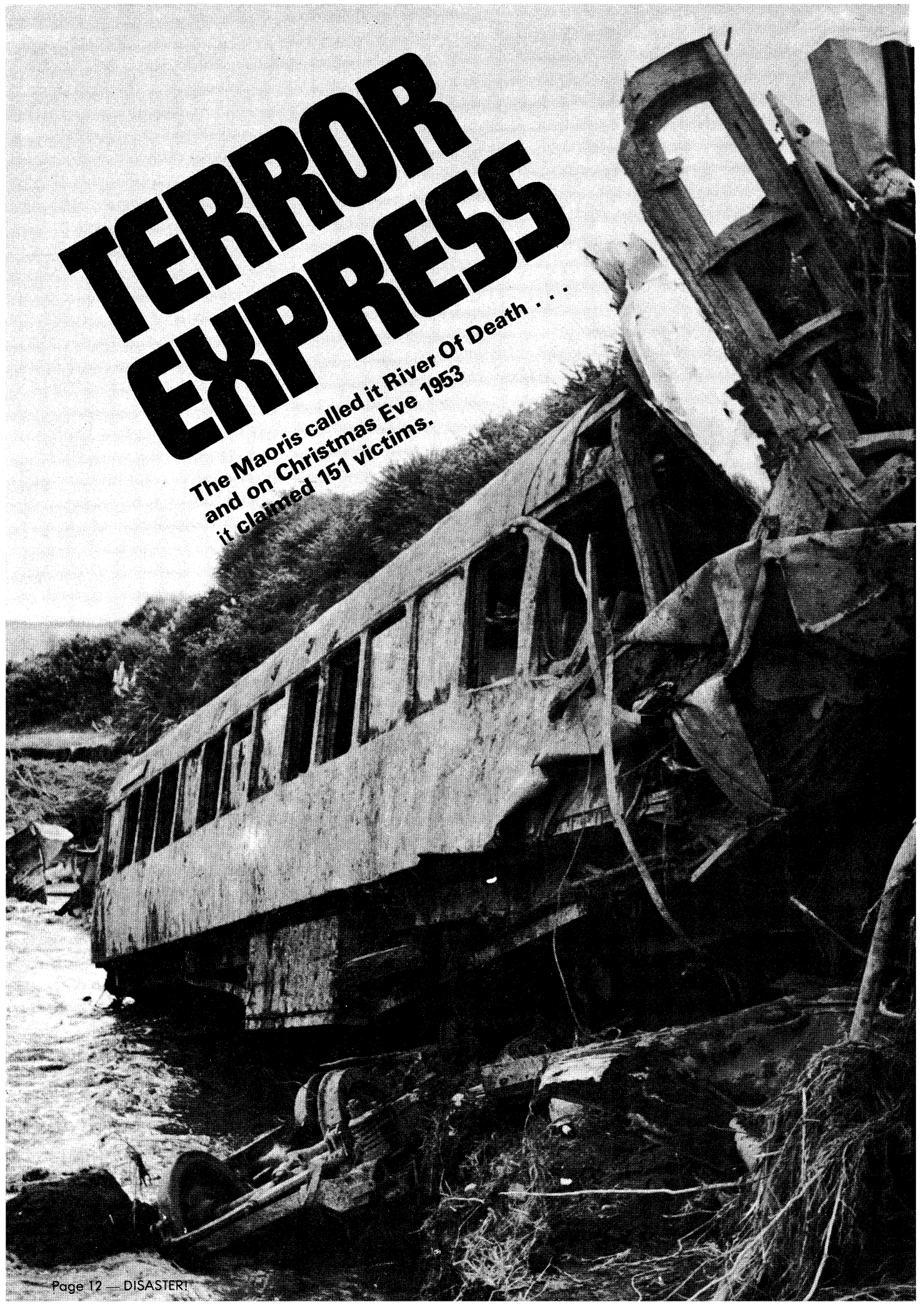


TERROR EXPRESS

The Maoris called it River Of Death . . . and on Christmas Eve 1953 it claimed 151 victims.

CYRIL ELLIS, a young postal clerk from Taihape, in New Zealand's North Island, glanced at his watch. It was 10 pm. He wanted to get home early, for in two hours it would be Christmas Day, 1953.

That was when Ellis heard the roar of angry waters coming from the Wangaehu River, not far from Tangiwai. He was astounded. There had been no rain, no reason for floods.

Ramming down the accelerator of his truck he raced up to the road bridge that spanned the river. It was not just flooding. The river was boiling and seething, driven to a frenzy by tremendous pressures.

Then Ellis saw the 50-year-old railway bridge. It was almost awash. Great boulders and chunks of ice crashed against its piers. He could see the bridge trembling under the massive assault.

Ellis looked southwards and saw a headlight. At first he thought it was another car, then he realised it was the light of an approaching train. It was about 1.5 km (one mile) away, but he guessed it was travelling at a good 100 km/h (60 miles an hour).

On board the brightly-lit express 285 passengers laughed and sang carols as the train sped down the steep grade from Waiouru towards Tangiwai bridge. They were making the trip from Wellington especially to see the Queen, whose visit promised to make this the gayest Christmas in New Zealand's history.

But they were wrong. Laughter was about to change to terror. Already the events were taking place outside.

Grabbing a torch from his truck, the young clerk raced down the line waving the beam as the distance between him and the train rapidly closed.

When the train was less than 50 metres away, Ellis leapt clear of the tracks and shouted at the top of his voice as the locomotive rushed past.

But the torch's beam was not seen, nor could the engine crew hear his voice, drowned by the shriek of steam, the thunder of steel wheels on steel rails and the surf-like roar of the Wangaehu River.

Seconds later the Wellington-Auckland express hurtled to its doom, taking 151 lives with it.

When Cyril Ellis realised his frantic signals had not been seen he could do nothing but stand frozen with horror and watch the express hurl itself on to the bridge's approaches.

For a fleeting moment he thought the locomotive might make it. If it did the lighter carriages would have a chance. But he hoped vainly, for when the engine was about three-quarters of the way across the bridge disappeared from under it.

Shocked, Ellis watched the train's death plunge. The engine went down with a bellowing splash, hitting the far bank. The tender and the first carriage went with it. The second carriage reared up, nose first, then dragged the next three cars into the seething flood.

The carriages rolled over and over through the swirling waters while passengers tried desperately to break windows. Others shrieked hopelessly, trapped and injured, until they found watery graves.

Ellis watched these carriages being rolled over like logs under the assaults of towering eight metre (25-foot) waves. And, above the awesome sounds of the waters, he heard the screams of the trapped passengers as they were hurled downstream.

Ellis saw the sixth carriage had stopped at a 45 degree angle, half its length projecting beyond the sheared-off rails of the bridge. He climbed in the back.

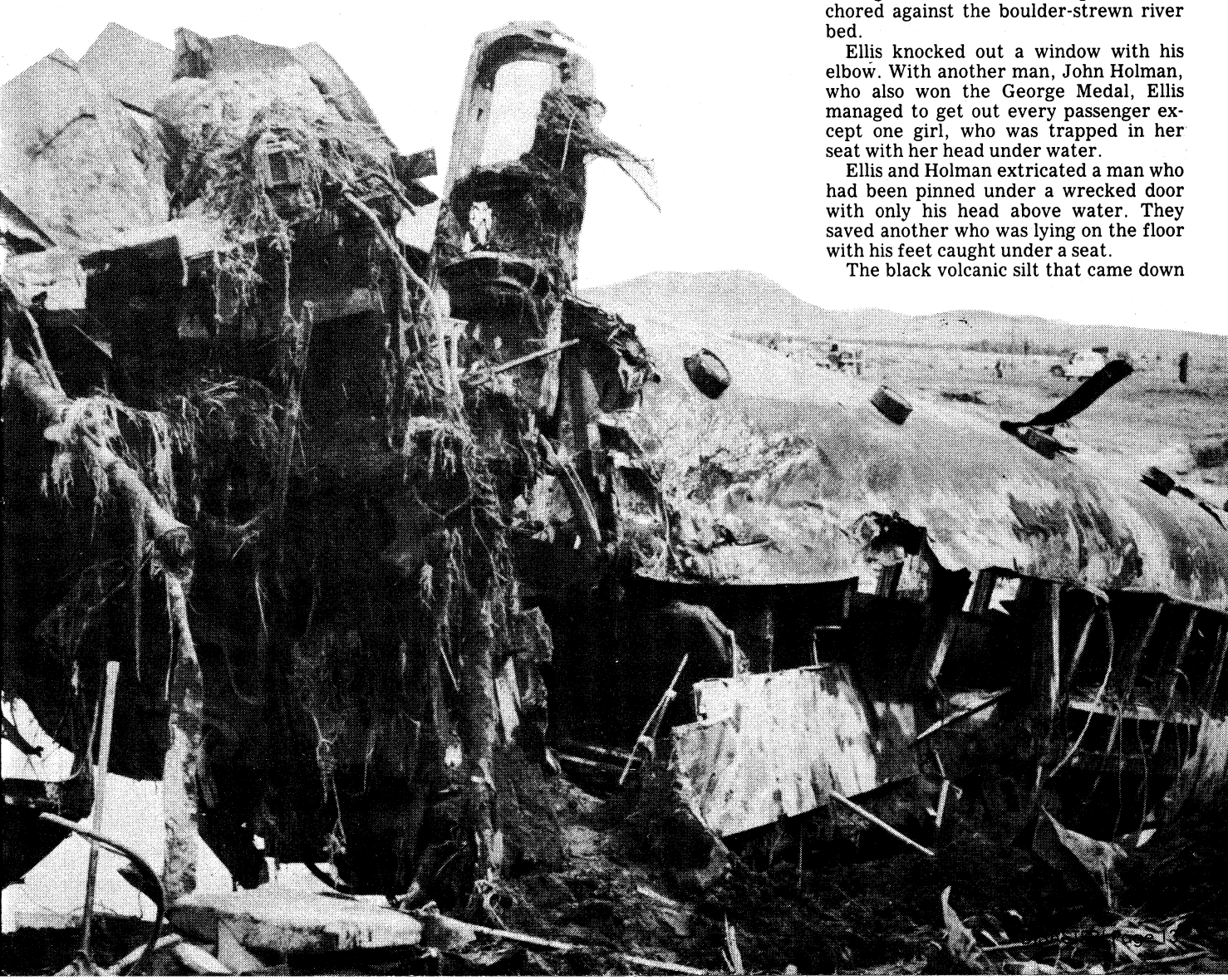
Most of the passengers were still in their seats, not knowing what had happened. Ellis called, "Get out, please!" As they staggered to their feet the back coupling holding the carriage snapped. The carriage with Ellis and 22 passengers plunged into the river.

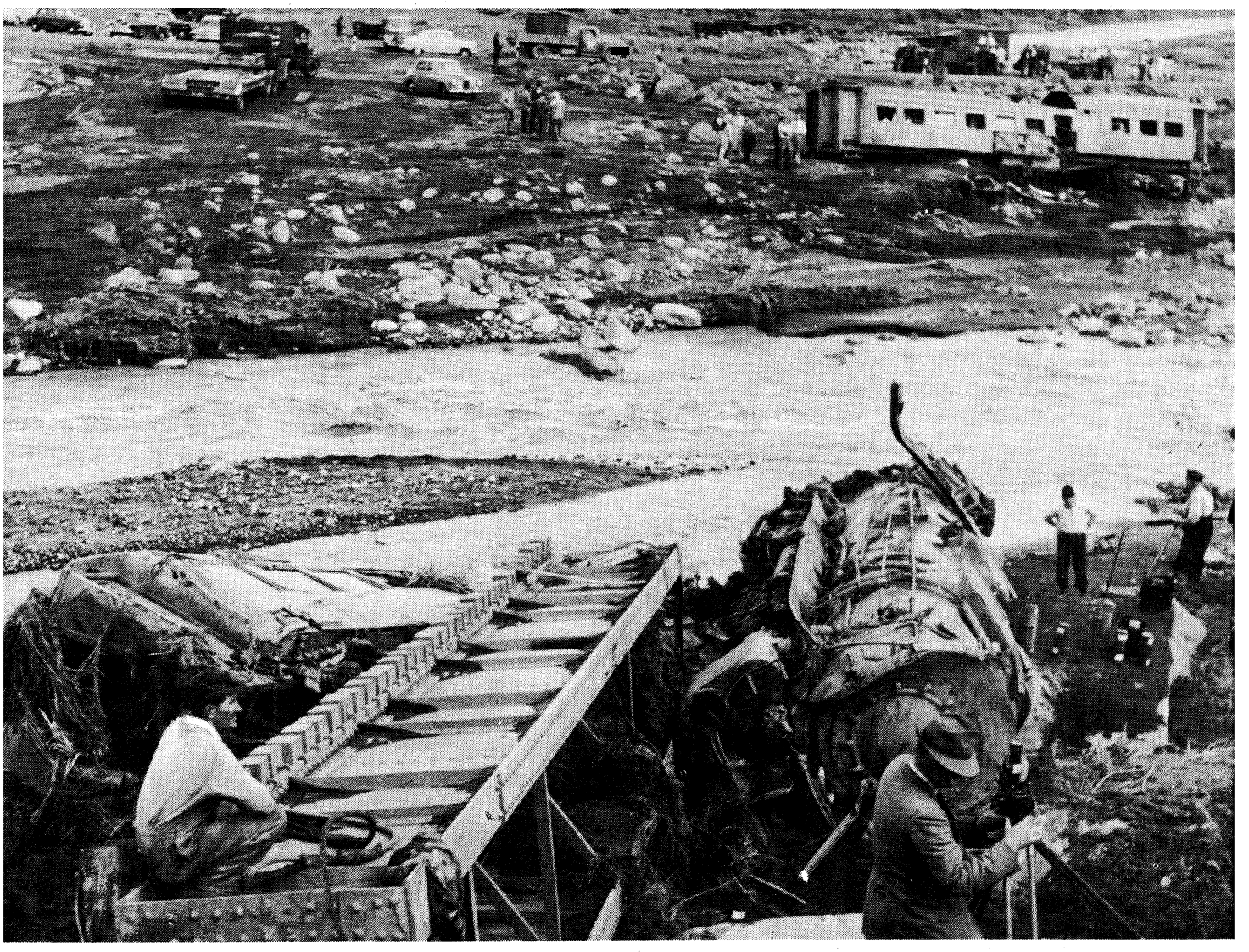
Ellis still had his torch when the lights failed. The car rolled over several times, came to rest on its side. Water poured through it, but the carriage was anchored against the boulder-strewn river bed.

Ellis knocked out a window with his elbow. With another man, John Holman, who also won the George Medal, Ellis managed to get out every passenger except one girl, who was trapped in her seat with her head under water.

Ellis and Holman extricated a man who had been pinned under a wrecked door with only his head above water. They saved another who was lying on the floor with his feet caught under a seat.

The black volcanic silt that came down





with the wall of water took many lives. One survivor was so covered with silt and oil from the locomotive's tender that he could neither see nor speak. Rescuers found one badly injured woman buried up to her neck in silt and oily black ash.

Indicative of the flood's tremendous force was the subsequent find of bodies 130 km (80 miles) downstream from the bridge. It was also discovered that other bodies had been driven 160 km (100 miles) to the river's mouth and then out into the Tasman Sea.

New Zealand received the first scanty reports of the catastrophe when Arthur Bell, of Raetihi, who was driving towards Tangiwai with his wife, sighted the wrecked bridge.

Skidding the car to a halt, Bell raced towards the river bank and found himself staring at a series of enormous waves trying to batter the Wellington-Auckland express to matchwood.

Bell shouted at his wife to drive to a nearby forestry camp and raise the alarm. Then he began crawling down the river bank to save as many lives as he could.

The first organised rescue team came from the nearby Waiouru military camp. Quickly the men set a battery of searchlights and flooded the horror scene with beams of white light.

The army personnel were followed by police, doctors, nurses and a fleet of ambulances converging from all points in the district.

Soon the searchlights as well as beams from motor vehicles had transformed the dark river into a starkly brilliant tableau of sheer terror.

The locomotive, with its crewmen dead, lay on its side near the river bank. Steam hissed from its belly while oil was sucked from its fractured metal and swept downstream in great black patches.

Now having done its fearful work, the river began receding, allowing the rescue teams to release the trapped and recover the dead in conditions that did not threaten their own lives.

The coming of the dawn brought a broad perspective to the limited field illuminated by the searchlights. The scene was even more sickening now than it had been by night.

Everywhere lay the ink-black volcanic mud, the great boulders that had come to rest as the river lost its venom.

Near the river bank lay the locomotive, dead and cold.

Four broken carriages lay near the bridge. The other could not be sighted. It was several miles away down the river.

Exactly 70 metres from the bridge was an 80-tonne concrete pier, smashed from its foundations by the hurtling debris and swept away by a force almost beyond calculation.

But the bodies of the dead could be seen as bulldozers scooped them from the mud-covered river banks.

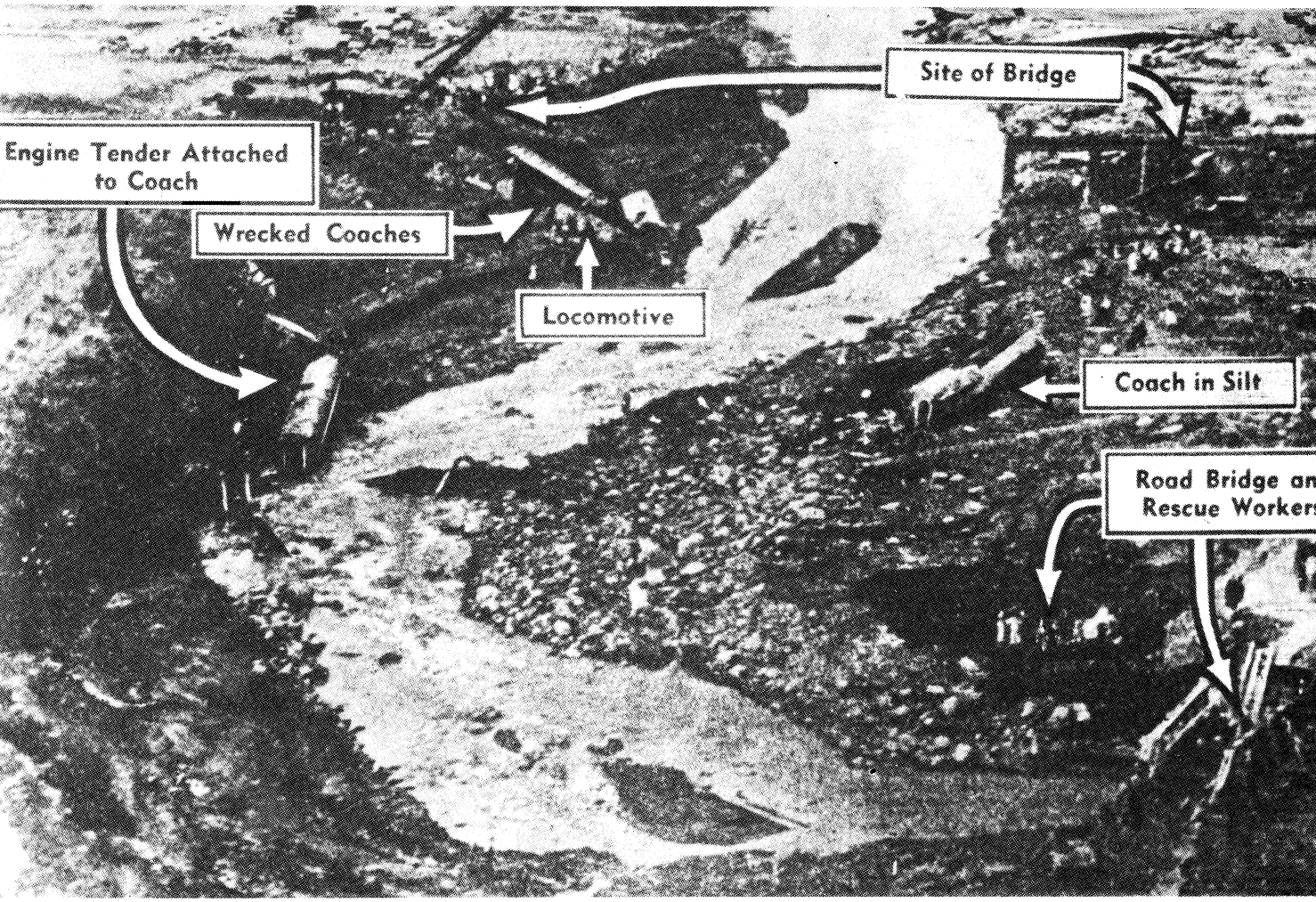
The acrid smell of the sulphur which the stream brings down from the volcano hung in the air as bulldozers dug for more bodies by the muddy banks. The river had settled to a sluggish, dirty-brown stream winding slowly to the sea.

Rescuers found a woman's green overcoat, soaked and muddy; a baby's battered highchair; a tiny red purse, with 5s 4d still in it, and a leather-bound diary with the final entry on December 24, "Left Wellington for Auckland by train to see the Queen".

They put aside anything that might help in identifying victims. They took entire stretcher-loads of scrap clothing and luggage back to Waiouru camp.

Soon it was realised that it would be many days, perhaps weeks, before identification was completed. The passengers had gone to their deaths as seat numbers in railway carriages. There was no list of the names of people on the express.

Looking down on this grim Christmas scene was the snow-white pyramid of Mt. Ruapehu, stark and unnaturally



THE TANGIWAI tragedy . . . the scene the morning after the bridge collapsed. Left, the locomotive and a carriage lay close by one of the bridge girders while, above, the extent of the devastation is clearly shown. The tragedy was compounded by the inability to identify all the victims. A mass burial was undertaken . . . and the Duke of Edinburgh attended the service.

beautiful in the early morning light, seemingly remote from the tragedy and yet the cause of it all.

New Zealand's Prime Minister (Mr. S. G. Holland) was called from his bed at midnight and told of the crash. Before he left Auckland by car at 3 am Holland appointed an executive commission to handle relief and later inquire into the disaster.

He ordered taxi drivers to be sent out to rouse rail executives and rescue experts and rush them to Tangiwai.

By 9 am Holland had reached Tangiwai and was helping to organise rescue work. Early in the afternoon, sitting in his shirtsleeves at emergency headquarters set up in Waiouru military camp, he spoke to the nation over an emergency radio hook-up.

It was from their own Prime Minister that New Zealanders heard that 166 were believed killed in the Dominion's worst rail smash. Days later the figure was reduced to 151.

Radio broadcasts throughout the day gave names of victims as they were identified. New Zealand's Royal Christmas became a day of grief and mourning.

Officers at Waiouru camp cancelled Christmas leave. Soldiers on leave nearby who heard of the disaster at Tangiwai immediately reported back for duty. Heavy army ambulances rumbled in and out of the camp.

One of the largest huts was turned into a temporary morgue.

By evening rows of white-shrouded bodies lay in the hut. Sad-eyed friends and relatives viewed dozens of bodies whose features were virtually erased, wondering whether this had been their loved one on the train. Part of the heartbreaking task was to examine mud-soaked scraps of clothing.

On Boxing Day the tiny camp post office at Waiouru was crowded with men trying to phone news to wives and mothers waiting at home.

By December 27 humid conditions were affecting the bodies in the army morgue. As a result a special train was ordered to transport them to Wellington.

It was an enormous task, for already 114 of the victims had been recovered, half of whom had been identified.

The entire nation, led by Queen Elizabeth, prayed that day as the death train set out on the journey to Wellington and during the mass funeral on December 31, at which the Queen was represented by the Duke of Edinburgh.

An executive commission appointed to probe the disaster laid the blame on snow-capped Mount Ruapehu (2780 metres, 9175 feet), an active volcano with a crater full of hot water.

Experts found that 18,000 million litres (400 million gallons) of water had crushed through the ice barriers of its great crater lake and swept down into Wangaehu River.

The surging torrent, carrying volcanic ash and great chunks of ice, tore down the river uprooting trees and pushing huge boulders before it. It struck the rail bridge with a roar, loosening the foundations of the massive 80-tonne concrete piers, minutes before the train reached it.

The local Maoris have always avoided the scene like poison. They call the stream The River Of Death.

No fish swim in Sulphur Creek, no lush vegetation grows along its banks. Cattle and sheep won't drink its muddy water. Maoris say the river has an evil smell and refuse to cross the bridge.

Experts blame the sulphur which the Wangaehu River brings down from the volcano. The Maoris say it is a bad river because its source, Ruapehu, is an evil volcano.

Today there are many New Zealanders with a loved one lost in that tragic Christmas Eve bridge collapse who join with the Maoris in calling the spot Tangiwai — "weeping waters."