

NEW ZEALAND'S TUNNEL DISASTER

LEITRIM MEN SURVIVE

At present New Zealand's longest tunnel is being built—5½ miles in length—to connect the rich farmlands of the Waikato to the port town of Tauranga. It is known as the Kaimai Rail Tunnel Project. Some 13 miles from the site lives the majority of the tunnel workers in our small town of Matamata with its population of 4,000.

Last February a cave-in occurred on the project trapping 12 men, four of whom were killed. An Englishman, with an Irish name, Pat Conlan, was rescued from the outside after being trapped for eight hours. The other survivors were eventually rescued seventy hours after the fall, when a shaft was sunk through caved-in roof.

Among those trapped were four true Irishmen—Hugh Neely, County Derry; Brendan Hester, County Roscommon; and Willy Gilheaney and Pat Kelly, both of County Leitrim. Trapped as they were for 24 hours before voice contact was made, their greatest hazard was the break in tunnelling, like mining, is a team effort and the confusion which the cave-in imposed. Tunnelling, like mining, is a team effort and the breaking up of the team inflicted new and perilous restrictions at a time they could least be afforded. A six inch shaft drilled through the roof of the tunnel enabled food, cigarettes, beer and most important of all—a small axe—to be lowered to the men.

Neely had been caught in a sitting position with his legs outstretched and pinned under timbers. This however, was not his greatest concern, as the water was rising rapidly and he was in grave danger of drowning. Gilheaney had been working on the top level with Liverpool-born Alf Leighton, and had been knocked unconscious by the fall. Leighton had been killed and his lifeless frame pinned the young Leitrim man in his tomb of silence.

An expectancy of death and disaster stalked those whose mobility remained unimpaired. Australian Don ("Abo") McGregor; Kiwi (New Zealander) Peter Clarkson; and Scotsman, James Smart, together with Leighton breathed no more the polluted air of the earth's bowels. However, there was no place for fear—only courage could win through.

Pat Kelly from Leitrim's town of Mohill was unaware of the location or condition of his county colleague, but by his bravery and tenacity he was to prove his saviour—not without danger and anxiety crossing his path.

Together with the Maori (native of New Zealand) Shift Boss, Murray Hemopo, Kelly worked frantically to reach Neely and diving under the muddy waters attached a chain to the timbers by which Neely was held, while Hemopo held Neely's head high to avoid the rising waters which almost engulfed their mate. The chain was then attached to a "come-along" and the timbers were carefully shifted to free his legs.

"WE'RE COMIN' FOR YOU, WILLY"

Meanwhile Gilheaney had regained consciousness and his agonising cries haunted Kelly, but because of the urgency of Neely's predicament, these cries had to be ignored until the latter was free. "We're comin' for you, Willy", Pat would holler, as often as the tenseness of the operation with Neely would allow.

Weakened by his injuries, overpowered by the corpse under which he lay, and unaware of what was happening, Gilheaney despaired of ever getting out alive. Thoughts of home and eternity raced through his mind—"if only I could make the fairs or have a beer with my old Dad



P. J. Kelly, Aughris, Mohill, and William Gilheaney, Cornafosta, Foxfield.

Photo courtesy Matamata District Chronicle.

Special "Leitrim Guardian" Report from H. R. Baker, Matamata, New Zealand.

at Fenagh once again". His spirits lifted however when Kelly's voice came to him, but he eventually had to wait eight hours before he was freed.

With Neely free, Kelly proceeded to trace Gilheaney by following the direction of his voice. Finding it he soon began to dig his way up to his fellow Leitrim-man and getting into the cavity where Willy was trapped Kelly lifted Leighton's body onto his back so that the other trapped men could help Willy to the lower level. Anxious moments were felt by all as Kelly worked at the jammed timbers to free Gilheaney, as one false move could have entombed the lot.

Willy came out of the accident remarkably well—he had multiple lacerations and bad bruises to his right leg, but he was alive "and that was a great relief" he said. He spent three days in hospital. Other survivors beside the five mentioned, (Kelly, Gilheaney, Hester, Neely and Hemopo) were Lyn Grason (Matamata) and Gordon ("Peanut") McLeavy (Matamata).

The situation was nothing short of desperate and concern for the folks back home did not alleviate that desperation. "I hoped that the news of the cave-in would not reach home and cause my folks anxiety", said Pat.

Now some ten years here in New Zealand they both state that it is doubtful that they would return now to Ireland to live; they are obviously enjoying life here; however, they long to make a trip to the country of their birth to see folks and friends, and stroll once more down the highways of their own "Lovely Leitrim".

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