

# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

SPECIAL  
PICTORIAL  
SECTION



# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

EVERYONE knew there would be a serious train accident near Sydney . . . and many thought it would involve a Blue Mountains commuter train.

Clairvoyants in January 1976 had warned that about the middle of January 1977 a train from the Blue Mountains would be in a horrific accident near Sydney . . . but few took the warning seriously.

Regular travellers did, though. Commuter associations peppered the New South Wales Public Transport Commission with complaints about trains and their rough riding . . . and warned that they felt an accident likely.

Despite all the warnings, when the big crash came and the 6.09 met its doom . . . on January 18, 1977 (just past the middle of the month) . . . no one was prepared for the death and devastation that came with it.

Commuter trains have regular clientele and the 6.09 from Mount Victoria was no exception. From a start high in the lush coolness of the Blue Mountains by the time the train reached the suburbs proper, nearly 600 people crammed the wooden carriages for a fast ride through Sydney's western suburbs before being delivered at the city proper for a day's work.

But on the Tuesday that driver Edward Olenczewicz, 52, eased his eight-carriage train out of Mount Victoria station for the run to Sydney, a different form of deliverance was in store.

By Penrith, start of Sydney's suburban sprawl, the train was well filled . . . there was space for 604 passengers. The train now ran express to Sydney but for one more stop — at Parramatta — and this made it even more popular with people from those two stations who overlooked the old-style carriages and crammed in regardless.

At 8.09 the train moved out of Parramatta station and started picking up speed around the long, sweeping S-bend to Granville. Speed limit for trains on this section was 80 km/h (50 mph) and Driver Olenczewicz shut off power as the speed reached 78 km/h.

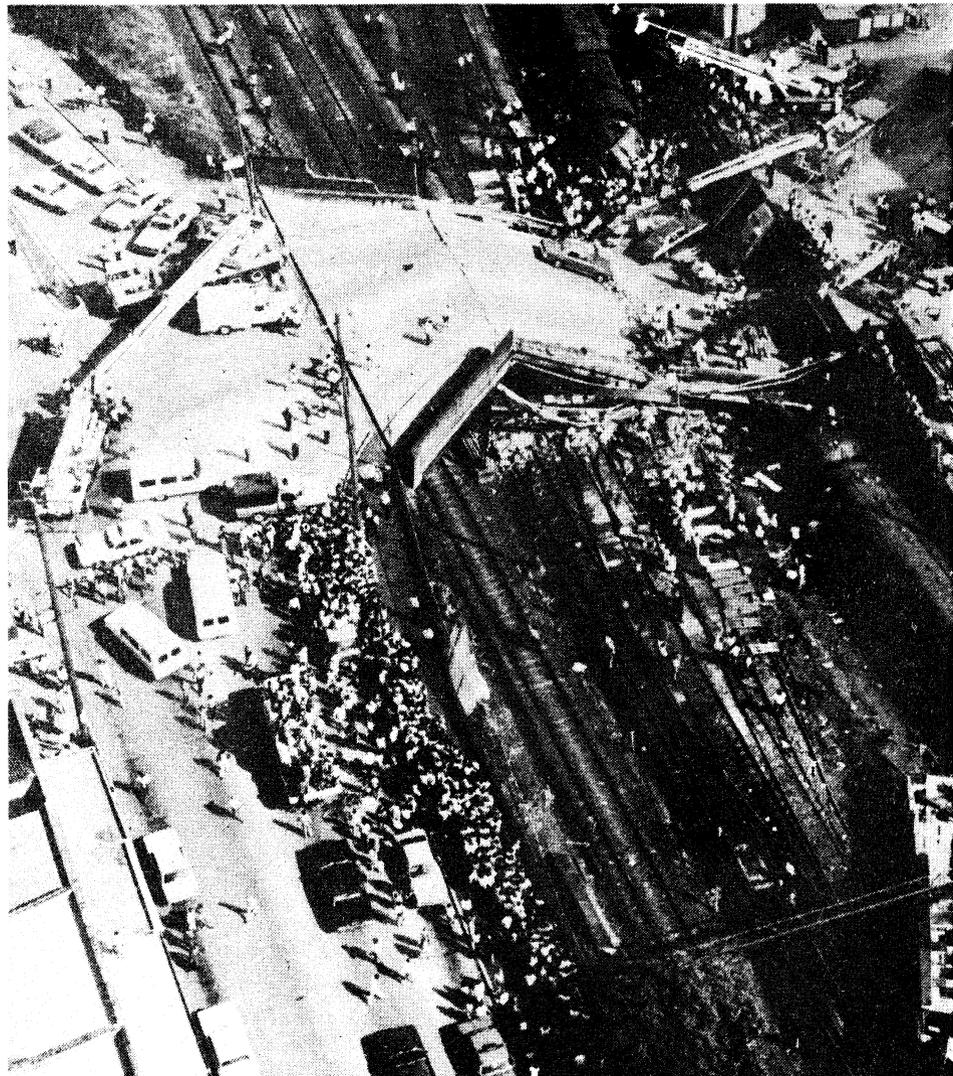
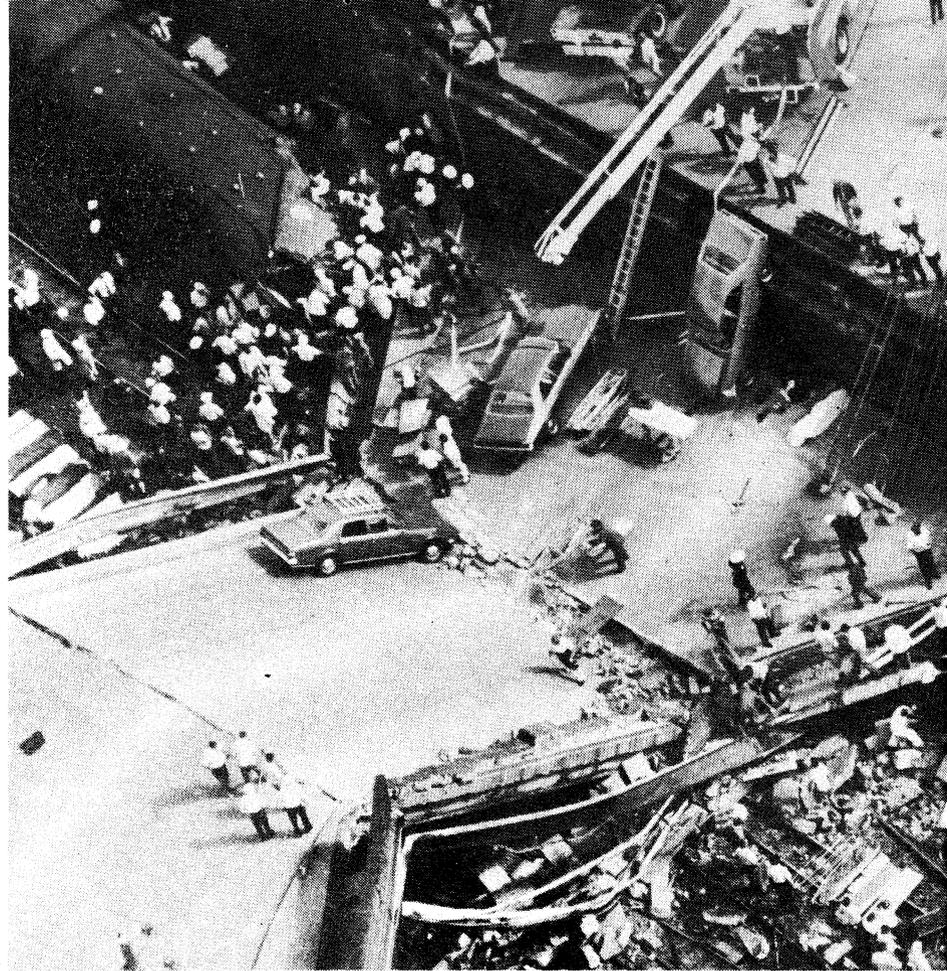
At this point, lines from Liverpool joined the lines from the Blue Mountains . . . a little way ahead lay Granville station.

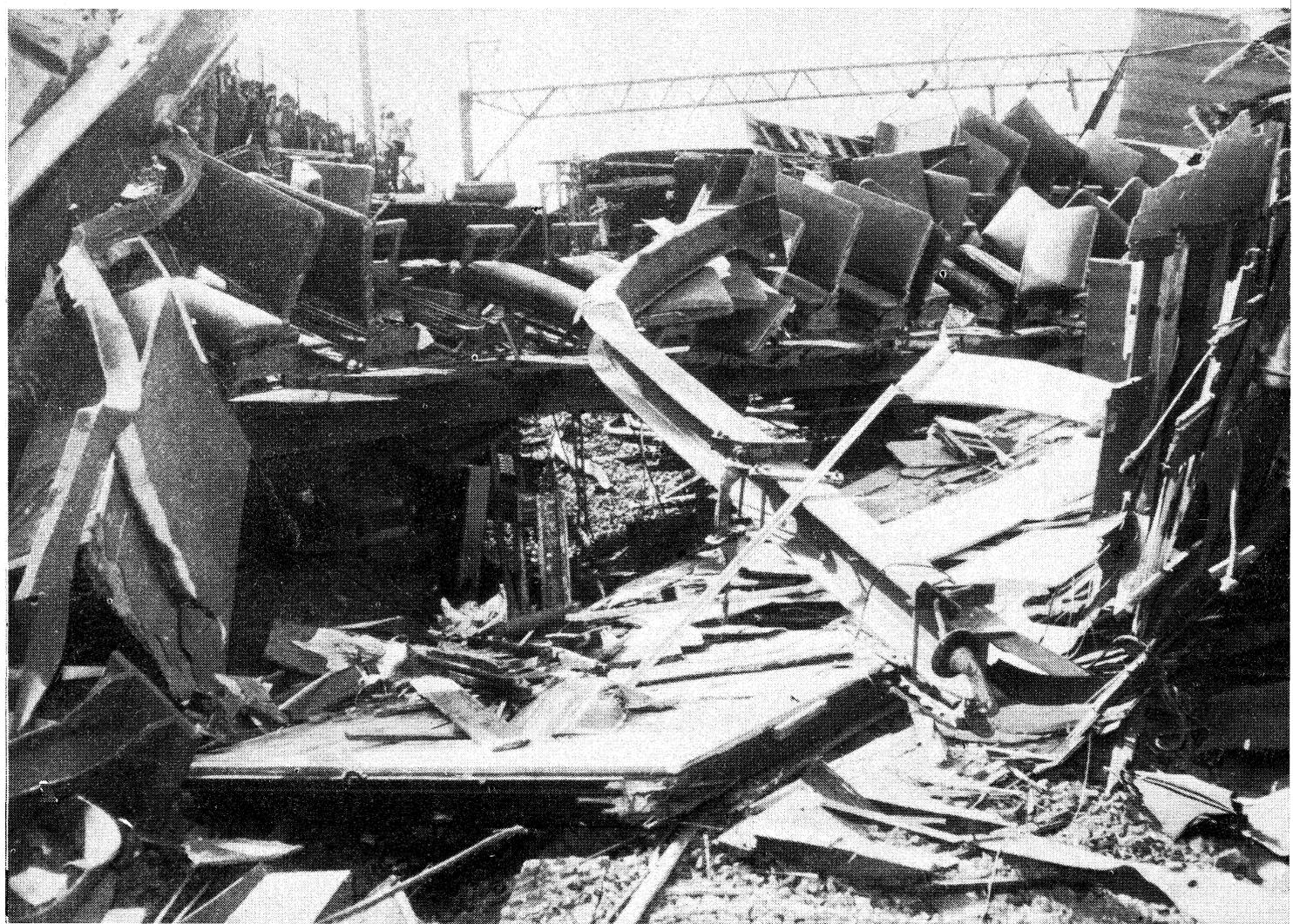
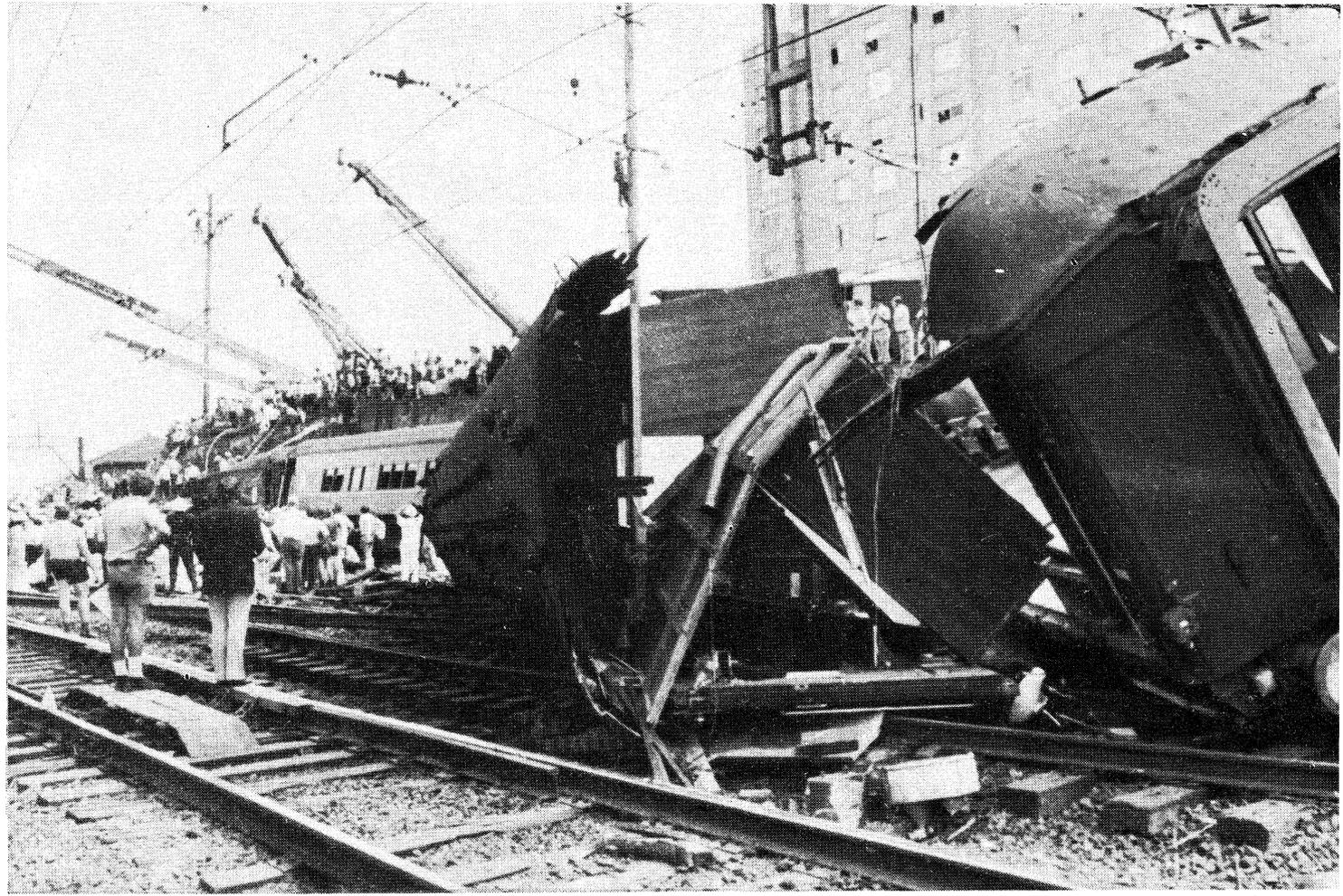
Suddenly Olenczewicz heard a loud bang. His reactions were quick. Fearing a broken rail under his heavy locomotive, he applied the brakes for an emergency stop.

But the locomotive tilted . . . then careered toward the Bold Street bridge. It was off the lines — no one could control it now.

On board the train, the passengers felt nothing unusual. Noise at this point was not unusual . . . and some of the regulars always looked out for something to hang on to as the train straightened up for the run to Granville.

Those in the first carriage knew something was wrong though . . . dust





# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

was flying through the air and they could hear an unusual noise.

They then heard the locomotive hit the bridge stanchions followed by their carriage. The roof peeled off and the 40-tonne carriage was flung sideways.

Several people saw the accident. They saw the locomotive spear out from under the bridge then roll on to its right side and skid along the lines for 66 metres (220 feet). And they saw the wreckage of the first carriage slew to the side. Signalman Davis at the junction signal box saw the derailment and immediately put 13 signals back to danger and raised the alarm.

Davis then heard an enormous "whoomph" and looked out to see a scene of devastation. The Bold Street bridge had collapsed on to the train . . . completely crushing to seat level parts of the third and fourth carriages.

Inside those two carriages were 141 passengers . . . 73 of them had just been killed!

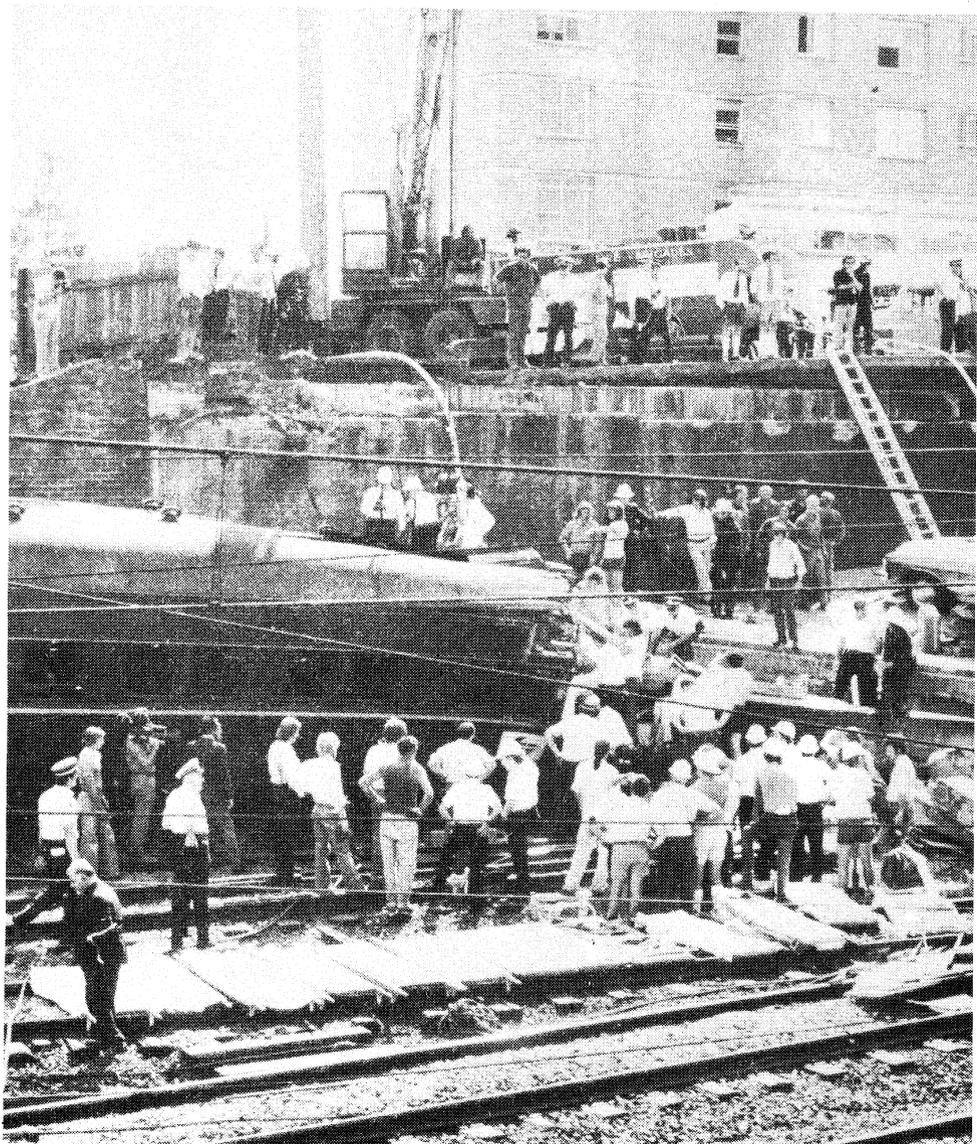
Nearly 11 hours later the last survivor would be prised from the wreckage and rubble — and more than 24 hours on the last shattered body would be recovered.

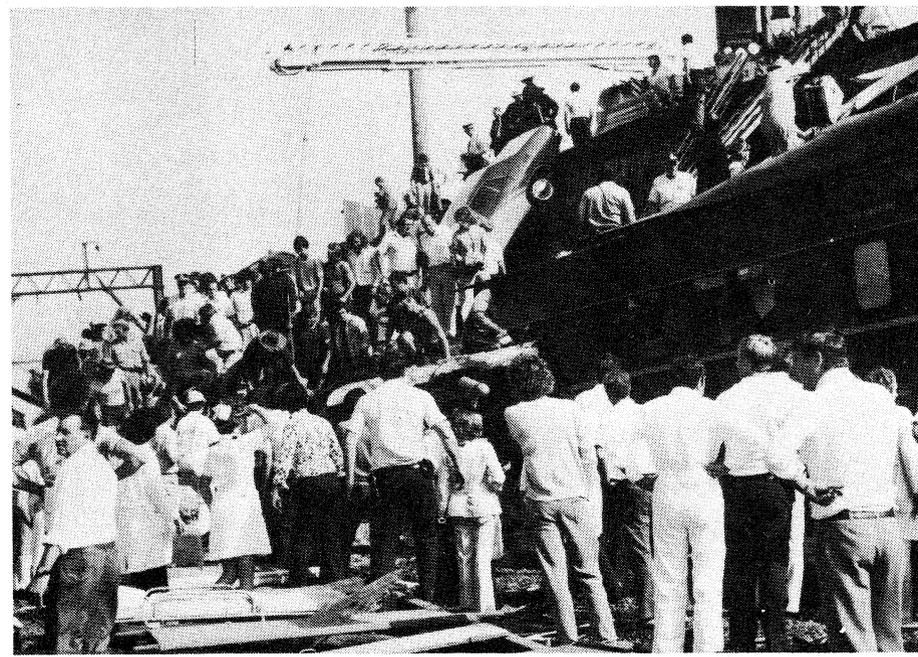
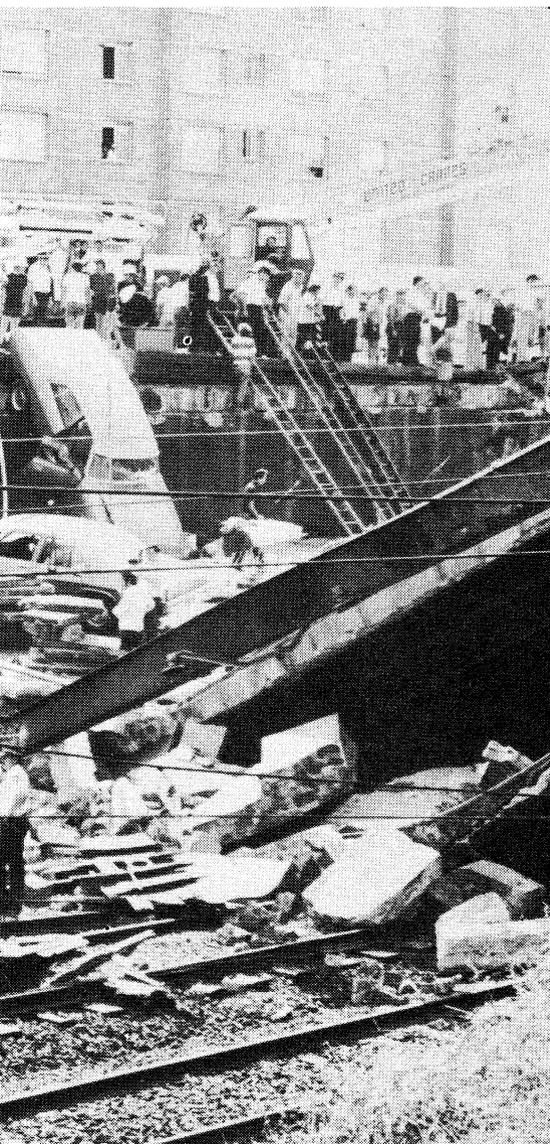
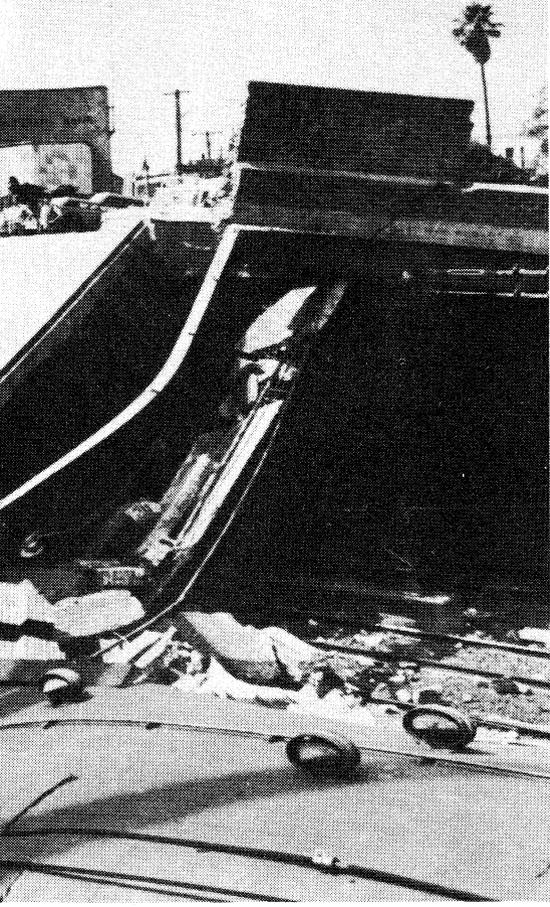
Late, the figures would show that Australia's worst-ever railway accident had claimed 83 lives and injured another 83.

In an editorial, the national newspaper *The Australian* commented: "The tragedy at Granville is inevitably the major thought in Australians' minds this morning. The horror of a train crash is somehow a more personal and a more chilling thing than the instant disasters which can strike people in airliners, dramas which occur at sea or the steady attrition on the roads. On top of the tragedies to those who lost their lives or who were maimed, Granville has the peculiarly horrific dimension of catastrophe intruding at a blow into everyday lives: the commuter train suddenly struck with shattering disaster, people wiped out en masse in the course of the entirely ordinary pursuit of just going to work.

"Once the disaster occurred, people behaved marvellously — as people almost invariably do in the face of outrageous catastrophe. Hundreds of men and women slaved without limit in the attempt to aid the victims on the line, without thought of the risks involved, and some were injured — at least one seriously. The queues of Sydney people who came to give blood to the depleted blood banks stretched several blocks outside the hospital donor station. That is one shining sidelight worth recording in the dark annals of the disaster.

"But the particular nature and context of the Granville crash poses serious and disturbing questions. The rail unions have complained repeatedly over the years about the safety standards of track and rolling stock on the NSW Government system. NSW had an election last





# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

year in which these concerns — and associated complaints about general railway efficiency and standards of service — became a major issue. In the run-up to that election Mr. Cox, who was then Labor shadow Minister for Transport and now holds the ministry, said: 'It is now just a matter of time before we have a major disaster.' Those now prove sadly prophetic words."

Australia was shocked as word of the train disaster flashed out across the airwaves.

At the crash scene itself, the first rescue units were arriving within minutes to face an enormous tangle of concrete and steel, twisted carriages, a locomotive slumped on its side — and dozens of dead and injured people.

Unhurt passengers were nevertheless numbed by the experience, but they pitched in and helped right from the beginning, even before the doctors and ambulances arrived. Some hauled out injured friends and fellow passengers. Others just sat and comforted the bleeding victims.

Inspector Ray Williams, a policeman since 1944, was emergency co-ordinator. He was given the news at CIB headquarters in Sydney, about two minutes after the crash.

The emergency plan, developed for such catastrophies, was put into action and ambulances were at Granville within seven minutes. Big cranes were rolling in 10 minutes.

Inspector Williams spent a few minutes making important telephone calls for rescue units before leaving by car. Alerted by police radio to the enormity of the disaster, he called up a helicopter, which landed in a suburban park to pick him up.

He reached Granville at 9.05 am and was amazed to find many branches of the emergency services already there — among them doctors and nurses of the Sydney Medical Disaster Response Plan.

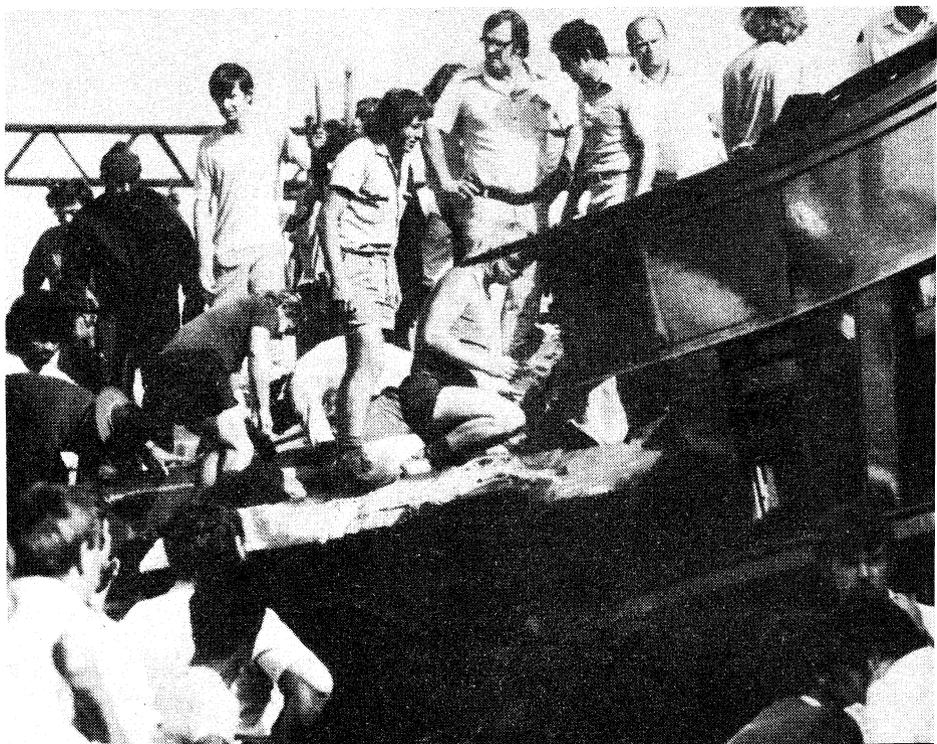
Among the first on the scene were two young Granville policemen, Constables Dennis Preston and Bill Cox, who were pulling out victims. So, too, were local residents, including the nearby newsgent.

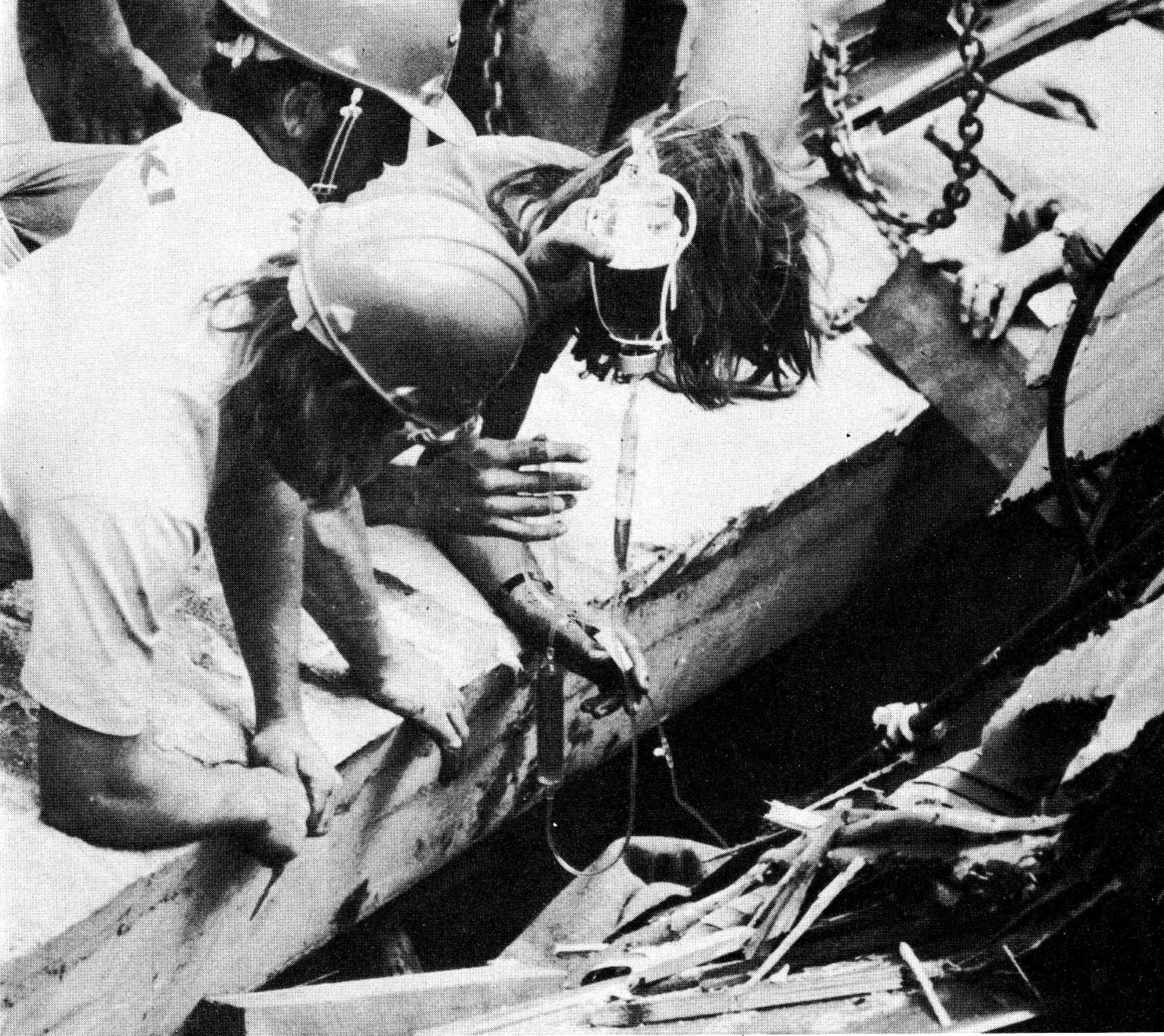
In the hell and chaos of the scene other people plunged into the shattered carriages pulling out the wounded and dazed, working alongside police, firemen, ambulancemen, nurses, doctors, Salvation Army men and women. The fresh white uniforms of nurses and doctors were soon covered in blood. Priests took off their collars, rolled up their sleeves and bled in.

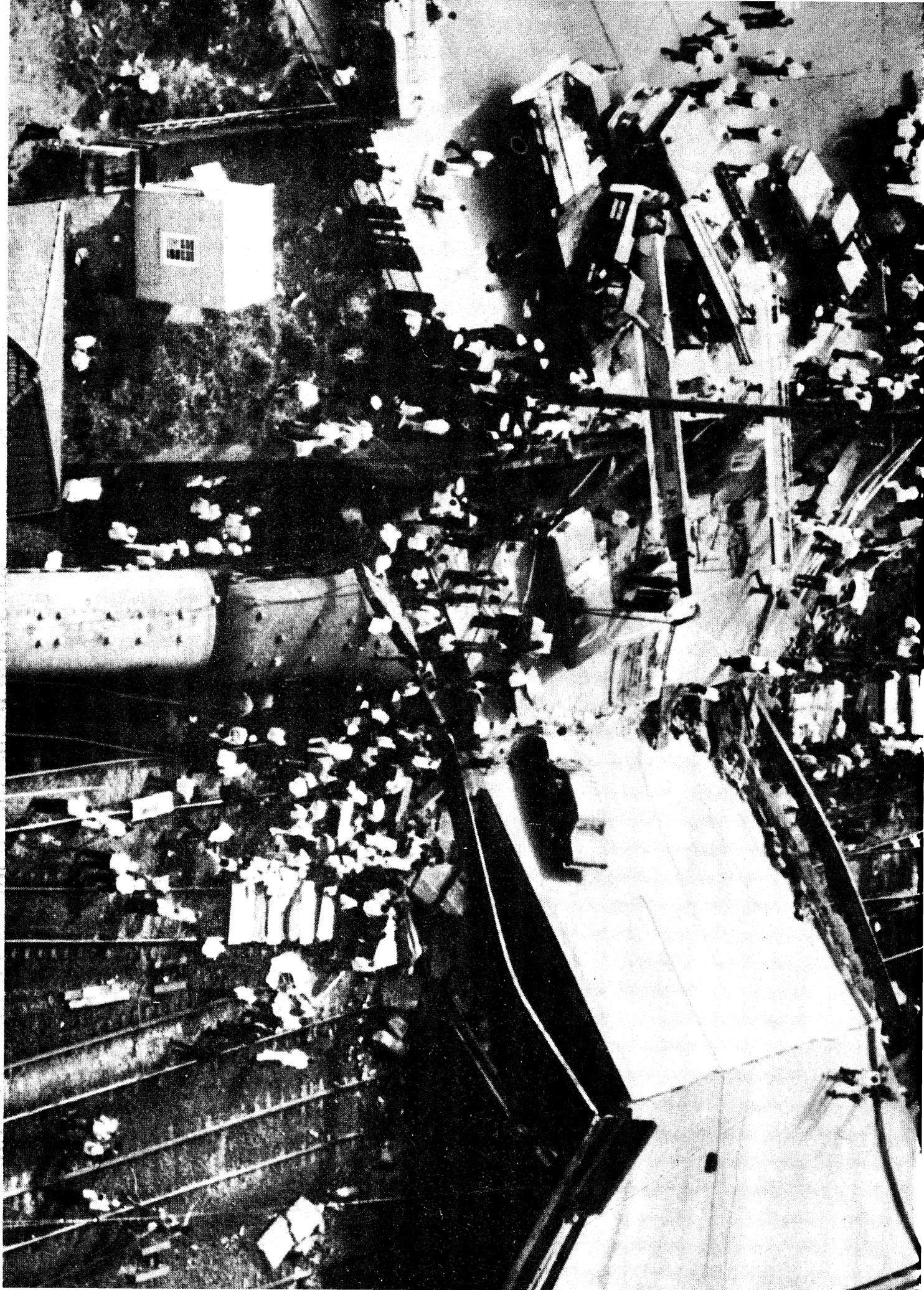
Meanwhile, in answer to urgent calls, thousands of Sydney workers and housewives queued outside the Blood Bank and mobile centres to give blood.

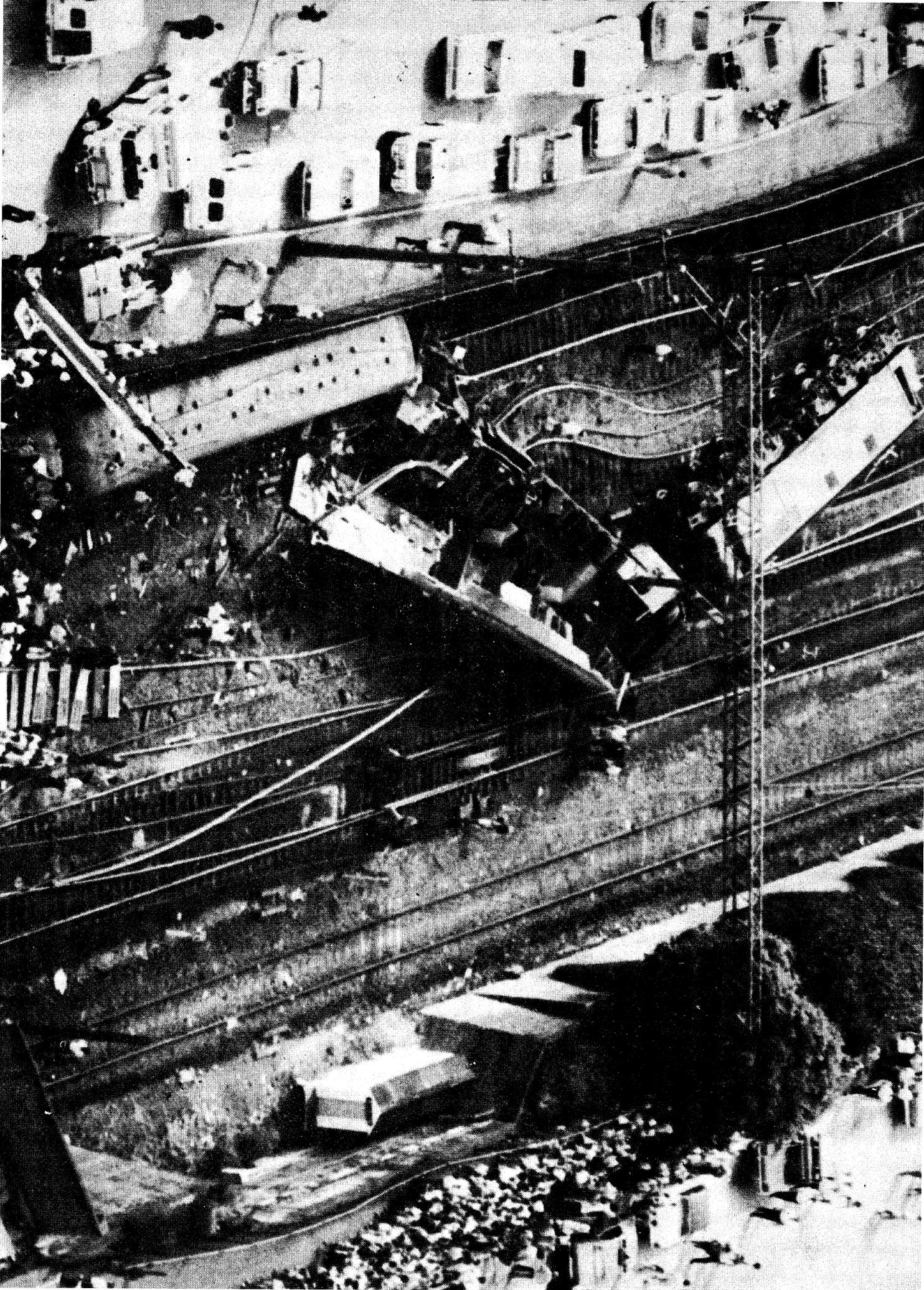
There were many stories of individual heroism at the crash scene.

Constable John Wilson, 27, was one man who risked his life in the rubble as the remaining section of the concrete









# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

roadway threatened to tumble down on the rescue workers at any time.

But his attitude was typical of those who worked untiringly at the site of Australia's worst train disaster: "I'm not a hero. That's what we are here for — to help people who need help," said the policeman afterwards.

Constable Wilson, however, defied danger to help a girl, in her late teens, lying injured and trapped amid the debris. He said: "There was a clearance of about 18 inches.

"To get her to I had to climb over dead bodies. That was the worst thing of all. The girl did not seem badly injured. She had a big chance of living — bigger than many people I dragged out that day.

"But a doctor came round and told me to get out of there because the concrete was being moved at the other end and could collapse.

"I told him that I was going to do what I wanted to do. She was alive. Why should I just leave her there to die? The slab had moved, but it had been moving all the time.

"We got her out, but I don't know which hospital she went to or what happened to her."

Inspector Williams said that some of the heroic acts of the rescue operation may never be known.

He said: "We have never produced so many heroes at one time and we have never needed so many heroes at one time.

"I am still amazed."

Inspector Williams said that some of the bravest people at the crash scene were doctors and nurses.

"There was one young nursing sister who went in under the slab — she was only small," he said.

"It took her about half an hour to get through because of the lack of space. We eventually managed to get power leads through. But if one light bulb had been broken, we would have had an explosion to cope with as well as a train smash, for there was gas leaking down there from the train's heating system."

Passengers on the death train later told their stories.

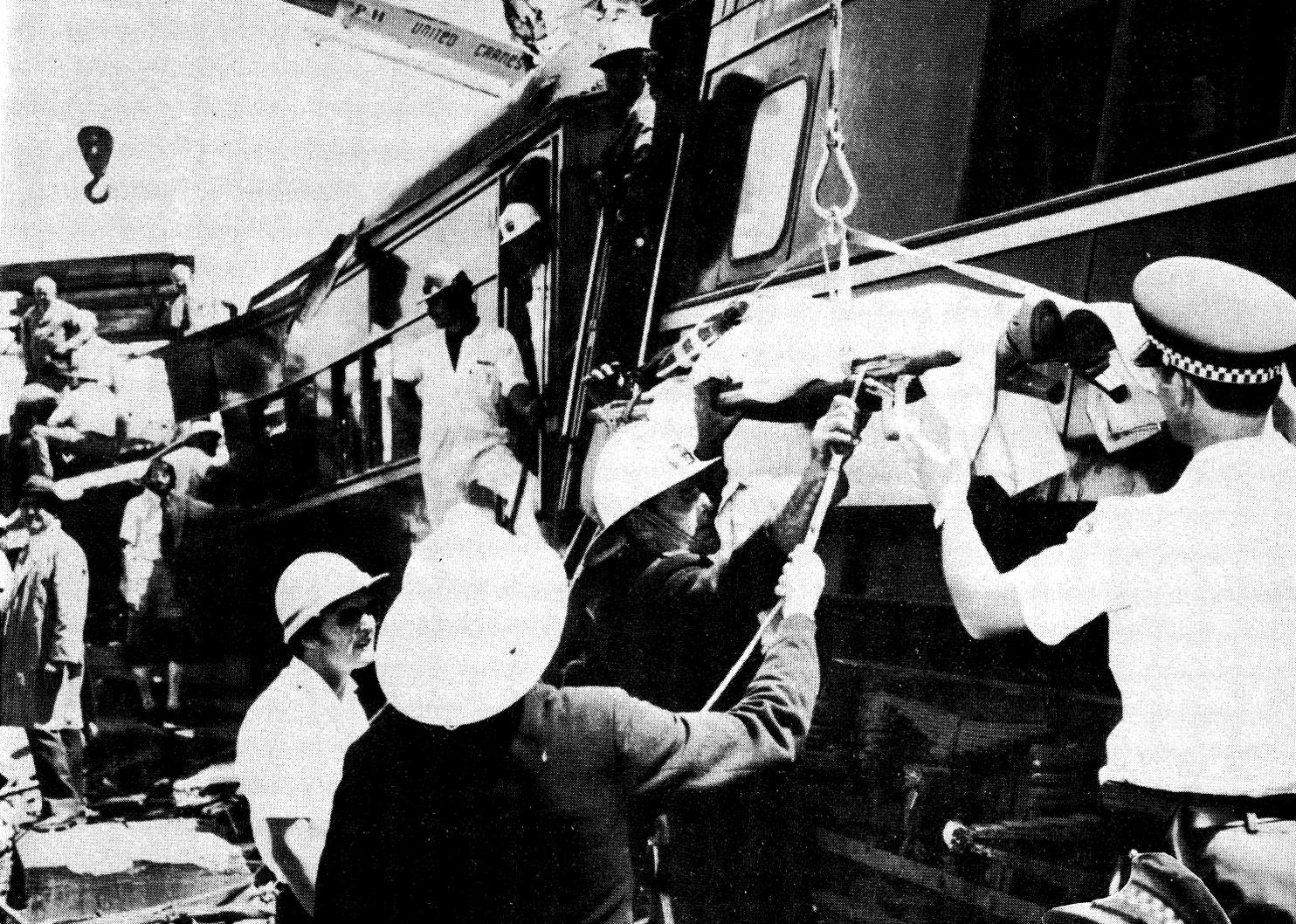
An engineer with the Department of Main Roads, Mr. Martin Richard Haley, of Springwood, said he normally travelled in the third carriage, where dozens of people were crushed to death. But on January 18 he changed his seat to the first carriage because he had an appointment and wanted to be near the barriers when the train stopped.

Mr. Haley said that after the train was derailed and crashed he picked himself up, checked himself all over for injuries and although dazed began to look around the carriage to see what he could do to help other passengers.

"I could see the wreckage of seats, I could see injured and dead lying around the carriage," he said.

"A man was lying dead on top of





# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

another jammed between the seats at the rear of the carriage.

"The trapped man had a broken left arm and he was groaning and asking for the other man to be taken off him."

He also saw a young woman groaning and asking about her children and a middle-aged woman wedged between seats and unconscious.

Edgar Foster, of Warrimoo, a technical officer working at Sydney University, said that when the concrete pavement of the bridge fell the roof collapsed to 60 cm above his head.

Mr. Foster said he was riding in car three and the roof was down to seat level two rows behind him. Three rows behind him the roof was just above the floor and he could hear a woman calling out from that row.

"I tried to move the ceiling but I could not," he said.

"Outside I saw car one had both sides and the roof torn off and there were injured people in the car and on the track. I then went with another man to car three and tried to get a man out who was trapped in the fifth row where I could see the face of a woman beside him.

"We tried to get the man out but could not."

Mr. Vivian Gene Stewart, a factory hand, of Blacktown, said he was in the front toilet of car three when he heard a tearing, ripping sound followed by a loud bang.

"I opened the door of the toilet and came out and saw the concrete lying on top of the back of my carriage and it was all crushed down," he said.

"I saw a bald-headed man on the left side of the train still sitting in the seat, bent over with his head in his lap and the concrete on his back.

"He was gasping and turning blue in the face."

Mr. Stewart said he tried to pull the man out by the arms but could not move him. On the right side of the carriage he saw a woman's legs sticking out from under the concrete and also the leg and arm of a man who had been sitting next to her in a window seat.

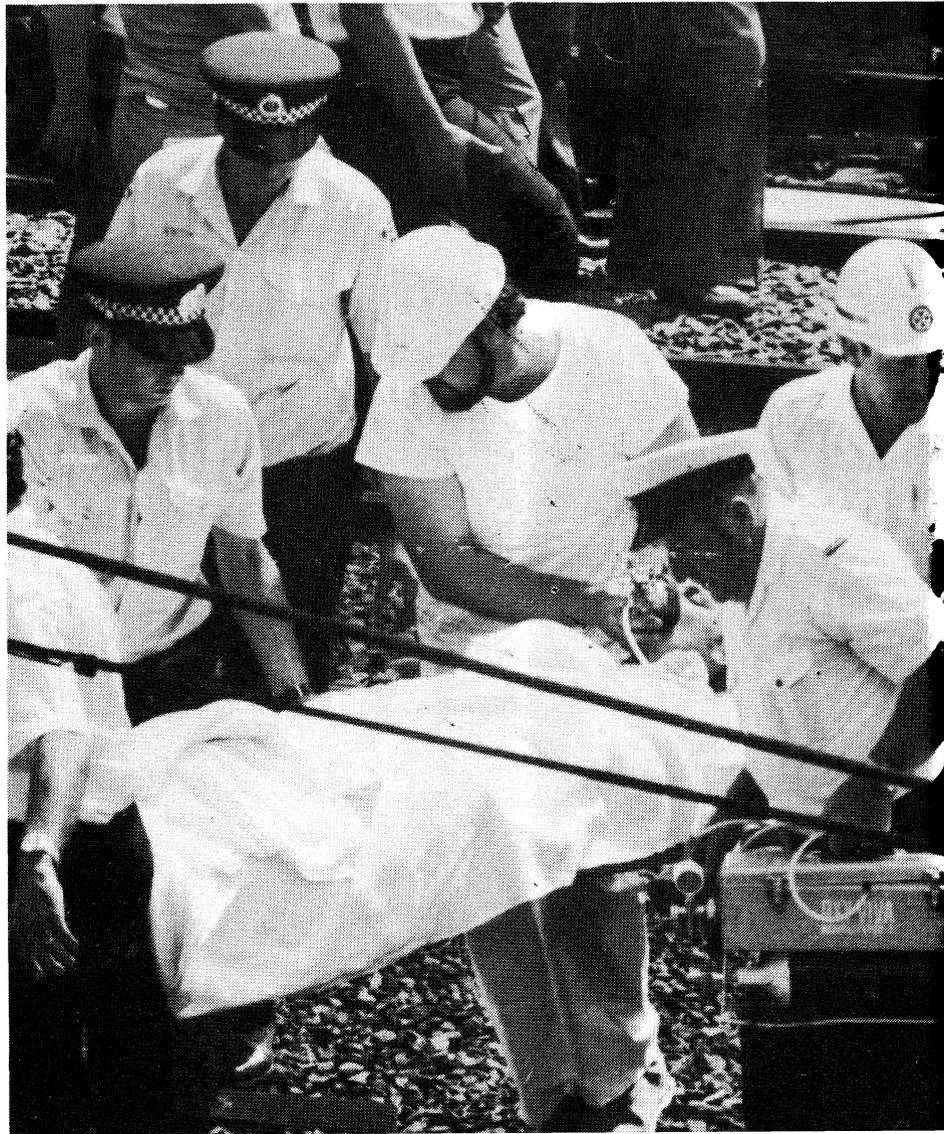
"I could hear a lady crying from under the concrete somewhere and then some moans and groans," he said.

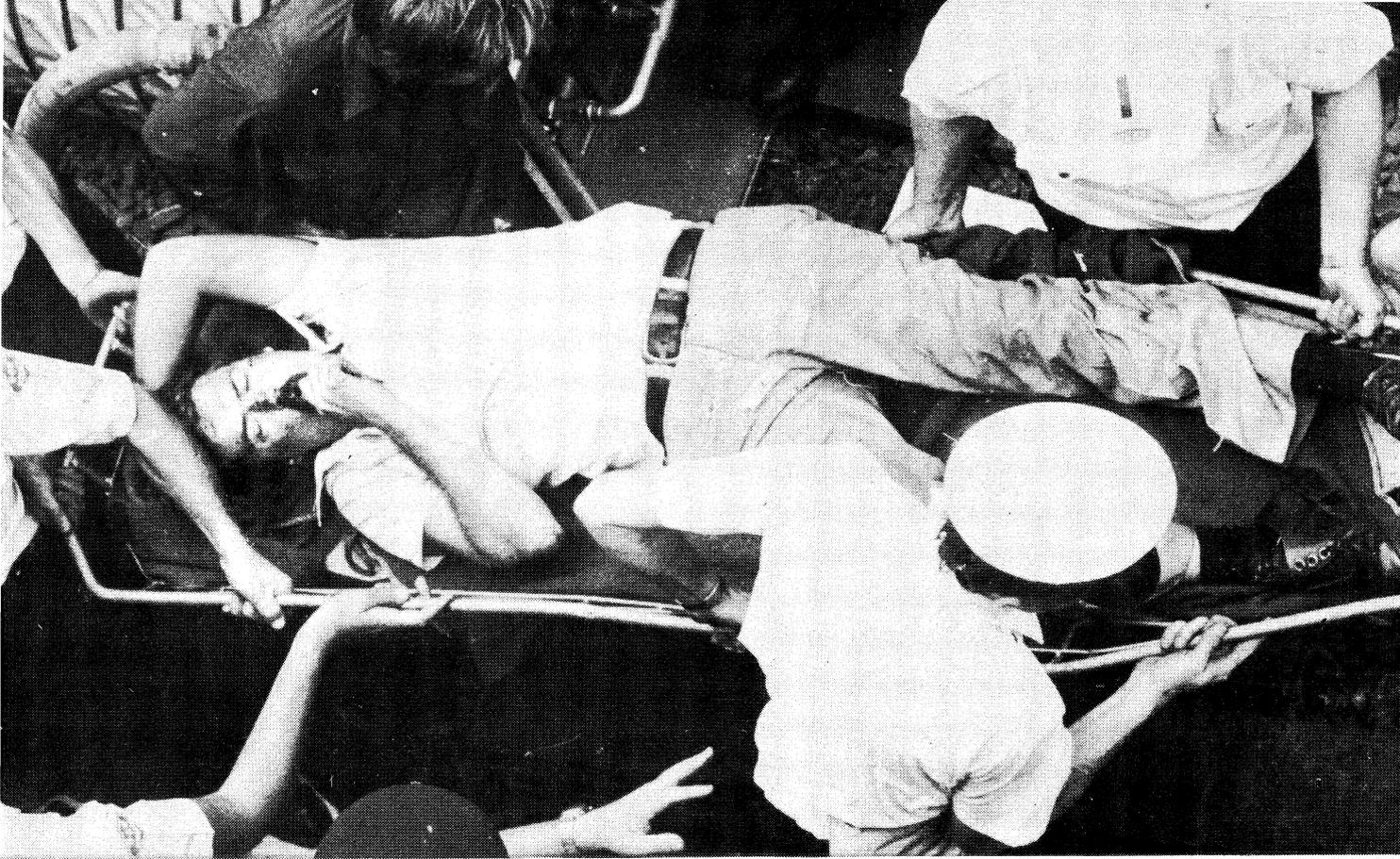
Apart from passengers in the train, people in cars were endangered, too. Several cars were crossing the bridge when the train brought it crashing down. Mrs. Beatrice Stevenson, an accounting machinist, of Granville, was driving over the bridge when cracks suddenly appeared.

She was unaware it had been hit by a train.

"I felt a shudder just as I turned from the southern side on to the bridge and I saw cracks in the brickwork and parapets," she said.

"I knew it was going to collapse and my immediate reaction was to accelerate and get over it. When I was about a third of the way across it started to





# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

disintegrate and the road fell away at an angle.

"I knew there was nothing I could do but go with it. I hit the bottom with a jolt. I hit my head on something and my knee hit the steering column.

"A few minutes later a man forced the door open and I got out."

Another witness, Mr. John Grant, a loader of Schultz St., Balmain, said he was watching the crash from his place of employment at Granville railway yards.

"I saw the bridge collapse on to the train and the overhead wires come down," he said.

"As the wires hit the rails sparks flew everywhere and they were alive with electricity."

All the survivors were out of the wreck by early evening, about 6.30 pm. It had been a long hard day. A few injured victims had been trapped beneath debris for hours and yet, remarkably, they maintained high spirits as rescuers worked frantically around them.

Doctors carried out amputations on the spot to save lives.

But even when the living were out, the search for the dead was to continue. It went on all night under lights, big cranes lifting concrete and other wreckage to reveal more horror.

Rescuers insisted on taking the wreck apart carefully so that bodies would not be further mutilated. It was 24 hours before all the dead were removed. With two deaths in hospital later, the toll reached its grisly climax of 83.

The only bright spot was that the community rallied so magnificently.

Sydney's Sunday Telegraph carried a story which said: "Sydney, normally brash and cynical, showed heights of greatness this week by opening up its big heart in response to the Granville train disaster."

Teenagers in jeans, unemployed workers, retired people, even those with relatives trapped in the wreckage, all came forward and pitched in to help.

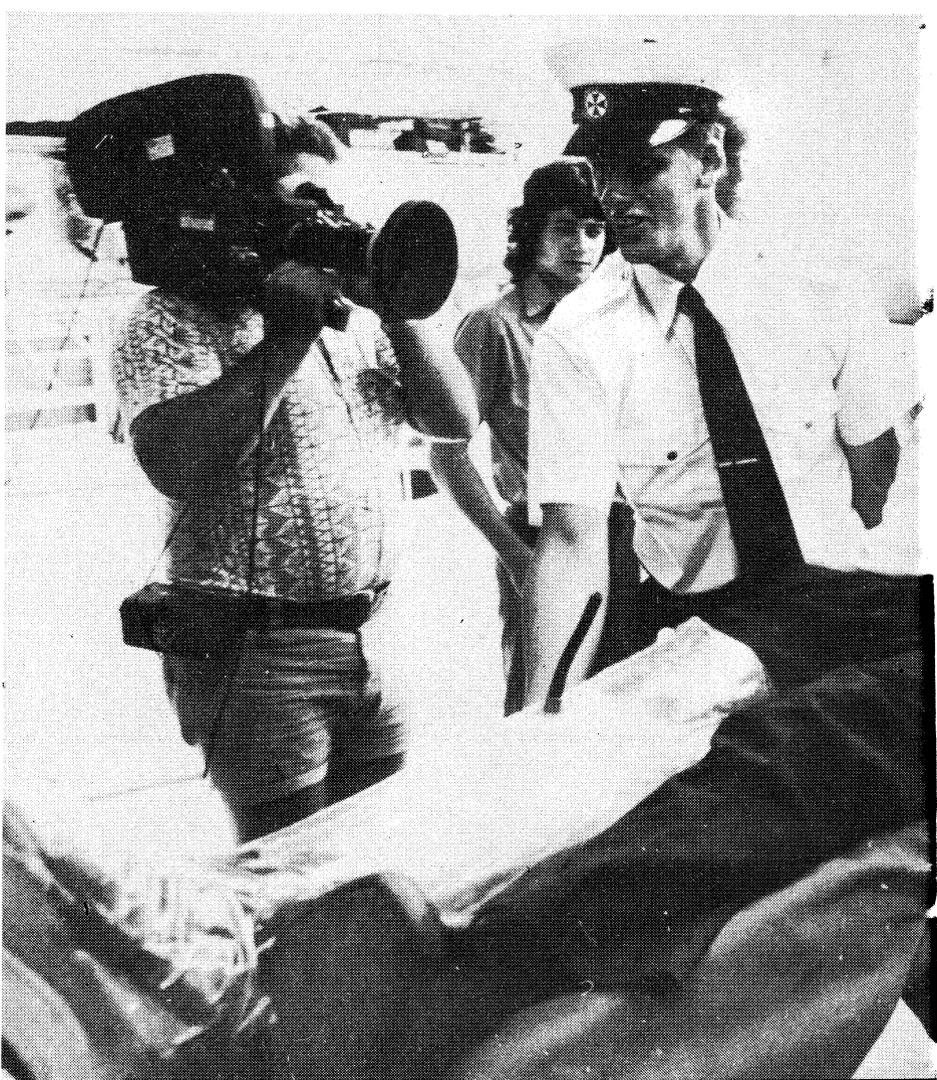
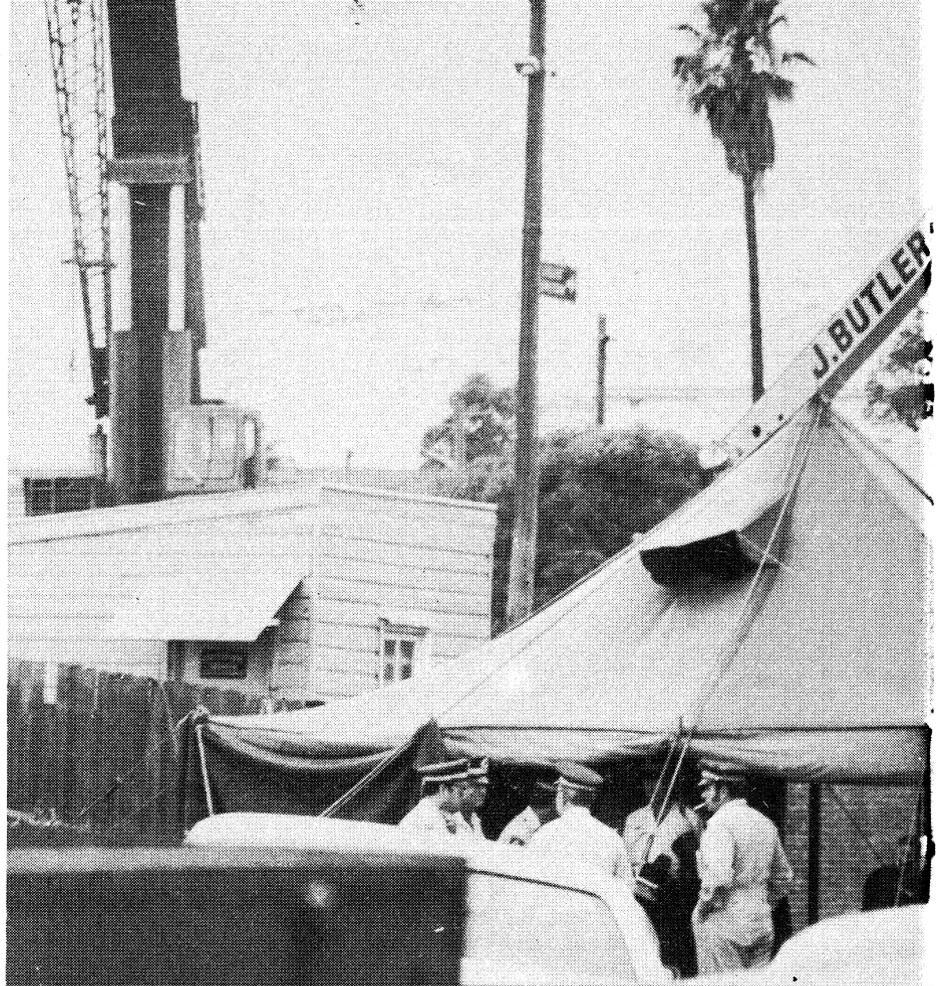
Sydney's response in the face of tragedy was so overwhelming that toward the end of the rescue operation organisers had to tell people they had enough help.

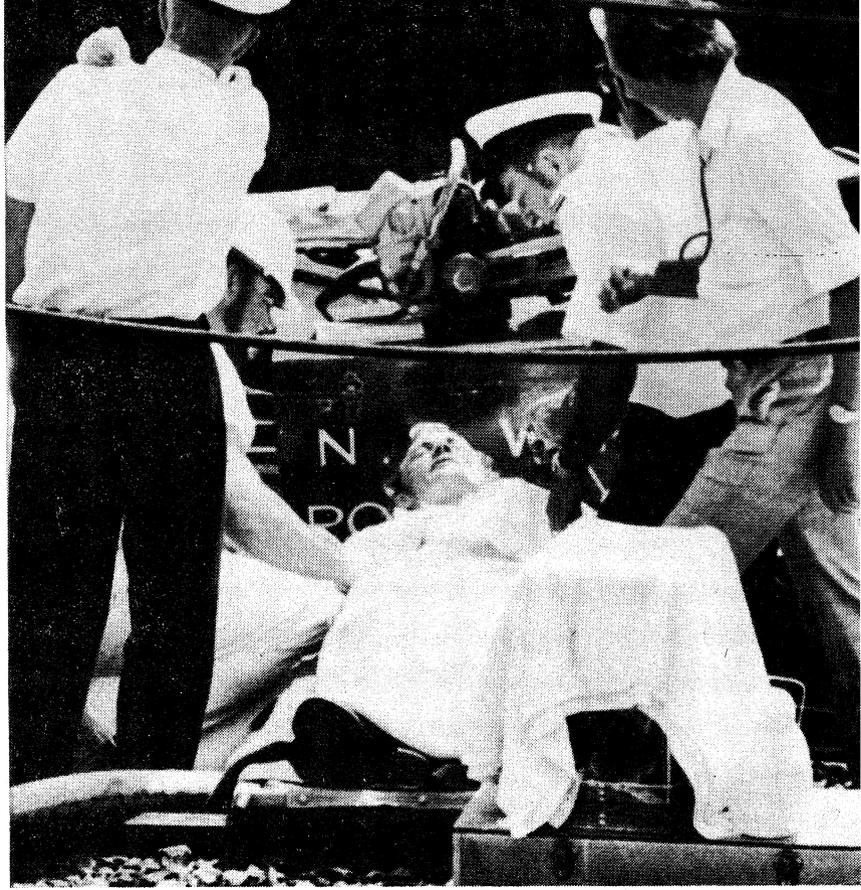
As rescuers began removing the last of the trapped bodies, there was only one major problem: too many helpers, too many offers of assistance. Police had the delicate task of turning away volunteers who had buried themselves in wreckage earlier in search of victims, trying to explain that was best left to the professionals.

Those who co-ordinated and carried out the rescue in the city's first real test of its new disaster plan were superb.

When Australia's worst rail disaster was cleared up 31 hours later, some organisers at the scene shook their heads in disbelief at the co-operation achieved at Granville and the incredible response of the public.

Inspector Williams saw it all at first hand. "I have never seen anything like





# THE 6.09 TO DOOM

it," he said. "Australians will do me after this.

"I don't know why, but a disaster like this seems to bring out the best in them.

"Young, brilliant fellows came forward quietly and unobtrusively offering good suggestions and special equipment.

"One was Ron Skoech, an engineer with Civil and Civic, who chaired our engineering conference on ways of removing hundreds of tonnes of concrete from the smashed carriages.

"There were others like him. They just came out of the crowd.

"No words could adequately praise the efforts of all who helped. Australians were very brave at this time. But some of the overlooked heroes were the passengers in the train. Those who were unhurt pulled out 70 of the injured passengers and were absolutely calm about it."

But after the smash and the horror and the official inquiries, there was still great sadness, sadness that must last lifetimes. For entire communities were affected, communities in the Blue Mountains, communities that had sent their workers off on the 6.09 to death.

The dead included fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and friends and . . . well, hardly anyone in the Blue Mountains area was untouched by this tragedy. The pain was bound to be felt long after the grisly details of the train wreck were forgotten.

Even after the official inquiry got under way, the people of Sydney were dissatisfied. This had been a tragedy that had to happen, said many of them, for the railway system had been neglected.

As the Sydney correspondent of the Melbourne Sun wrote: "The Granville train disaster is the legacy of more than 15 years of neglect and cut-price maintenance of the run-down Sydney rail system. It was a disaster that everybody knew would happen. If it had not occurred at Granville on Tuesday, then those tragic few seconds which have taken such a horrible toll of life would have occurred somewhere else."

The Australian's editorial continued: "No one can judge the precise cause of the Granville tragedy until an expert inquiry has taken place. But Granville was not an act of God. If the 6.09 from Mount Victoria was travelling around the fatal curve at its scheduled speed, and unless some inconceivable human error can be demonstrated, it has to be assumed that there was either an equipment failure or that the operational system allowed too little safety margin. In either case the safety standards of the NSW railways are in question.

"Very plainly, the NSW Government must now undertake the step for which it called when in Opposition but thought unnecessary when it took office: there must be not only a full inquiry into the specific crash at Granville, but a royal commission or an open committee of investigation into the whole subject of safety on NSW railways."



