On Wednesday 23 February persistent heavy rain began falling over the headwaters of the Goulburn River in the Upper Hunter Valley. As floodwaters began to flow, the intense rain continued moving towards the coast until Sunday 27 February. The accumulation of rising floodwaters on both the upper and lower reaches of the river system resulted in widespread flooding.

The total flood volume for the entire Hunter River system was 2.1 million megalitres—enough to fill Sydney Harbour over four times. The discharge of floodwater from the catchment area was 1.5 times the average annual discharge.

Flooding in Maitland

In Maitland, the flood reached a peak height of 12.1 m (AHD*) at the Belmore Bridge gauge on 25 February (photo 1). The high velocity floodwaters broke levees and inundated most of the central business district, surrounding suburbs and rural properties. Floodwaters rose to 1.5 m above the deck of the Long Bridge, 4.2 m above the rail level at Maitland Railway Station and approximately half a metre inside the Post Office in High Street (photo 2).

Some of the most severe damage occurred in Mt Pleasant Street. The river bank broke at Oakhampton, and a tremendous volume of water rushed along the floodplain. About 20 houses, some with people clinging to the roof, were swept up and smashed against the Long Bridge (photo 3). One couple, clinging to the wreckage of their house, were swept under the Long Bridge and floated along for about 8 km before being rescued at Testers Hollow.

The flood of 1955 was the most catastrophic of all floods recorded on the Hunter River since European settlement. The impacts in the Hunter Valley were severe with the loss of 14 lives, 5200 homes flooded (130 of which were destroyed or had to be demolished), and severe damage to farmland, streets, bridges and railways. The greatest impacts occurred in Maitland, Singleton and Muswellbrook. In today’s terms, the cost of the damage would amount to over $2 billion.

* Australian Height Datum (AHD)—a datum used to measure vertical height based on mean sea level as zero.
Rescue operations

*It was said, with wry humour, that the Army was in the water, the Navy in the air, and the Air Force on the land.*

Many people were stranded on roof tops and some rural areas were isolated for days until floodwaters subsided. Rescue and relief operations were carried out by the Royal Australian Air Forces (RAAF), the Australian Army, the Royal Australian Navy and Surf Life Saving Clubs.

An estimated 1800 people were saved and about 600 more were ferried to safety by surf boat crews. Several rescues were made by lifesavers swimming long distances with belt and line. Naval helicopters were credited with saving 23 people. Tragically, one of the helicopters crashed trying to rescue people thrown into floodwaters after the signal box collapsed at Maitland Railway Station.

Stranded people required food, water, medical supplies, clothing and blankets. At its peak, the daily drop by the RAAF and the Royal Newcastle Aero Club amounted to about 1000 parcels in Maitland and about 3000 parcels in Singleton, Muswellbrook and Denman, equivalent to about 23 tonnes.

While the rescue operations were effective in saving hundreds of people, it was clearly evident that a central authority to co-ordinate and control emergency responses to such large-scale disasters was urgently needed. In response to the widespread flooding across much of New South Wales in 1955, the State Emergency Service was formed.

In Maitland there is a 1-in-200 chance of a flood occurring each and every year which is as big or bigger than the 1955 flood. Unfortunately the time when such a flood will hit the city cannot be forecast more than a few hours before it strikes. Floods large or small can occur on the Hunter River at virtually any time.

*“On Friday night there were two men on the roof of a green cottage in Mount Pleasant Street. They were standing yelling for help and signalling. At 6.00 am on Saturday, when the water was still tearing across the bridge at terrific pace, the Swansea–Belmont surf boat crew captained by Bill Adams battled their way through to the house. When the crew reached it, they found, besides the two on the roof, two more men, three women and three or four children and brought them all off. The boat crew then went to the the bridge to take off people who had been clinging to it all night but this time Nobbys surf boat arrived and rescued these people.”* Senior Constable W McKie