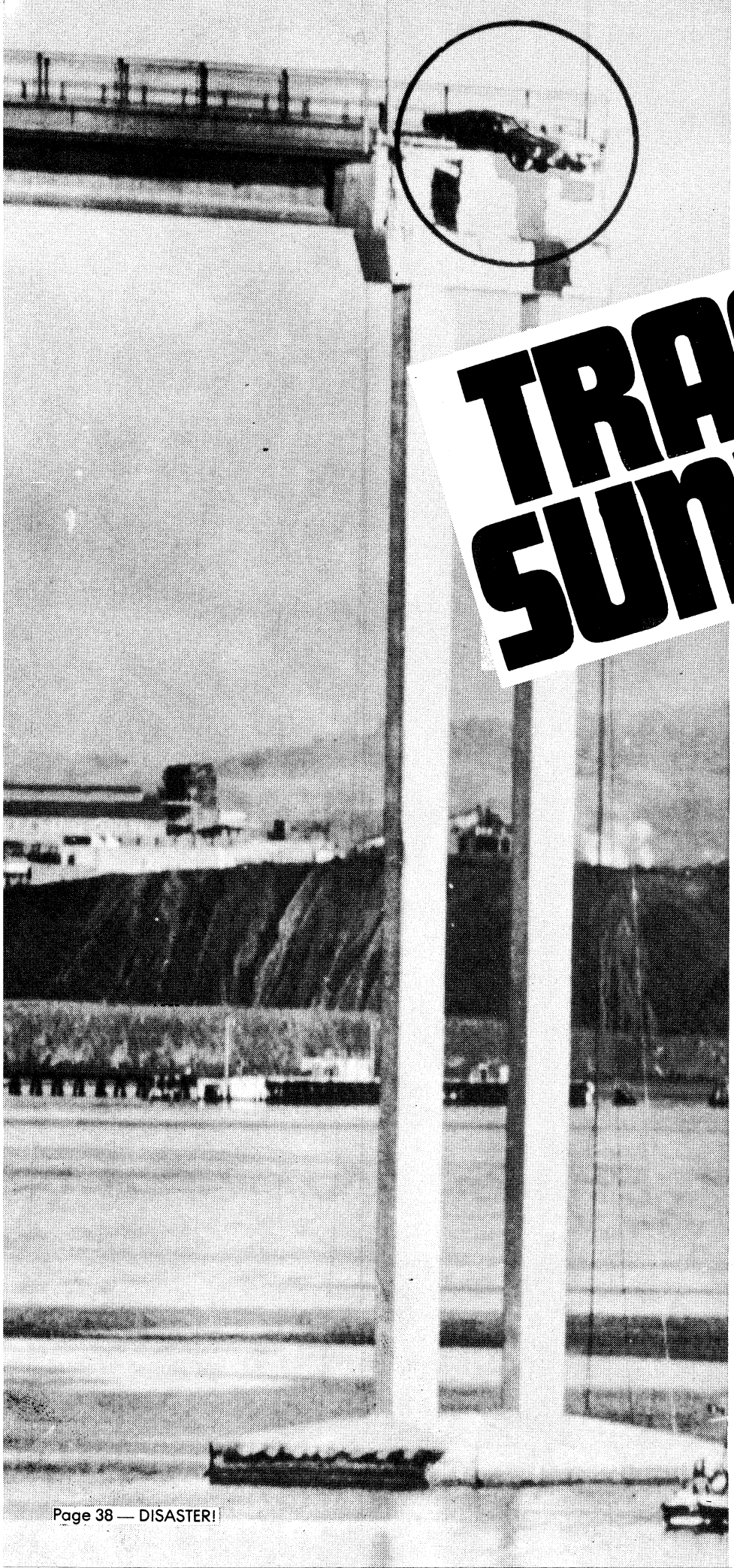
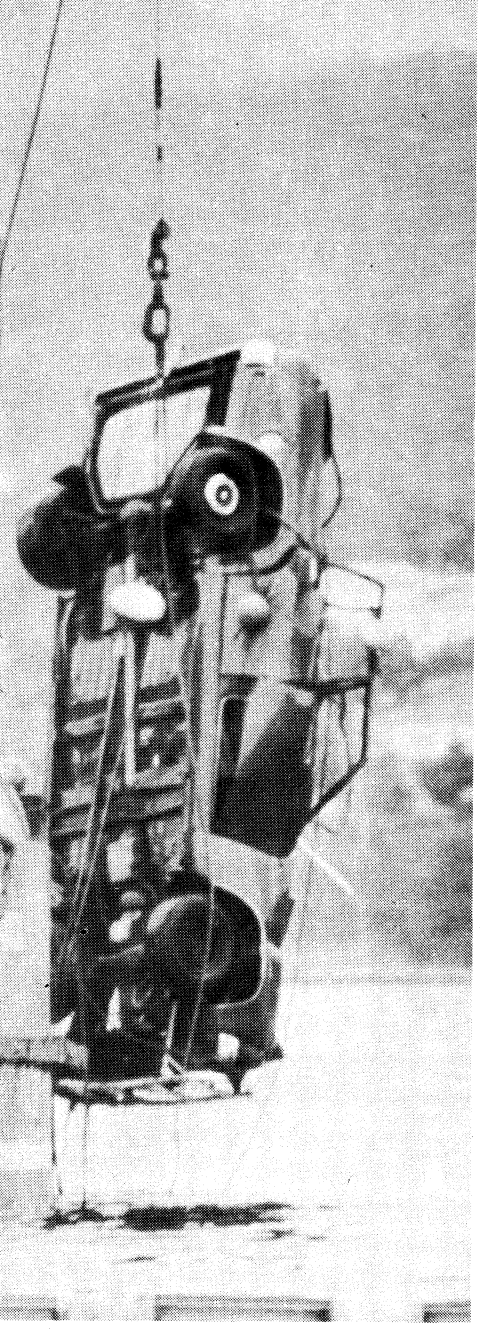
TRAGIC SUNDAY





The icy Derwent River claimed 12 lives when a ship rammed Hobart's Tasman Bridge

MAURICE ALLAN loved ships. His home at Montagu Bay, Hobart, overlooked the main shipping channel and he often stood and watched as the big vessels glided along the beautiful Derwent River.

Shortly after 9 pm on Sunday, January 5, 1975, he heard the sound of ships' engines. Glancing out of his window he noted the familiar silhouette of an old favorite of his, the 11,200-tonne Lake Illawarra, a ship he used to work on.

Through the rain and mist he watched as it approached the Tasman Bridge — a massive yet graceful two-kilometre-long concrete bridge spanning the Derwent and linking Hobart's east and west sides.

Suddenly Maurice became concerned. He watched as the ship steered to the left of the navigation span.

It was going to hit the bridge. There was no way a ship of that size could fit between the pylons at that point.

On board the ship, its captain, Boleslaw Pelc, 60, knew a disaster was inevitable. "She is not steering . . . the steering has gone," he said in an agitated tone to his helmsman.

Within moments the ship had rammed a pylon. Seconds later the concrete roadway tumbled on to the ship's bow, dipping the heavily laden vessel under the icy Derwent waters.

Cars plummeted 29 metres from the shattered roadway to a watery grave. The ship, with its bow weighed down by slabs of concrete roadway, tilted, then started its last journey — to the muddy Derwent bottom.

A tragedy was in the making. Twelve people were to die and a ship be lost. And Hobart was to be effectively cut in two.

The ingredients for the disaster started to knit together shortly after 9 pm.

Helmsman Robert Banks, 45, had taken over the helm at 8.52 pm and was steering a course of 002 degrees directed by the captain.

With the bridge about 1300 metres ahead, Captain Pelc looked for other shipping traffic. There was none. He then rang through to the engine-room for full shipping speed, about eight knots.

The ship responded, but not as the captain had intended.

Pelc found his ship heading for foul ground and shallow water. Quickly he ordered Banks to bring the ship to starboard.

Again the ship responded. This time Pelc noticed that he was not in line with the bridge markers which were there to guide ships through the opening.

Banks received another order. "Steer due north," Pelc commanded.

The bow of the ship swung quickly to take up the new heading.

"Steer 020," snapped Pelc, only to follow that order up with a demand to come to 015 and then 101. Pelc was trying to correct the swing of the ship and at the same time line it up with the markers.

This time the Lake Illawarra swung too far to starboard.

"Stop engines," ordered Pelc when the ship was about 700 metres from the bridge. He turned to Banks and called for hard aport.

Banks swung the wheel over as far as it would go and watched for the instruments to show that the rudder was hard aport. But the ship didn't change course. Twice more Pelc repeated the order . . . each time the great ship continued its advance on the bridge.

There was now less than 300 metres to the bridge.

Pelc immediately rang through to the engine-room and ordered full astern. Water foamed at the ship's stern as the

by Jim Clarke

mighty propellers turned and tried to halt the mammoth's advance.

"Double full astern — drop both anchors," ordered Pelc, only to follow that with "triple full astern."

But the fate of the Lake Illawarra had been sealed. It had only minutes left to live.

Shipwright Graham Kemp, 28, got the order from his captain to drop both anchors. He sprinted to the fo'c'sle and dropped the port anchor.

At this stage the increased reverse thrust of the propellers bit into the Lake Illawarra's forward motion. A giant force was now pulling the ship backwards . . . but the effect was disastrous.

Responding to being drawn in two directions at once, the vessel's bow bobbed gracefully to starboard . . . and delivered a massive backhander to one of the bridge's pylons.

Kemp was in two minds what to do. He started to flee the fo'c'sle when he felt the ship punch the bridge. Duty overcame him. He raced back to the fo'c'sle and tried to drop the starboard anchor.

On the bridge, Captain Pelc and Helmsman Banks stared at each other. Banks broke the silence.

"Thank God it didn't hit hard . . ." he said.

Then he noticed the roadway was cracked in the middle and that all the electric wires on the bridge were sparking and fusing.

The impact surprised many off-duty crewmen.

Chief Officer Edward Condon, 63, thought the bump was from a tug coming alongside rather heavily. But it seemed too heavy for that, so he went out on deck.

Continued next page

LEFT: Survivors . . . after their ordeal.

FAR LEFT: Cars hang precariously over the end of the broken bridge . . . in the background is one of the many wharves along the Derwent River.

ABOVE LEFT: Up from the icy Derwent comes one of the cars that plummeted from the shattered bridge.

There he met the second officer, who said: "We've hit the bridge."

Condon made his way quickly to the ship's bridge. Pelc was there, standing on his own by the door.

The captain pointed at the arch of the bridge and said to Condon: "Eddie, that arch is going to fall on top of us."

"If that bridge is going to collapse we had better get off the bridge," Condon replied.

Seconds later 7000 tonnes of roadway and concrete crashed more than 30 metres on to the fo'c'sle. Graham Kemp, still there trying to release an anchor, was crushed.

The Lake Illawarra started to sink quickly, then stopped. Many thought her bow had settled on a mudbank. But they were wrong. She had 10,000 tonnes of ore in her and it was just a matter of settling.

Chief Engineer Max Dalton heard someone yell that the ship was going down. Quickly he scrambled forward to get on deck — but went the wrong way and ran into a wall of water.

"Abandon the lifeboat . . ."

The seething, frothing water swept him backwards down a corridor until he managed to cling to some stairs. These led to the deck.

He was on deck without a lifejacket. He grabbed hold of another seaman who had one and the pair jumped over the side.

Able Seaman John Bush had a lucky escape. He was swept off the deck of the sinking ship and washed to one of the bridge pylons. He hung on until picked up by rescuers.

Edward Condon, with the help of several other seamen, was hard at work trying to launch the ship's lifeboat. Already about half the ship's crew of 42 had jumped overboard and were swimming to safety.

About 20 seamen, including the captain, got into the lifeboat. But it wouldn't release from the rapidly sinking ship.

Condon then gave an order to abandon the lifeboat.

Condon stepped out of the lifeboat and back on to the ship just as it disappeared beneath the waves.

He surfaced shortly after and was surprised to find the lifeboat there. It had floated free at the last moment. He scrambled back on board and was taken safely ashore.

Away in the windows of Montagu Bay homes, several people watched the ship sink.

Maurice Allan, who had watched the tragedy mount, saw the ship hit the third pylon. He then watched as the bridge collapsed on to the ship.

His son, Gordon, 20, was also watching. He saw cars collide on the bridge and plummet through the gap.

Frank Chamberlain also saw the concluding moments of the tragedy.

He was alerted to the accident when he heard loud machinery noises — probably the anchor being dropped. "Five seconds later there was a mighty crash; a clap of thunder we thought," he said later.

"It shook the whole house, it was so noisy."

He looked out over the Derwent and saw the ship sinking.

His wife shouted: "Look at the cars." The pair stood transfixed as three cars, with headlights burning, tumbled from the bridge into the water's blackness.

He was quick to act. He raced to his boat, launched it and spent more than three hours searching for survivors.

Soon after launching he saw three men and navigated alongside them. He dragged them aboard then saw a fourth man at his boat's stern.

He reached out to grab him, but the man slipped away.

Not all the drama was taking place in the water. High above the Derwent, car drivers using the multi-lane Tasman Bridge were having their own nightmare.

Frank Manley was driving his family home in their Monaro. Cresting the brow of the bridge he saw what he thought was a broken-down car on the side.

He slowed down a little. Then his wife screamed out: "The bridge has gone." It was too late. The car skidded over the end of the roadway and grounded on the edge of the enormous drop to eternity.

It stopped there . . . front wheels two to three metres (7-10 feet) over the drop. Carefully Frank eased himself and his family of three out of their two-door car, fearing that one false step would send car, and them, plummeting into the Derwent.

A little before them the same thing had happened to Murray Ling and his family.

Driving their old Holden station wagon, Mr. Ling suddenly noticed that the bridge had collapsed. He screeched to a halt, inches from the drop.

A following car, caught unawares by the unexpected stop, ploughed into the rear of Mr. Ling's car, pushing its front wheels over the breach.

He, too, eased himself out of the car, then stood there horrified as two other cars raced past and hurtled over the edge into the icy river.

By morning the picture was grim.

The bridge stood with spans missing — looking more like it was in the throes of construction rather than demolition. The only real hint of the disaster came from the cars perched precariously at the drop.

The police were perturbed. They had factual sightings of two cars plunging into the river. They felt it could be four, and some witnesses had indicated that there could be as many as 11 on the river bottom.

"We can only rely on reports about people who had not arrived home by late night," said the police.

"But should a whole family be in any of the cars then there would be nobody to report it," they despaired.

Inspector Roy Briscoe of the police communications office said that had the accident happened other than on a Sunday night as many as 50 cars could have been on the affected span.

"We will have to wait until the teams of 10 navy and five police divers have covered the area," he said glumly.

Hobart people found themselves in a divided city, as people tried to get to work.

About a third of Hobart's 140,000 people live in dormitory suburbs on the east shore. For them, the Tasman Bridge was the only link with the city proper.

Now that was gone.

They had no hospitals, emergency services or industries on the east side. Just a few corner shops.

People quickly organised emergency ferry services. A call went out to Sydney to supply some of its ferries to Hobart.

But two of them were condemned as unseaworthy shortly after their arrival.

Down in the river, the diving teams were working in appalling conditions at depths up to 35 metres (115 feet). By early afternoon, four divers had been forced to leave the water for fear of getting the "bends".

Apart from working at extreme depths, the divers had to contend with almost no visibility, a silt river bed and enormous chuks of concrete and rubble from the bridge.

It was necessary for them to feel their way hand over hand along the sunken objects.

Their first attempts at finding any survivors trapped in possible air pockets in the Lake Illawarra failed. So did their efforts at finding any of the death-dive cars.

But they did find the bodies of five crewmen and driving licences and other items to indicate that cars had plunged off the bridge.

Equally alarming were reports that the remaining bridge structure was unsafe. It was "moving visibly all over the place," police said.

The tragic toll mounted some days later when the first of the toppled cars was found. In it were the bodies of Anthony Sward, 28, and his wife Pamela, 26.

Police divers reported that they had sighted a second car about 200 metres east of the Swards' car. In it, they said, appeared to be the bodies of a man, a woman and a small family.

When police divers returned to the site the following morning, they found the previous night's tide had shifted their marker.

It took them three days to relocate the car . . . and found a third car nearby.

On January 11 they pulled the crushed car containing the body of Mr. Bob Rezek out of the water.

At the same time they tried to recover another car, but as they were lifting it from the silt-laden river bottom, the rear suspension, rear wheels and exhaust system parted from the main chassis.

Two days later they recovered the rest of the vehicle, and the remains of Joyce Stokoe, 60.

One other person was obviously missing — Dr. T. Jones.

The death toll now stood at 12.

All attention now shifted to the Court of Marine Inquiry.

Painstakingly, all factors in the disaster were pieced together. Witnesses were questioned and cross-examined,

engineers reported on the bridge's design.

Although the piers either side of the main shipping channel had special zones designed to withstand a blow from a 20,000 tonne ship travelling at nine knots, no other pier on the bridge had been specifically strengthened to withstand a blow from a passing ship.

"It would make the cost of such a bridge prohibitive," the experts thundered.

"What about the people in the engine room?"

The inquiry revealed a startling lack of appreciation of the disaster among the ship's crew.

No warning that the ship was sinking had been given to the ship's engineers — men who worked below the decks.

Off-duty Engineer Royce Davies was originally told that a tug had rammed the Lake Illawarra. He and several other seamen immediately ran up on deck to see what had happened.

He saw the ship's bow hard against one of the bridge pylons and raced back to his cabin to get overalls and a torch to help out with the pumps.

When he returned to the deck, the ship's bow was under water. He then grabbed a lifejacket and was preparing to abandon ship when he heard a crew member remark about the people in the engine room.

It was traditional on sinking ships for the below-deck crew to be told to abandon ship by either six short blasts followed by one long one on the ship's siren, or by ringing "finish off engines" through engine room.

The engine room telegraph still read "full astern".

Davies raced to the engine room and yelled to the crew to get out. "The ship is sinking," he shouted.

They just stood and looked up at him. So he shouted his message again.

This time the message got through and the engine room staff bolted up the steps.

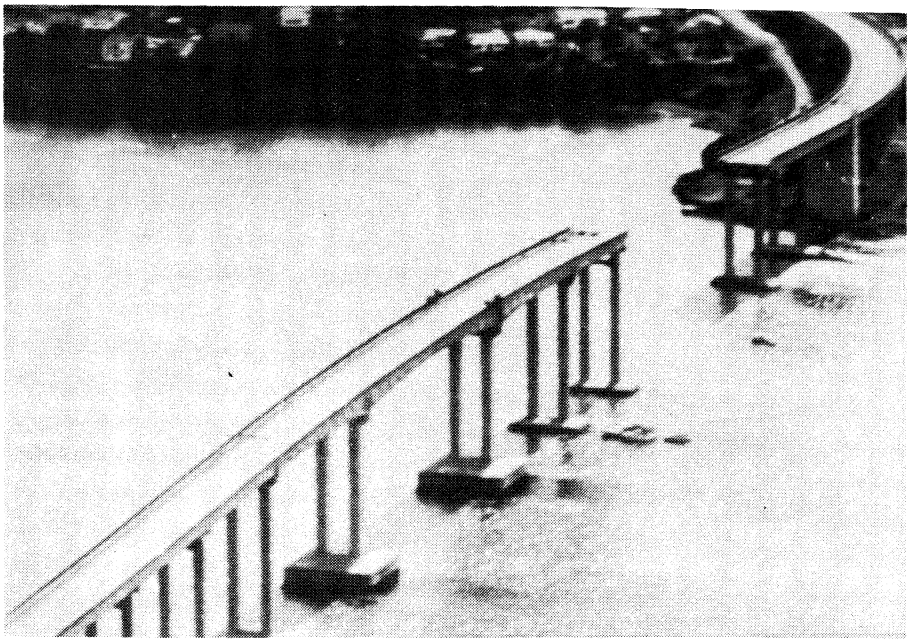
Not only the crew and the captain came under fire at the inquiry, even the ship's insurers came in for some venom from counsel for the maritime unions, Mr. A. R. Rowlands.

He contended that the Australian National Line's counsel was really representing the interests of London-based insurers in trying to "shop" the captain so that the insurers — whom he called the "gnomes of Threadneedle Street" — could take advantage of an 1894 Act allowing a ship owner to limit his liability to a very small sum if the blame could be laid on the captain and crew.

Similarly attacking the ship's owners, The Australian National Line, Mr. H. E. Cosgrove, QC, for the Tasmanian Government, described the Lake Illawarra as a "modern dreadnought, set loose on the seas by an administration whose methods and procedures are still based on clippers and whalers."

At the end of April the inquiry released its findings.

Careless navigation by the captain of the Lake Illawarra was found responsible for the ship's loss.



ABOVE: The shattered Tasman Bridge . . . under the missing section lies the Lake Illawarra, while two spans to the left is the shipping lane with its specially re-inforced pylon bases.

Captain Pelc's certificate of competence was suspended for six months — although suspension was backdated to January 30 when the inquiry started.

Sir John Spicer, chairman of the inquiry, said that there was no evidence to show that Captain Pelc had been an incompetent master, other than through his actions which led to the collapse of the bridge.

"On the contrary," said Sir John, "other than in this event, Captain Pelc has been a qualified and competent master."

He added that Pelc had been an honorable man and an honest witness.

He said that the inquiry felt the prime cause for the disaster was when the captain ordered the ship's speed to be increased.

The initial change of directions took the ship to the west of the navigation channel under the bridge, and when the captain ordered the helmsman to correct this, the ship came too far to the east.

The skipper then went through a series of orders to come into line with the navigation arch, but by this time the ship was going too slow and had lost steerageway.

This left the ship out of control when about two ship's lengths (300 metres) from the bridge.

The skipper then ordered hard aport, full astern, double full astern and drop both anchors.

This resulted in swinging the ship's bow to starboard, where it collided with the bridge pylon.

Captain Pelc was philosophical about the inquiry's findings.

They were more or less what he expected, he told reporters.

He said he was prepared to return to work as a ship's master on the Tasmanian run and would have no worries captaining ships trading with Tasmanian ports.

"But if at any time I go back to Hobart, I'll take a pilot with me and let him worry about the bridge," he said.

"I understand ANL holds nothing against me and I will be given a ship . . ."

He continued by saying that he did not believe the bridge disaster would cause concern to any officers and crew he might control in the future.

"I am eager to get back to the sea," he added.

"All my life I have dealt with facts, and now I know the facts from the inquiry, I can handle them.

"I have been at sea for 40 years and it has always been a cruel sea, no matter what people say. It's a tough profession."

No matter what Captain Pelc thought about his return to seafaring duties, it was not to be.

In late November 1975 it was revealed that Captain Pelc had been retired by the ANL.

Now, as Hobart set about joining itself together and healing the scars, the hidden-from-view Lake Illawarra was not allowed to rest in peace.

Its fuel oil was heated and pumped out of the wreck to stop possible pollution. And when they came to rebuild one of the smashed piers they had to cut off the ship's bow to get working space.

With the ship so close to one of the new piers, few were willing to give it any chance to have a role in a new tragedy.

Salvage had been ruled out of the question, but there was a possibility that the ship could move with the exceptionally strong underwater currents that cropped up from time to time around the bridge piers.

Special electronic monitoring devices were fitted to the ship's hull in July 1976 to detect any shifting of the vessel's carcass. The sensitive devices can record movement of 0.5 mm.

Bridge restoration officials firmly believe the Lake Illawarra will not move — mud is gradually filling the ship.

But after the disaster and distress the ship caused in January 1975 no one is prepared to give it any chance of repeating history.