

**MEMORIAL SERVICE TO MARK THE 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
SINKING OF THE SS LAKE ILLAWARRA AND THE PARTIAL COLLAPSE  
OF THE TASMAN BRIDGE  
ADDRESS BY  
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC  
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA  
MOTOR YACHT CLUB OF TASMANIA, LINDISFARNE  
SUNDAY 5 JANUARY 2025**

Good afternoon, everyone. It is my solemn privilege to join you for this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial service.

May I begin by acknowledging the Muwinina people upon whose land we gather and today's Tasmanian Aboriginal Community as ongoing custodians of Country. I recognise their enduring culture and deep connection to land, sea, sky, and waters.

On the night of Sunday the 5th January 1975, the *SS Lake Illawarra*, a 140-metre long, 10,000 ton steam turbine bulk carrier, was transporting zinc concentrate from Port Pirie in South Australia to our Hobart Zinc Works. The carrier was under the command of Captain Beslow Pelc, with 42 crew on board.

Just before 9.30 pm that night, Captain Pelc realised the ship was off course on its approach to transit under the Tasman Bridge. He ordered a change of course for the vessel, and for the engines be set to 'slow ahead'.

Unfortunately, the ship did not respond as expected. 300 metres from the bridge, Captain Pelc ordered 'full astern' and dropping both anchors in an attempt to avoid a collision, or at least reduce its impact.

At 9:27 pm, the ship struck pylon 18 and then pylon 19. The collision was enough to demolish the pylons. A 127-metre section of the overhead bridge roadway collapsed on the ship, which began to sink.

Despite the light night traffic on the bridge, four cars, either on the collapsed section or unable to avoid the gap, entered the water. Two more lodged precariously on the edge.

Local residents who heard the noise looked out to see the disaster. Many launched private boats to assist. Their quick thinking saved many lives. Members of the *Lake Illawarra* crew abandoned ship or were washed off as it began to sink.<sup>1</sup>

The tug *Cape Bruny* was on the river to assist with the berthing of *Lake Illawarra*, so it was on site quickly. The Police Vessel *Alert* was launched and arrived within 20 minutes to assist with the search and rescue.<sup>2</sup>

Other responses were remarkably fast. Just after midnight, the Australian Army had teams searching along the foreshore and in the water, and Navy Clearance Divers were immediately dispatched from Sydney, arriving at 7.30 am the following day.

Tragically, five motorists on the bridge and seven crewmembers of the *Lake Illawarra* lost their lives.

The collapse of the bridge effectively isolated the eastern shore from the city. The only alternative was to travel to Bridgewater and back. Private ferries began operating almost immediately and Government ferries were also used to move some 23,000 passengers daily.

Our Australian Army continued to assist during the recovery. Two landing barges transported emergency vehicles across the river, and the boat ramp here at the Motor Yacht Club was used as their launching site. May we also acknowledge that one of the 4-ton anchors of *Lake Illawarra* was refurbished by volunteers and now stands outside as a permanent memorial. We thank our volunteers for their work.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/maritimecoastal-lake-illawarra-sinking-and-tasman-bridge-collapse-1975/> accessed 9 Dec 24

<sup>2</sup> Email Brian Edmonds / David Hughes 6 Dec 24

The Army also designed and built a 788-metre Baily Bridge near Dowsing's Point,<sup>3</sup> which was funded by the Commonwealth and was opened in December 1975, near the current Bowen Bridge.

The Tasman Bridge was repaired and expanded at a cost of \$45 million. It was opened to traffic again on 8 October 1977.

A plaque<sup>4</sup> was erected for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial on the eastern side support of the Tasman Bridge that reads:

“In memory of those who died”.

“In recognition of those affected.”

“In acknowledgment of those who assisted.”

“The Tasmanian Community remembers the Tasman Bridge disaster of 5 January 1975.”

I conclude with those fitting words.

Thank you

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<sup>3</sup> <https://navalinstitute.com.au/29670-2/> accessed 11 Dec 24

<sup>4</sup> Email Brian Edmonds / David Hughes 6 Dec 24