



Gold-plated medal presented to Vincent Kelly after he survived a fall from the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1930. The medal measures 30mm x 44mm. Photograph by George Serras, National Museum of Australia.

SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE MEDAL

This medal was awarded to Vincent Kelly who survived falling from the Sydney Harbour Bridge while working on its construction in October 1930.

Fall from bridge

Kelly was using a heavy riveting gun when he slipped and lost his footing, plunging 55 metres to the harbour below. Other workers looked on, amazed, as Kelly, an experienced diver, turned a somersault and steadied his body to enter the water feet first, before surfacing and swimming towards safety.

Back to work

Kelly was lucky to escape the fall and, though he suffered shock and a few broken ribs, he was back at work a little over two weeks later. His amazing survival was commemorated with the presentation of a watch by the Minister for Public Works, MA Davidson, and a medal from Lawrence Ennis, Director of Construction for Dorman, Long & Co, the British company contracted to build the bridge.

Hazardous conditions

The building of Sydney Harbour Bridge had a huge social impact on the city, providing hundreds of jobs during the Great Depression.

Working conditions on the bridge were difficult and hazardous. There were few safety barriers, no harnesses, and very little of the safety equipment that is standard on construction sites today. In all, 16 men died as a result of accidents that occurred during construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Many others suffered long-term health issues, such as hearing damage due to the constant noise and lack of ear protection.

QUESTIONS

- 1. What were some of the potential hazards that workers faced while working on the Sydney Harbour Bridge?**
- 2. How have working conditions and regulations changed since the 1920s and 1930s?**
- 3. What influence did the Great Depression have on society, and why was the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge important at this time?**