

INCIDENTS AT CASUARINA SANDS

by Philip Castle

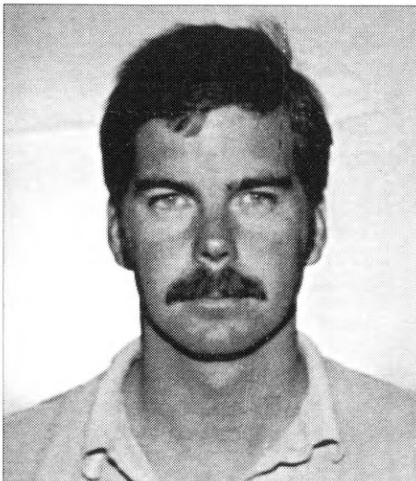
THE recent announcement of a bravery award to two Canberra men for an unsuccessful attempt to rescue a boy from the flooded Murrumbidgee River at Casuarina Sands, about 20 kilometres from Canberra, has aroused some memories of an earlier drowning incident there almost exactly 20 years earlier.

Senior Constable Tony Lewis of the ACT Region's rescue squad was last month awarded the Silver Medal from the Royal Humane Society of Australasia for his part in the attempted rescue of Brandon McIlroy, 13, of Downer, on 22 November last year. A member of the public who helped in the attempted rescue, Mr Colin Trinder, of Dickson, ACT, has been awarded the Society's certificate of commendation. Both awards were announced by the Australian Federal Police Commissioner, Major General Ronald Grey, who is the honorary secretary for the Society in the ACT. A special presentation ceremony will be held later this year.

Brandon McIlroy had become stranded mid-stream in the flooded Murrumbidgee River after he and a 33-year-old woman companion had used a dinghy to go over a weir. The dinghy had been caught in a back-pressure wave just below the weir. The woman had been thrown out of the dinghy and reached safety.

The rescue squad was told of the incident at about 4.25pm and reached the scene about 10 minutes later. Senior Constable Lewis was in charge. A separate rescue of an injured man was already being completed at another beach about eight kilometres upstream by another rescue team led by Senior Constable

Senior Constable Tony Lewis



Peter Bright. They also attended Casuarina Sands not long afterwards.

When Senior Constable Lewis arrived he attached a line to himself and attempted to reach the stranded boy from below the weir. The boy was being held by the current about 30 metres from the shore. He did have a life jacket and when he moved about fell a number of times from the dinghy. Senior Constable Lewis was only able to get to within about four metres from the boy before being washed downstream by the strong current.

Second Attempt

A second attempt was made to reach the boy when Senior Constable Lewis, attached to a line, entered the river upstream. He planned to float over the weir and grab the boy as he went past. They would then be pulled to safety. When Senior Constable Lewis got to within about three metres of the weir he was suddenly forced towards the near bank and went over the weir wall about four metres from the boy. Witnesses at the scene said that Senior Constable Lewis disappeared underwater for about a minute.

Log

Mr Colin Trinder, who was on a log about 25 metres downstream from the dinghy, was waiting in case the boy fell from it and he would attempt to rescue him before he slipped by. He had seen what Senior Constable Lewis had attempted to do but had lost sight of him. After about a minute he saw his head come up in the pressure wave and saw him make an attempt to move towards the dinghy. He then lost sight of him again. He next saw him in the water about 15 metres away with his face underwater. He called out to him and saw Senior Constable Lewis briefly raise his head partially before going under again.

When Mr Trinder saw that Senior Constable Lewis was in trouble he jumped into the river and took hold of him dragging him to about four metres from the bank where he and other police and members of the public pulled him from the water.

Dinghy deflated

Efforts to continue to rescue the boy were directed by Senior Constable Peter Bright of the rescue unit. Another officer made four attempts to reach the boy but

was unable to get any closer than about ten metres.

The dinghy soon deflated and the boy disappeared. His body was recovered downstream two days later.

Senior Constable Lewis received bruising to his kidneys and a fractured rib, and suffered from hypothermia. He was unconscious when he was removed from the river and was admitted to hospital for four days.

Commissioner Grey said Senior Constable Lewis was aware of the extreme risks but he was prepared to ignore these to try to reach the boy. Mr Trinder's timely rescue of Senior Constable Lewis most likely saved his life. At the time he saw him floating the safety line had become ineffective and he was either unconscious or semi-conscious.

The Commissioner praised the efforts of all those involved in the rescue attempts and expressed sympathy that sadly on this occasion the boy had not been rescued. It was heartening that members of the public had come so readily to the assistance of the police at the time.

Triple drowning

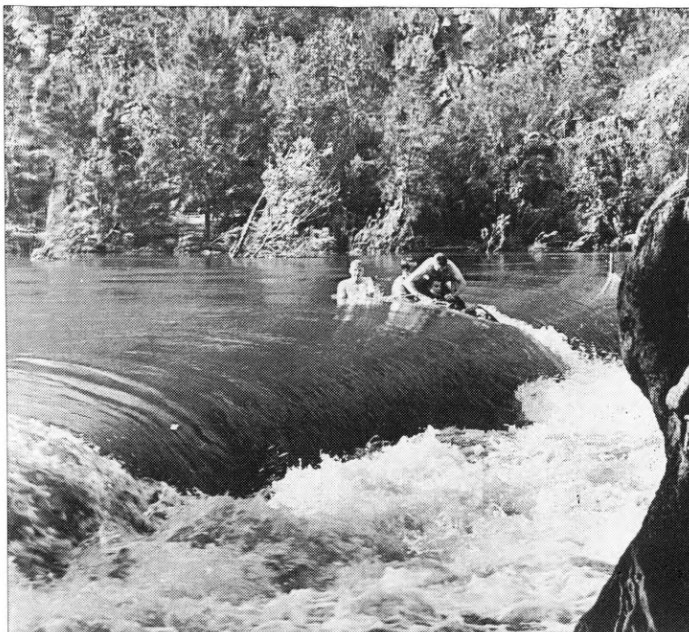
The latest tragedy at Casuarina Sands revived memories of an earlier triple drowning at exactly the same section of the flooded river below the weir about 20 years ago on 19 November 1966. Three of the four former ACT Police officers directly involved are with the AFP.

It was also a Saturday and mid-afternoon when three youths got into difficulties near the weir.

A report in *The Canberra Times* said that a witness, Miss Tina Volani, said, 'A girl friend and I saw a group of fellows near the weir. We thought they were just fooling around, but then we saw three heads in the water, going up and down. Then a log came down over the weir. I think it might have hit one of them. There were quite a few people trying to help them. My girl friend is a swimming instructress so we ran down to the water to help.'

'A man moved out into the river with a float. They got one boy on it and brought him to shore. Then my friend and I and three other people began giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. By this time I couldn't see the others.'

The youth pulled from the river was dead on arrival at the then Canberra Community Hospital. He was John



The scene at the weir on the Murrumbidgee River in 1966. Gary Symonds, John Franklin and Ray Sweeney attend to George Harris when he got into difficulties.



L to R: Gary Symonds, George Harris and Arthur Allmond at the Murrumbidgee bank. The fourth man is not identified.

Lahey, 17, of O'Connor. It was about this time when the police arrived, led by Constable George Harris, now an Inspector at Training in Barton, who was at that time a diver.

As George Harris now recalls it he went into the flooded river after donning a wet suit to search for the two missing youths. He attached a line to a staunchion on the top of the weir and holding onto it, went over. The strong current got inside the bottoms of his wet suit and began to drag him under. He discarded some of his equipment. He pulled himself up on the rope back to the staunchion.

Constable Ray Sweeney, now a Detective Inspector in the National Crime Investigation Branch, was based at the Water Police and was being visited by an off-duty colleague — Constable Gary Symonds, now Detective Inspector with the Bureau of Criminal Intelligence. Both went to Casuarina Sands.

Gary Symonds recalls that he and Ray had seen that George was in trouble. Constable John Franklin, now retired on the north NSW coast, had already gone out to help George Harris. Ray Sweeney then swam out and the three were together at the top of the weir clutching the staunchion. By this time George had become considerably fatigued as he had gone under water a number of times.

It was about this time that Ray Sweeney went over the weir and thought he was a 'goner'. Because of the strong current, a pressure wave had been created below the weir which was later thought to have caused the death of the three youths. Ray almost ended up in

that except that he was able to grab a rope attached to the staunchion.

'I don't know how I did it but I managed to hang on and clamber back over the others to the top of the weir,' Ray Sweeney said recently. 'I think our finger marks would still be embedded on that post. We all wondered whether we were going to get out alive.'

The Police Officers on shore led by Detective Sergeant Arthur Allmond, who had taken his shirt off but was knee deep in water with his shoes and pants still on said, 'I'm not going to let any of my boys drown.'

Gary Symonds volunteered to take a rope out to pull them ashore. He was a little coy about stripping off his pants until Sergeant Allmond asked him if he had underpants on: 'Well if you've got underpants on, get your trousers off and get in there,' were his instructions as he now recalls it. He swam out to the group with the rope fed out from the shore held by other police officers and anchored around Arthur Allmond's waist.

When the rope was attached to George Harris, both he and Gary Symonds came ashore. George recalls at that stage he was almost unconscious and suffering from hypothermia. He was taken to hospital where he stayed for two days.

Last in

Gary Symonds went out again and the others were also able to use the rope to get to shore. Gary was the last to come in with the rope and said those ashore were so keen to get him in quickly that he was virtually pulled along the river bottom all the way.

'The bodies of the other two youths

were found a few days later downstream,' Gary said. 'The current was bloody strong and for anyone to swim there with that current made it extremely dangerous and were taking a serious risk. I was 25 then and pretty fit. We all felt wrecked. We all went home and when we realised what we had done, we got very drunk. Our wives got into us for getting so drunk that night.'

Police continued to search the river and found the bodies of Frank Bree, 18, of Red Hill and Mark Dwyer, 15, of Deakin. Before the tragedy of the three youths earlier that afternoon a girl, Linda Wyllie, 9, of Curtin, had been pulled from the swollen river and taken to hospital. During the search for the bodies coordinated by Superintendent Jack McSpeerin, sweeps of the river were made. The police were hampered by the strong currents and the cold water. They were kept secured by ropes. During the search the police were again called to successfully rescue two people who had been swept over the weir.

Modifications

Since the last tragedy of Brandon McIlroy and the death about six weeks later nearby when a man was killed instantly when he dived into some muddy water and struck a submerged tree, a number of signs have been erected near the popular swimming area. Following the Coroner's findings into the death of Brandon McIlroy, a number of modifications are presently being planned for the weir to reduce the pressure wave effect for anyone unfortunate enough to go over the top. A warning boom has been again placed upstream from the weir. ●