

Brooklyn train smash left bodies strewn along rail line

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While victims' families, survivors and rescuers gathered this week to remember the rail tragedy that claimed 83 lives at Granville in January 1983, 72 years ago today it was the village of Brooklyn in mourning.

The peace of the idyllic riverside hamlet north of Sydney was shattered by a level crossing accident that killed 16 villagers.

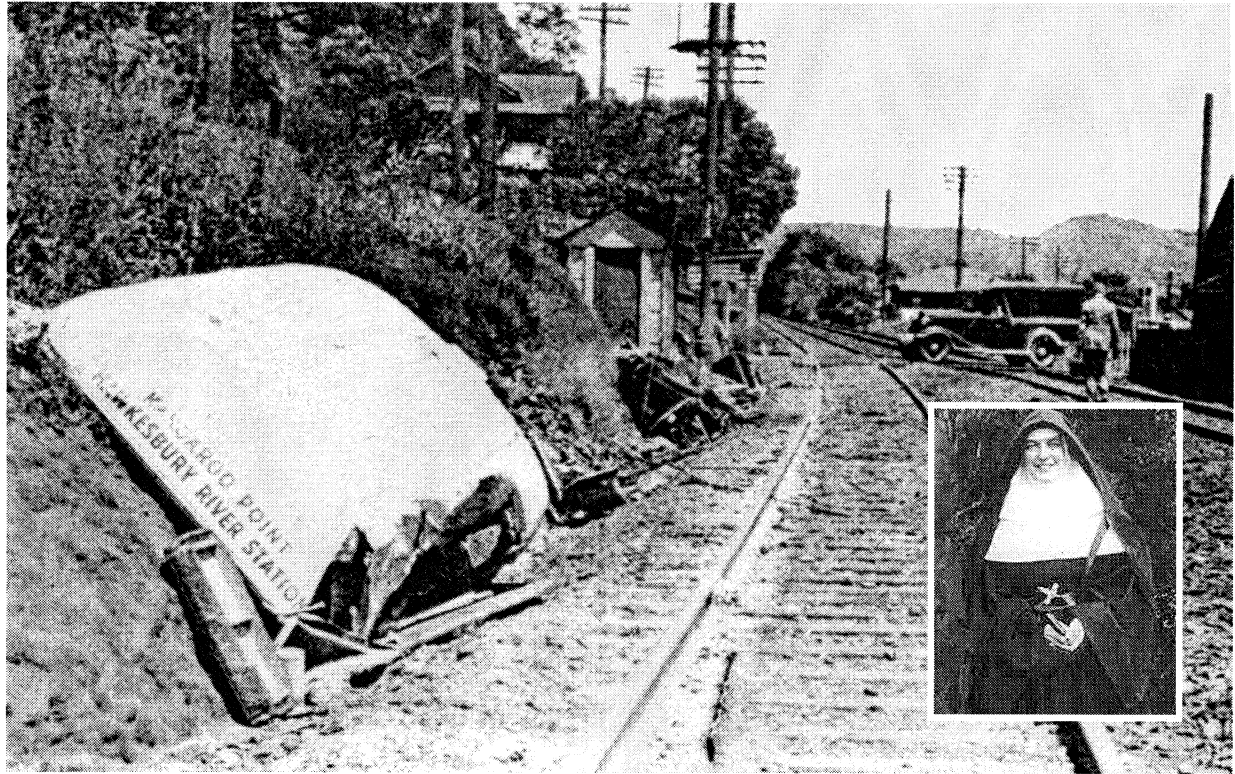
Among the dead were grandmother Gladys Italiano, her daughters Valerie, aged 14, Norma, 11, and her seven-year-old son David, whose father Raphael was critically injured.

Other victims included nuns Sister Mary Ephrem Nolan, 48, and Sister Mary Germaine Brennan, 43, of St Catherine's Orphanage on the Hawkesbury River at Brooklyn; June Darker, 12, and Vera Gauchi, 12, orphan students at the convent; Keith Cameron, 13, Walter Cox, 14, and bus driver John Callen.

All were on a bus travelling from Kangaroo Point to Brooklyn, which some boarded less than five minutes earlier. Most planned to catch the 9.30am train from Hawkesbury River station to Sydney. They perished when the bus crossed on to the main northern railway line in front of the Kempsey Mail, travelling at about 70km/h.

The bodies of 14 victims were found scattered in wreckage along 400m of track near the station. Cameron died that day at Hornsby Hospital, where David Italiano died the next day.

Horrific details of the crash, the third worst in NSW, published next day explained the crowded train carrying 300 passengers was travelling down an incline towards the level crossing at 9.23am on Thursday, January 20, 1944, when the bus pulled on to the tracks. The sound of the train engine hitting the bus was heard 1km away, drawing residents to the scene. Although train passengers were



The bus lies beside the tracks after the tragedy; (inset) Sister Mary Ephrem Nolan was one of the locals killed.

shaken none were injured. Train fireman Howard Moller described the look of horror on the faces of women and children in the bus as the train sped towards them. Train driver John (Jack) Sponberg jammed on the brakes when he saw the bus on the line as the train rounded the corner.

"I realised that there was no chance of stopping," he said.

Witnesses found the body of one child 400m away, while six bodies were recovered from under the train. Women tore up sheets for bandages while waiting for ambulances.

An inquest in April 1944 heard level crossing gatekeeper Peter Cecil Tolley, 20, had not fully closed both crossing gates to road traffic that morning.

Detective Martin McMahon explained Tolley said in a statement that he had opened the gates to let a bread truck cross about half an hour earlier, saying: "I had not closed the gate, and the bus driver thought the line was clear and drove on to it."

Tolley said he had heard a train approaching and jumped from his cabin to call out to tell the bus driver to stop. "But the bus continued," Tolley said. "The driver looked towards me, and the train struck the bus about the centre of the line. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again the train was passing me and I saw wreckage of the bus along the line."

Asked why he had not closed the gates, Tolley said, "There was a lot of traffic, and it is the most monotonous job on the railway. You do not realise how serious it is until something like this happens."

Tolley explained his only duty was to open and close the crossing gate for road traffic. But the inquest heard he had no automatic warning of approaching trains, no accurate timetable and no clock or watch. He was supposed to listen for whistles from approaching trains then take action. Tolley had left the gate furthest from the shops open and the other partly shut.

The bus driver stopped on the line

when he saw the other gate closed. Sponberg explained he sounded the warning whistle twice when he saw the bus about 80 yards from the crossing.

"My attention was concentrated on the signal. It showed 'clear'. As I took my eyes off the bus, the driver moved ahead and stopped dead. I noticed the gate was open as the driver came through. I couldn't say whether the other gate was open."

After a four-day hearing Tolley was committed for trial, charged with manslaughter for alleged negligence in failing to close the crossing gates, but in June 1944 the Crown decided not to proceed.

Brooklyn businesses closed for the Italiano family funeral on January 24, 1944, although Raphael and his grandson, Neil Ross, three, remained in a critical condition.

Tragedy struck just one month after Raphael's release from hospital when he was struck by a lorry as he crossed Parramatta Rd, Annandale, in May 1945. He was admitted to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and died the next day.

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