



Locomotive B246 came to grief in 1910 on the Zig Zag Railway after a brake failure in the Blue Mountains. The driver and fireman managed to leap clear of the dangling engine and nobody was hurt. But 83 died and 213 were injured in the nation's worst rail accident (below) at Granville, Sydney, in 1977.

Pictures: NEWS LIMITED ARCHIVES

When public safety goes off the rails

Australia has a better rail safety record than most countries, although there have been horrific lapses. TROY LENNON reports

In 1910 locomotive B246 began its trip down the Zig Zag railway in the Blue Mountains. With a heavy load of 36 wagons, this sort of operation would have been nerve-racking at the best of times as the train made its precarious way down a steep gradient. But this time the crew had to contend with an extra problem — there were no brakes.

The train went careening across the elegant sandstone viaduct, made it around a bend and began heading toward a cliff. The driver and the fireman managed to jump clear before it broke through a buffer and a low wall and was left dangling over the edge of the cliff.

Photographs of the accident attest to how close the men came to death and to the miraculous lack of fatalities on one of Australia's most dangerous stretches of track. Accidents seem to be an inevitability where rail is concerned. Despite numerous commissions into safety standards — usually following fatal or near fatal accidents — the mishaps continue.

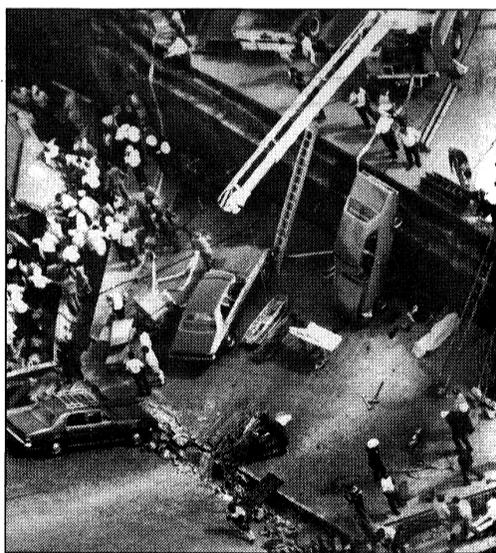
An interim report handed down by Justice Peter McInerney this week on the 2003 Waterfall train disaster shows that more deaths are likely to occur as long as the culture of running on time left safety a "secondary consideration".

By coincidence, McInerney's report was handed down on the 28th anniversary of the Granville train disaster, Australia's worst rail accident.

On Tuesday, January 18, 1977 the 6.09am commuter train, No. 108, left Mt Victoria station in the Blue Mountains heading for Sydney. It was due at Central at 8.32am.

The train built up to the maximum permissible speed of 80km/h after it left Parramatta station. As it approached Granville station it began to slow down because of track work.

Just before the Bold Street bridge, however, there was a section of track that had been worn by heavy rail traffic — which had been accidentally overlooked by maintenance staff. Some of the dog spikes, used to hold the track in place, were badly worn and as a result the train derailed. The driver slammed on the emergency brake but it was too late.



The derailed engine smashed through the bridge supports, dragging the first and second carriages with it. The engine also struck a steel mast, which carried overhead wires used to power the trains. This falling mast sliced through the first carriage, killing passengers instantly. The train came to a stop leaving sections of the third and fourth carriages under the bridge. The road bridge, which had cars driving over it, collapsed bringing 255 tonnes of concrete down on the carriages.

A desperate rescue effort swung into action but the bridge needed to be slowly broken into pieces in order to rescue some and retrieve the bodies of others. The last body was not recovered until the afternoon of the next day.

In all, 83 people were killed and 213 injured but many more passengers and their rescuers were scarred by the tragedy.

An inquiry cleared the driver of any wrongdoing blaming the accident on the condition of the track. It caused safety standards around the country to be tightened and more money to be poured into improving rail infrastructure.

There were also accusations of politicians forcing trains to race at unsafe speeds to keep people in marginal electorates in the mountains

happy, but these charges are difficult to substantiate. To this day many people return to the rebuilt bridge near Granville station on the anniversary to drop roses on the track in remembrance of those who died.

Prior to Granville, Australia's worst accident had been in April 1908 at Sunshine in Victoria. On April 20, 1908 an Easter Monday special from Bendigo, headed by two locomotives, came towards Sunshine Station.

Standing at the station was the Ballarat train, letting off passengers. Because of its length and the large number of holiday customers, the Ballarat train had spent more time than expected offloading passengers from its carriages.

Expecting a clear run, the Bendigo train passed by the signals and ran into the back of the stationary train destroying four carriages.

Most people were killed by the initial impact and flying splinters of wood but many more died as a result of the injuries after the train caught fire. Many people died before they could receive treatment of their injuries.

Locals sprang quickly into action to rescue those trapped in the wreckage and the fire brigade rapidly brought the fire under control.

The front half of the Ballarat train was used to transport some of the wounded away.

Forty four people were killed and 431 injured. The accident plunged Victoria into mourning, and flags were flown at half mast. An inquiry afterwards found that the driver of the Bendigo train, desperate to stay on schedule, had tried to beat the Ballarat train into the station.

Realising the other train was already there, he applied the brake but it failed. The brake was later found to be in perfect condition.

Those involved were suspended pending a coroner's inquiry, which blamed faulty signalling and driver error. The crash, like many others afterward, inspired new safety plans.

Statistically speaking, railways are one of the safest modes of transport. But history shows that when safety standards drop — because people are pushed to keep trains running on time, or to cut corners because of budgetary restraints — the room for human error will always be there.

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