

Stuck truck proves TNZ maths are not all they should be

By JOHN MITCHELL

FURIOUS truckies were left shaking their heads in disbelief after a wide load became wedged in the Awakino tunnel yesterday.

The truck, carrying a huge 35-tonne steel pontoon from New Plymouth to Whangarei, became stuck in the tunnel, on State Highway 3, about 2.30pm.

While cars and smaller trucks could squeeze past the huge load, bigger vehicles were left stranded, with columns of about 30 trucks backed up either side of the tunnel for hundreds of metres.

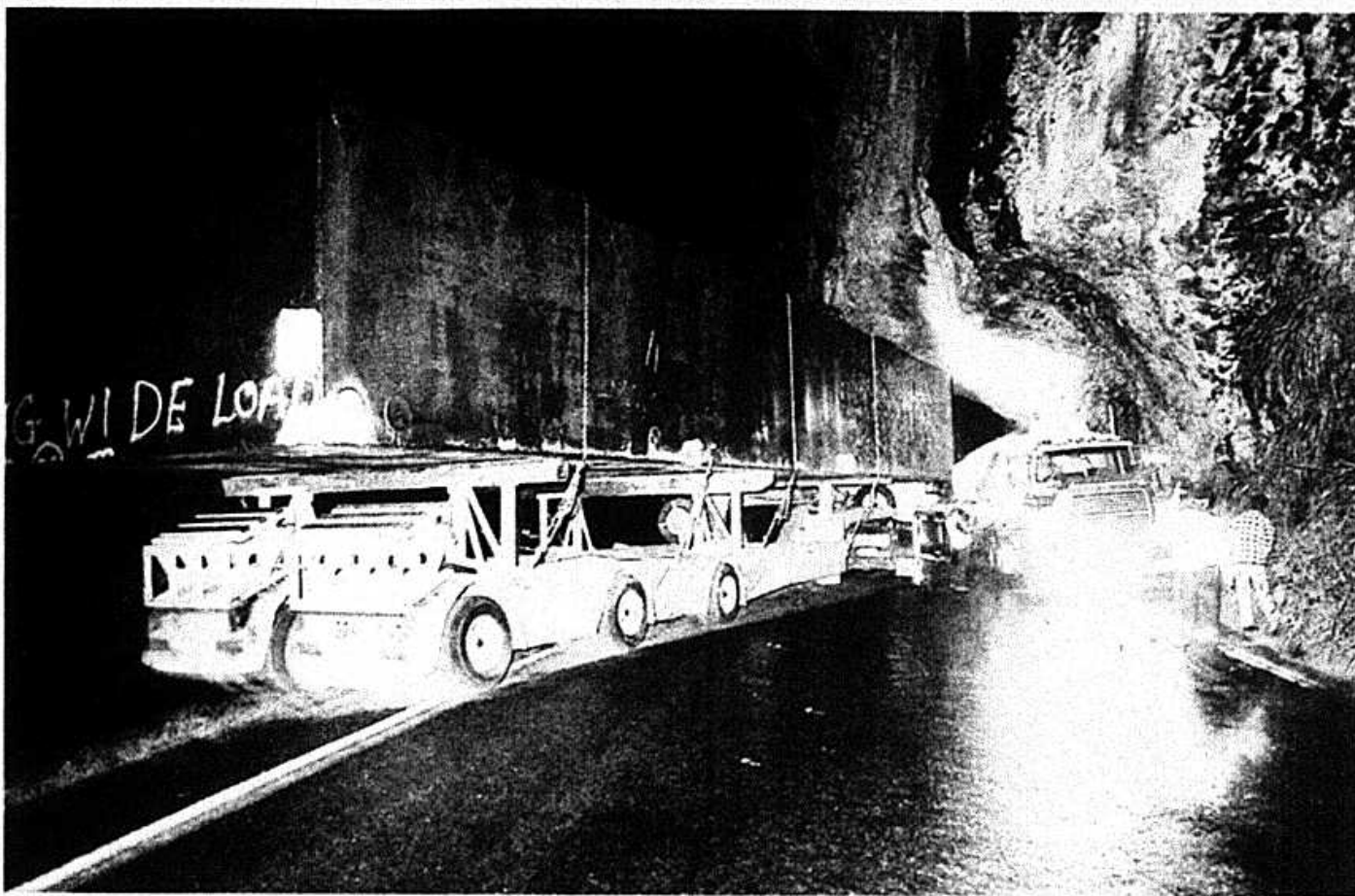
Truckies milling around the scene, seeking shelter in the tunnel from heavy rain, were furious about the holdup.

The unfortunate driver of the load, Neville Irvine from Mt Maunganui, was not the target of their anger. It was Transit New Zealand, the agency which approved the route for the load, which copped truckies' flak.

Even Mr Irvine was dumbfounded by TNZ's choice of routes.

"I should've gone south through to Bulls and then up," he said. "We thought it was a bit strange."

At 25 metres long, 4.5m wide, and 4.5m high, the load was never going to squeeze through the narrow tunnel — despite Mr Irvine's best efforts.



TIGHT FIT: A petrol tanker squeezes past the load which blocked the Awakino tunnel yesterday. Larger trucks weren't so lucky, with about 60 being held up while the load was shifted by cranes.

Photo: TREVOR READ

"I had three attempts. I've left gouge marks on either side of the tunnel where it was a perfect fit."

Backing the vehicle out of the tunnel was no mean feat and the attempts were halted when it looked like the truck might go over the edge into the river. Instead, two cranes from New Plymouth were called in right the load. Traffic was flowing again by 11pm.

Even once it was freed, Mr Irvine said, the load would be forced to continue north along SH3 because the angle of the road would not allow the truck back through the narrow Mt Messenger tunnel.

Constable Stephen Richardson, Mokau, said TNZ's approval of the route "came off the rails somehow".

Dimensions of the load had been supplied to TNZ, so it was aware of how big the pontoon was.

"I don't know why a permit was issued in the first place," said Mr Richardson.

"We'll definitely be making follow-up inquiries."

Among the truckies held up was Auckland driver Justin Bryce, who was on his way to Waitara to pick up a load. The holdup not only made him hours late for the pick up, but there was added concern about driving

hours. Truckies are only allowed to log a certain number of driving hours each day.

"Even though we're standing around here we're still technically on duty. What I want to know is, if we get stopped and they (police) check our log books, what will happen?"

Another driver echoed the concern. "I think we can book off-duty but if we got caught I don't know how it would stand up."

Meanwhile, Mr Irvine laughed off his ordeal, but said he had learned his lesson. "We've got four more of these things to move. I think I'll be going the other way."