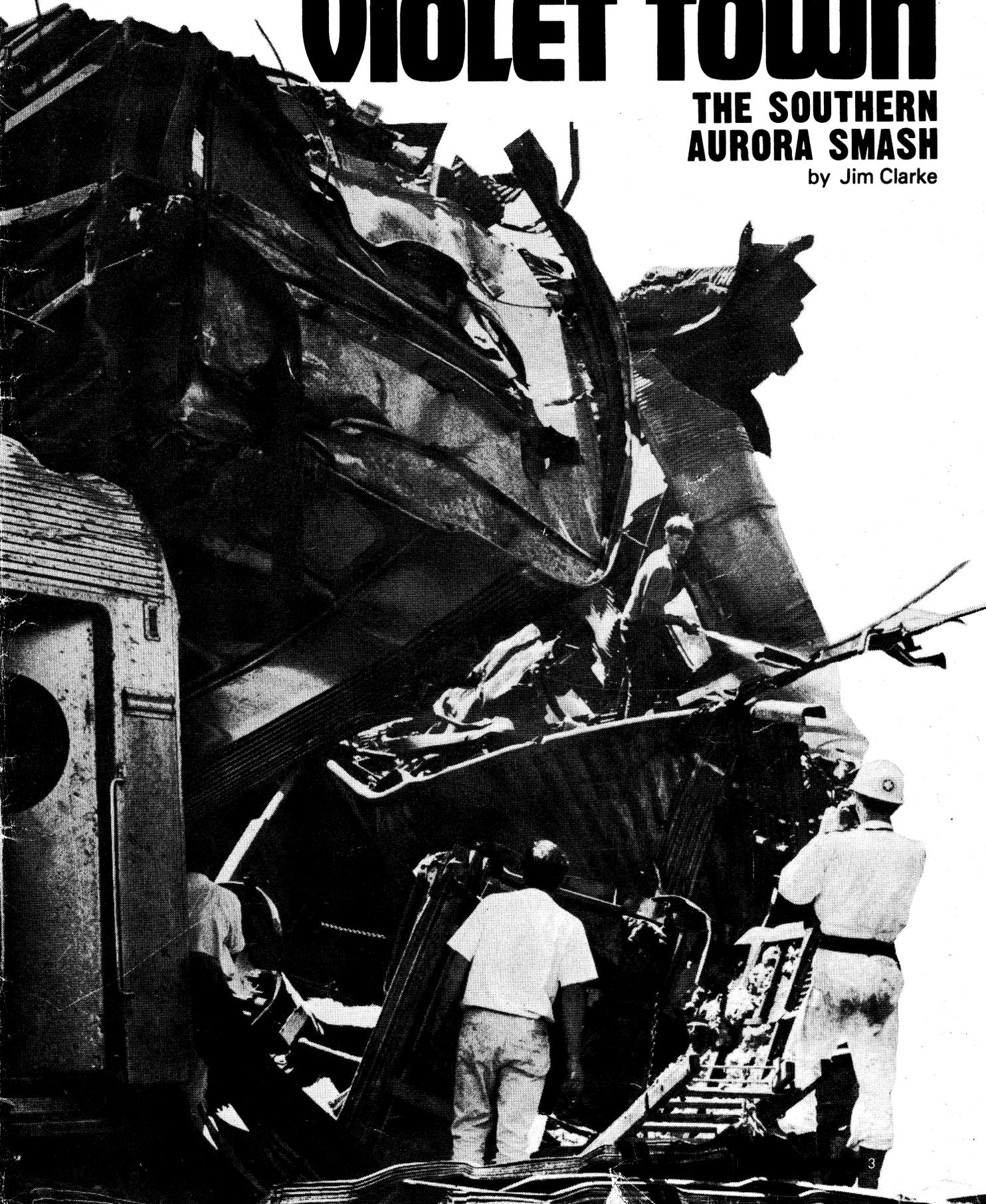


LIFE AND DEATH AT VIOLET TOWN

**THE SOUTHERN
AURORA SMASH**

by Jim Clarke



FEBRUARY 7, 1969, dawned as a beautiful day. The morning sun rose into a clear sky over north-eastern Victoria — and by 6.30 that morning had warned everyone that it was going to be hot.

At this precise moment the scenario for one of Australia's most spectacular rail smashes was being set in motion. Within three hours nine people would be dead, 36 injured and a crack streamlined train would be a broken, blackened ruin.

Precisely at this time Frank McDonnell, a train controller for the Victorian Railways, scanned his giant diagram of the Melbourne-Albury standard gauge line.

Several lights indicating trains in motion studded the control panel. He focussed his attention on two . . . the crack Sydney-Melbourne express Southern Aurora and the 1.25 a.m. Melbourne-Sydney fast freight train.

Consulting his chart he noticed that the Southern Aurora was running late. He also noticed that its driver was Jack Bowden, a top man who would use every ounce of his skill to regain lost minutes.

He carefully plotted the progress of the two trains through the Violet Town-Longwood area. One would have to wait for the other. But which one?

General practice decreed that freight trains give ground to a passenger train, but Frank noted that would have meant delaying the freight train for nearly 100 minutes by the time it reached Albury. He opted for a small delay to the Southern Aurora at Violet Town and set all signals and points that way.

Frank's next move was to press an alarm that would signal to the driver of the 1.25 a.m. freight train that the train controller wanted to talk to him.

Within minutes, one of the Victorian Railways younger drivers, Lawrence Norman Rosevear, 28, was on the line.

"I'm sending you on to Violet Town to cross the Aurora . . . with any luck you'll just about get away with a running cross," said Frank cheerfully. (A running cross is when neither train actually stops . . . speed is usually about 10 km/h (6 mph).)

Seconds later Lawrie Rosevear was back in his locomotive getting his train of 22 wagons underway.

Many miles away to the north Jack Bowden, 52, was piloting the Southern Aurora away from Glenrowan station. He glanced at his watch to see how much his train was behind time.

Right from the first day Jack ever dreamt of being an engine driver, he marvelled at how the big expresses

always seemed to run to time. He loved the stories of people setting their watches by the time the crack trains passed.

He had learned in that top school — as a fireman and driver on the Spirit of Progress when that train was clearly acknowledged as one of the top trains in the world. And now he was carrying on that tradition on the Southern Aurora.

From Glenrowan station the line dropped sharply for many miles before running across swamp land into Benalla. Jack knew that by holding his speed to the maximum permitted here—97 km/h (60 mph) — he could regain one more minute.

Approaching Benalla he re-applied full power. Not only did the speed limit now rise to 113 km/h (70 mph) but the track undulated all the way to Violet Town.

As the speed crept up, Jack settled back into his seat and watched the warm sun climb into the heavens.

As the time reached 7 a.m., away in the distance a yellow warning signal blinked out its message to the crew of the Southern Aurora.

Mervyn Coulthard, 30, fireman on the Aurora, glanced across at his driver and said: "It looks like we may be having a bit of a stop. I'll put the kettle on." He rose from his seat, picked up the electric kettle, and descended some steps into the locomotive's nose to get the water.

While filling the kettle, he felt the train rumble over the switches at the start of the Violet Town passing loop. Jack hadn't slackened off speed at all.

Returning to the cab he noticed Jack still sitting there with the locomotive throttle wide open. He glanced around and looked in the passing line. Nothing was there. He looked down the track as the Aurora bounded towards switches at the Melbourne end of the loop.



What he saw horrified him. The train was about to hurtle past a stop signal at full speed . . . and there, just a little way ahead was Lawrie Rosevear's freight train.

Coulthard shouted "red light" (stop) to Jack and raced for the locomotive engine room . . .

Pandemonium was breaking loose in the other train, too.

Approaching Violet Town at just on 80 km/h (50 mph) Rosevear had remarked to his fireman, Arnfried Brendecke, that he could see the Aurora's headlight in the distance. At that time he applied his train's brakes and slackened speed to about 60 km/h (35 mph) in readiness to take the passing loop.

As the freight train approached Violet Town Rosevear's eyes narrowed. His face wore a worried frown. Again he turned to his fireman. This time he said: "He seems to be going fairly hard."

Both men fixed their attention on the approaching train. Suddenly they noticed it swinging from behind Violet Town station.

"Jesus, it's still coming," shouted Rosevear as he dived to apply his train's brakes. At the same time he started flashing his train's headlight.

Rosevear then moved to the door and opened it. Brendecke took the hint. He lunged to his door, opened it and climbed down the steps.

Inches beneath him the jagged ground

of bluestone ballast and sleepers thundered by. Behind him were several hundred tonnes of freight wagons . . . ahead of him was 750 tonnes of express train.

He glanced back inside and saw his driver making for the engine room. He thought for a second or so whether he should join him, then looked at the express. It was about 20 metres away.

Brendecke jumped.

On the parallelling Hume Highway, commercial traveller Peter Fennessy was pacing the Southern Aurora just for interest.

He later told The Sun what he saw. "The Southern Aurora was travelling about 300 metres to my right. It was doing just on 113 km/h (70 mph).

"Then I saw the goods train near the crossing. I thought they would pass each other . . . I didn't realise they were on the same track.

"There was a hell of a smash . . . everything seemed to shake. A goods wagon sailed high in the air through dust and smoke. Parts of both trains were in the air.

"They seemed to hang there. Then the carriages of the Aurora went crashing into the engine and each other.

"They collapsed on each other like a telescope."

Under the incredible wreckage, and almost untouched, was Arnfried Brendecke.

"When I hit the ground I rolled over and over," recalled Brendecke.

"I looked up to see the Aurora climbing on top of our engine. Then there was an explosion. The locomotive landed less than two metres (about five feet) from me. I dug my face into the dirt and put my arms over my head.

"A carriage appeared to fall right over me."

Miraculously, Brendecke survived —

although early reports put him as one of the dead.

Regaining consciousness, Brendecke staggered to his feet, picked up a metal bar and staggered to the Aurora carriages. He started smashing windows so that trapped passengers could get out.

Some needed help. When he tried to help pull the passengers out he found that his shoulder was dislocated.

On the other side of the wreckage, Peter Fennessy was hard at work. "People were screaming and there were faces at the windows," he said.

"People were trying to get out but many of the doors were jammed.

"Glass was breaking and falling as people hammered out windows with shoes. A couple of other motorists arrived and we began pulling people out.

"People were crying and moaning in the carriages. Many others were lying on the ground or wandering about, dazed.

"I got into one of the sleepers and found a baby crying . . . I don't know what happened to its parents.

"The goods engine was burning but the Aurora hadn't caught fire. A lot of liquid was flooding around, though. It was dieselene.

"I said: 'God, the whole lot's going to go up.'

"There was a whoosh and flames were everywhere. We got out but there were still people trapped.

"One woman was beating at a window. We couldn't get to her. There was screaming all along the train.

"It was the most horrible thing I've seen."

Hearing the heart-rending crunch of metal, the following explosion and seeing the smoke pall rise, the townspeople of Violet Town rushed to the scene. It was as well they did.

Their efforts enabled nearly everyone to escape the train before a devastating fire claimed the wreckage. And the efforts of the local fire brigade kept the



"Age" photo

fuel-fed fire at bay long enough for most people to be saved.

Less than 30 minutes had elapsed since the two trains slammed into each other. Fire was ravaging the broken carriages, people were wandering dazed and bleeding around the crash site. The dead were being taken away.

Back in Melbourne, train controller Frank McDonnell had alerted his superior, Bob Humphrey of the likelihood of the smash. He had seen the indications come up on the signal panel.

News of the crash reached Melbourne quickly. Within minutes disaster organisations were speeding to the site under police escort, or flying there in planes offered by helpful bodies.

A Department of Civil Aviation DC-3 flew two medical teams to Benalla; the DCA's HS-125 jet flew another to Mangalore. The RAAF offered two Iroquois helicopters to ferry doctors from the airfields to the crash site; TAA offered a Viscount airliner for police use.

Even hardened cynical railwaymen, well experienced in the devastation of railway crashes around Australia and the world, were unprepared for what they found at Violet Town.

Here was Australia's top express train, a shiny stainless steel train of 14 carriages, broken, twisted and strewn over yellow countryside. Some carriages lurched at crazy angles. Some were devastatingly damaged.

And many bore the tell-tale blackening and charring of fire.

After a quick assessment, messages were relayed back to Melbourne in an attempt to cover the extent of the tragedy.

The train was due at Spencer Street station at 9 a.m. and already people were gathering there to meet their loved ones. Nine o'clock came and went. The Aurora did not arrive.

At ten minutes past nine, the public address system at the station called for everyone's attention. "We regret to announce that the Southern Aurora from

Sydney has been involved in an accident," came the official voice, trying hard to choke back emotion.

Silence descended on the crowd.

After a pause officials continued, saying that they were waiting for further details. Anyone with friends and relatives on the train were asked to go to a desk where officials recorded names and telephone numbers.

The message was cautious and grief-laden. "It's best if you go home and we'll ring you as soon as we get news from the crash site . . ."

Many people hesitated for a moment or so, then left.

First news from the crash site was horrific.

Officials reported that sleeping cars 10, 9, 8, 7 and 6 plus the lounge and dining car were all derailed. Car 10 was buried under the debris and they presumed that all in that carriage were dead.

Already they had pulled nine bodies from the wreckage. Conservatively, they said, they expected the toll to reach 30 dead.

Early that afternoon the survivors reached Melbourne. Only then did the enormity of the disaster come to light.

Mr. C. F. Cormack, of Box Hill, had been travelling in car 10 — the carriage buried under the rubble.

"I had just started to get up for breakfast when I felt this tremendous shattering crash and then dust and smoke started to fill the carriage.

"The walls of the carriage started to cave in. Then I heard a trapped woman crying for help. I ran to her then someone smashed the windows with an axe and we climbed out.

"The conductor, Mr. W. B. Matteson, who was taken to Moorooopna Hospital was fantastically helpful."

Mr. F. Shank of Hawthorn was in one of the front carriages when it rolled wildly and then turned over.

"We could see the flames and smoke and it became terribly hot inside the car-

riage," he said. "I pushed three other people out then scrambled out myself."

His right arm was burnt by the scalding hot metal of the side of the carriage.

Newlyweds Mr. J. Culnane and his Chinese wife, Tin, of South Yarra, were in car 9 when it was upended.

"We were severely jolted then both of us were thrown to the floor," he said. "The fire was gutting cars 7 and 8 and was starting on ours. Smoke was filling up the carriage and people were coughing.

"There was a great urgency to get out but no one panicked. One of the children saw blood on his mother and started to scream.

"But we found we could not get out because we were too high from the ground. Then someone hacked through a window from the outside with an axe and a crowbar.

"About 30 of us were lowered gradually through the window."

Mr. J. Heathorn of Balwyn said: "We didn't seem to be going as fast as they said — it was supposed to be 113 km/h (70 mph) — and the next thing there was a series of jolts and the rattle of hardware, teacups and things.

"Then the train stopped completely. I got out and saw this devastation down at the front.

"It was shocking. Smoke was pouring everywhere and carriages were piled on top of everything. Further down there seemed to be three carriages zigzagged across one another.

"There were a lot of elderly women in the carriage and I helped to get them out and save some of their luggage."

Mr. and Mrs. F. Mulready of Belfield, Sydney, were breakfasting in the dining car when the collision took place.

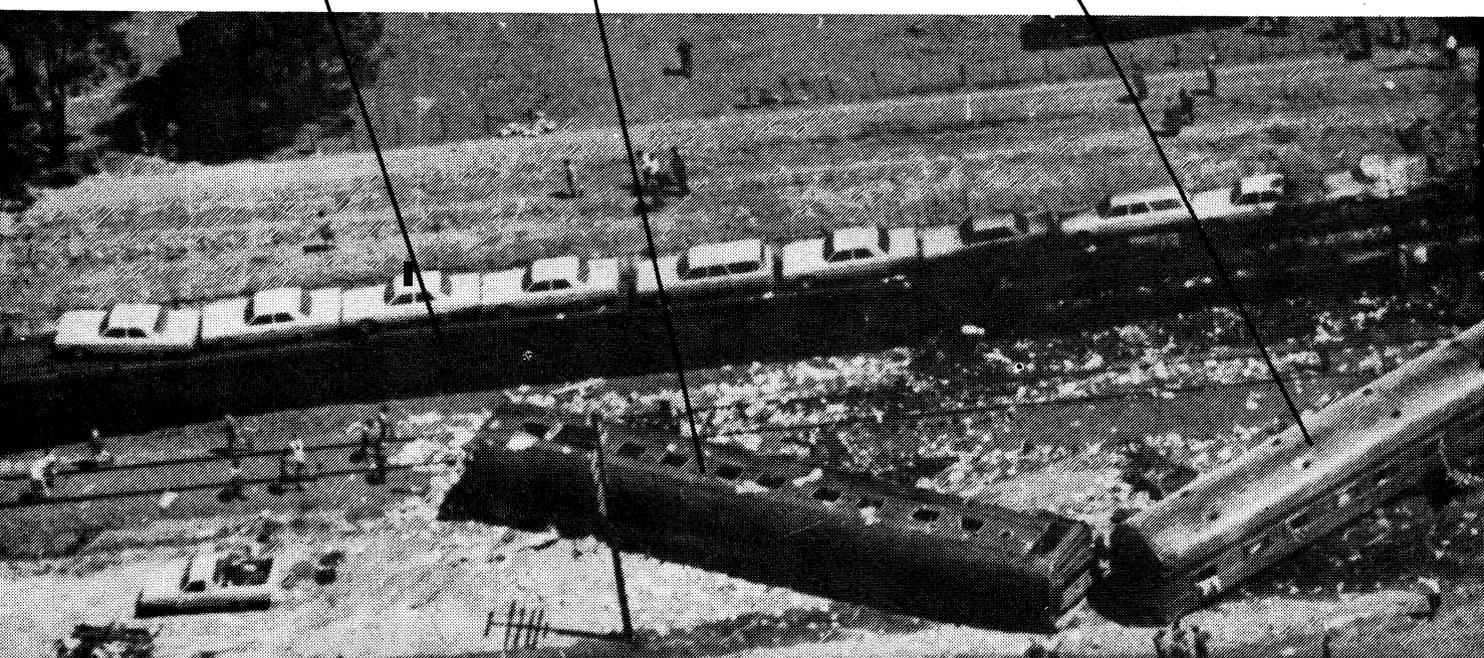
"Everything went bang," said Mr. Mulready. "Food went all over the place and we were both hit severely in the chest by the dining table.

"Waiters were thrown all over the place. I thought we might get away

1.25 AM FREIGHT TRAIN

CAR 8

CAR 7



through the kitchen . . . then I saw it fall down. I looked out of the window and the kitchen was a mass of flame.

"We managed to get back to our carriage and found it being evacuated. People were falling down a lot but there was no panic. The passengers who were unhurt were wonderful. I can't say enough for them."

Another passenger to praise the calm of the passengers in face of the disaster was Mr. E. Imel, an American soldier on R and R leave from Vietnam.

Mr. Imel was also in the dining-car when the jolting of the train swept crockery off tables and threw waiters to the floor.

"I was an employee of railways back in the US and was once in a minor train smash so I had a good idea what was happening," he said.

"What amazed me was that the passengers were so calm.

"When we got out and saw the smoke and the wreckage up front we helped to carry blankets to the injured and give what other help we could.

"The locomotive was on its side and a lounge-car and sleeping-car were telescoped together nearby."

Mr. L. Collier, described what happened to car 6: "We rode through the car in front of us which reduced it to one quarter of its length. There were a terrible number of deaths.

"Car 6 seemed to jump along the line, then rose up in the air and settled on its side on top of another carriage.

"I thought it was a derailment but later I knew it was worse. We looked out of the window and saw fire shooting up the side of our roomette.

"We looked down below our car and could see the crushed body of a woman. There was nothing we could do . . . nothing."

Passenger Mrs. Phyllis Cutts paid greatest tribute to the courage of Violet Town people.

"I saw them go through flames with

the greatest courage to bring out people," she told the Press. "Those who arrived with ladders and axes saved a lot of lives.

"There was little anyone could do at first until people arrived from Violet Town with crowbars and axes to smash open the sealed windows.

"It seemed ages until help came. Smoke was billowing in the air. There was no water but people were running away trying to fill up any receptacles they could find.

"You could not recognise the engines they were so badly damaged."

Passengers at the back of the train, where damage was minimal, told a different story.

Prudence Harris, 22, was flung from her bed by the impact. She got straight back into the bed. "I thought the train had just stopped suddenly," she said. "I didn't know there had been a crash until the conductor came in and told us."

"I thought we'd bumped into a cow," said Enid Pike of St. Kilda. "I was putting on my lipstick to go down to breakfast when there was a sudden lurch and the train shuddered.

"The lights went out but I wasn't worried.

"We stayed in our carriage because we didn't want to add to the confusion and it wasn't until the conductor came back and told us a fire had broken out that we moved.

"When we got out I just couldn't believe my eyes. There was a great pall of smoke and people and wreckage were everywhere."

But just as the passengers had their stories, so did the rescuers.

Their favorite was six-year-old Heather Newell.

Trapped for nearly four hours in the wreck of the train, Heather had fallen through broken flooring and suffered a broken leg, bad bruising, cuts on the chest and head and superficial burns when the carriage she was in caught fire.

Rescuers could hear her crying but they could not find her.

Constable George Williams told The Sun: "There was fire all around but we could hear her crying somewhere in the wreckage.

"Firemen poured water into the carriage but we thought she must have been dead. When it cooled a little I climbed in and searched around, but could see nothing.

"Suddenly I heard a voice say: 'Hey . . . mister.'"

Former jockey, Charlie Shugg, also crawled through the wreckage looking for her.

"I saw two bodies," he said. "I was horrified but I could hear the kid crying and calling out and I just concentrated on that.

"I shouted out: 'Just a minute, mate, we'll get to you.'

"And when they pulled her out, this little darling, her face all black and bleeding and her hair still smouldering, said: 'I'm not a boy. I'm a girl . . .'"

Farther down the train, rescuers found a nursing nun, Sister Marietta, trapped on the floor of her crushed compartment. She had a broken leg and it would be some time before she could be rescued.

Conductor Alan Hyatt told the Sister that help was on the way and added that he would try and get a priest, who had been travelling on the train, to visit her.

"Tell him not to waste his time on me," the Sister said. "I'm sure he'll find plenty to do elsewhere."

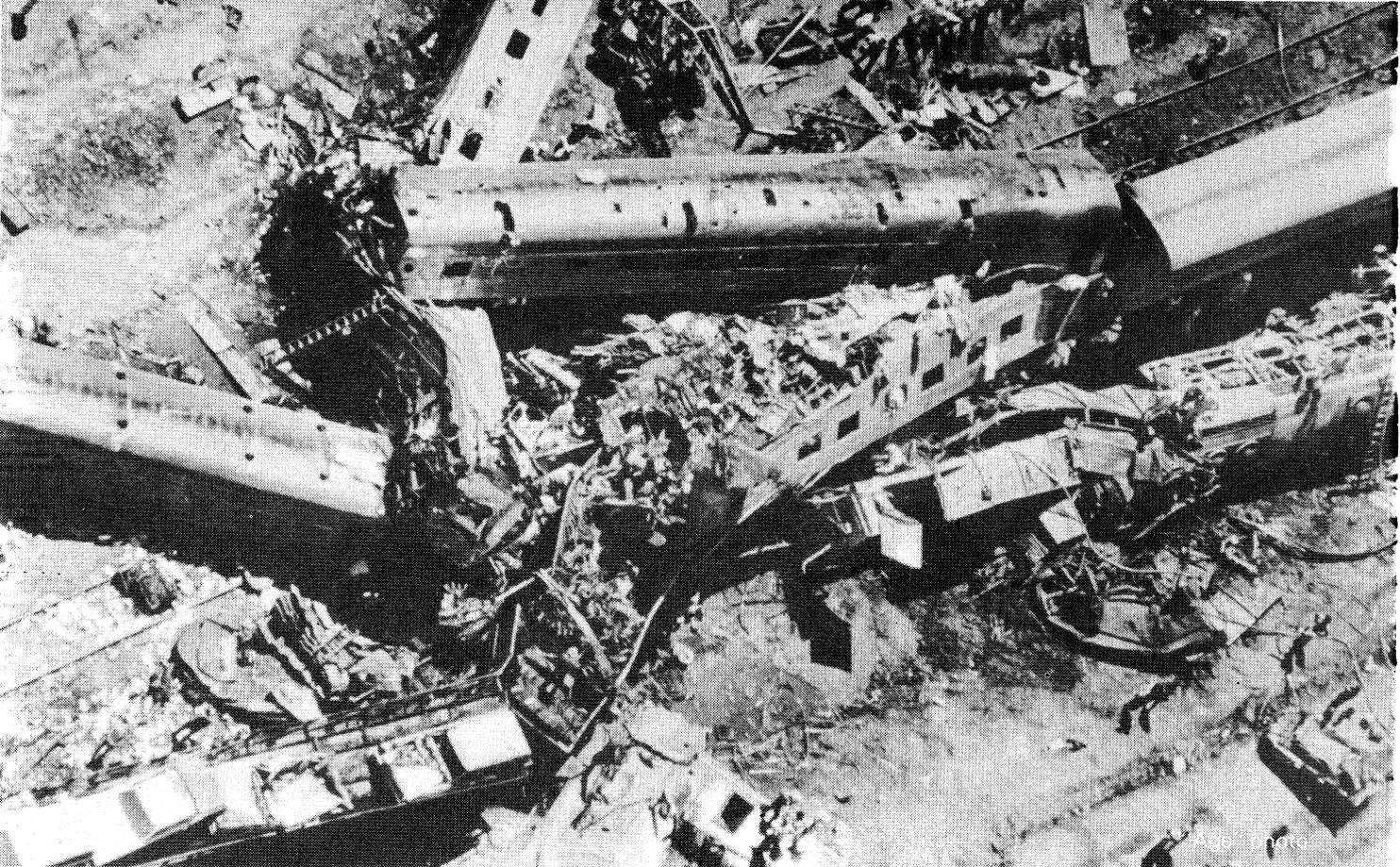
By late Friday afternoon the police reported they had recovered 10 bodies. Missing was the body of the freight train driver . . .

As well, the police reported that they had been unable to search one of the carriages and they expected to find more dead there.

That night, massive bulldozers and cranes tore at the twisted heaps of once

CAR 9 CAR 6 COLLISION POINT CAR 10 FREIGHT TRAIN LOCOMOTIVE SOUTHERN AURORA LOCOMOTIVE LOUNGE CAR





sleek-steel to get at the trapped carriage and to clear the lines.

All night the wrench of metal and roar of machines filled the air while would-be rescuers sadly nodded their heads and intimated that there was no way anyone could be alive in the wrecked and crushed carriage.

The sun came up hot in a clear blue sky on Saturday and shone down on the carnage.

Only a few more pieces of wreckage remained to be removed before the last carriage could be searched. Finally the word was given. Men with axes, crow bars, oxy-acetylene torches and other aids attacked the crumpled carriage.

Jubilation broke out on the faces of the searchers as they scrambled through the wreckage — the carriage was empty!

Later they were to find out that most of the people from that carriage had gone to breakfast in the dining-car and were there when the collision occurred.

Fate had played one of its few hands for the living.

Refreshed and invigorated with the good news, the men clearing the line tore into their work afresh. Within hours new lines had been laid for trains to pass . . .

The next episode in the sad saga unfolded at the Coroner's Inquest into the nine deaths.

Evidence was presented that the Southern Aurora had sped through two warning signals and one stop signal before crashing into the freight train.

People everywhere refused to believe that Jack Bowden had failed to see the signals and respond to them. Something else must have happened to him, they said. They were right.

Medical evidence was presented indicating that Bowden was dead some time before the smash. Ambulancemen

reported that on removing his body from the wreck they noticed that although one leg was severed there had been no bleeding.

Medical reports were then produced on Bowden — and revealed a sad tale of deteriorating heart.

Bowden knew this. His mother had died in her early fifties, and Jack had had a turn when out fishing. But he stated that he could not give up locomotive driving because he would lose too much financially.

A doctor had challenged him that in his condition he was unfit to drive trains, but Bowden had reassured him that the fireman was fully qualified to take over in the event of anything happening to the driver.

So Bowden's heart condition was not reported.

The Coroner, Mr. H. Pascoe, slated Bowden's attitude in continuing to drive.

"Although I have found the medical staff of the railways warrant criticism, the real blame is attached to Bowden for continuing a responsibility he was not physically well enough to perform.

"He was extremely negligent in persisting in driving what might well be called a prestige train, knowing that he was a candidate for death at any moment; and, in effect, admitting that if death did overtake him on the train, the safety of the passengers, crew and equipment would depend upon the fireman pulling up the train.

"And I have no hesitation in saying that the fireman and the guard were also negligent.

"Once the driver was dead, it only needed one of the two surviving crew to be attentive to this duty and this accident would never have happened."

Coulthard, the Aurora's fireman,

came in for much criticism from the coroner.

"I have no reason to doubt Coulthard's agreement with counsel that Bowden was a skilful driver with a reputation of being reliable and steady," he stated.

"But acknowledging this makes Coulthard's actions incomprehensible.

"When the steady and reliable driver was apparently acting in an unusual fashion by travelling at a speed which was prohibited under any circumstances (more than 113 km/h (70 mph)), but in this case was aggravated by passing a caution automatic signal, and had made no attempt to implement what the signal connoted, he left the cabin to fill the kettle.

"He did this at a time when other drivers (including Bowden on a prior trip) had slackened speed by at least 15 km/h (10 mph), and at a time when Coulthard knew there were other signals coming up and that it was his duty to observe."

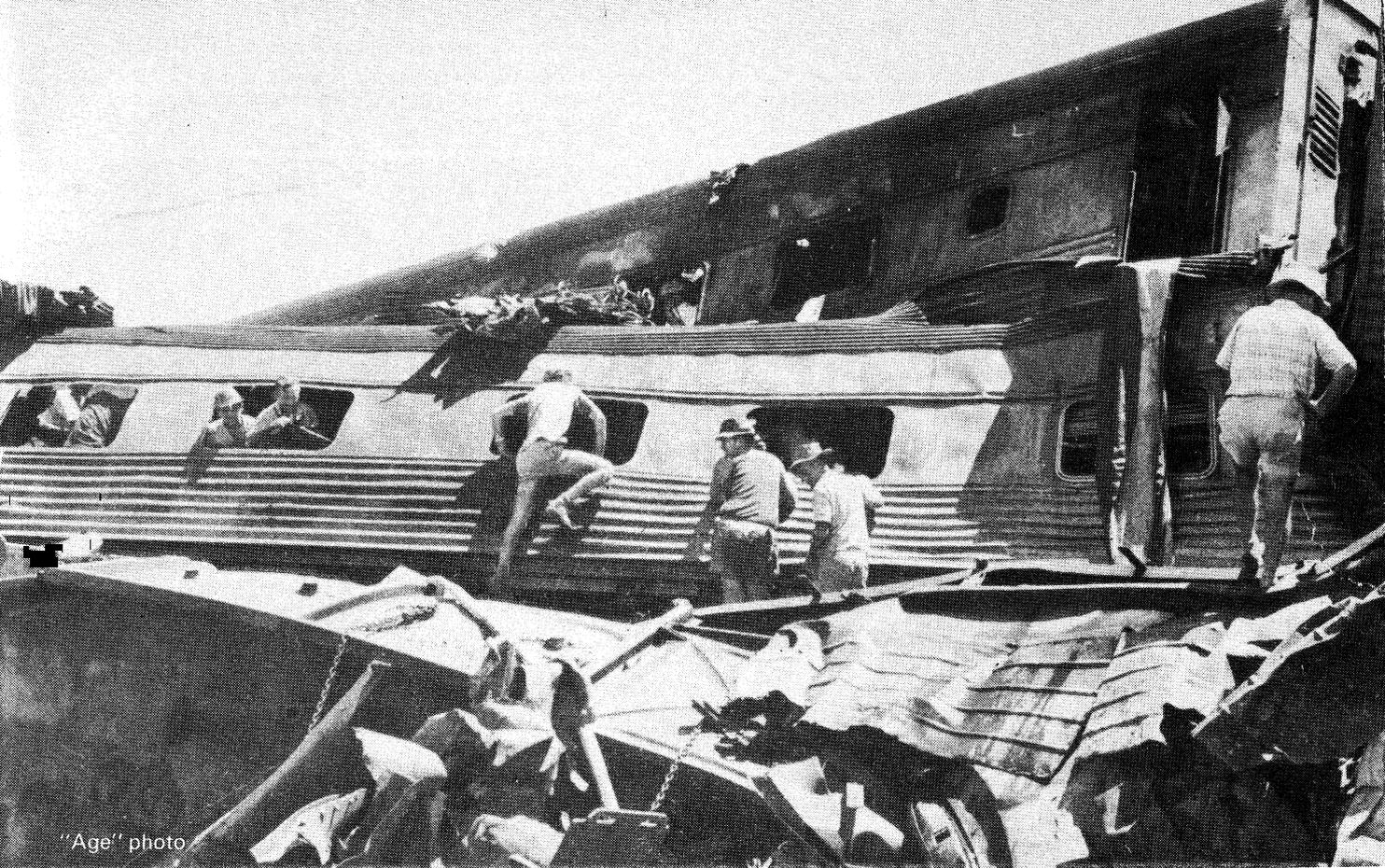
Mr. Pascoe said he was satisfied that Bowden was dead or in a coma for at least 10 km (six miles) before the crash.

He continued: "Coulthard was not the only person who considered that all he had to do was to be physically present on the train.

"The guard, William Frederick Wyer, was another.

"His log book was largely a piece of fiction and I am satisfied he was asleep shortly after clearing Albury."

Evidence was given that Wyer had recorded a six-minute delay in his log book at a point other than where it occurred — Wodonga — and admitted that he saw the train go through the warning and red lights before he made any attempt to apply the train's brakes.



"Age" photo

When he finally did it was far too late — the collision was inevitable.

"As both Coulthard and Wyer breached their duty they must share the responsibility for the loss of the trains and eight lives.

"The combination of a dead driver, an insensitive fireman and a somnolent guard caused this multiple tragedy.

"I have naturally given much thought as to whether I should commit Coulthard and Wyer for trial for manslaughter.

"But while I say they were extremely negligent, I am not prepared to attach to them the evidence of culpable, criminal, gross, wicked, clear or complete mentioned in the famous (and confusing) case of *Andrews v. Director of Public Prosecutions* and therefore content myself with a misadventure finding in the case of the deaths."

The matter was then handed over to the railways to deal with the train's staff.

Within a week it was announced that Mervyn Coulthard, fireman on the Southern Aurora, had been sacked. William Wyer, the guard, had been demoted to a station assistant, with a drop in pay from \$59 to \$43 per week.

Then, in the New Year's honors list, nine men were honored for their work in rescuing people from the crashed train.

Dr. Robert Dunn, of Euroa, was awarded the OBE for risking his life by entering burning railway carriages to attend the injured and trapped.

Eight others, including three of the Aurora's conductors, received British Empire Medals.

Today, the Southern Aurora has been fully restored and the site shows no sign of the tragedy. No marker bears testimony to the horror of February 7, 1969, and the incident has slipped from most people's minds.

