

Rockhampton's Zahn Rothery dies in Nebo crash near Mackay

A friend who worked side-by-side with with a 21-year-old who died in a horror crash leaving a Bowen Basin mine will remember him as a 'gentle giant' who volunteered to fight fires and never let people down.



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Rockhampton region 21-year-old Zahn Rothery died in a crash at Nebo on March 13, 2024. Picture: Facebook

A 21 year old who died in a horror crash at Nebo is being remembered as a hardworking, compassionate man who cared deeply for his mates, family and the community.

Zahn Rothery had been driving home to Rockyview after a seven-day swing at the Byerwen open cut coal mine when his Nissan Navara veered off the road and hit a tree along Oxford Downs Sarina Rd, southwest of Mackay, about 11am Wednesday.

The North Rockhampton region man had barely made it 90 minutes into his five-hour drive home when tragedy struck.

Emergency personnel tried to revive Mr Rothery but the volunteer firefighter died at the scene, with Byerwen employees receiving a text about 5pm informing them of a critical incident.

His colleague Austin Riley, who had worked almost every swing alongside Mr Rothery for the past six months as dozer push operators, said he was at the gym when he got the text as he desperately tried to contact Zahn to ensure he was alive.

Then a workmate delivered the devastating news.

‘My heart just dropped’

“I seen it was his car (in the report) and my heart just dropped,” Mr Riley said.

“I still keep thinking about that image, it’s just sickening.”

Mr Riley said he and the six-foot-six “big fella”, who was more like his “big little brother”, became close mates over their time together, as he came to admire Zahn for his incredible work ethic “like no other” and his expertise on machinery.

He said even when Zahn was on days off, he did not rest, playing a vital role in helping to fight the Rockhampton fires in late 2023 but always showing up to work.



Then when Mr Riley took days off to prepare for a cyclone to hit Mackay, Mr Rothery made sure to phone and check he was okay.

“He was just so selfless and would help anyone,” Mr Riley said.

He said while Zahn was a bit quiet, he was really a gentle giant who loved to joke around.

‘All so bloody tragic’

Mr Riley said it was all “so bloody tragic” and he never got a chance to say goodbye with Mr Rothery taking an early bus to camp.

He said they ate dinner shortly before 5pm on Tuesday ahead of their 6pm shift start, but neither had enjoyed a restful sleep because of noise outside their sleeping quarters.

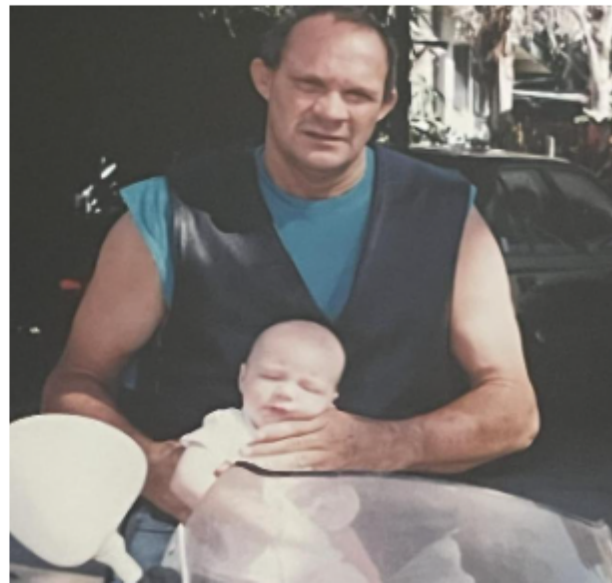
“Around about nine o’clock, I think he hurt his knee in the dozer so he didn’t work for the rest of shift and sat in the crib hut,” Mr Riley said, adding he tried to convince Zahn to get some sleep but he said he would be okay.

That was the last time they spoke, and at 6.30am, the last shift of their seven-day swing had drawn to a close and both were free to go home.

Zahn’s aunt, Connie Lauren Rothery, posted on Instagram that her nephew would be “forever 21”, describing the crash as “terrible news for the family”.

“Keep reminding our young babes about the importance of road safety and driver fatigue particularly any of our loved ones working and driving the miner life,” Ms Rothery wrote.

Zahn had only turned 21 in November last



Zahn had only turned 21 in November last year with his mum Joanne posting to Facebook that she was “so very proud” of him and everything he had achieved.

‘Your dad would also be so proud of you’

“Your dad would also be so proud of you and love that you have his number plate and watch to celebrate this special milestone. Love you,” she posted.

Mr Rothery had volunteered with the Belmont Rural Fire Brigade in North Rockhampton since he was 16, with Kunawara Rural Fire Brigade posting to Facebook that he was “gone way too soon”.

“Together we stand, our thoughts go out to the family,” it posted.

As a student, Mr Rothery attended Emmaus College and competed in athletics competitions as part of the Rockhampton’s school’s Track and Field team.



Zahn Rothery, pictured as a child with his father Graeme Rothery. Picture: Facebook



Zahn Rothery was a volunteer firefighter with the Belmont Rural Fire Brigade, after joining at 16. Picture: Facebook



North Rockhampton Athletics Club runner Zahn Rothery raced to seven gold medals at the Winter Championships. Photo: Contributed

He also held multiple records for regional best performances with Little Athletics.

This included for Boys U10 200m recording 31.03 seconds in 2012 – in the same year breaking the record for 60m hurdles; Boys U12 High Jump scoring 1.43m in 2014; and Boys U14 Shot Put landing 11.23m in 2016.

Zahn's death comes only four years after the passing of his father Graeme Rothery in January, 2020.

Adam Neumann commented on Facebook that the "legend" Zhan would be missed.

‘He was the nicest fella’

“Safe trip to the promised land my friend. R.I.P,” he posted.

Nic Ricks commented that Mr Rothery was the “nicest fella” and he was thinking of the family” and Abby Geiger wrote, “Rest in paradise.”

Mr Riley said the passing of his friend had rattled the mining community with many feeling the pressure to hustle to make production targets.

He said a Byerwen mine manager offered him a number to call for psychological support after he rang to speak about the crash.

This publication contacted QCoal, the owner of Byerwen mine located about 40km west of Glenden, to ask how it would support staff but it declined to comment.

Police are asking anyone who may have dashcam footage or information about the crash to contact Policelink quoting reference number: QP2400434028.