnbull Library

By sheer good fortune, he found himself in a part of the river sheltered by the first carriage. He had recently gone rock-climbing with friends in Wellington and this possibly gave him the ability and wherewithal to scramble clear of the torrent, still holding the “pillow”. Only once he reached solid ground near one end of the first carriage did he realise his clothes were shredded, he was freezing, his right fist had swollen to an enormous size, and his entire body ached.

“I didn’t even know the damn river’s name. I didn’t know where I was. Almost didn’t know who I was.”

In the wreckage of one half of the third carriage, Joan Karam clung to a luggage rack to keep her head above the waterline. She struggled to process what had happened, initially believing the train had been swept out to sea until she realised the water was not salty—instead, the carriage had come to rest, and icy water was rushing through it. Joan yelled and yelled for her sister Madeline, but no response. She felt the hand of somebody underwater, who she pulled to the surface: another young woman whom Joan knew only as Anne.

The two women were buffeted by objects hard and soft in the water, including dead bodies. “It was sickening”, she remembered. They had to get out. Joan pulled herself through a smashed window and then helped Anne. They perched on the carriage and

took stock of their surroundings: they were beside a girder of the bridge and the engine, still hissing and hot to the touch. On the other side of the river, they could see the rear half of the train, its lights faintly illuminating the rescue operation at the sixth carriage. And, in the distance on their own side, a hopeful sign: torches moving along the riverbank.

Robert Somerville first heard cries for help coming from downstream, on the other side of the road from the railway bridge. The water was subsiding, but darkness and smoke made it difficult to find the person calling out. Eventually, he found a man almost fifty metres from the road but separated by turbulent water. Although muddy, it turned out to be only thigh deep. Somerville then made his way towards the railway bridge, coming upon six men from the first carriage, uninjured but covered in silt. They informed him more people were alive down the bank.

Trevor Wildbore, meanwhile, had gone to raise the alarm with another motorist who had recently arrived on the scene, Alan Stuart of Taumarunui. They drove to the nearby Forest Service station in Karioi, and found the offices illuminated but unattended. The staff left lights on overnight to keep a load on their generator, but Wildbore and Stuart were not to know that their yelling and banging on the door was perfectly useless. One of them smashed a window to gain access and place a telephone call, but the



phone was disconnected. Wildbore, in his desperation, flicked a switch of unknown purpose; it triggered the fire alarm.

Within a minute, five foresters—the entire skeleton staff at Karioi for the holiday period—were out looking for a forest fire. Wildbore and Stuart explained that there was no fire; rather, the Auckland express was in the Whangaehu River. Ranger-in-charge Alan Woodward simply could not believe what he was hearing and asked for it to be repeated. He opened the telephone exchange and contacted Ohakune while John McDonald, fire equipment officer, led the rest to the scene with first aid equipment, stretchers, tools, torches, and a swivel light.

At the river, motorists on the Ohakune side—Somerville, Arthur Dewar Bell, and others—brought survivors from the first carriage, as well as a lucky few plucked from the water who had been in other carriages, up to the road level. They offered what

they could in terms of first aid, blankets, and drinks. Somerville recalled that “I carried a little boy up to the top of the bank.” It is impossible to say if this was Ted Brett’s “pillow”, but the location checks out.

Ted found himself blinded by the swivel light and the headlights of cars, and he struggled to keep his eyes open. One rescuer took the “pillow” with urgency and hurried up the steep riverbank, while somebody else offered Ted a drink. He thought it was a bottle of water, only realising it was brandy after taking a big swig.

Calls for help continued to ring out. Ted, remembering them late in life, remarked with characteristic understatement that he did not wish to hear such a thing again. It took over twenty minutes for rescuers to reach Joan and Anne, who had scrambled from their precarious position atop the third carriage onto the bridge girder. In the dark, they dared go no further and risk additional injuries.



At the scene of the railway disaster at Tangiwai, December 1953. Photo: New Zealand Railways



A little after midnight, it became clear to those involved in the rescue that they had saved all they could and the search would have to resume in daylight. The last person found alive was a woman buried up to her neck in silt. She had been praying for a quick death when rescuers came upon her. By sheer fluke, she ended up at Raetihi hospital in a bed next to Joan Karam, who discovered this woman was a third survivor from the third carriage.

Survivors were dispersed throughout local hospitals and homes. The Condor (or Conger) family of Karioi accommodated Ted and four other young men. They were caked in silt and oil, and the Forest Service supplied a tanker of water so that there was enough for all five to wash. After Ted bathed, Mrs Condor marvelled at the Pākehā man in front of her, exclaiming “I thought you were Samoan!” It also transpired that one of the other four was a redhead.

On Christmas morning, Ted thumbed a lift to Tangiwhai to try to find John and Douglas. The sight of the wreckage was confronting, and the landscape was covered in mud, twisted metal, torn clothes—and, a tragic reminder of the timing, Christmas wrapping paper. Those at the scene told him he should not be there, and that he should go to the Ohakune police station for the list of registered survivors.

At Ohakune, Ted found John and Douglas’s names were not on the list of survivors—and nor was his,

as it had been incorrectly taken down as “T. Brent”. A nearby shopkeeper handed out free ice creams to survivors, while the local butcher and milkman distributed meat, vegetables, and dairy to households hosting them. Ted joined one group for Christmas dinner with the Blinkhorn family. He remembered with gratitude the Blinkhorns’ efforts to make Christmas a little happier, but he could not stop worrying about John and Douglas.

Ted was not the only survivor who returned to the scene seeking answers. A correspondent for the Mail, an Adelaide newspaper, hurriedly wrote an update at the scene. “A boy watching me as I type is still crying. His two pals are dead.” The lad only gave his name as John because “he didn’t want his folk to know he had been crying”. He told the reporter of hearing mothers screaming for their children in the pitch dark. He sobbed again.

Possessions were scattered around the black volcanic soil. A woman’s green overcoat; a baby’s high chair; a small red purse. In a leatherbound diary, the Mail’s correspondent found an entry for 24 December legible: “Left Wellington for Auckland by express to see Queen.”

With no newspapers on Christmas Day, most people learned the news by radio—and, internationally, the Queen herself broke the news to many. She recorded her worldwide Christmas radio broadcast in





Auckland, and at the end she addressed her New Zealand subjects directly.

“Last night a most grievous railway accident took place at Tangiwai which will have brought tragedy into many homes and sorrow into all upon this Christmas day. I know there is no one in New Zealand, and indeed throughout the Commonwealth, who will not join with my husband and me in sending to those who mourn a message of sympathy in their loss. I pray that they and all who have been injured may be comforted and strengthened.”

**N**ews came in dribs and drabs. Rescuers searched down the river in the summer heat, finding bodies and possessions all the way to the Whangāehu’s mouth on the Tasman Sea. Joan Karam learnt on Boxing Day that the body of her sister Madeline had been found. Three days later, at the morgue in Wellington Hospital, master baker Harold Cockburn identified the body of his 12-year-old son Douglas. The tickets from John Cockburn’s shirt pocket were found under the locomotive—but his body never was.

The night had been clear and the weather fine, but 151 people died in the “Weeping Waters”, the English translation of “Tangiwai”: 148 second class passengers, one first-class passenger, and both locomotive crew. 20 victims were never found and presumed washed out to sea.

21 bodies who could not be identified were buried in a mass grave at Karori Cemetery, Wellington, on 31 December 1953. The Duke of Edinburgh left the royal tour in Hamilton and flew to Wellington to present a wreath during the ceremony on behalf of himself and the Queen. 13 of these bodies were later identified and five reburied elsewhere, so the grave now contains 16 victims. Eight are named. The other eight, in the words of their plaques, are “known unto God”.

To recover from the ordeal, John Holman and his wife took a camping holiday at Ngakuta Bay in the Marlborough Sounds during January. Beyond the reach of the telephone network, they had no idea there was big news waiting. When they returned to Picton on 29 January, Holman bought a paper and read it over their evening meal.

“By God, dear,” he exclaimed to his wife, “I have won the George Medal.”

He was one of four rescuers whom the Queen acknowledged with royal honours. Cyril Ellis and John Holman received the George Medal for their bravery, and William Inglis and Arthur Dewar Bell received the British Empire Medal for the assistance they rendered.



The Duke of Edinburgh at the Tangiwai memorial for 21 victims at the Karori Cemetery on December 31, 1953. Photo: Archives New Zealand

A board of inquiry submitted its report on 23 April 1954, finding that railway staff exhibited “no failure to exercise reasonable care”. It attributed to the disaster to “unpredictable forces of the lahar ... of such nature and magnitude as to cause failure of a soundly constructed and maintained bridge”. It made only modest acknowledgement of the heroism of Parker and Redman, who could have jumped

clear but “lost their lives in the performance of their duties”.

**I**n 1957, a national memorial was erected at the head of the mass grave in Karori Cemetery. NZR, however, was not enthusiastic about a memorial at the disaster site, and it was not until the 1980s that locals, led by the Ohakune Lions Club, succeeded in establishing one—aided by the momentum of the 35th anniversary, when a National Radio journalist was disappointed to find only a worn wooden cross at the site, the text on it illegible. A granite monument depicting the number plate of the ill-fated locomotive was dedicated on 18 June 1989.

The memorial site has since been expanded considerably during the 2010s, bringing belated closure



for many family members. This includes dedicated memorials to Parker, Redman, and Chris Akapita, a worker who died during construction of a replacement bridge, as well as a lookout over the railway bridge and more comprehensive information panels. It is now the most extensive memorial to any New Zealand railway disaster—indeed, it is one of the most substantial in the nation—and a flower station beside the main monument is the nation's only memorial to survivors of any railway accident.

For the bereaved, the months and years immediately after Tangiwai were hard both emotionally and financially. As the disaster was an “act of God”, NZR was not liable to pay compensation, but its prominence in New Zealand society as one of the largest departments of state meant it made over 150 payments ex gratia to survivors and relatives.

John McAlpine, the Minister of Railways, believed the payments were “reasonably generous ... in accordance with what the public would regard as right and proper”. But negotiating compensation was a lengthy process, and many payments were not received until two or more years afterwards. Some families who lost breadwinners depended on the kindness of friends and family to make ends meet. Seven widows with dependent children shared the proceeds of a rugby fundraiser in England played to honour the victims.

New Zealand culture prioritised “getting on with it”: returning to everyday life quickly and not discussing bereavement or mourning publicly. Many of those involved never spoke about what they saw, their experiences mysterious even to close relatives. Men in

particular were expected to deal with their emotions without assistance.

Ted was the only survivor among passengers who travelled from Masterton. His joyful reunion with his parents was tempered by his inability to explain to the Cockburns why John and Douglas were not with him, and he did not know what to say to relatives of the other victims either. But one person understood his grief: John and Douglas's 22-year-old sister Patricia.

“I kept on seeing Pat as she helped me through the rough patches, there were plenty of them,” Ted recalled in 2007, “and this led to my admiration and falling in love with Patricia”. They wed at St Matthew's Church, Masterton, on 16 April 1955. A year later, Pat gave birth to their first son, Douglas John Brett—my father. Ted died in 2008 aged 72, survived by Pat, three children, and three grandchildren.

Memory is a funny thing. Ted gave two interviews to relatives and wrote his own jottings about the disaster, and almost every aspect that can be cross-checked with other sources matches up. He did, though, consistently misremember one detail: in all three accounts, he describes inclement weather: “it was pouring with rain and it appeared to be set in”, obscuring any view of Ruapehu.

Perhaps escaping from a lahar left a sense that the entire world was wet—because, as the fourth page of the report of the board of inquiry says, “The night was clear and the weather fine.” It was a warm summer evening, one nobody could have expected would leave a scar on the national conscience.





## Sources

I wrote this narrative principally from newspaper reports, the board of inquiry's report, and personal testimonies either in my personal collection or found within NZR files at Archives New Zealand—indeed, it was finding some of these last month that motivated me to write this piece. In places I also draw on an academic journal article I have written about the legacies of Tangiwai, which is currently under review and I will add a link when it is (hopefully!) accepted for publication.

The sources used most heavily above are:

- Archives New Zealand, AAAA 158/1/166/18 (witnessed written statement of William Inglis, 2 January 1954)
- Archives New Zealand, ADQD 300/1607/35 (a vast file that contains transcript of Trevor Wildbore's account via telephone, 25 December 1953, and Robert Somerville's signed written statement, 26 December 1953)
- Archives New Zealand, ADQD 300/1607/S.2 (another vast file, containing Joan Karam's account, written 1954)
- Press (Christchurch), 26 December 1953, 8 (Cyril Ellis's first account to the media) and 30 January 1954, 8 (report of royal honours)
- Mail (Adelaide), 26 December 1953, 1–2 (eyewitness journalist)
- Bruce Mason, "Some Impressions of Events on Christmas Eve, 1953", Treeline no.36, January 1984 (NZ Forest Service newsletter's 30th anniversary article written from interviews with the foresters who participated in the rescue)
- Tangiwai Railway Disaster: Report of Board of Inquiry (Wellington: Government Printer, 1954)
- Ted Brett, "Ted's Jottings", c.2007, and transcripts of two interviews—one c.1991 with Annie Collins and one from 20 January 2008 with André Brett (me)—all held in my personal collection

There are some conflicting details and many gaps to fill. Arthur Dewar Bell was, as noted above, one of the four men to receive official honours for bravery but none of my sources mention him and searches on Papers Past

and Trove bring up little more than reports of him being awarded the British Empire Medal. The Press, 30 January 1954, 8, states that Bell's wife raised the alarm at the forestry camp in Karioi, but the testimonies of Somerville and Wildbore, and the account in Treeline, all concur that it was those two men who did so.

Interestingly, Somerville and Wildbore both claim the car in which they travelled together was their own. I have not ascertained whose it actually was. I am also unsure of the spelling of the last name of the man they met from another vehicle—in the transcript of Wildbore, he is "Alan Stewart", while the signed statement from Somerville says "Alan Stuart". I chose the latter spelling as Wildbore's account is from a telephone call and the person who transcribed it misspelt other last names, e.g. "Wilddore" and "Summerville". Relatedly, Ted consistently recalled staying with the "Condor" family of Karioi but an NZR document in ADQD 300/1607/35 refers to him and other survivors staying at "Conger's store at Karioi". I went with Grandpa's version for this piece, as the NZR document has some errors—it is the one screenshotted above with "T. Brent" corrected by hand.

Anyone with any connection to the disaster is more than welcome to email me at [andre.brett@curtin.edu.au](mailto:andre.brett@curtin.edu.au), especially if you would like to share information for potential use in future tributes. I anticipate writing about this disaster for years to come, and I believe all of us with connections to Tangiwai will be enriched through sharing memories and understanding what happened on that most horrendous Christmas Eve.

***You can follow André on X (formerly Twitter) at [x.com/DrDreHistorian](https://x.com/DrDreHistorian)***



