

POLICE ACTION (LAW AND ORDER)

New Zealand Police Department

Police action began immediately following the earthquake. As the initial shock subsided, the constable-in-charge of the Reefton Police took control. Checks of the town and of nearby communities were organised to establish the effects and extent of damage caused by the earthquake.

With large numbers of premises insecure, and valuables unrecovered, it was recognised that the whole area required security measures. The possibility of looting could not be overlooked. Property owners were requested to make their premises secure, and police carried out patrols of the whole disaster area, continually checking all properties. Co-operation from local residents was excellent.

The five-man civil defence police unit was called to duty, and maintained a constant patrol of the Inangahua business area until damaged premises could be made secure. A police liaison officer was appointed to civil defence headquarters, where a desk was set up for police work. A log was commenced to record police activities, and a list of persons awaiting evacuation was prepared.

A police-controlled party, which included a doctor, left Reefton when information was received that there were casualties and a probable death at Inangahua. Some of them travelled in vehicles and some walked. They later linked with a police party flown in by helicopter.

The Officer-in-charge of the Greymouth police district went to Reefton after receiving information on the extent of the damage. Daily conferences between leaders and/or their deputies of civil defence were held, and many difficulties were ironed out before serious problems arose.

Because of the widespread damage to houses, the fact that the area has no sewerage or water supply, the continuing earth tremors, and the possibility that the Buller River might flood, the population of Inangahua Junction and Camp were evacuated. Transport and accommodation were arranged from Reefton. Elderly people and women and children from the Camp were flown out by helicopters. Male persons over 12 years of age were evacuated by road. Junction residents left the area on foot.

Police patrolled the civil defence helicopter landing point because of the danger to onlookers and children. While most evacuees were relieved to leave the disaster area, a few were reluctant.

As evacuees began to arrive at civil defence headquarters in large numbers, police helped registration staff to speed the flow, and to guide evacuees through the correct channels so that all particulars needed were obtained.

So that an accurate record of valuables taken from properties could be kept, a plan of the Inangahua Camp and Junction areas was drawn up, and houses and premises were numbered. Valuables were removed from evacuated homes and held at the Reefton Police Station until they could be returned to their owners. An inventory of property removed was made.

Members of the Christchurch police search and rescue squad drove throughout the night to reach the disaster area by first light on the day after the earthquake. Their first job was to ensure that nobody, injured or otherwise, was left in houses in the affected district. Livestock was liberated and two injured animals, a sheep and a heifer, were destroyed.

The township had no communication links until about 9 a.m., when radio contact was made with Greymouth Police Headquarters. Police and Forest Service radio networks provided the main communication link with the disaster area for 24 hours until a co-ordinated signals system was established.

A road block was established on the only accessible road into Inangahua and official daily passes were issued by the police at civil defence Headquarters. These passes were issued to operators of essential services and to farmers with stock to attend, and were cancelled when they left the area. At a later stage, permanent police passes were issued. The road block was maintained continuously for five days, with constables living on the site. Regular police were assisted in manning the road blocks by civil defence police.

Police facilities were made available to organisations helping with the work. In particular, the Scene Command Post at Inangahua was used by everyone as a communications centre until telephone links were re-established. After the state of local disaster was lifted, the area remained under police control.

The command post served as a meeting point for persons on relief work in the area, and as a station from which patrols and security work could be efficiently carried out.

When the disaster area was finally opened to the public, police presence was essential, because sightseers attempted to wander across properties and through homes.