

Carelessness and ignorance led 81 miners to their deaths in . . .

THE BULLI DISASTER

DOTTED along the narrow strip of flat land between the towering Illawarra Ranges and the restless Pacific Ocean of the south coast of NSW lie a string of coal mining towns. Each has a story of courage, tragedy and heartbreak to tell. Bulli is among the most tragic of all.

In Bulli's now somewhat ignored cemetery are 81 headstones bearing the date March 23, 1887. On that day a horrendous explosion and fire snuffed out the lives of 81 men working in the old Bulli Colliery, high up on a verdant mountainside.

Coalmines are always full of danger for the men who work in them.

They were worse in those days, before the electric safety lamp and oxygen rescue gear. But a shocking feature of the dreadful loss of life at Bulli was the fact that the blast was due directly to the gross inefficiency, carelessness and foolhardiness of the mine management, and of the miners themselves.

When a coal seam is being worked underground, a mixture of gases, called by miners "fire-damp", is sometimes given off by the coal face and collects in the workings. "Fire-damp" can asphyxiate a miner, and will explode if ignited by a naked flame or carelessly fired charge of mining explosive.

To counter the risk of gas explosion, in the days before electric lamps, the Davy Safety Lamp was used. In this, a cylinder of gauze shielded the naked flame of the lamp from igniting surrounding gas.

Unfortunately the gauze could be removed by a foolhardy miner to gain a brighter light.

The Coal Fields Regulation Act made the use of these lamps compulsory in "gassy" mines. The Act also declared that upon the discovery of gas the men must be withdrawn from that portion of the workings until it was made safe by ventilation.

In the Bulli Colliery the Hill End headings, tunnels driven about 2.5 km (a mile and a half) into the base of the range from an adit in the bush above the town, were known to be "gassy". From these headings ran smaller tunnels, or "bords", each one being driven into the coal-seam and worked by two miners.

Gas collected on the face in these bords when the mine was not working. Occa-

sionally the men would strike a "blower", a pocket of compressed "fire-damp" gas, which would hiss out from a crack in the coal face.

The night before the explosion, one man in the No. 2 heading had been burnt, though not severely, when gas from a "blower" ignited. The men had begun to run from the heading when the flame died down and went out.

This was not reported at the time by the deputy, Robert Milwood, nor by the miners.

Not only was Milwood easy-going on the subject of gas, but he also tolerated the negligence of the miners, their use of unlocked lamps, the use of naked lights to fire the fuses for shots and smoking in the danger areas of the mine.

The miners, too, took the presence of gas very casually. None of them reported it; according to subsequent testimony, they feared "the sack" if they did.

The miners had not been long back at work after a strike. J. B. Nicholson, secretary of the Miners' Association, met some of the men a day or so before the disaster. "I suppose," he said, "there's a bit of gas?"

"Too much gas, too little air," one miner replied. "I hear you men in the bords are working with naked lights." — "Oh, yes." "God help you!" said Nicholson. "You'll get it one of these days."

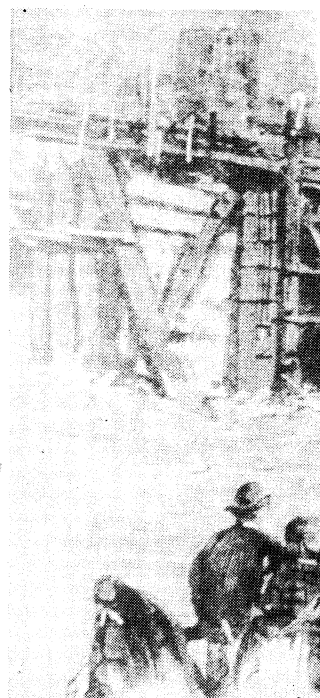
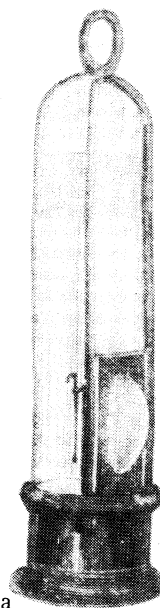
It happened after the lunch-break on Wednesday, March 23.

Two miners, Westwood and Compton, had set a shot in their bord to bring down the coal, fired the fuse, and retired to the heading. Milwood was close by them.

Instead of the reverberation of the shot there came, drowning it, a roar, a rush of flame, and a blast that swept the three men into eternity and flamed over their charred and mangled bodies down the heading, killing all in its path, to the adit.

The blast brought down patches of the roof, blew aside the pit props, leaving them burning in places, smashed the skips and slaughtered the wheelers and their horses. One wheeler's body was found jammed into the undercarriage of his skip.

Another, Herbert Cope, one of the fortunate ones, was caught by the blast near



Relatives stood quiet

the adit and hurled 100 metres beyond it into the scrub, bruised and stunned, but still alive.

Men in the other heading, sheltered from the flame and the worst of the blast, heard the roar of the explosion and ran for the entrance. Very few managed to reach it.

On the wings of the flame came the "choke-damp", two gases, the poisonous carbon monoxide that kills quickly, and the dioxide that lies heavily on the ground and suffocates those who fall. A few men from No. 1 heading staggered from the entrance amid the gas and smoke.

In the tunnels of the Hill End area, however, nothing moved after a few minutes except the stones that dropped from the roof. The bodies of 81 men lay charred and mangled by the blast, or choked by the gas. There was no hope of rescue.

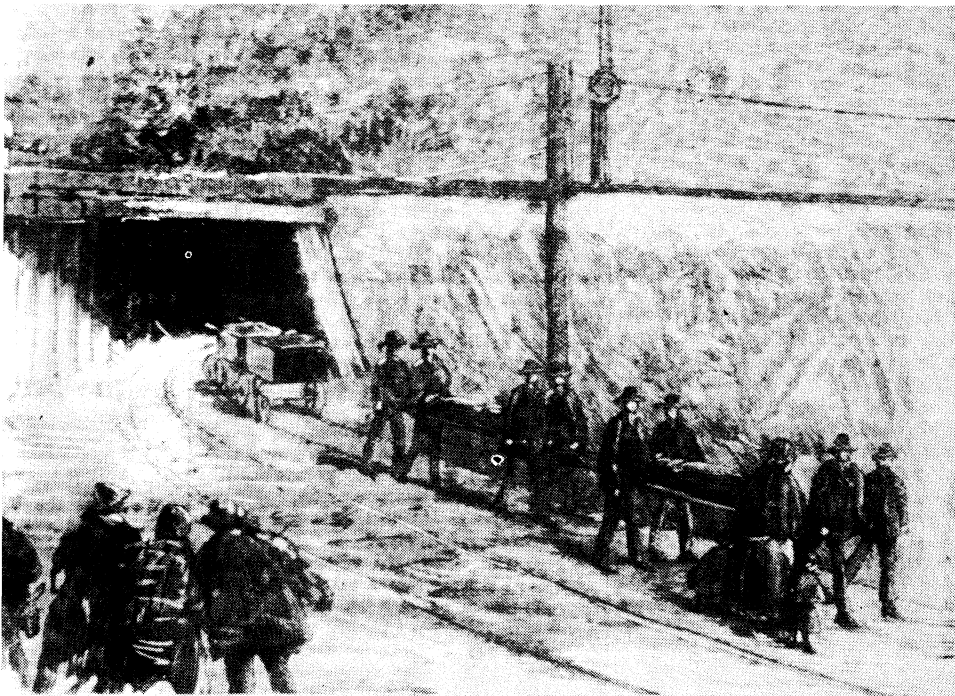
Yet four brave men, Lang, Chalmers, Scott and Hope, entered the reeking and shattered tunnel shortly after the explosion in an attempt to bring out survivors. Small explosions were still occurring, and the debris was afire in some places, while the roof-falls and the gas made their progress difficult and dangerous.

They penetrated 800 metres (half a mile) into the wrecked heading and saw the bodies of some of their mates. Then they were driven back by the heat and the gas.

Three hours after the explosion the first body was recovered, shattered and burnt. The ventilation had now begun to clear the gas. Parties were organised and the work of recovery went on.

Down in the village the explosion was heard, and flame and smoke were seen at the mine entrance. Men and women began to climb the track and gather before the smoking adit, wild with anxiety and grief as they awaited hopelessly the arrival of the rescue parties.

As each party returned with its dead it



by the mine adit as mutilated bodies were brought out.

became apparent that none in the mine remained alive.

Right through the night they waited, hoping against hope. Some lost husbands and sons — all the adult males of the families were gone.

William Bourne and his two sons, Felix and James, were among the dead. James Bourne's was the first body recovered.

A. Harris and two sons, Walker and two sons, William Wade and his son, two brothers Brodie and two Mackey boys were also dead. It was some time before all were brought out, since most were crushed under fallen stones from the roof, or hidden among the tangled wreckage of gear and pit props.

There were the providential escapes usual in great disasters. One miner, named Tippet, had been fined at the police court for some misdemeanor a few days before. He had refused to go back to work. That fine saved his life.

Another, Edward Kerrigan, had been cut on the head by a stone falling from the roof, and came out of the mine an hour before the explosion. Four others

had taken a holiday and gone to Sydney, and it is probably that the first estimated deathroll of 85, corrected later to 81, was due to the belief that they were at work when the disaster occurred.

The inquest was held with a jury. It went on for over three weeks, and an enormous mass of evidence was taken, evidence which showed an appalling and consistent neglect by everybody of the safety regulations of the Act and of the colliery.

Alex Ross, the manager, admitted that he knew there had been gas in the workings of the Hill End area for two years, but he said it had been "got away" by ventilation. No report of gas had been made by the deputy, Milwood, or anybody else, to him, in any quantity, great or small.

As for the observance by the miners of the regulations, Ross trusted the overman, Richard White, to see that the rules concerning lights were obeyed. He himself, in his visits below, had never examined the miners' Davy Lamps to see whether they were locked, nor knew that

the men smoked within a few yards of a danger bord, nor that matches had been used to light the fuses for shots.

The Government Inspector of Mines for the district displayed a similar lack of information. He had been in the mine a few days before the explosion. He did not, however, visit the Hill End area, since everything seemed all right, according to the reports of the manager.

Evidence given by the miners made it abundantly clear that they knew all about the gas in the mine. It had been observed by them, particularly on the Friday and Saturday preceding the explosion. They did not report it to the deputy; they said he knew it was there.

One miner, pinned down by the coroner on his reasons for not reporting the presence of gas, declared that it was against the rules of the colliery to "interfere with the working of the mine."

The witness thought it was a bad rule, because "if I had reported it I would have gone against the rule and been dismissed by the manager."

On the subject of the safety lamps, Woods, a miner, gave evidence. All the miners took the gauze off the lamps because it interfered with the lights. Shots were fired by lighting torchpapers from the lamps — he had never fired them any other way.

Lamps, said Woods, were open in the presence of the deputy, Milwood. And when the gas from the "blower" ignited, but went out, "I thought nothing of it."

The verdict of the jury was "that the victims met their death by a gas explosion brought about by a disregard of the Bulli Colliery special rules and the Coalfields Regulation Act in allowing men to go to work where gas existed."

This seemed a "lame and impotent conclusion", but later on, a specially appointed commission of inquiry, found that the catastrophe was directly due to the culpable neglect of the management as well as the carelessness of the miners.

This terse summing-up brought little comfort to the kinfolk of the 81 miners. To the wives and children of the dead there was much more avail in the relief fund of 40,000 pounds or so raised throughout Australia in order that they should not suffer want as well as the loss of their husbands and fathers.

BELOW: The task of identifying some of the bodies placed in the morgue was almost impossible.

