

**04-16-1897 New Zealand –O'Donovan and Stephenson – LEO Attempted Rescue**  
<http://www.police.govt.nz/about-us/history/memorial/officers-staff-who-died-as-a-direct-result-of-duty>

## **Sergeant Florence O'Donovan**

**Died:**

16th April 1897

Napier

Drowned while rescuing citizens from floods in Napier.

## **Constable Alfred John Stephenson**

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## **From The MTG: Ten Men Perish During Rescue Effort**

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/hawkes-bay-today/news/from-the-mtg-ten-men-perish-during-rescue-effort/55S3YYEWG3UZQPNKKIIXNWOHQM/>

7 May, 2021 By: Gail Pope

Overshadowed by the Scenic Hotel Te Pania on Napier's Marine Parade, is a statuesque yet forlorn monument erected to commemorate the April 16, 1897 flood.

Etched deeply into two of the marble plaques are the words: "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

On the opposite side are the words: "This monument was erected by the people of Napier to commemorate a deed of heroism by which 10 men lost their lives on Good Friday 16 April 1897 in attempting to rescue the flooded out settlers of Clive".

The Hawke's Bay Herald eloquently described the destruction caused to the railway line on that infamous day.

"The waters in their fury simply played with the railway line and after the embankment extending over a great area, had been washed away, the rails and sleepers seemed to have been lifted bodily into an upright position, and now for some distance present the appearance of having been specially erected there as a kind of a fence."

The newspaper further described the event as the most "wretched it is possible for mortals to endure".



**Waitangi Railway Bridge after the 1897 flood.  
Photo / Supplied Hawkes Bay Today**

From the early hours of the morning until nightfall, "blinding rain accompanied by a howling gale" swept across Hawke's Bay. At some stage, those living in the hills surrounding Napier and Taradale as well as at Meeanee heard a thunderous boom as flood waters burst the Tutaekuri riverbank encroaching across the shallow lagoon and spewing into Napier streets.

Munroe St was a sea of water and the rotunda in Clive Square stood like "a grim sentinel" amidst the ruination. At Robert Holt's mill, timber floated about in the yards and the timber stacks were swept away. The water was so deep in the stables that horses had to be led through floating timber in "water over their girths" to safety.

Water extended over three-fifths of the Heretaunga Plains. The damage was horrific as the deluge swept through houses, destroyed fences and killed thousands of livestock.

Clive residents were in imminent danger and when news reached Napier, rescue parties were quickly organised. Mayor George Swan ordered a train to transport men and their rescue boats to Waitangi.

Once there the rescue parties were instructed to row "towards Papakura" and, when clear of the Ngaruroro and Tukituki River mouths, "to strike over to Clive". Six crews bravely set forth, four of which successfully rescued many of those in danger and returned safely.

Tragically, the first two boats were capsized by the river washout, swept out to sea and the 10 men on board lost their lives.

The Napier community was shocked by the loss of "well known and highly respected" men. In the first boat were Arthur McCartney, licensee of the Albion Hotel; Frederick Ansell, carpenter at Robert Holts; Henry Brierly, wheelwright at Mr Faulknor's coach factory; Frederick Cassin, clerk at Mr Lascelle's auction mart; and John Rose, an Australian commercial traveller.

In the second boat were Sergeant Florence O'Donovan; Constable Alfred Stephenson; John Prebble, fruiterer; Herbert Oborn, employed at Kirkcaldie and Stains and George Chambers, blacksmith at Gleeson's.

Of the 10 men who drowned, only four bodies were recovered. On April 27, Brierly and Rose were found three miles north of Pania reef floating amongst animal carcasses. The bodies "presented a shockingly mutilated sight".

An inquest was held the following day at the Union Hotel and the verdict given "that the deceased John Rose and Henry Brierly were accidentally drowned in a brave attempt to save the lives of others".

Henry Brierly's funeral took place on Thursday afternoon and the procession was led by the Napier City Band followed by the coffin transported on the Spit Fire Brigade salvage car. John Rose's funeral was held the following day presided over by Dean Hovell who eulogised that Rose was "a stranger in a strange land who had ungrudgingly given his life".

Constable Stephenson was discovered two weeks later washed up at the Napier breakwater and the following day John Prebble was located near Awatoto. Reportedly, more than 3000 people lined the streets for the funerals and two local bands led the procession to the Napier Cemetery. Constable Stephenson's coffin was carried on a gun carriage and John Prebble's followed in a hearse.

In the Hawke's Bay Museums Trust's photographic collection are several images reflecting the aftermath of the tumultuous event. Photographer William Neal captured this fleeting moment in time, showing the twisted remains of the Waitangi Railway Bridge. Tied to a ramp near the road are three rowing boats waiting to ferry passengers across the still flooded river.

- Gail Pope is social history curator at the MTG

### **New Zealand Police Museum**

<https://www.facebook.com/NewZealandPoliceMuseum/posts/today-we-mourn-the-loss-of-sergeant-florence-odonovan-and-constable-alfred-steph/3126082307421981/>

Today we mourn the loss of Sergeant Florence O'Donovan and Constable Alfred Stephenson on the 123rd anniversary of their deaths while performing their duty. They will always be remembered.

Ka maumahara tonu tātou ki a rātou.

Name & rank: **O'DONOVAN, Sergeant Florence**

Police number: 293

Born: 10 December 1853

Years in New Zealand Police: Eleven

Died: 16 April 1897, drowned

Age: 43

Widower with four small children

Name & rank: **STEPHENSON, Constable Alfred John**

Police number: 543

Born: circa 1864

Years in New Zealand Police: Eight

Stationed: Napier

Died: 16 April 1897, drowned

Age: 33

Married with three small children

## **A report from The Evening Post 19 April 1897, page 5**

### **A FRIGHTFUL CALAMITY.**

**DISASTROUS FLOODS IN THE HAWKES BAY DISTRICT.  
THE WHOLE COUNTRY-SIDE UNDER WATER. SHOCKING LOSS OF LIFE.  
A RESCUE PARTY SWEEPED TO DESTRUCTION.**

**ENORMOUS DAMAGE DONE.  
THE LOSS OF STOCK INCALCULABLE.  
ROADS, BRIDGES, AND RAILWAY LINES DESTROYED.  
AN AWFUL TALE OF WOE.**

[by telegraph— press association.] Hastings, Sunday Night.

The most disastrous flood Hawkes Bay has ever experienced occurred on Good Friday. From early morning rain fell in a deluge all day, accompanied by a gale. At 6 p.m. on Friday the River Ngaruroro burst its banks at Roy's Hill, flooding the districts surrounding, and about 7 p.m. the water was in evidence at Hastings, and at 8 several families were calling for assistance. Rescue parties were formed, which were kept busy during the night and through the next day rescuing families in boats from the houses. The residents in the low-lying districts are in a terrible plight.

There is great loss of stock. Hastings in parts is 10ft under water.

## **RAILWAY COMMUNICATION BLOCKED.**

Railway communication between Wellington and Napier is completely cut off. The express to Wellington, with 250 passengers, stuck beyond Pakipaki, where the rails have been washed away, and returned to Hastings at 6 p.m. The passengers had no food except fish cooked at the engine boiler, and a few sandwiches. The express from Wellington stuck at Makotuka, and returned to Palmerston. The line between Napier and Hastings is terribly damaged, and railway bridges have been washed away and the rails torn up and deposited yards away. There is a wash-out 25 chains long north of Pakipaki, and another a chain long near Longlands. The Longlands bridge is severely shaken. From Havelock to Pakipaki is a mass of water, and the Te Aute-road is impassable. The settlers will lose terribly. The bridge over the old Ngaruroro River at Havelock is strained, and tons of debris are piled against its south side.

## **SOME PARTICULARS OF THE LOSSES.**

The Redcliffe bridge was washed away, also the Petane bridge. There is thousands of pounds' worth of damage to stock, &c, at Marekakaho, the property of Mr. R. D. M'Lean, M.H.R., and houses overturned, but no loss of life is reported up to time of writing. Pakekura is several feet under water. The house of Mr. Baker was washed out to sea. The loss of stock throughout the district is incalculable. Mr. J. N. Williams lost 700 sheep ; Mr. T. Tanner, Riverslea, 1000, and Nelson Bros. 13,000. Messrs. T. Crosse and W. Bridgman are heavy losers. This does not represent anything approaching the loss. No further particulars are to hand. The carcasses are floating through the country. The water was at its highest at 7 p.m. yesterday.

Reports from Wairoa district show that there has been a loss of stock, and bridges have been swept away. Great damage has been done to the railway bridges at Takapau and Waipawa.

## **THE LIST OF CASUALTIES.**

Some ten well-known citizens of Napier went out as a rescue party to Clive with two boats. They launched them at the Waitangi river, and have not been seen since. It is supposed they have been washed to sea and drowned, as the boats were found capsized in the sea. They were all well-known and respected in Hawkes Bay. The following are the names of those who were lost: — Arthur McArtney, Albion Hotel, who leaves a wife and three children. Sergeant O'Donovan (wife and family). Constable Stevenson (wife and family). Joseph Brierley (wife and family). Fred

Cassin, clerk (wife and family). Prebble (married). Rose, commercial traveller. Hobden. Ansell, Chambers. The Harbour Board's steamer J.D.O. is searching for the bodies, but so far no result is to hand. Meanee is under water, and loss of life is reported there, but there are no particulars. Two Maoris were seen to be washed off their horses while attempting to cross the river, and have not been seen since.

Cunningham, one of the shepherds on the Chesterhope Station, was drowned. A man named Broadbent is reported to have been swept to sea on his horse. It is feared the loss of life will be considerable. It would be more only that Friday night was bright and moonlight.

### **AN ALARMING OUTLOOK.**

Fears are felt for the safety of Clive, which is all under water. In the lower parts of the township only the tops of a few of the houses are visible, and several have been washed away. Communication between Napier and Hastings is stopped, and the question of food is serious. Tomoana is a sheet of water; there is 4ft on the bridge.

Nelson Bros.' freezing works are here. All the sheep this side of the river are safe, but about 16,000 at the Chesterhope Station, belonging to the same firm, have been lost. Telegraphic communication with Napier is cut off, but it is reported to be under water, with boats in the principal streets. The Omahu bridge has been washed away. The natives left the pah, and their whares have been washed away.

Enormous damage has been done to the crops and fences. The residents of Fernhill had to leave their houses. The hotel is the only place out of water. The waters are subsiding gradually. The effect of the flood to settlers and inhabitants generally will be disastrous in the coming winter.

Sergeant O'Donovan was drowned after he volunteered to assist the distressed, along with Constable Stephenson.

Florence had emigrated from Ireland with other members of his family. He had served in Wellington, Havelock and then in charge of the Waipawa station and finally transferred to Napier.

An In Memoriam published in the local newspaper read:  
"Greater love hath no man than this; that a man lay down his life for his friend."  
His orphaned children were taken in by his brother John, who later became Commissioner of Police from 1916 - 1922.

Constable Stephenson was drowned after he volunteered to assist the distressed, along with Sergeant O'Donovan.

Alfred had served in the Armed Constabulary then Wellington Permanent Artillery before transferring to Police in 1889 and spending most of his career in Napier. He was described as a young man with a very genial disposition, and was held in high esteem by his superior officers.

An In Memoriam published in the local newspaper read:  
"Greater love hath no man than this; that a man lay down his life for his friend."