

New Zealander dies in Chinese Train Crash??

This is a story about a train crash that happened in China in 1988 and became known as the "January 24th Incident" in which many people died. One of the passengers was a New Zealander who became momentarily famous as one of the victims.

It was January 1988 and our friend, Val had just received some awful news. Her elder brother, Alan, had been killed in an horrific train crash in China. Alan had always been the restless member of the family and spent most of his life travelling the world. Recently, he had spent some time visiting China for the third time and now intended to travel to Tibet to see the life of the locals there for himself. But he had chosen quite the wrong time for China. It was Chinese New Year, the annual holiday when literally millions of working Chinese travel home to see their families.

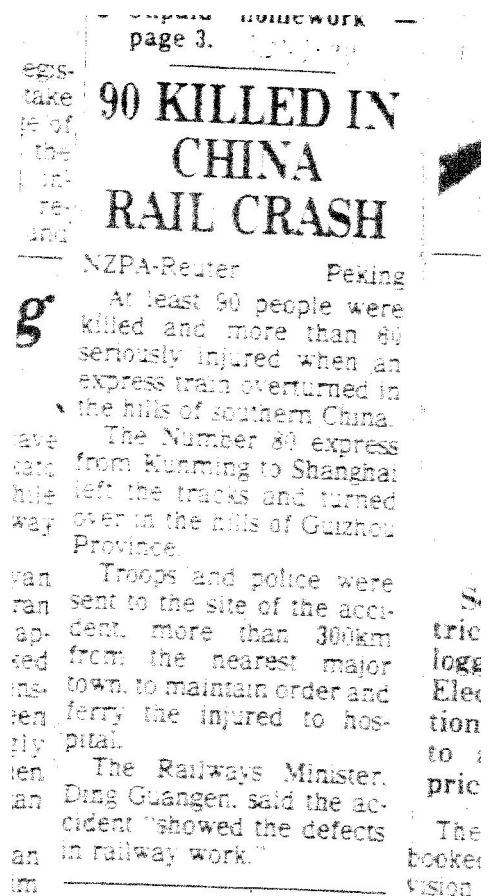
Val received a phone call from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informing her that her brother, Alan had been killed in the train crash. The whole family was traumatised and began to collect his belongings together and look at his will. There was a report in the NZ Herald saying that two New Zealanders had been in the accident and one was dead, the other injured and in hospital. Little did they know that there had been a mix-up with the bodies in the train. Alan takes up the story...

"I had tried to buy a hard sleeper berth on the train to Chengdu from where I hoped to travel to Tibet but because of Chinese New Year had found it impossible and so found myself in Kunming, going nowhere, squatting on my backpack for what seemed days. I gave the ticket collector a black market identity card I'd bought in Hong Kong."

He knew that if it was accepted he'd get a discount ticket. He managed to get a 'soft sleeper', something he didn't normally approve of, because they were always for party officials or foreigners, but there was nothing left and the journey was long. When he finally boarded, two days later, he had a kitbag and an old backpack. He shared the top bunks in the compartment with a young Hong Kong man who spoke little English and below was a man in his thirties and a middle-aged woman.

During the long journey he woke suddenly, sitting bolt upright, feeling that something was amiss with the motion of the train. It was going faster than any train he had been on in China and suddenly it jerked forward as brakes were applied. When they were released again, the train shot forward once more, increasing its speed every few minutes. He knew then that they were heading for a derailment. Switching on the bunk light, he wrapped the heavy bunk cover around his body and motioned for the other young man to do the same, and then grabbed the steel mesh shelf beside the bunk and held on as tightly as possible. The train began to sway and people started yelling. Finally an explosion of sound and violent upheaval, and dust and debris began to fill his mouth and nose and he realised that he was alive! Voices shouted and he answered, checking that his body was all in one piece: one arm was soaked in blood but it wasn't his and finally hands dragged him towards a large hole in the side of the carriage. At the hole's edge he could see that they were two metres off the ground and he yelled in agony as a soldier lifted him to safety.

How many carriages remained upright he had no idea, but was told later that two carriages went over the mountainside and weren't reached for a couple of days. The crash later became known as 'The January 24th Incident' and was reported nationwide as well as in some international papers. The mail car had survived intact and became one of the first aid centres. His Hong Kong friend had survived but the two people in the lower bunks had been killed. The number of injured was so great



He spent four days in Xuan Wei hospital and finally could explain to the bewildered doctors, via a young woman who volunteered to interpret, that his back was extremely painful, and it was found that he had two badly damaged vertebrae.

He was told how incredibly lucky he had been to survive by officials who came by later when he learned that there had been a mix-up in the bodies. Val, his sister had been told in New Zealand that he had died because the authorities had decided that his identity card belonged to the mutilated dead Chinese man in the lower bunk. Alan's waist pack had been found close to the body and so the body was presumed to be Alan's. He was told later that, as the train flew off the rails, the carriage flipped over and the set of bogies weighing several tonnes came off the spindle of the carriage flew into the air, dropping down again on top of the carriage. The man in the lower bunk had his head completely crushed by this heavy weight and the woman had also been killed. The soldiers, who pulled him free from the wreckage, said he was within a centimetre or two of also being crushed.

Later, still in hospital and feeling very weak, he decided he must try to contact his sister to reassure her that he was alive. He was contacted by a Reuters correspondent wanting to know details of the crash and the young woman helping Alan with translation, made the correspondent promise that in return, he would contact Alan's sister in NZ with the news of his survival. This was not done, leaving Val still thinking he had perished in the crash. The hospital director was furious with the young woman who had helped Alan, for allowing details to leak out of the crash – such things were frowned upon in the 80s. Alan felt that this would negatively affect her prospects for the future and advised her to move on.

The next day a visitor arrived with newspapers for Alan to read to pass away the time and later the railway inspector returned several items of his clothing as well as his Nikon camera and his by-now-filthy down jacket and some of his books!

By this time, he had managed to speak to his sister, Val, who had just received a letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to say that there had been a mistake and Alan was still alive. Because of the body in the lower bunk being wrongly identified, the Chinese authorities had notified the NZ Embassy of Alan's death.



Mrs Corrigan and her 7-year-old son, Jamie, listening to an interview recorded with her brother at his hospital bedside.

Death Report 'Greatly Exaggerated'

Aucklanders Alan Robert Stockhausen, aged 17, says reports of his death were greatly exaggerated.

The reports circulated the week when Chinese officials listed him among the 30 people who died when the Koming to Shanghai Express was derailed on January 24 in Yunnan Province, south west China.

No one was more shocked or grief stricken than his sister, Mrs Valerie Corrigan, of Whangaparaoa.

"We opened his will, located the death notices. But we don't blame anybody. We understand how difficult it must have been with the accident taking place in such a remote place."

The will has since been resealed and refolded in his lawyer's safe.

The family had intended to bring his ashes back to New Zealand but Mr Stockhausen had other ideas.

"Tell them I'll be coming back as warm flesh and blood," he said from Kun-



Mr Stockhausen

far. Oh God, I never expected this... to read your own death notice. Tell them I intend to lead a long life."

Mr Stockhausen was traveling in a first-class compartment with four bunks at the time of the derailment.

"In the compartment I was in, at least one of the

Article in NZ Herald, 27 Jan, 1988

Val will remember the letter she received for many years to come and says that the emotions were extreme for a few weeks, ranging from intense sorrow, to hope, to happiness to hear that her wandering brother had escaped with only short-term injuries and would be back in New Zealand soon.