

# Tasman Bridge disaster: 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial service

## Introduction

The collision of the vessel *ss Lake Illawarra* with Tasman Bridge on 5 January 1975 had a major impact on the lives of the people of southern Tasmania. The event had a number of unique characteristics and occurred at a time when the effects of disasters on communities were less well understood. Assistance to the community in this regard was thus limited.

An approach to the Tasmanian State Government by a local Lions Club led to a memorial service to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster. This paper provides some background to the building of the Tasman Bridge and the disaster, discusses its effects on the community and describes the memorial service. It shows that effects of disasters can remain after extended periods and a memorial service after 25 years can assist members of the community.

## History of Tasman Bridge

Hobart is divided by the Derwent River. Non-indigenous settlement of Hobart occurred in 1804, initially on the eastern shore but transferring shortly afterwards to Sullivans Cove on the other side of the river due mainly to a lack of fresh water. As early as 1816, a ferry took passengers across the river north of Hobart at Austins Ferry. A bridge at Bridgewater, some 20km north of Hobart, was opened on 30 April 1849. Ferry services across the Derwent close to Hobart commenced in the 1850's.

While a bridge of boats was proposed for a crossing close to Hobart in 1832, the first investigation of possible bridge crossings was not commissioned until 1913. Costs of all the options were however high and it was recommended that a ferry would meet traffic requirements for many years.

In 1936, a proposal for a floating arch bridge was submitted to the Premier by the Director of Public Works for consideration. The floating arch was proposed to eliminate deep and expensive foundations. The proposal was accepted and construction of the bridge commenced in 1938. It was opened to traffic on 22 December 1943. A lift span was provided to allow vessels to travel up-

by Rod McGee, Manager Asset Strategies, Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources, Tasmania and Lynn Young, State Recovery Coordinator, Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania

stream. Population growth on the eastern shore had been slow to that time, but accelerated after the opening of the bridge generating increasing traffic demand. *Figure 1* shows population on the eastern shore and cross river vehicular traffic and highlights the rapid

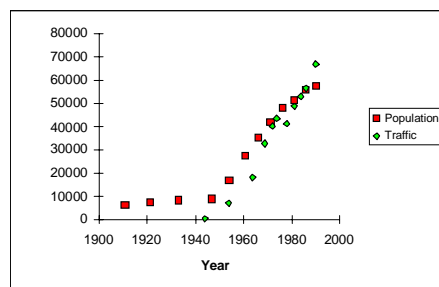


Figure 1 – Eastern shore population and cross river traffic

growth in both after the opening of the bridge.

The bridge however suffered storm and corrosion damage and increasing traffic congestion, especially during the operation of the lift span. As a result, consultants were commissioned in 1956 to investigate options for a bridge to replace the floating arch. A number of bridge and tunnel options were considered during the preliminary design stage and review by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works. Navigation issues, including the possibility of ship collision, were assessed comprehensively. While a suspension bridge was considered the best option, its high cost and the inability of the State to finance it meant that a viaduct structure was adopted.

Construction of Tasman Bridge commenced in May 1960. The bridge was opened to 2 lanes of traffic on 18 August 1964, with all 4 lanes becoming operational on 23 December 1964. The bridge was officially opened by HRH The Duke of Gloucester on 29 March 1965.

## Tasman Bridge Disaster

At 9.27pm on Sunday 5 January 1975, the bulk ore carrier *ss Lake Illawarra* struck



Figure 2 –Tasman Bridge during construction and floating arch bridge

Tasman Bridge resulting in the collapse of 3 spans, the sinking of the vessel and the loss of 12 lives. Seven of those were crewmen, the other five people were travelling in four cars.

A large number of organisations and members of the public were involved in the response to the event. Organisations included Tasmania Police, Tasmanian Ambulance Service, Hobart Fire Brigade, Royal Hobart Hospital, Civil Defence, Hobart Tug Company, Marine Board of Hobart, Public Works Department, Transport Commission, Hydro-Electric Commission, Postmaster-General's Department, Hobart Regional Water Board, Salvation Army and the Defence Forces.

The *Mercury* newspaper on the following morning said that: 'Few could comprehend the meaning of the disaster, the lives lost, the destruction of both the *Lake Illawarra* and the bridge itself and the huge traffic problems which will face Hobart for months, perhaps years to come'.

For people travelling from the eastern shore, the immediate effect was that what had been a 10 to 15 minute trip became a 2 hour journey in each direction. The nearest alternative road connection was via Bridgewater over mainly unsealed roads for a distance of approximately 50 kilometres. Ferries that had been carrying tourists on the Derwent started commuter operations on the following morning. The ferry fleet was expanded rapidly and shore facilities upgraded and built to cater for people wishing to cross the river.

Prior to the disaster, the eastern shore was almost exclusively a dormitory suburb with a large labour force that had to cross the water every day to workplaces on the western shore. The major tertiary institutions, private schools and hospitals were also on the western shore. There had been no decentralisation of government administration and there was a lack of eastern shore offices of insurance companies, banks, solicitors, doctors, dentists and many other businesses. Cultural activities were largely based on the western shore; these included the theatre, halls, the museum and art gallery, cinemas, restaurants, meeting places, lecture theatres and the botanical gardens.

There was a diverse range of effects on the community from the disaster. These included psychological effects arising from anger, uncertainty, inconvenience and dissatisfaction. Fatigue and reduced family contact were a consequence of the additional travel demands. Alcohol sales on the ferries were substantial, placing



Figure 3 – Tasman Bridge, 6 January 1975

additional demands on relationships. Social contact was reduced. Many with part-time jobs, particularly women, gave up work because of the cost and time involved in travelling. Overtime was also in many cases curtailed. Phobias associated with water, ships and crowds became apparent in some. The difficulties were exacerbated by the lack of hospital services and specialists on the eastern shore. Pregnant women in particular felt very insecure. A number of businesses closed. Much of the frustration and anger was directed towards the transport services.

The Tasman Bridge disaster was in many respects unique. Because it occurred on a Sunday evening shortly after Christmas, there was relatively little traffic on the bridge. If the event had occurred during a weekday after schools had resumed and businesses had returned to work, the death toll could have been far higher. Except for those who lost their lives or were on the ship, no personal possessions were destroyed and there was nothing that the community could do to help clearing debris or provide support for rescue operations, clothing, shelter, aid or restoration of the damage as it had done after the 1960 floods or the 1967 bushfires in southern Tasmania. Visible progress on restoration of the bridge was slow because of the need for extensive underwater surveys of debris and the time required for design of the rebuilding. The role of Salvation Army and Red Cross, although geared to disasters, was limited to support for the search and rescue

teams. The effect on the hospitals and police was small. The ferry queues did however provide some assistance by providing a forum where people had much in common and could vent their frustration.

A Tasman Bridge Restoration Commission was established to oversee the rebuilding of the Tasman Bridge, which was widened to 5 traffic lanes and reopened in October 1977.

The eastern shore police presence and medical services were upgraded. Branch offices of several government agencies were also established. The increased Government presence on the eastern shore remains.

Flexitime was introduced to reduce peak transport demands, and this also remains.

The disaster stimulated development in Kingborough, a municipality south of Hobart on the western shore, because of the reduced travel times for western shore workers compared to the eastern shore.

The eastern shore became a more self-contained community, with a higher level of employment and improved services and amenities, than it had been prior to the disaster. The previous imbalance between facilities and employment opportunities between the two shores was to a high degree redressed as a result of the disaster. Many roads were upgraded and the Bowen Bridge subsequently built to provide an alternative crossing.

Bob Clifford was successfully operating the Sullivans Cove Ferry Company as a ferry and charter operator and a boat

builder prior to 1975. The disaster was the catalyst which totally changed the focus of the company and was a significant influence on its growth. As Incat, the company is now an established exporter of high speed catamarans and a major Tasmanian employer.

### Memorial Service

The Clarence Lions Club, from Hobart's eastern shore, proposed to the Minister for Infrastructure, Energy and Resources in January 1999 that a memorial to the Tasman Bridge disaster be erected. As a result of the proposal, a meeting of representatives of organisations and individuals that may have had an interest in the proposal was convened. The meeting resolved that a service, which included the unveiling of a memorial, would be appropriate and a planning committee was established comprising representatives of:

- Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources as owner of the bridge (chair)
- Department of Health and Human Services because of their roles in community health and recovery
- Clarence and Hobart City Councils representing the people of greater Hobart
- Tasmania Police, Tasmanian Ambulance Service, Tasmania Fire Service and State Emergency Service because of their roles in emergency management
- Department of Premier and Cabinet for matters of protocol
- Hobart Ports Corporation as managers of river usage
- Clarence Lions Club to represent community groups
- Tasmanian Council of Churches for their role in the spiritual aspects of a service
- Hon Bruce Goodluck MHR who was Warden of Clarence municipality at the time of the disaster and as a community representative.

It was recognised that music would be an important and integral part of a commemorative service and a sub-committee was established to develop that part of the program. The sub-committee comprised representatives of the pipe bands, concert bands and choirs invited to participate. The music program comprised recognisable tunes that were consistent with the nature of the commemoration. It also included the playing of a popular tune, 'The Ferry Boat Shuffle', which was written shortly after the disaster and described the carrying of commuters across the Derwent River and,

with 'Highland Cathedral', provided a transition from the one hour music program for people arriving for the service itself.

The site selected for the service was beneath the eastern approaches to the bridge because of its proximity to the site of the impact, and its ability to accommodate the number of people likely to attend a service, albeit with some tidying of the area. It was also close to the location selected for the memorial plaque, being a large bridge pylon adjacent to the water's edge.

The Governor and Premier of Tasmania were invited to participate in the service and readily accepted.

The planning committee identified the desirability of placing a plaque near to the site of the collision, both for commemoration and for interpretation by visitors to the area. Careful consideration was given to the wording on the plaque to recognise the passage of time since the disaster and the likely inability to contact many of the families of the deceased to discuss the proposal. Significant input was provided by attendees at a disaster recovery course at the Australian Emergency Management Institute. A symbol was developed to illustrate the bridge with the collapsed spans. The layout of the plaque is shown in *Figure 4*. A commemorative brochure outlining the history of the bridge, the disaster and its effects on the Hobart community was prepared for and distributed at the service.

Awareness of the service was raised through a series of press releases over a period of about six months prior to the

service and display advertisements during the preceding three weeks. The service was strongly supported by both print and electronic media. The chair of the planning committee gave a series of interviews in the preceding week. The media also gave prominence to its extensive coverage of the service.

The service was developed to have a number of symbolic aspects, including:

- being held beneath the eastern approaches to the bridge where many of the people involved in the early response were located
- choirs and bands comprised youths and adults from both sides of the Derwent River, representing the nature of the Hobart community
- prayers were said by leaders of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Uniting, Salvation Army, Jewish and Islamic religions representing the spiritual diversity of the community
- extinguishing the lights on the eastern half of the bridge, to a lone piper playing a lament at the time of impact, recreated its appearance after the collision
- a single wreath was laid by a serving police officer from the police vessel *Vigilant* during a period of silence to represent those who had assisted in the response to the disaster, especially from the emergency services; both the officer and the boat were involved in the actual response.

Estimated attendance at the service exceeded 1000 and included families of some of those who died or were most affected by the disaster, senior representatives of government and organisations that had been involved in response

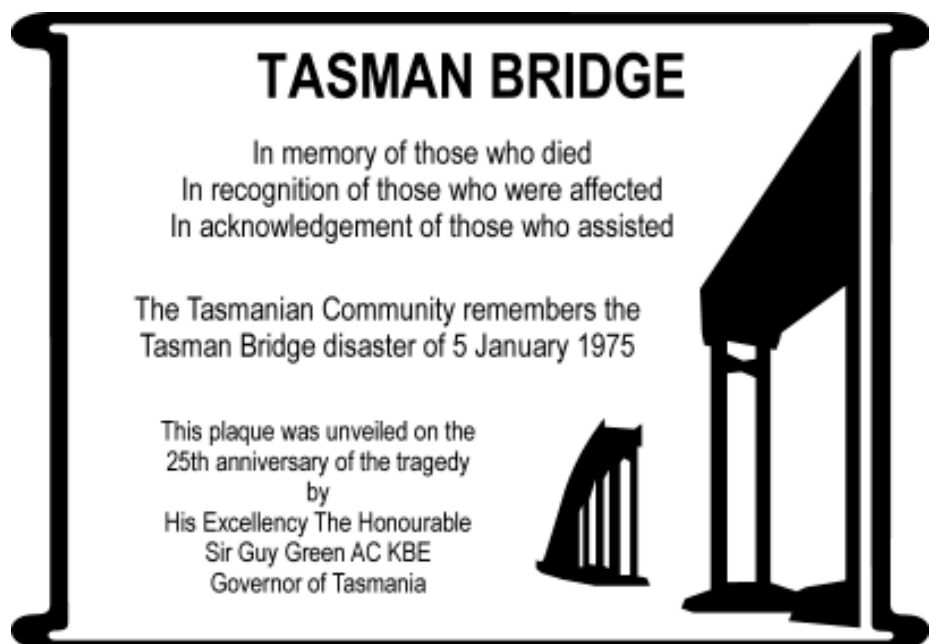


Figure 4 – Commemorative plaque



and recovery and members of the public.

In his address the Premier said that the disaster was clearly remembered by many Tasmanians. He noted that some were still struggling with the memories of its effects, and commended the resilience of the community in coping with the disaster. The Governor described the pain and loss of loved ones and the social and economic disruption. He paid tribute to the efforts of emergency services personnel in responding to the disaster and the way in which the State managed to the challenges created by the collision. He said that the eastern shore had emerged more self-sufficient in the wake of the tragedy and that Tasmanians were now stronger, more self-reliant and mature.

### Community recovery aspects

The collision occurred at a time when the psychological effects of disasters on communities were less well understood. A service, prepared and led by members of the Tasmanian Council of Churches, to commemorate the tragedy of the bridge disaster, to celebrate the rebuilding of the spans and to rejoice in the possibilities which the reopening offered to greater Hobart was held on the occasion of the reopening on Saturday 8 October 1977. The reopening itself was however low key and other assistance to the community was limited. As noted previously, opportunities for the community to be involved in the response to the disaster and the physical restoration of infrastructure were minimal because of the nature of the event. It is likely that this lack of contribution contributed to the enduring nature of the effects of the disaster on a number of individuals.

Knowledge and practice regarding community recovery has developed significantly over the past 25 years since the Tasman Bridge tragedy. Eyre (1999) describes the psychological and social importance of post-disaster rituals associated with anniversaries of disasters, both in the short and long term, and the need to take account of the range of social, religious and political issues involved in planning for such commemorations.

It is of value for recovery agencies to examine the efforts made at the time of the commemorative service. The planning committee included a number of members with backgrounds in emergency management and community recovery and was able to draw on their training, expertise and involvement in the recovery aspects of the Port Arthur tragedy in the planning of the service.

A set of principles relating to com-

Pipe Bands	Cullen Bay, Mairi's Wedding, Rowan Tree, Steam Boat Song, Cock of the North, Bonnie Dundee, Green Hills of Tyrol, When the Battle's O'er, Sweet Maid of Glendaruel, 1976 Police Tattoo
Pipe and Concert Bands	Scotland the Brave, Skye Boat Song
Concert Bands and Choirs	Maritime Medley, Strike Up the Band, Anchors Aweigh, Andrew Lloyd Webber: A Concert Celebration, Songs that Made Australia, El Shadah, I am Australian
Recording	Ferry Boat Shuffle
Pipe and Concert Bands	Highland Cathedral
Concert Bands and Choirs	Crimond
Premier of Tasmania	Address
Church leaders	Prayers
Concert Bands and Choirs	Abide with Me
Lone piper, lights extinguished on eastern half of bridge	Sleep Dearie Sleep
Police Vessel Vigilant	Silence, wreath laying
Governor of Tasmania	Address, unveiling of plaque
Concert and Pipe Bands, Choirs	Amazing Grace
Pipe Bands	Auld Lang Syne, Will Ye Nae Come Back Again, We're No Awa' Tae Bide Awa'

Table 1 – Memorial Service Program



Figure 5 – Estimated attendance at the service exceeded 1000 and included families of some of those who died or were most affected by the disaster

munity and personal support services has been endorsed by the Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Security Administrators (SCCSISA) and commended by the National Emergency Management Committee. The principles advise that:

Community and personal support services are most effective when they:

- are provided in a coordinated, timely and culturally appropriate manner
- are available for all people affected by the disaster including individuals, families, communities, groups/organisations, and emergency service, recovery workers and volunteers

- include the affected community in their development and management
- facilitate sharing of information between agencies as an integral part of the service delivery
- recognise that people will require accurate and current information about the situation and the services available
- are integrated with all other recovery services, particularly with regard to financial assistance
- provide assistance and resources to create, enhance and support community infrastructures
- recognise that cultural and spiritual

symbols and rituals provide an important dimension to the recovery process, and

- utilise personnel with appropriate capacities, personal skills and an awareness of the full range of services available.

The initial impetus from the local Lions Club, and their subsequent membership on the planning committee ensured solid and informed community representation. It facilitated the establishment of dialogue with representatives of the community which was further enhanced by representation from local government. The planning committee met on a regular basis over a period of approximately 12 months and a coordinated response, with a set of common and stated goals, was achieved.

That the committee had such broad representation from community and church groups, and all levels of government from the Premier's Department to Emergency Services highlighted the range of resources which are deployed, and thus need to be acknowledged, in the event of a disaster.

The fact that until 2000 no formal closure ceremony had taken place at the site marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an appropriate time with a large proportion of the Hobart population remembering well the immediate and longer term impact of the tragedy. Representatives from a range of church groups and service organisations were involved in an attempt to deliver a culturally appropriate service.

Direct contact was made with as many of the families that may have been most affected by the disaster as could be located prior to the commencement of publicity so that they would be aware of the background to and nature of the service. With the passage of time and the spread of residential addresses for the ship's crew, this was however difficult. While the majority of those contacted were supportive of the commemoration, others indicated that events in their lives had enabled them to move on.

The inclusion of a contact telephone number in advertising for the service enabled a number of people to tell their story or of the involvement of others in response to the disaster; these stories had mostly been untold for 25 years. Awareness of the service was assisted by the support and interest of the media.

The service itself was described as emotional by the media, whose interviews included families of some of the deceased, one of the crewmen from the *Lake Illawarra*, and Frank and Sylvia

Manley. Those interviewed described the beneficial nature of the commemoration, with one saying it was the service that we didn't have at the time. A number of those attending expressed similar sentiments privately to members of the planning committee with as much said as unsaid.

Frank and Sylvia Manley are two people who remembered the disaster vividly. Their vehicle was one of the two that were left with their front wheels over the edge of the gap. They still own the green GTS Monaro that featured in many reports of the event.

The Manleys participated in a number of interviews for media reports on the anniversary and the commemoration. *The Mercury* reported Mrs Manley as having said that "sometimes it's okay to talk about it, other days it's not" and that 'grief takes a lot to get over, you never get over it'. *The Examiner* noted that Mrs Ingrid Harrison, who had been one of their reporters at the time, was still haunted by the night of the disaster each time she drives over the bridge.

A reunion for a substantial proportion of the crews of the ferries that maintained cross river links until the bridge was rebuilt was held on one of those ferries, the *Cartela*. It was one of a number of boats that moored near the bridge during the service. While unplanned, the sounding of its horn at the end of the silence and the rafting together of a number of the boats added further symbolism to the service.

The presence of the crews on one of the ferries used during the disaster in close proximity to the service was an appropriate commemoration for those people because of their particular role.

Spiritual symbols and rituals are an important dimension to the recovery process. The presence of survivors, relatives of those who lost their lives in the tragedy, dignitaries, the evocative playing of the lone piper, the extinguishing of lights on the bridge and the laying of the single wreath provided an air of solemnity appropriate to the occasion. Whilst the growth of the Eastern Shore as a direct result of the tragedy provided a positive side to the event, it appeared that, in a general community sense, there had been limited opportunities for the mourning of those who had passed away and were otherwise affected. The goal of the commemorative service was to pay those long overdue respects.

The attendance at the service, the telling of stories, the emotion of the service and the expressing of sentiments highlighted the enduring nature of the effects of

disasters on communities and the beneficial effects of commemorations at appropriate times.

More recent disasters have provided opportunities closer to the event; the Tasman Bridge 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial service nevertheless demonstrated that there are benefits in providing some form of commemoration after a significant passage of time where these opportunities have not arisen earlier. It is considered that the service met those needs of the Hobart community and further services are not envisaged.

## Summary

The Tasman Bridge disaster on 5 January 1975 had a significant effect on the people of Hobart. While it resulted in major enhancements to physical infrastructure, it occurred at a time when the psychological effects of disasters on communities were less well understood and assistance to the community in this aspect of recovery was limited.

A proposal by a local service club to erect a memorial to the disaster was developed by a planning committee with broad community representation and expertise into a service to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster. The staging of the service highlighted the enduring effects of disasters on communities and the benefits of such commemorations after extended periods where earlier opportunities have not been provided.

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