

Spectacular Derailment at Ngaruawahia Bridge

AT 7.25 p.m. on Sunday 14 July 1974, as a Westfield-Te Rapa goods train hauled by "Da"s 1490 and 1420 approached the single-line railway bridge across the Waikato River at Ngaruawahia, wagon "La" 17112 became derailed, reportedly as a result of a broken axle. As it entered on to the bridge structure and became jammed, 21 following wagons on the 55-wagon train also derailed and piled up into a tangled mass of wreckage. Wagons ended up inside and on top of the bridge superstructure, and some fell into the river.

Because this is a single-line bridge, it soon became obvious that this derailment would result in long delays to both passenger and freight train services north of Frankton. Passengers off the southbound "Silver Star" had to be taken by bus to National Park, where they joined the northbound train, which returned to Wellington. Northbound passengers had to complete their journey by road. Passengers on the northbound express were transhipped to buses at Frankton to complete their journey.

Railway staff immediately began to sort out the problems of moving freight and passengers to and from Auckland over a period of at least several days while the track was cleared and the bridge repaired. For freight movement, various stations were set up as "terminals" for Auckland-bound traffic. Most goods were handled at the already busy Frankton goods depot, but containers for Auckland were transhipped from rail to road transport at Cambridge, and motor vehicles at Te Awamutu.

Generally passenger trains ran between Frankton and Wellington, but the "Silver Fern" service ran only between Wellington and National Park at first, there being only one of these cars south of the blockage. Later a "Blue Streak" railcar was brought into use, enabling the road portion of the daytime service to be confined to the section north of Frankton.

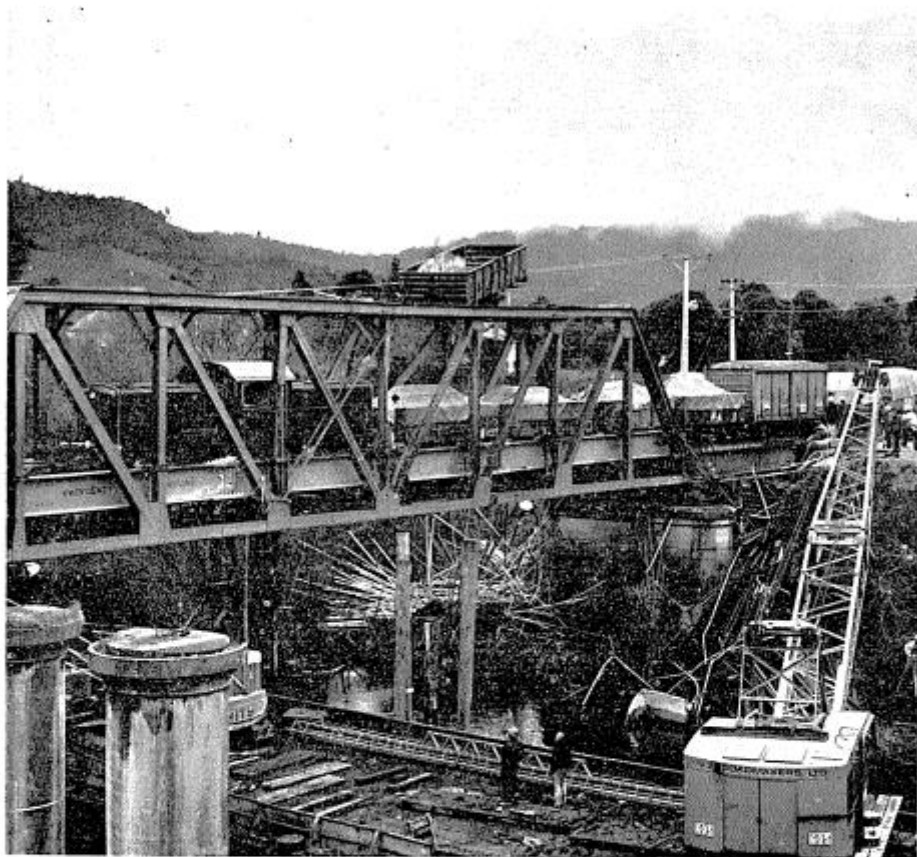


Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity.

Looking north through the damaged span of the Ngaruawahia railway bridge after the goods train derailment in July. Most of the derailed wagons have been cleared away.

Meanwhile, back at the bridge, railwaymen worked night and day to clear the bridge and make temporary repairs to the badly damaged north span. Their work did not go unnoticed. They were visited by the then Minister of Railways, Hon. T. M. McGuigan, who was most impressed with their progress, and the member of Parliament for Hamilton East, Dr. A. Rogers, who introduced a motion in the House of Representatives praising the work of the men concerned.

New girders to strengthen the steel span, and temporary piles to give it added support at its centre, were provided and at 9 a.m. on Friday 19 July, 4½ days after the accident, the first goods train moved slowly southwards over the repaired bridge. At first these trains were moved across the bridge



Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity.

The first train to cross the Ngaruawahia bridge after temporary repairs were made was hauled by a "Dsc" class shunting locomotive. Note the strengthening steel beam, two of which were inserted to help support the damaged structure. Piers in the foreground were those of the original timber bridge at this site. One of the derailed wagons still rests on top of the span where it came to rest in the accident.

by light "Dsc" class diesel-electric locomotives, and by 3.15 p.m. that day ten southbound and seven northbound goods trains had crossed in this manner.

On Sunday 21 July the first fully loaded trains hauled by their own main-line locomotives made their way carefully across the repaired bridge, and once again New Zealand's busiest and most important section of railway was open for business.