

The Glenbrook Disaster

Inquiry will ask why InterCity ran a red signal

By KELVIN BISSETT and KIM SWEETMAN

THE judicial inquiry into yesterday's devastating crash will focus on why the 6.39am InterCity service from Lithgow ran a red signal at Glenbrook station.

With the rear of the 18-car Indian Pacific just a few hundred metres ahead around a blind curve, there was never enough time to stop a disaster from occurring.

Although less than 10 years old, the signalling on the city-bound track of the Blue Mountains line appears to have malfunctioned yesterday locking the lights on red.

When the Indian Pacific arrived at Glenbrook station on schedule shortly after 8am, it came up against a red light at signal 41.6.

The driver followed strict operating instructions waiting the specified 60 seconds before contacting Penrith signal box by radio. He was given permission to proceed with caution.

A further 1.3km farther down the track towards Lapstone station, the Indian Pacific stopped at a second red light at signal 40.8. Again Penrith signal box gave the driver permission to proceed with caution.

Passengers on the luxury cross-continental train, many enjoying a silver service breakfast, were told over the loud speaker system that signal problems were to blame for their delays.

Under safe working rules, trains may proceed slowly where there are signal problems.

Meanwhile, the Lithgow to Sydney service had arrived on time at Glenbrook station where passengers alighted and boarded the train.

The Glenbrook signal was still showing red when the train pulled out at 8.17am.

The train accelerated out of the station towards the 500m-long Indian Pacific which was travelling at walking pace on the same track towards Sydney.

As the Lithgow driver rounded a blind corner, he would have seen the rear carriage of the Indian Pacific, a vehicle transporter, less than 200 metres in front.

He left his cab, releasing the "dead man's handle".

Once he stopped applying pressure to the handle the engine's power would have been cut and emergency brakes applied.

The four-car InterCity train should be able to stop in about 100 metres on a level track in good conditions.

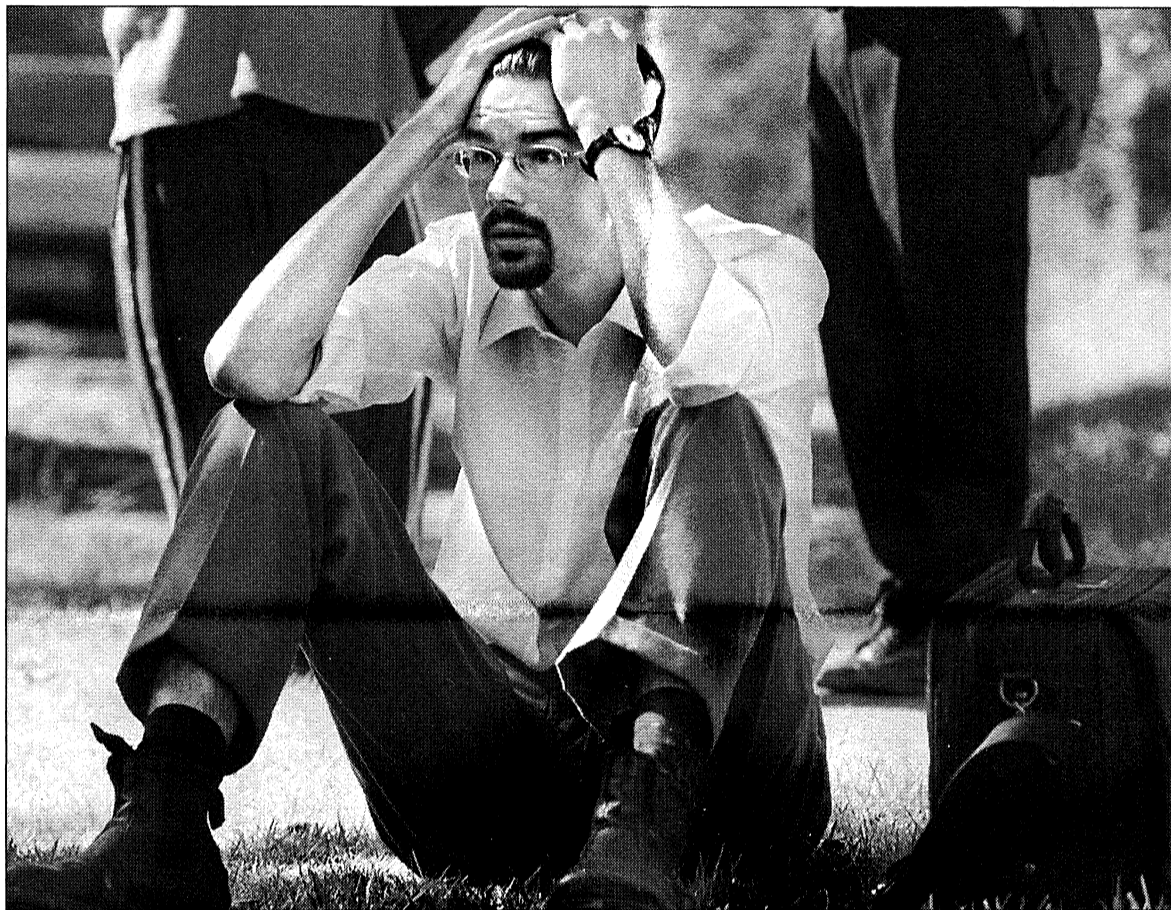
But the downhill gradient would have added considerably to the time it would have taken to bring the train to a halt.

State Rail sources confirmed last night there was no obvious reason for the Indian Pacific to be shown red signals. There were no trains ahead and no trackwork, indicating a signal failure.

When there is a malfunction, the failsafe system that backs up signalling automatically shows red signals.

State Rail chief executive Simon Lane said last night there appeared to be three facts that the inquiry would have before it.

Firstly, the guard on the Indian Pacific notified passengers the train would proceed with caution because of signal failure.



It all happened in slow-motion . . . survivors of the Glenbrook crash yesterday.

Picture: ADAM HOLLINGWORTH



Split open . . . the point of impact of yesterday's crash. Picture: DAVID HILL

Secondly, the signals were all showing red in the area, as they do when there is a signal malfunction.

And thirdly, there are standard operating procedures that must be followed when signals fail.

"The inquiry will have to look at all these facts and try to determine what happened," Mr Lane said.

He said a red light did not mean a train was stopped indefinitely because such a scenario would hold up the system.

After a minute, drivers can make contact with the nearest signal box and seek permission to continue "with caution".

The silver electric-powered V-set

InterCity train in yesterday's tragedy is the usual service on the Blue Mountains route.

Introduced in the late 1970s, it is popular with passengers because of its reliability and comfortable ride.

The 6.39am service departs Lithgow just nine minutes after the Indian Pacific leaves that station.

If the Indian Pacific is late, the 6.39am is held up too.

But even in these circumstances the signalling system should have kept the two trains apart.

And in yesterday's crash, it appears both trains were running on schedule.

Premier Bob Carr yesterday

warned against making judgments too early on what caused the disaster.

"I don't want to enter into this kind of speculation while emergency workers are entering the wreckage to see what they will find," he said.

Mr Carr gave an assurance that the inquiry by Supreme Court judge Peter McInerney would be open and independent.

His Transport Minister Carl Scully quickly dismissed any links to work on the Blacktown signal box due to start next week.

This essential work requires the shutdown of many train services across Sydney's west for nine days from Friday midnight.

But Mr Scully said this work was "completely unrelated" to the area in which the accident occurred.

He similarly dismissed Opposition claims in May 1998 of poor track maintenance in the area.

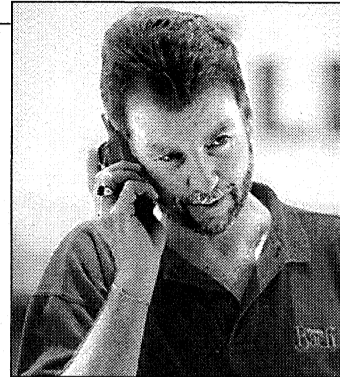
A spokeswoman later said the area where the accident occurred had been re-railed just 12 months ago.

The signalling system, too, was reasonably new, having been installed in 1990.

Australian Services Union assistant State secretary George Panigris demanded a full royal commission into the disaster.

He said the accident was a tragedy waiting to happen.

"Already this year we have had four derailments and one near-miss of a track worker," he said.



Eyewitness account by passenger **Michiel Irik**

Michiel Irik, a 46-year-old Leura father of three and music teacher was travelling to the city with his fiancée Danielle Diamond when the accident happened. Here's his account:

I usually catch the 6.45am from Leura but I was running a bit late so I got the later train.

We were sitting in the second carriage on the top deck, on the right-hand side, about half way down the carriage.

We'd been on board 50 minutes and we were just talking and intending to do a bit of composing on the train.

Everything was fine as we left Glenbrook station then, all of a sudden, there was this almighty sound of grinding and huge forces pushing and shoving together.

It took 10 seconds and then the whole thing came to a halt.

There was no warning whatsoever.

A lot of the seats in the second carriage slid off the floor and were thrown forward.

Some passengers were thrown out of their seats and some were pinned in their seats against the wall in front of them.

Luckily for me I was braced by my guitar, which was between my knees, and that's what stopped me from being thrown.

Danielle was thrown on to the ground and the contents of her bag thrown all over the carriage.

There was a bit of electrical flashing in the carriage and flickering of light.

Initially there was a calm in the carriage but as people became aware of what happened a bit of hysteria broke out.

Our carriage was standing at about a 30-degree tilt to the left.

The first carriage was derailed and 45 degrees across the track.

The undercarriage was ripped off and the train carriage was corkscrewed a bit.

I stayed in the carriage to check if anyone was hurt for about 10 minutes until Danielle became hysterical and we started to leave.

We had to climb over seats and I could see other carriages had air conditioning units falling down. To get out I had to sit on the landing and lower myself down about 2 1/2m.

I stayed there and helped some primary school children to get off for about 15 or 20 minutes.

The children were mixed in their reactions. Some thought it was exciting and an adventure, some didn't know what happened and others were hysterical.

While we were on the train my main concern was getting away because it was precariously tilted.

Looking back at the impact, I can understand how people talk about things happening in slow motion. As it unfolded you could see every second of it because it's so abnormal. I was very aware of every minute detail.

Danielle has a phobia about train travel and was anxious before we left.

She didn't want to sit in the front carriage. I think in hindsight it's lucky we didn't.