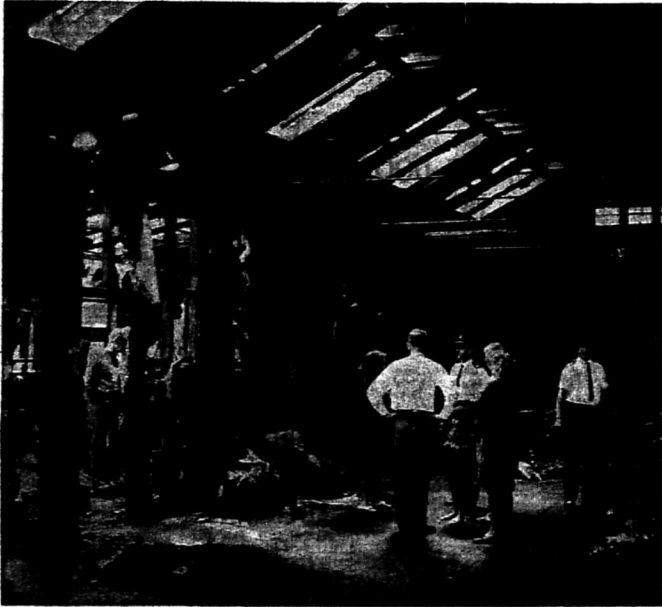


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FIREMEN AND VISITORS inspect the gutted shell of the New Plymouth Old Folks' Hall after a fierce fire swept through the building early today. Damage was estimated at nearly £15,000 by the association's president, Mr E. Davis.

2 a.m. fire guts Old Folks' hall

FIREMEN battled raging flames and choking smoke to control a fire sweeping through the New Plymouth Old Folks' hall in Liardest St. New Plymouth, early today.

Using respirators and four hose leads from three appliances, 18 firemen saved the front portion of the hall and prevented the blaze from spreading to an adjacent petrol station and restaurant-milk bar.

But the damage to the gutted hall interior and to furniture and equipment could well amount to £15,000, a former Old Folks' Association President, Mr E. Davis, estimated today.

THE FIRE COULD LEAVE THE 800 NEW PLYMOUTH OLD FOLKS' ASSOCIATION MEMBERS WITHOUT A CENTRE FOR THEIR CHRISTMAS ACTIVITIES.

Before the brigade were called, just after 2 a.m., the flames had a strong hold in the 18-year-old hall.

Apparently starting in the kitchen section, the flames licked up the walls, through the ceiling and into the lounge, main hall and store rooms.

Interior walls were burnt through and dozens of lounge chairs and expensive electrical equipment was destroyed before the brigade was called.

The blaze was apparently hard to notice in the early stages as the heavy smoke drifted west along Liardest St. and out to sea.

The alarm

Two people gave the alarm within a few seconds of one another. One man called at the station and a gas works employee, working a short distance away, saw the heavy smoke over the sea and phoned the brigade.

At first it was thought that the fire was in the nearby St. Aubyn Motors garage and petrol station, but flames soon had blown into the fiercely burning hall.

Two firemen with respirators battled through the choking smoke with the first hoses as flames began bursting through the roof.

If the fire was halted before it burned through the front portion of the hall, which contains the library, another store room and the office and records.

But the main portion of the building was gutted. The charred remains and burnt-out roof greeted a stream of OPA members this morning.

Rubble

The floor was deep in charred rubble, the kitchen section demolished. Many of the association's valuable pictures burned in their frames; biscuits roasted in their tins; milk boiled in a burnt-out refrigerator, and the keys on the piano melted together.

The four-piece Trends pop band lost all their equipment which was stored in the hall. "There was practically £2000 worth of gear there," said a dismal drummer, Monty Sharrock, as he indicated the ruined drums, electric guitars and costly amplifying equipment.

The group would probably have to cancel engagements, he said.

The band equipment and the hall were insured.

Tears

Mr Davis, the association's president for 13 years, had tears streaming down his face as he surveyed the ruins. He said the association would have a meeting at the hall this afternoon to try to decide on an alternative hall to accommodate the 800 members.

"We will try to get a temporary hall in the meantime until we get a roof on this hall again."

"Fancy this happening right at Christmas. We were to have our Christmas party on the 17th and I was going to give a party as president — I generally do."

Mr Davis said the association's new hall, to be built next door and linked with the present hall by a passage, would not be finished for about seven months. The new hall would be the lounge and card rooms while the present hall would be used for members playing indoor bowls.

Mr Davis said he hoped the fire would not affect the festive season.

The New Plymouth Old Boys Surf Club used the hall for their weekly "house" evening last night, but they left about 11 p.m.



FIREMEN CLIMB OVER THE ROOF and through the smoke-filled hall about 3 a.m. today after their hour-long battle to save the hall and neighbouring premises from the blaze.

NPGHS may be closed earlier

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE NEW PLYMOUTH GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL BEING CLOSED TO PREVENT AN OUTBREAK OF DYSENTERY WAS CONSIDERED TODAY.

The New Plymouth High School Board secretary, Mr W. A. Connor, said today that Taranaki's medical officer of health, Dr A. A. Cox, had recommended that the school should be closed.

Mr Connor said the Department of Education in New Plymouth today had been contacted this morning for a decision, but by early this afternoon no reply had been received.

Mr Connor said the board had recommended the school be closed.

"However," he said, "the school can only be closed by the Director of Education, on the recommendation of the board. We are now waiting for his decision."

"It is not an epidemic," said the school's headmistress, Miss A. R. Allum, today. "We have three cases of dysentery in Scotland's (the boarding establishment), two of them very mild, and two other cases in the school should stay away from the

NO EXTRA BUTTER IMPORTS

(NZPA-Special—Copyright)

LONDON, Monday. — No additional imports of butter will be authorised by the British Board of Trade for the period December 1 to January 31, 1966. This does not affect basic quotas already agreed on.

Tooley Street sources say the announcement indicates that butter stocks by the end of the year are "likely to be fairly heavy."

Such a move was valuable for New Zealand, by that if additional butter was allowed in from Europe — where large stocks are being held — it would have a depressive effect on prices.

Indonesian trade office planned

SYDNEY, Monday. — The Indonesian Ambassador to Australia, Major-General R. A. Kosasih, yesterday announced plans to open an Indonesian trade office in New Zealand.

He was speaking on his return to Sydney from a nine-day tour of New Zealand.

"Although relations between Indonesia and New Zealand are very friendly, we do not have sufficient trade," he said.

The young man, one of Britain's growing army of drug addicts, lay in bed having medical treatment today at the home of one of the Baptist ministers operating in the hotel clock shop.

'Some very frightened people'

LONDON, Monday. — A new anti-smoking squad drug by clergymen went into action here during the weekend and picked up its first heroin addict in a telephone box.

The young man, one of Britain's growing army of drug addicts, lay in bed having medical treatment today at the home of one of the Baptist ministers operating in the hotel clock shop.

Search for boy on raft

MELBOURNE, This Day (NZPA). — Police at sea today resumed search for a boy who was reported to be drifting on a rubber tyre or raft on the Pacific night, but they left about 11 p.m.

Gemini-7 fault not serious

(NZPA-Reuters—Copyright)

CAPE KENNEDY, Monday. — Engineers decided today an electrical fault in the Gemini-7 guidance system was less serious than expected and should not affect Saturday's launching, UPI reported.

The trouble involved is a brief surge of electricity in the Gemini guidance system during a simulated launch, that would have caused the Titan-2 booster rocket to swing three-thirds of a degree to the side for a fraction of a second in actual flight.

"We feel that even if this did happen, the guidance system would correct itself, and as a result would not affect the mission in any way," a Space Agency spokesman said.

SERGEANTS RELEASED

PHNOM PENH (Cambodia), Monday. — Two American servicemen captured by the Viet Cong two years ago were released as promised by the Communists and are in Cambodia, the Government announced today, UPI reported.

A communique said the two were being allowed to travel through the country, which does not maintain diplomatic relations with the United States, as "a humanitarian gesture."

The freed war prisoners were identified as Sergeant Claude Smith and Sergeant George McClure, both attached to the U.S. Army Special Forces.

The Cambodian Government statement said Sergeants Smith and McClure turned up on the border last night and asked permission to cross Cambodia en route to the United States. No other details were given immediately.

Smith and McClure were among four special forces advisers captured by the Viet Cong at Hiep Hoa. The other were Sergeant Isaac Camacho and Sergeant Keith Horwath.

Camacho made a daring escape last August, becoming the first U.S. war prisoner in Vietnam to successfully escape a Viet Cong prison camp. Norback, however, was executed by the Communists.

BABY BETTER

(NZPA-Special—Copyright)

APIA, This Day. — A 10-week-old Australian baby who was rushed to Apia (Western Samoa) aboard a United States Coast Guard cutter from the liner Canberra a week ago with serious case of pneumonia, is reported to be in satisfactory condition.

The Apia Hospital said today that it was hoped to discharge the baby, Renee Chaplin, in about 10 days.

CONGO-STYLE COUP IN DAHOMEY

BLIZZARDS in Britain

COTONOU, Monday. — Dahomey's army commander, General Christophe Soglo, today overthrew President Migan Apithy and Prime Minister Ahomadegbe—whose Government he helped establish two years ago.

In their place he installed to the President to resign, but he refused to do so.

LONDON, Monday. — Blizzards, gales, rain and floods swept Britain today, and swiftness of an ice 18

Up to the minute and a half

(NZPA-Reuters—Copyright)

ALDERSHOT, Monday. — A top-secret device to speed up Britain's telephone service was named last night. It is an egg-timer.

Twelve guaranteed-infallible-with-no-moving-parts, sand-operated-only types have just been installed in a new telephone exchange here alongside some of the latest electrical equipment in Britain.

When a call comes through the operator flicks the egg-timer over. If there is no answer by the time the sand runs out (90 seconds) the operator tells the caller he will try again and ring back.

When a call comes through the operator flicks the new device said: "It's still officially secret... it's more than our job: are worth to say anything."

But later a Post Office official said: "It may sound old-fashioned, but the egg-timers give the operator an idea of how long it takes to connect calls."

— THIS AUSTRALIA —

A Sydney radio station holds a daily quiz for housewives. To win the prize of a lottery ticket, housewives one day last week had to guess how many Americans had been killed in Vietnam the previous week.

DISCORD 'NO ADVANTAGE TO ANYONE'

(NZPA-Reuters—Copyright)

LONDON, Monday. — The British Foreign Secretary, Mr Michael Stewart, warned today against expecting discord between Russia and China to be of