



“We had to go to the morgue at Port Ahuriri the next morning for identification and they told us they had recovered all the bodies by 6 pm. I pray no one in our families has to go through a day like that.”

LONE ROCK – Tangoio Beach

Photograph courtesy of Don Trask

My Grandfather died seventy five years ago. It was on Easter Saturday, April 19 1930. I never knew him as I was born nine and a half years later but I do remember hearing stories about him from close family members. As children we were told that he, and two of my father’s brothers, were washed off the beach adjacent to the big rock at Tangoio. Another man came along on a motorcycle and jumped in to try and rescue them, only to be drowned himself. A simplistic explanation to satisfy a child’s curiosity but searching deeper into the records of the event, an amazing story unfolds of bravery and selflessness by complete strangers who, without asking were willing to put their own lives on the line.

William James Trask died before his time. Not from heart disease or tuberculosis or any of the other diseases that were common in the 1920’s, he was, as the coroner ruled, “Drowned in the sea by accident”. He was not the only victim of the tragedy. Two of his sons and another man who attempted to rescue them also died. It happened at Lone Rock (Peneipaua) at the northern end of Tangoio Beach north of Napier. The Napier’s Daily Telegraph newspaper evening edition on that fateful day headlined it as a “Shocking Fishing Accident”.

The Hawkes Bay Herald Tribune reported it as ‘One of the most terrible beach tragedies that have ever occurred in Hawkes Bay’.



William James (Jim) Trask

But who was this man, the father of my own father. William James (Jim) Trask was born at Meeanee on July 20 1875, a son of Israel Trask, who arrived in Wellington from Somerset in 1842 at the age of 8, and Catherine Trask nee McLaughlan, who arrived in Napier from Ireland in 1865 when she was aged 21. Married in 1870, they raised five children, Jim being the fourth born. Not very much is known of his childhood except that Jim lived at Meeanee and attended the local school. He married Mary May Fergusson of Whakatu on February 13 1908 whereupon they moved to Rangataua near Ohakune to work at the Egmont Box Company's Timber mill. As part payment of wages, land that had been clear felled was made available to mill staff and Jim and his brother-in-law William Reeves, along with a Mr Wood took up the option of two parcels of land which they proceeded to clear of stumps and turn into farmland. Jim built a house on the land and here he and May raised four children. Eric James (my father). Beatrice May, Robert Donald and Francis Gordon.

In 1928 the Crown acquired, under the public works act, the 156-acre block they were living on for the Railways Department 'for Railway purposes'. The family then shifted to another block nearby. As the forests were worked out, Jim, May, and the three younger children returned to Hawke's Bay, moving into a house in Hastings where he was employed at the McLeod and Gardner's mill at Puketitiri as foreman. Oldest son Eric

- my father - had begun work at the age of fourteen in Marton with the Post and Telegraph Department (P&T). This would have been about 1923. By 1930 he had been transferred to Wanganui and was working as a technician in the telephone exchange there. Because of this he was not present on that fateful day. The events of that day detailed below are from media reports, and from the proceedings of the inquest that followed the tragedy, as well as the personal memories of people who were present at the time.

Just what actually happened on that tragic day? The newspaper reports were somewhat at a variance with each other and it was not until the transcript of the proceedings of the inquest that followed the tragedy was obtained that the whole picture began to emerge.

The day started out with the family deciding, it being Easter Saturday, to go for a drive, as was a regular activity at that time. Travelling in the car were my grandparents Jim and May, their 20 year old daughter Beatrice May, sons 18 year old Robert Donald and 15 year old Francis Gordon and their 17 year old cousin, Audrey Beil. They left Hastings at about 10.30am and it was not until they had got under way that May decided she wanted to head for the Tangoio Lagoon, north of Napier. At about 11.45am, on reaching Peneipaua Rock, known locally as Lone Rock, Jim stopped the car to show the boys the rock formation. There was a huge sea running at that time. Bus drivers who knew the road well and passed the scene that day later reported that at times the sea was breaking over the road. Beatrice was suffering from a headache so May and Audrey decided to stay with her in the car. The men went down to the water's edge but shortly after, the ladies decided to follow them and made their way down the beach to join them.

Beatrice in her evidence to the inquest following the tragedy said that when they got to the beach, the boys had gone around the rock and were out of sight. Jim was waiting for the waves to recede and when he could he followed the boys to the other side of the rock. At that point the ladies lost sight of the men. A huge wave broke on the beach and the next time they saw the men, Gordon and Donald were in the surf and Jim was attempting to reach for them. Donald had, in her words 'a mark on his face'. Another wave then came in and washed them further out. Beatrice said that she lost sight of them but when she next saw Gordon he was 'a good distance out and was alive at that time'. Jim and Donald were out in the breakers and appeared to be dead. Gordon was then washed closer to the shore but while regaining his footing, fell as a wave hit him.

Whilst all this was happening, traffic was passing up and down the road. A number of vehicles stopped and the occupants ventured onto the beach to render what assistance they could. The attention of the occupants of one of these vehicles was drawn to the crowd that had gathered down on the beach. Stanley Jones and his friend Vincent Smith were on their way to Morere for a holiday. When they stopped the women asked if they had any rope. All they had were some short pieces of tent rope but they were able to tie them to some strips of a rug that had been torn up in an attempt to make a longer one. As they made their way down to the waters edge, Gordon Trask was thrown onto the beach by the breakers and both Smith and Jones rushed to his aid,

along with a Mr Kinmount who had been passing with his wife (they were from Dunedin and were in the area on their honeymoon). Joining them was a 15 year old high school boy, John Johnston. Johnston had been cycling with two of his friends, Arthur Garnham and Edward Scarfe, all from Napier, when they came upon the scene. Johnson said in his evidence that he stayed with Mrs Trask (May) to prevent her from trying to enter the surf herself to help those in the water. It was then that Gordon Trask was thrown by a wave, close into the beach. As the four of them rushed to the aid of Gordon, Smith was the last to get to the water and as he did so the women screamed that there was another big wave breaking. As a result three of them were washed off their feet and the strong undertow took them out into the breakers along with Gordon. Vincent Smith was able to maintain his footing by hanging onto a rock and thus he made it back to dry land. Johnston, who had some training in life saving procedures at school, was swimming out beyond the breakers but Stanley Jones was struggling in the surf. The next time Smith saw him he was floating face down in the water. He then disappeared from sight.

In his evidence to the coroner, Johnston stated that he along with Kinmont, Jones and Smith rushed down to the surf and grabbed Gordon who at this point was still alive. As they got to him they were struck by a big wave and he (Johnston) went under the water. Another wave broke on the beach, which caught Jones and Kinmont but somehow missed Johnston and Gordon. According to Johnston's evidence, Gordon told him that he could swim, so Johnston went to the aid of the others. Johnston eventually got Kinmount to the beach where Garnham, who could not swim, managed to haul him to higher ground where Scarfe resuscitated him. Kinmont's wife told the newspaper reporter that if it had not been for Johnston's efforts she was sure that her husband would have been a victim as well. Garnham entered the water where he managed to grab hold of the body of Donald Trask but was caught in the terrific undertow and lost his grip on him, whereupon he returned to the beach, being fortunate to escape.

Scarfe then tried to enter the water but was restrained by some of the men on the beach until they tied the short makeshift rope to his waist. He then re-entered the water and with some difficulty retrieved the body of Donald Trask. He then attempted to resuscitate Donald but to no avail. Jones' body was retrieved at about this time and although another man attempted to resuscitate him as well, this also proved futile.

After he got Kinmont ashore, Johnston went back into the sea to aid Jones and Gordon Trask, who were still in the water. Another wave broke over him and he dived under it and swam out beyond the breakers. A group of men, possibly a group of cricketers from Eskdale on their way to Kaiwaka, were on the rock trying to give directions to Johnston but it appears that what some saw as bodies were in fact logs floating beyond the breakers. One newspaper report unfairly castigated these youths for yelling encouragement to those on the beach to enter the water to recover the bodies when they would not do so themselves, however too many had died already and more could have been lost if they had tried to re-enter the surf.

Johnston, who had found a landing place further along the beach, was then assisted from the surf in a state of exhaustion. One newspaper reported that '*Johnstone's heroic effort, in the course of which he sustained several cuts and bruises, is clearly deserving of recognition*'. *Some clothes were obtained for him, as he had discarded his own while in the sea, and he was taken from the beach, along with the three women who had witnessed the tragedy and the rescue.*

While all this was happening, a message was received by Constable John Greenless at the Napier Central Police Station that 'three men were struggling in the surf near the bluff about 1 mile past Westshore. Send out some ropes and a horse as quickly as possible'. This was at 12.15pm. Constable Greenless informed the Senior Sergeant and Constable Vernon Arnold was dispatched from the Port Ahuriri Police Station at 12.20pm. He met up with Constable Thompson at Bay View and the two went looking for the place north of Westshore where the accident was reported to be but after a search of the area they could not find any drowning accident there. They were then informed by a local man that the accident was at the Tangoio Lagoon. The two then proceeded by bicycle up the coast to Tangoio, arriving at 2.15pm. Here they found the bodies of Donald Trask and Stanley Jones lying on the beach and covered by a rug. Jim's body was recovered at 3.15pm and that of Gordon Trask at 4.00pm. They were all then taken to the morgue at Port Ahuriri by ambulance. At 4.15pm a Mr Simmonds arrived from Napier with a life saving reel but it was all too late.

The next day an inquest was convened in order to formally identify the bodies and to release them for burial. Francis William (Frank) Fergusson, May's brother, officially identified the bodies of William James, Robert Donald and Francis Gordon Trask while Arthur William Jones formally identified the body of his son. At the inquest the coroner said to Mr Jones, '*Mr Jones I want to shake your hand. Your boy did a gallant deed, and you should be proud to have such a son. He died a noble death, and died a man*'. The inquest was then adjourned.

The inquest resumed on 15th of May 1930. No autopsy had been performed on the bodies, and as no authoritative medical evidence was presented to the coroner, he could only go on the evidence of the witnesses as to the events. Although mention was made to the abrasion marks to the heads of Donald and Gordon Trask and Stanley Jones, the finding was that the four had 'Drowned in the sea by accident'. I have no doubt in my own mind that the injuries that were sustained by the men were as a result of them being thrown against the rocks by the huge surf and which could in all probability would have rendered them unconscious. It would then be as a result of this trauma that they would have drowned.

On Tuesday April 23rd, the Hawkes Bay Herald Tribune newspaper printed the following:

FUNERAL OF THE TRASKS

The funeral of W.J., R.D., and F.G. Trask, victims of Saturday's drowning fatality, took place yesterday afternoon. A long succession of cars followed in the melancholy procession to the Hastings Cemetery where the bodies were laid side by side in one grave. The Rev. D J A Shaw conducted the Presbyterian service at the graveside, in the presence of a large congregation of mourners, many of whom were affected to tears. After the interment, a mass of flowers were laid upon the grave as tribute of sympathy and esteem.'

There appears to be no mention of Stanley Jones funeral in the newspapers but he was buried in the Hastings Cemetery. His headstone reads:

*HE DID HIS BEST - IN MEMORY OF **STANLEY ARTHUR JONES** AGED 23 YEARS WHO LOST HIS LIFE AT TANGOIO EASTER 1930 IN ATTEMPTING TO SAVE THE LIVES OF OTHERS - ERECTED BY METHODIST YOUNG MEN AND FRIENDS*

John Johnston's act of heroism earned the recognition of the Royal Humane Society New Zealand's Silver Medal. (Refer Case 668 RHSNZ – John Percival Johnstone.) He went on to reform the Hawke's Bay Branch of the Royal Life Saving Society, and was the Hawke's Bay Councillor on the National body. He was later honoured with life membership of the Hawke's Bay Branch of the New Zealand and Commonwealth Royal Life Saving Society. John also received an award from the New Zealand Swimming Association for his services to the Poverty Bay Swimming Centre of which he was also a life member. In 2002 he was awarded a Queens Service Order (QSO) in the New Years Honours List but sadly passed away a few months later aged 86.

Eric, my Father, transferred back to Hastings in late 1930 and was in the Hastings Telephone Exchange the day of the Hawkes Bay Earthquake on February 3rd 1931. My mother at that time worked in a bookshop next to the Post Office and after the earthquake manned the bookstall on the Railway Station platform opposite, the shop being in ruins. It was here that Audrey Biel introduced my father to her and the rest as they say is history.

May, Jim's wife or Nanny as we knew her, moved in to live with us after my parents were married. She lived till 1959 and was buried in the same plot as her husband and two sons in the Hastings Cemetery. How these traumatic events affected my father can only be of conjecture but all through the years that I knew him he had a dread of the sea. Even though we would holiday by the coast or have family picnics at the various beaches locally, I can never remember him swimming or boating in the sea. It was not till 1964 when my wife finally got him to take a short ferry ride across the Tauranga Harbour that he appeared to have put this demon to rest.

Providential really, for six years later my family and I moved to the South Island and he and my mother were able to travel across the Cook Strait on the inter-island ferry to holiday with us.

Eric lived until he was 84 and his sister Girlie (Beatrice) died just short of her 84th birthday. Audrey Stafford, the cousin who accompanied the Trask family on that terrible day, died in 2002, just months before her ninetieth birthday, thus bringing to an end the family saga that affected not only those of our family who were present on that day, but so many other people, complete strangers, who put their life on the line for others whom they did not know.

Today there is no Tangoio Lagoon and the rocks at the foot of Lone Rock that had inflicted such terrible injuries to those who were swept into the sea on that day, are buried in beach gravel. This is as a result of the Hawkes Bay Earthquake, which on the 3rd of February 1931, uplifted the whole area by over 2 metres.

References:

Daily Telegraph: Newspaper reports 19th April 1930 & 22nd April 1930.

Hawkes Bay Herald Tribune: Newspaper reports 21st April 1930 & 22nd April 1930.

Archives New Zealand: Transcript of the inquest 20th April 1930 & 15th May 1930.

Interview with Audrey Biel 1998.



Wedding of William James Trask to Mary May Fergusson , Hastings, 13th February 1908.

**The Trask Children at Rangitana circa 1915.
From left to right.
Robert Donald, Beatrice May, Francis Gordon, Eric James**

