



## THE 1970 WESTGATE BRIDGE DISASTER

Peter Adamis Abalinx 13 January 2017

**Westgate Bridge - The author serviced lift on the right during 1970.**

I was a young 20 year old apprentice electrician for a firm called J PARK Electrics, operating out of Brighton. I remember well the days when John Baker (Foreman) and I would visit the bridge to undertake maintenance and repairs on the lift that took the workers to the summit of the bridge.

We would drive to the eastern side of the Yarra and take a boat across to the western side. The bulge (ripple) on the bridge would stretch across the width of it, appearing some four centimetres high. The rumblings and jerks often heard and felt occasionally were laughed at by those working on the bridge and considered it part of the job. Tough blokes they were, that's for sure.

Two weeks before the disaster, I visited the bridge to undertake lift maintenance as per our work maintenance schedule. On completion I went to obtain a work docket signature from the young engineer, (Bill Stacey) and in doing so, I asked him about the ripple and the reason for the concrete blocks. Bill's answer was that the concrete blocks had been put placed on top to remove the ripple from the bridge. I made a joke about the bridge falling around his ears and we both just laughed. On reflection my prophetic remark of that day has haunted me ever since and I feel a sense of loss and sadness. Bill unfortunately died some weeks later after suffering massive internal injuries. He was a real good bloke.

In fact on the day of the disaster, John Baker and I were scheduled to work at the bridge that morning; but for some unexplained reason John decided to change the shift from the bridge to maintenance on the city construction lifts. Subsequently at 12.00 am whilst on the top floor of Marlin House in Bourke Street we heard of the Westgate Bridge disaster. Using the surveyor's theodolite we looked in the direction of Williamstown to locate the Westgate Bridge and found that one of the pillars supporting the western end of the bridge was missing along with the span. John Bakers decision saved both our lives on that day. My brother, who worked in the bank near the disaster, stopped work and raced over to see whether I was among the dead.

The following Saturday being a few days later, John and I visited the site to check on the stability of the lift and to ensure it remained in good working order. How the lift did not collapse with the bridge is probably a testament to those who initially installed it. Whilst we at the site we went amidst the wreckage, seeking still for signs of life and/or body parts if any. I took my camera with me and filmed certain sections of the bridge. I walked inside the cavernous bridge and slowly made way through the tangled enclosure.

I could see where the rescuers had cut open sections of the bottom of the bridge using oxyacetylene torches to see if any human remains were under the bridge. The reason for this is because many of those who had died had gone down the lift and were having lunch in the huts below the bridge. In doing so they were crushed instantly without having time to escape. In one area where the wreckage lurched to one side, there appeared some brownish reddish water pooled in one corner. I stuck my finger in it and I am sad to say it was blood. The wreckage looked like twisted brown metal embedded into the dark and oily mud of the pool of water adjacent to the Yarra River that was flowing into the bay

On the day we heard stories of bravery, lucky escapes and tragedy. One lucky chap happened to be under the bridge but not in the path of the iron and steel that cascaded down from above was lucky. As the bridge collapsed downward the draught of the bridge blew him away from the iron and steel and thus saved his life. Another chap, who had fallen off the bridge as it was coming down was fortunate to have fallen between the cyclone wires that had been installed between the railway lines adjacent to the bridge itself. These rail way lines had been installed to hold the structure in halves and wheeled into place. Once the two half structures had been hauled up the railway lines remained intact. The chap who fell in-between the railway lines bounced up into the air as if it was a trampoline while the wreckage of steel and iron crashed around down about him.

Another chap was retrieved from the muddy and oily surrounding after having fallen off or jumped of the bridge. Although injured and battered by his fall, it is believed that he too survived. One other chap was found floating in the nearby river, but I am of the belief he had died. The worst luck of all fell to one chap who after finding that he had survived the crash site as he rode the bridge down and fallen off the bridge, must have thanked his lucky his stars. Unfortunately and sad to say, one the concrete boulders that were on the bridge itself as stabilizers, rolled off the bridge and crushed the man. These stories that I have recorded will not be found anywhere and I have carried them within me for the past 47 years.

What can I say, but that for some time later we were in shock at what occurred and although my immediate family were relieved, I found myself wondering what life had in store for me if I had survived. Over the years, I would be confronted with many different challenges and on each occasion somehow I was able to overcome them all. But I must say that the West gate Bridge disaster was something I carried around with me all those years and at times, I would come into contact with one or two individuals who had relatives on the bridge or friends.

In one case I had to be at a mates place and spoke about the experience, adding that I still had a copy of the super 8 film intact of the wreckage. The chap I was talking with became somewhat emotional and asked for a copy. Apparently had known some who had died and some who had survived the disaster. One chap who survived became a very prominent and active member of the Trade Union in Victoria and I must admit his experiences with the West Gate Bridge certainly gave him the credentials to lead the crusade for safety. Unfortunately this good man has since passed away. Some say that his experiences of the West Gate Bridge disaster may have had a hand in his illness.

Life is what it is and we who are here this day, must ensure that the decisions we make are the right ones. I don't know the answers or have any solutions to what is a successful life other than to say, try and be a good person, use the cards that you are dealt with wisely and do what is right amongst your fellow man. For we are all mortal and no man or woman has a monopoly on longevity. As for the Westgate Bridge, all that I will say is that I am of the belief that had they not taken out some many bolts holding it together and redrilled each hole separately and not at once, maybe and just maybe the bridge would not have come apart at the seams and collapse with the concrete boulders still on them.

In any case the Royal Commission came up with its own findings and I who is but an ordinary bloke would not know sand from clay cannot give an engineer's perspective but only what I observed, and heard whilst the bridge was still intact. May those who have gone since the disaster as a result of the Westgate experience find the peace that may have eluded in life? The Westgate Bridge was one of errors of judgement and the loss of life was just not worth it.

As always, apologies to purists for my poor grammar and savagery of the English language. I wish you all well and hope that this article does not cause ambiguity in the minds of those who read it.



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