

THE MOUNT KEMBLA MINING DISASTER

Explosions, fire and White Death claimed miners and rescuers

RETIRED miner William Stafford, and his wife were quietly gardening outside their cottage at Mount Kembla, N.S.W., when suddenly the earth lurched and shook beneath them. A second later they heard a loud rumble from the heart of the mountain and saw a red tongue of flame writhe from the mouth of Mount Kembla Colliery.

Awestruck, they watched as clouds of smoke billowed from the workings and mushroomed overhead. They were the first to give the alarm in one of Australia's worst disasters — trapped in the workings were 280 men and boys.

All day long coal dust and other gases had been accumulating in the mine. At 2 p.m. a miner's lamp ignited them into an explosion that was heard 15 km (nine miles) away.

And like a mighty earthquake, the

BELOW: Major H. McCabe . . . led rescue parties at the Bulli disaster and at Mount Kembla.



shockwaves buried the mine mouth under thousands of tonnes of debris.

Inside the mine, roofs collapsed, coal skips were tossed about like leaves in a hurricane and searing blasts of gas roared through the tunnels. Feats of grim heroism were enacted as rescuers risked, and in some cases gave, their lives to save entombed victims.

The Mount Kembla Mine stands in the Illawarra Ranges about 10 km (six miles) from Wollongong. It was opened in 1880 and employed about 300 men.

Miners regarded it as one of the best ventilated and safest mines in Australia. For that reason there were no safety lamps. They toiled at the coal face by the flickering light of naked flares.

On July 31, 1902, there was not the slightest warning of impending disaster. A few days earlier the colliery manager, Will Rogers, reported there was not a whiff of gas in the workings.

Two testers who went through the mine on the morning of the disaster declared it gas free. One of them died in the blast . . .

The explosion rocked the mountain at 2 p.m. Houses in the township 400m (quarter of a mile) from the pit began to rock and shake. Several wooden dwellings collapsed.

Terrified housewives rushed their families into the open, fearing an earthquake. Only when they saw the pit head enveloped in black smoke did the grim reality dawn on them.

All had husbands or sons in the mine. In panic they ran up the mountain to the main shaft.

The scene of devastation horrified them. Office, engine house and other surface buildings had been blasted into an unrecognisable mass.

Ironwork was twisted into fantastic shapes. Sturdy coal trucks had been crushed as though they were eggshells. Hundreds of tonnes of rock blocked the tunnel entrance.

Gangs composed of men from the night shift and volunteers worked frenziedly to clear the debris. First they came across the mutilated body of a lad named Jacob Nelson under a mass of rocks and timber.

Ten minutes later they uncovered a human leg, a booted foot and a fragment of thigh belonging to another youth.

Though they worked frantically most of the rescuers in their hearts had given up all hope for the 278 entombed men.

Great clouds of smoke still gushed from the entrance. The first to enter the workings staggered out dazed, half blind and scorched by the hot blast. It seemed as though no one could live in the inferno.

The leaders, however, refused to abandon hope. It was well they did for, far underground at the end of the longest tunnels, men were fighting against odds for life, in pitch darkness and threatened by creeping carbon monoxide gas.

At last ventilation shafts were cleared and a draught of pure air was forced into the workings. As smoke diminished, rescue squads cautiously entered the shaft. This time they carried safety lamps for the air was still heavy with gas and coal dust.

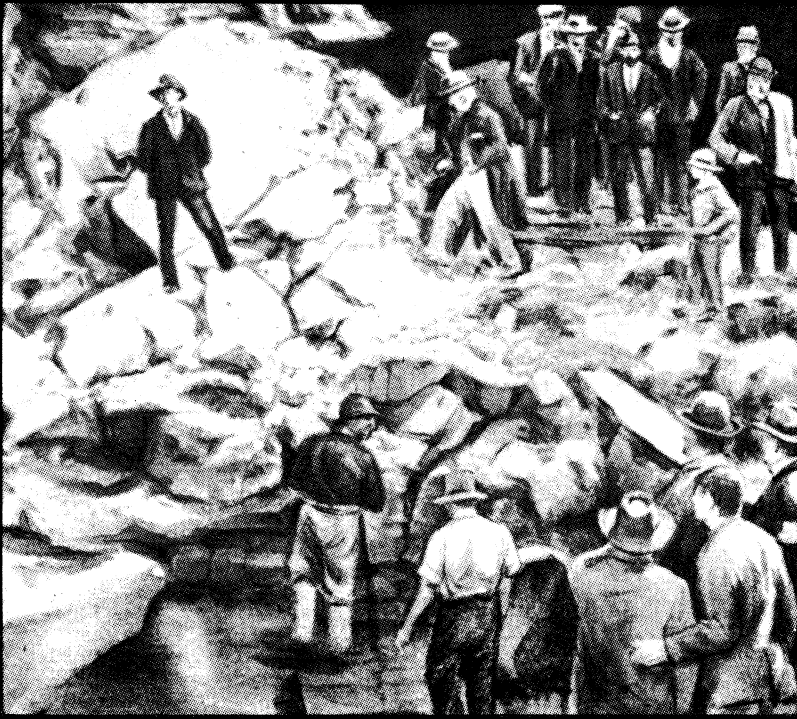
Their progress was slow. The explosion had brought down hundreds of tonnes of coal and rock to the mine floor. There was danger of new falls.

Soon they faced another peril — "after damp," or The White Death, the deadly gas caused by the incomplete combustion of gas and coal dust.

Insidiously, almost unnoticed the White Death sapped their strength, and left them weak and languid.

Other rescuers sealed off some of the gas-affected areas with bagging before they could press further into the mine.

About 1.5 km (one mile) from the tunnel mouth, one party found a dozen men in a pitiful condition. After damp was slowly killing them. A few struggled



ABOVE: Rescuers look at the rubble blocking the entrance to the mine.

weakly to move, others lay on their backs or faces, dying.

By the evening 23 bodies had been recovered. One man had his forehead split open, another his leg crushed. The blast had stripped the clothes from another and left him completely naked.

Survivors told of nightmare experiences. The first mighty onrush of air through the tunnels had swept them off their feet.

Skips had been tossed with shattering force against the pit ponies which had gone down screaming with agony.

Lights had been doused instantly so there was no warning when thick smoke billowed down the tunnels to threaten them with suffocation.

Rescuers encountered pathetic scenes among the dead. A father and son were lying together. Two brothers were clasped, as though in instinctive protection, in each other's arms.

Others had obviously been killed by the white death while trying to comfort or rescue a comrade.

Meanwhile a grim drama was enacted at a distant coal face where 90 men were working. They heard only a faint blast and took no notice of it till a sudden change in temperature warned them of danger.

Anxiety turned to panic when gas and hot fumes raced down the gallery. The less stolid men ran about in confusion not knowing which way to turn for safety.

Some degree of calm was restored when an old Welsh miner, David Evans, took control. A deputy, he knew every passage in the mine.

He ordered the men to proceed to a safety point and there wait while he looked for others.

Some of the men were jittery and impatient. "Come on Davy, lead us out at once," they cried. He refused. "Wait a

little longer, lads, till others can join us," he replied calmly.

A score of the men stampeded. Ignoring Evans' appeal, they dashed down one of the workings intent on finding their own way out. They perished to a man.

After waiting till there was no chance of others reaching them, Evans led the remaining 70 through devious cross tunnels driven originally to channel air to workings long disused.

For three hours they wriggled and crawled through passages sometimes so narrow that they had to lie flat to squeeze through.

Hands were bleeding, bodies and faces scratched and some had suffered minor injuries before Evans led them at last to safety.

Main heroes of the disaster were Major H. McCabe and William McMurray, who sacrificed their lives trying to rescue survivors.

McCabe was a former mine surveyor. He had led rescue teams in the Bulli disaster 15 years earlier. Knowing his wide experience, the Mount Kembla authorities jumped at his offer to lead a rescue squad.

He was joined by McMurray, a Mount Kembla deputy, who had been on the night shift.

Together they assembled a small party and plunged into a section of the mine badly affected by gas. McCabe and McMurray were well to the fore when suddenly they were overcome by fumes and fell to the ground.

Two of their followers rushed up and tried to drag them back, only to find themselves growing steadily weaker as the gas crept on.

When they could go no farther, McCabe ordered them to leave McMurray and himself and save themselves. Painfully, reluctantly, they crawled to safety.

The bodies of McCabe and McMurray were found later clasped together as if one had died in a final supreme effort to drag his comrade to safety.

There were many miraculous escapes. One group of miners known as the Front Shift did not know there had been a disaster till they left the mine and found their wives anxiously waiting.

William McDonough, working about 1.5 km (one mile) from the tunnel mouth, felt only a warm breeze. He walked out, almost unconscious from after damp.

A wheeler and two others were saved by a pit pony. When the lights were blown out, they unhitched the horse from the skips and allowed it to lead them through the darkness to fresh air.

There were scenes of wild delight among the waiting wives as these miners emerged safely. They changed to blank despondency when, after 12 hours, it was announced that gas had become so general that all rescue work must cease till more air shafts, blocked by blast, could be cleared.

All that night, wives, parents, children waited in the bitter cold at the mine mouth. There were harrowing scenes as it became obvious with the passage of time that no one still in the mine could be alive.

It was after dawn before the parties could re-enter the mine. When they emerged, they were carrying dead.

Distraught women had to be restrained from rushing forward to scan the faces.

The fitter's shop, the only building left standing, was turned into a mortuary. It was quickly filled. Carpenters had to rush up another shack to hold the rest of the corpses.

Cartloads of coffins arrived, but the demand was so great that rough caskets had to be made from scrap timber on the site.

Pathetic little funeral processions began to wind down the hill as relatives carried off their dead. Some families took them away uncoffined.

The disaster caused wide public sorrow. King Edward VII sent a message of condolence.

In Sydney, both houses of Parliament adjourned. Tens of thousands of pounds were quickly subscribed to aid the bereaved.

The Irish Egan family had seven sons in the mine, of whom four were killed. Another family lost five. Four of the Purcells were killed.

Another victim left eight young children. There were several instances where father and son perished in the disaster.

The final death toll was 96.

A Royal Commission carried out an extensive investigation.

The commission found that the disaster had been caused by an explosion of "fire-damp" ignited by naked lights in No. 1 level of the mine, and accelerated by a series of coal-dust explosions.

As a result, all South Coast mines switched to safety lamps.