

THE small North Queensland town of Mount Mulligan settled into its usual somnolence on Monday, September 19, 1921. Most of the menfolk were hewing coal deep under the forbidding mountain which gave its name to town and mine. Suddenly, at 9.25 am, the ground rocked to a series of explosions.

Panic flared. Men, women and children raced to the pithead. Flames spearing 50 metres from the tunnel drove them back. Another explosion shook the earth and a solid concrete fan-house collapsed, blocking the entrance.

News of a major accident flashed to the nearby townships of Mareeba, Cairns

and far away Rockhampton. The Ipswich Lifesaving Brigade was alerted for a 1600 km (1000-mile) dash north.

Before they could start, word came that it was useless.

Every one of the 75 men trapped in the mine was dead — burnt or torn apart by the tremendous blast.

The Mount Mulligan disaster was the worst industrial accident in North Queensland history. It affected cities and towns all over Australia. It was a new mine and had recruited men from Mount Morgan, Ipswich, Wonthaggi, Newcastle, Broken Hill and England.

Known as a "safe" mine, gas had

never been detected there. Miners worked with naked light instead of safety lamps.

Work had been under way for about an hour on the fateful day when the first blast seared through the workings. All men above ground rushed to the mine. They had to stumble over the debris of a switch-house, completely wrecked though 30 metres (100 ft.) from the mine entrance. Huge cable-drums had been blown 15 metres (50 ft.).

Grabbing shovels and picks, they worked furiously to remove the fallen rocks and concrete blocking the entrance. Those without implements dragged at the earth and rubble with bare hands.

They were led by Superintending Engineer J. T. Watson, who was first through the narrow aperture into the lower shaft.

There they stumbled over mine manager T. J. Evans dying with a length of wood embedded in his throat. It had driven his front collar-stud through to the back of his neck. A few yards further another man sprawled dead with leg and arm blown off.

As they rounded a bend, a gust of choking "after-damp" enveloped them. Wheezing and gasping, they stumbled back to the tunnel mouth, where Watson collapsed.

By this time the side of the mountain was dotted with fires. Women waited silently for news.

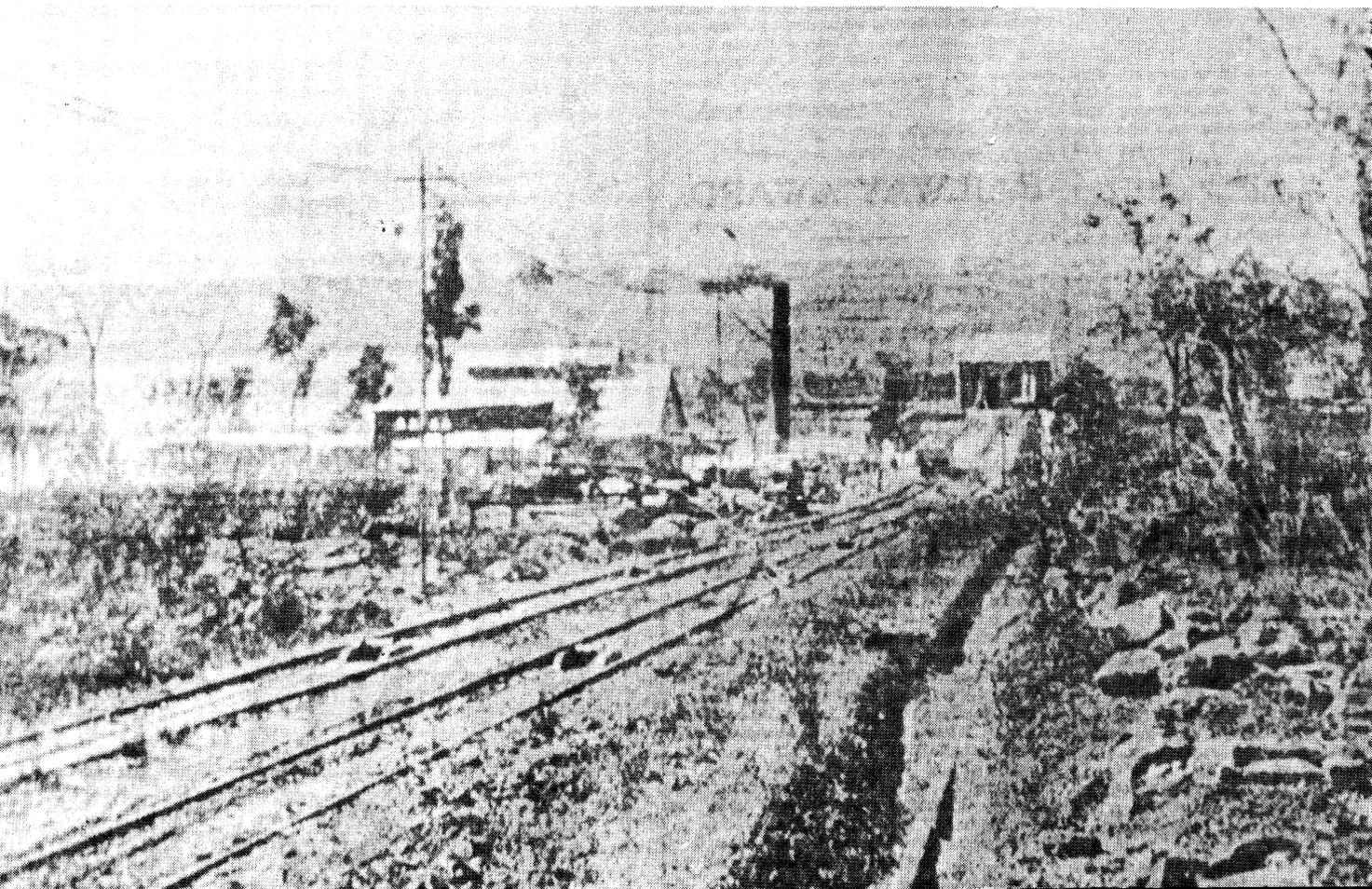
Mine officials decided nothing could be done till they contrived a booster fan to drive foul air from the workings.

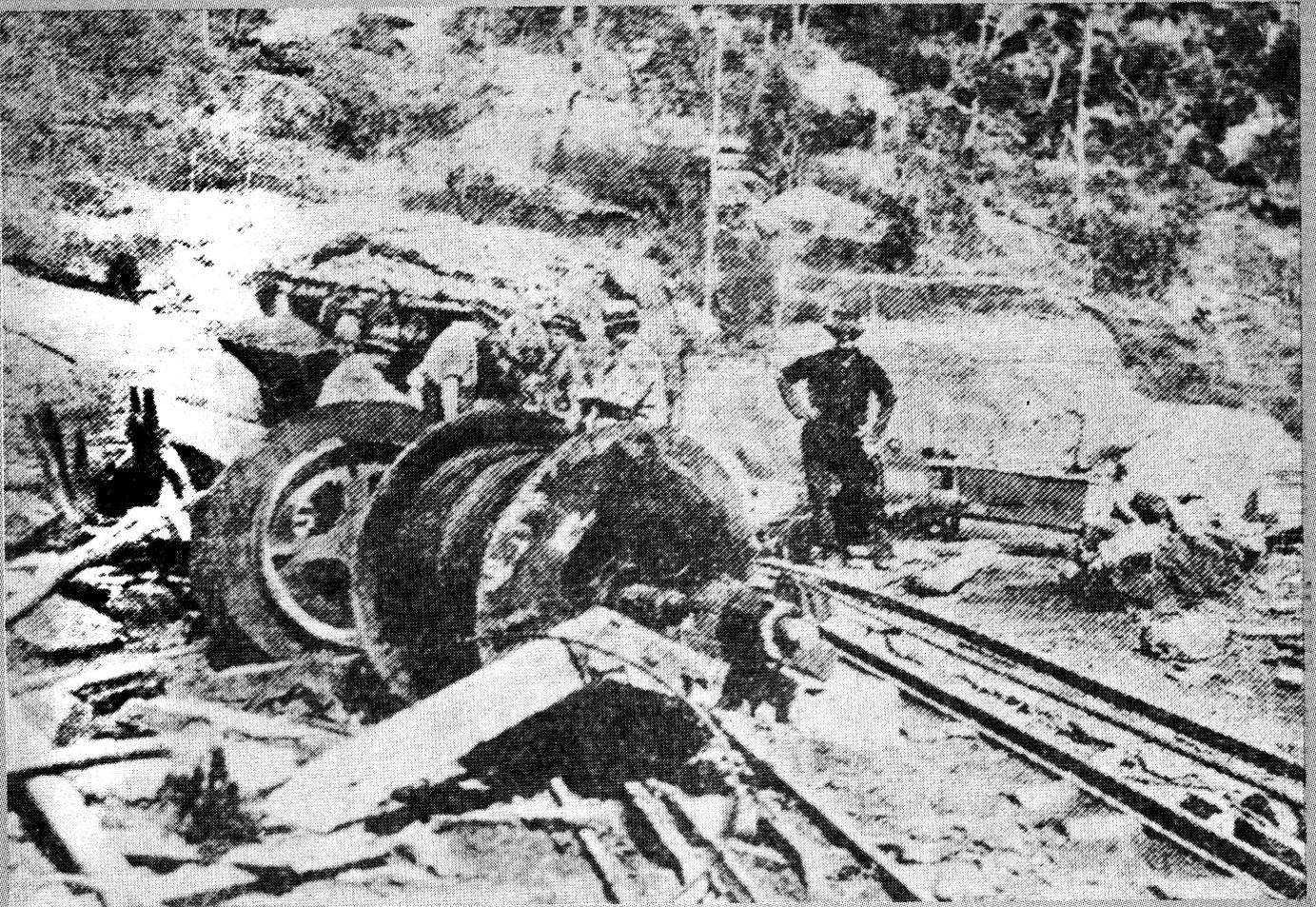
Meanwhile, news of the calamity had

# DEVASTATION AT MOUNT MULLIGAN

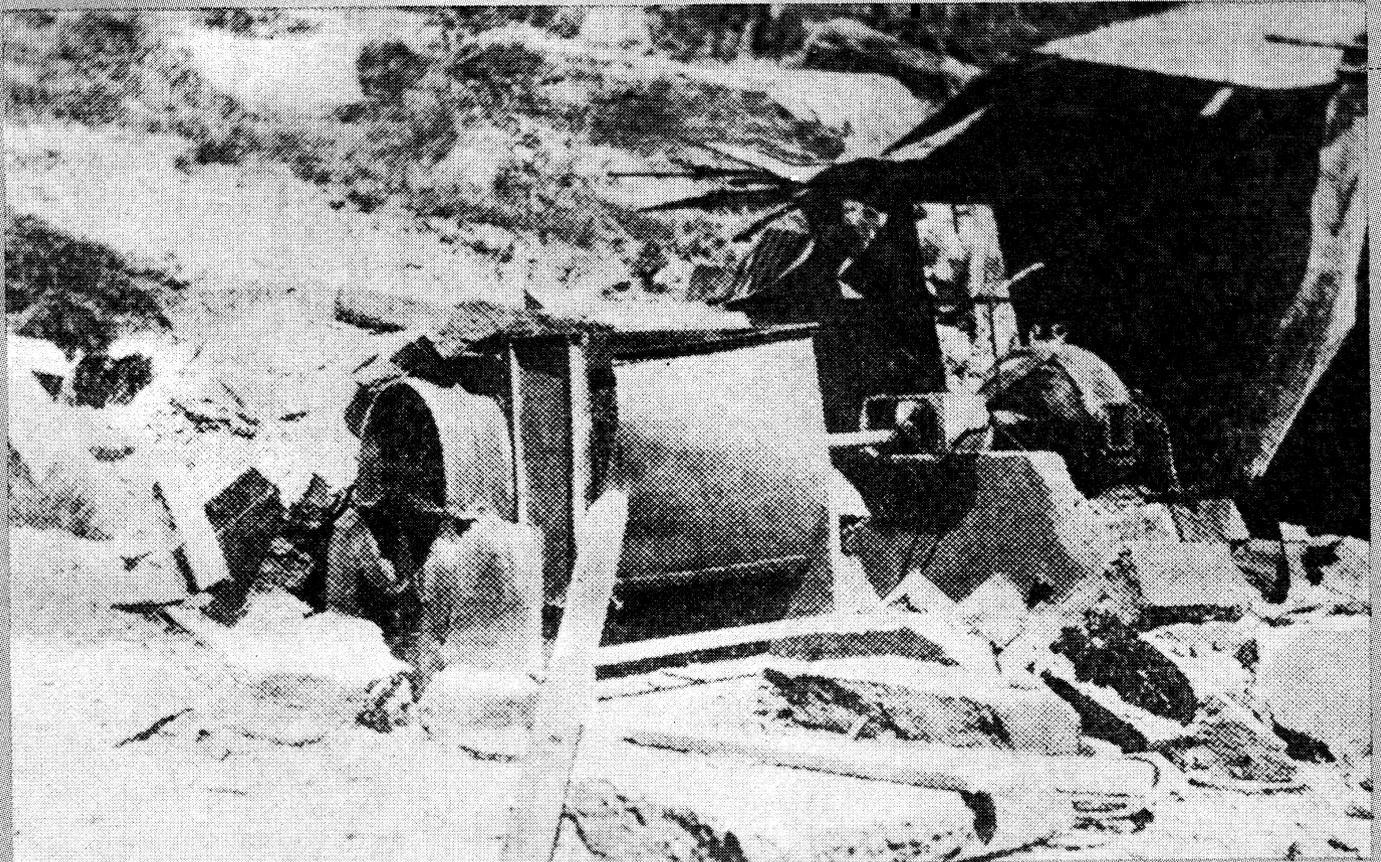
**The victims all bore a look of terror . . . an indescribable horror had overwhelmed them!**

**BELOW: The Mount Mulligan mine and works . . . deep in the arid North Queensland outback.**





**ABOVE: Wreckage of the mine winding gear . . . the blast blew the heavy drums 15 metres (50 feet).  
BELOW: Wreckage of the switch-house . . . although more than 30 metres (100 feet) from the mine entrance, the blast shattered the solid concrete walls.**



been flashed throughout Australia. At 10.30 am a train left the tobacco town of Mareeba with a corps of doctors, nurses and police. At 3.30 pm another left Cairns with seven ambulancemen and two waggons. Stacked in the guard's van was an ominous load of coffins.

Panic spread to all towns where men had been recruited. Anxious mothers stormed the post offices for news of their sons as the full scale of the calamity became known.

Back at Mount Mulligan, Inspector of Mines E. T. Laun took over from Watson, who was still ill. He organised the volunteer rescuers who poured into the town. Some he set to gathering fuel for cooking-fires and erecting shelters for weeping womenfolk, who would not leave the scene.

Others he detailed to the hastily flung-up morgue, the cemetery and the carpenter's shop.

The fittest he formed into a rescue squad. As soon as the booster fan had cleared some of the gas pockets, Laun led a rescue party into the death tunnel. As a precaution they carried caged canaries to warn them of lingering pockets of "after-damp".

Seven bodies were recovered from the main tunnel. Another 13 were found in Beatties' Machine Wall on the north side of the mine.

On Wednesday, the south side was entered. Two bodies were discovered before treacherous "after-damp" forced rescuers back. Unwilling to abandon the search, they moved to the top seam, where they found another 13 corpses.

On Thursday they again braved the south side. Fourteen bodies were pressed in a pitiful heap against the tunnel wall. All wore expressions of terror, as if "they had seen some indescribable horror descending on them". They had been scorched to death.

At the pithead, doctors, nurses and ambulancemen went through the forlorn task of testing to see if any were still alive. The ground resembled a battlefield, with blackened, torn bodies laid out in rows, some covered with blankets.

A cordon of brawny volunteers ringed the casualty station, fending off sobbing women who begged permission to scan the faces of the dead.

Once the doctors had completed their examination, the women were allowed to scrutinise the grim bundles under the supervision of police.

A statement by Premier Theodore that the rock falls might have trapped some of the men without injuring them, temporarily raised the hopes of some of the relatives.

On Friday, Fitzpatrick's Wall was entered and 13 bodies found. These, too, had died from blast and concussion. The flames and explosion had so torn and burnt them that identification was almost impossible.

Bodies were carried from the mine all Friday to sobs and cries from the crowd massed at the entrance. Each time there was a desperate rush, with doctors, police and rescuers struggling to control the relatives.

By now the crowd had lost hope of anyone being found alive in the heart of



**ABOVE: Part of Mount Mulligan township . . . and the coffin-shaped mountain of coal that gave the town its name and existence — then nearly wiped it out one fateful Monday.**

the brooding mountain. Fires flickered through the gloom as night fell. Lorries, carts and another train brought fresh bands of volunteers.

No one left the hillside. The town was completely deserted.

The carpenter's shop echoed to the sound of hammering and sawing as more rough coffins were fashioned.

In the morgue, men quietly prepared their charges for burial. Doctors performed autopsies. Stricken widows and sweethearts clustered together for comfort as they watched the lantern light glowing through the windows of the small building.

Clergymen sped to the town in answer to an appeal by the Mayor of Cairns. Denominational differences were forgotten as ministers conferred on burial arrangements.

This presented a big problem. Mount Mulligan was new. There had been no earlier deaths, and therefore there was no cemetery. The funerals of 50 of the victims of the disaster were the first ever held at Mount Mulligan.

A site was picked a mile from town. The ground was iron-hard. Gangs had to sweat for hours to dig the graves.

At 3.40 am on Saturday the last body was recovered from the mine. The mass funeral was set for Sunday, when coffins were stacked high on three farm wagons pressed into service as hearses.

The sun of semi-tropical Queensland blazed on the tragic scene. At the graveside, ministers had to lift their voices to be heard above the sobbing of relatives.

Premier Theodore appointed a Royal Commission composed of Messrs. R. Dunlop, C. Kilpatrick and W. Want. Findings were released in November, 1921. They confirmed that the disaster was caused by explosion of fire damp.

They added that explosives had been used, stored, distributed, and carried underground in a careless manner.

There was lack, too, of adequate means to render mine-dust harmless, as required by the regulations. Mine inspections had been made by men without the necessary experience.

The report criticised the absence of mine rescue stations in the area and ad-

vocated an experimental station to investigate causes of mine explosions.

Meanwhile, subscription lists had been opened in capital cities all over Australia. Cash poured in as citizens realised the magnitude of the disaster.

The heart-warming rally to the cause of the stricken relatives was marred by an unhappy squabble between the Queensland Premier (Mr. Theodore), the Lord Mayor of Melbourne (Councillor Swanson), and Councillor Atherton, Chairman of Woothakata Shire Council, which had jurisdiction over the Mount Mulligan area.

Premier Theodore issued a statement suggesting that all subscriptions be forwarded to Brisbane, to be administered by an officer of his Government.

Cr. Atherton opposed this, claiming it was a blatant move by Theodore to win kudos for himself and his party. Cr. Atherton argued that his council was best equipped to see the money was spent wisely.

On November 23 he wired Cr. Swanson in Melbourne, asking him to hold the \$10,000 subscribed there, pending clarification of the issue. Woothakata Shire had already distributed \$6000 collected in its area.

Theodore immediately wired Cr. Swanson, asking him to remit the money to Brisbane. Cr. Swanson wired back to Theodore: "Money has been raised to relieve distress, not for distribution as means of advertisement for a political party."

Theodore vehemently denied he had asked for the money to bask in the glory of distributing it. Cr. Swanson, encouraged by Cr. Atherton, remained adamant.

The dogfight went on till the day the Commission's report was released. Finally a compromise was reached. A trust was set up representative of all interested groups, with headquarters in Brisbane.

The quarrel left an unfortunate impression on the man-in-the-street. Compared with the holocaust of death that swept Mount Mulligan mine, it was, however, a minor issue. The calamity still lingers in the memory of many Australian families.