



here is a Holy Grail for any journalist worth his or her salt. The is having a major news story all to one-self. A scoop.

Mine began at lunchtime on February 7, 1963. As the office junior, just a couple of years into my career, I had the “privilege” of being on duty in the reporters’ room of the Northern Advocate in Whangarei.

The paper had been “put to bed” as they say, the front page with wall to wall coverage of the Queen’s visit to Waitangi the previous day. All the senior staff had been at Waitangi to record the royal visitors’ every movement. Young Kevin, as is the way with office juniors, had been left to hold the fort.

And so it was again on the 7th. I was doodling on a notepad between sips of a chocolate milkshake when the managing editor, Bill Crawford, wandered into the reporters’ room. “Kevin, there’s been some sort of accident on the Brynderwyns. If you’ve got nothing else to do you might as well grab a photographer and go and have a look.” Sweet. Always happy to get out of the office.

Just to set the scene, Northland is very similar to Wairarapa. Whangarei is the equivalent of Masterton. Half an hour south over the plains lies a mountain range, and beyond it lies a big city, Auckland in this case. I say “mountain” because like the Rimutakas it is seen as a physical barrier for would-be shoppers. Years later a Welsh friend told me Brynderwyn means “little hill of the acorn,” which I guess brings it down to size.

Anyway, photographer Warren Spiers and I cruised south, looking for signs of an accident. Nothing north of the Brynderwyns. Up the hill and over the top. Still nothing. We were almost to the bottom on the Auckland side when we spotted a hole in the fence. There were no people, no emergency vehicles, about, no warning signs. Nothing.

We got out and wandered over to the hole in the fence, to a sight that is as clear to ne today as it was then. Thirty metres below us was the shattered remains of a bus. And across a stream and up a bank was a row of 14 bodies in white shrouds. (A 15th person died in hospital later). Rescuers and some survivors milled about, shocked and aimless.

We drove down and into the scene of the tragedy. Warren began shooting film (provoking some angry responses as you’d imagine) and I began interviewing anybody willing and able to talk, frantically taking notes. Even then I knew I was onto something special. Remember, it was early afternoon. The Auckland Star and New Zealand Herald were two hours away and unable anyway to publish until the next day. Radio wasn’t a factor then, and there was no TV. I was like a kid let loose in a lolly shop.



This memorial marks the site of the tragedy

The biggest problem was communication. I walked to a nearby house to use their phone and found the occupants had heard the crash and had been first on the scene. They had a harrowing tale to tell. I called the office, where Bill issued those famous words, “STOP THE PRESS” and I began dictating what I had, even the eyewitness accounts of the property owners.

And slowly the story emerged. The bus carrying 36 passengers had left Waitangi that morning, heading back to Auckland. They were a happy bunch, all Maori and including a clergyman. Excited at having seen the Queen, they were singing along to a ukulele and enjoying the outing.

Just after passing the Brynderwyns' summit the bus suffered total brake failure. To set the scene again, the road is very like the northern side of the Rimutakas, steep and winding with a bank on one side and a steep drop off the other. The driver did an heroic job, crashing down through the gearbox, bouncing off the bank and dropping his wheels into the water table to try and kill speed. He damned near got away with it too. On the very last corner and only a couple of hundred metres from safety, the bus shot across the road and into space. The impact when it landed left 10 women and 5 men dead and 21 injured.

Imagine the scene as the singing subsided into silence and then into screams as the desperate situation became obvious to the 36. Imagine the driver shouting "hang on" as the old bus accelerated, despite the driver's efforts. Then those dreadful few seconds as it cartwheeled down the hillside before crashing at the foot of the gully.

Back in Whangarei the press had indeed stopped and as I filed my story linotype operators were frantically setting it, take by take, page by page into metal slugs. A hole was cleared in Page 1 and the new type placed. At the same time teleprinters were clattering as my story was transmitted first to the Press Association in Wellington, then to every paper in the country and eventually the world.

Warren and I raced back to Whangarei, he to develop his films for the next day's paper, me to finish my story for today's edition. By then, of course, a whole team of reporters were all over the story, chasing a by-now-very-tight deadline. Delivery vehicles were held up and there was lots of milling about and shouting. Eventually the old rotary press rumbled into life. We had achieved the virtually impossible, although the treatment left much to be desired.

Over the heading "15 Maoris Die in Bus Crash" was a row of photos of the young Queen smiling, under the banner heading "The Queen Smiles". Oops. Getting the paper out was only the beginning. We key players worked about 16 hours straight, getting the names of the victims, chasing official and other comment, attending media briefings and filing follow-up stories for the Press Association. The Quo Vadis restaurant down the road stayed open all night, the owner plying us with free cups of hot black coffee to keep us going. It was a shared disaster and we all felt part of it.

Obviously the story went international, and it spawned a brand new superstition. The Tangiwai rail disaster in 1953 followed a royal visit, so ergo royal visits were dangerous to Maori. Happily, subsequent visits dispelled that perception.

Editor Bill Crawford was there every inch of the way, sleeves rolled up and working as hard as any of us. A retired Army officer, he was a journalist to the core, but he was slow to praise, no matter what the troops achieved. We all worshipped him, but we reckoned that with Bill silence was an accolade.

Anyway I met Bill (he was Bill to even the lowliest staff member) in the loo at 2 or 3am the day after the crash. As we lined up at the urinal Bill commented: "Thank you Kevin. We could not have had better coverage than you gave us yesterday." I was still walking on air weeks later. Still am in fact.

There was one feature of the tragedy that still lives in my memory. Indeed, I used it in my story that day. The bus was an old, wooden-framed one and it literally exploded into thousands of tiny particles on impact. Amid the debris lay one object, shiny and perfectly intact, a symbol of joy, high spirits, fellowship and happy times.

A ukulele.