An Enduring Sense Of Disaster – The Bellbird Colliery, 1923

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Typically in coalmining communities the greatest disasters are caused by explosions of methane gas, or firedamp as it was traditionally known. Such explosions, occurring in pockets of gas that have built up in unventilated areas of underground mines, can have disastrous consequences.

The confined spaces of the mine's drives and headings turn the explosion site into something similar to the firing chamber of a pistol or rifle. The concussion wave propagates through the mine pushing everything before it and, in the days before stone-dusting of coalmines, lifting powdered coal into the air. The airborne powdered coal became like gunpowder and often ignited, causing secondary explosions. The aftermath of a typical methane gas explosion saw machinery, coal skips, haulage cable, men and horses flung about like leaves. Often wreckage was blasted out of shafts or drifts jammed against surface structures such as poppet heads.

The story of coalmining in Australia includes ongoing attempts to mitigate the dangers of methane and of underground fires in mines. In 1898 14 men were killed in a massive methane explosion in the Dudley Colliery in Newcastle. This disaster led to a debate about the applications relating to provision of consistent ventilation flows in mines. Regulations introduced in 1920 saw the implementation of stone dusting as an effective means of mitigating the dangers of coal dust. By the mid 20th century naked flame lights had been eliminated from New South Wales coalmines.

leave a permanent scar on the psyche of a community. Most mining towns have their monument, great or small, to the men who have lost their lives in the earth and to the families who have mourned them.

Various sociological studies of mining communities undertaken over decades have attempted to identify the traits that characterise a typical mining community. When M. Bulmer was attempting to synthesise a range of such studies in 1975 he identified a list of eight such traits. Among these he stated that the nature of the 'dangerous, unhealthy' work of mining created a sense of cohesion and a source of pride among miners that transcended any other differences. Bulmer's assertion has been affirmed by other researchers, including Warwick and Littlejohn who undertook a study of West Yorkshire mining communities in the 1980s.

The sense of danger shared by miners and their communities was a major factor leading to the establishment of miners' lodges in the late 19th century and the eventual creation of a national Miners' Federation in 1925. Safety is still a rallying cry of the mining unions.

In 1923 the Bellbird Colliery on the New South Wales South Maitland Coalfield employed 538 men, 369 of whom worked underground. At 1:00pm on 1 September 1923 20 men of the mine's afternoon shift entered the colliery to commence their day's work. Deputies Eke, Sneddon and Wilson from the day shift were also in the mine, undertaking inspections of the working places as part of the shift handover. At about 1:30pm, having finished their inspections, the three gathered near No.4 West flat at the main haulage way. There they greeted afternoon shift Deputy Frederick Moodie who proceeded into the mine. As the three began to walk out Deputy Moodie ran back calling: "Come quick, it's fire!"

The four ran back down the haulage way towards the fire and encountered thick black smoke at the opening to No.5 production district. They decided to retreat and were separated from Deputy Moodie in the smoke. They did not see Moodie again. Retreating towards No.3 flat the men encountered smoke and flames in the air return tunnel. They met Assistant Surveyor Milton Mathieson and the group decided to inspect surrounding districts to find the source of the fire while Mathieson went to the surface to get assistance. At about 2:00pm both Eke and Sneddon felt explosions within the mine. Sneddon was overcome by this explosion and was rescued by Eke. The pair then went to the surface.

All of the deputies, except Sneddon, then commenced an inspection of the mine accompanied by Under-manager Noble. They discovered two bodies in the main travelling road just below No.4 West. Proceeding further Mr Noble came across two bodies just inside No.9 West and a further nine bodies and three horses in the travelling road near No.9 West. He also found the bodies of a man and a horse inside No.8 West.

explosions that occurred between No.8 West and the surface. This party was able to use a number of alternate headings to reach the surface. A third party, working below No.9 West, was overcome by smoke. Two of the party reached the surface but Aberdare Colliery Manager John Brown, the third member of this party, was separated from his comrades. His body was not recovered from the mine. Sealing of the mine commenced at 9:30pm and was completed by 1:00pm the next day. The bodies of six men were entombed inside the pit.

Those involved in rescue and sealing operations noted a total of seven separate underground explosions that occurred between 2:00pm on 1 September and 3:00am on 2 September. The most intense of these explosions occurred at about 12:50am on 2 September. It injured two men who were involved in stopping off No.2 tunnel, blew a cover off the fan and blew a large section of brickwork off the air shaft.

Frederick Moodie	53	Deputy
Harold Richards	39	Miner
William Griffin	30	Miner
Charles Mills	38	Miner
Gordon Locking	25	Miner
William Hartley	27	Miner
Alfred Hines	25	Miner
Jerry McLaughlan	36	Miner
John Stewart	38	Miner
Jack Graber	43	Miner
John Morgan	50	Miner
Maurice Hyams	23	Miner
George Sneddon	33	Miner
Alexander Corns	21	Wheeler
Philip Roberts	21	Wheeler
George Kelly	22	Wheeler
George Chapman	32	Wheeler
Joseph Lambert	22	Driver
Fred Fone	21	Waterman
Malcolm Bailey	28	Substation Attendant
John Brown - Manager, Aberdare Colliery		

The bodies of Frederick Moodie, William Hartley, Alexander Corns, Fred Fone, Malcolm Bailey and John Brown were not recovered from the mine. The bodies of all but one were later recovered when the mine was re-opened.

Subsequent investigations into the disaster criticised the haphazard nature of he response to the fire. Inability to access the workings led to conjecture about the cause of the conflagration. There had been few recorded incidents of methane in the workings and this was ruled out as a cause. Evidence of heating within heaps of fallen coal raised the possibility of spontaneous combustion, however the possibly of the fire being caused by a naked flame was not discounted. After the mine was re-opened

The underground explosions were attributed to the distillation of coal gas within overheated coal heaps. The subsequent ignition of this gas by the fire created the explosions and caused the fire to spread. It was deemed that all of the fire's victims were killed by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Regardless of the causes of the fire the loss of life had a devastating effect on the town of Cessnock. The funerals of the victims were held on one day all 15 caskets proceeded to the cemetery in one procession. Twenty-five thousand people lined the streets of the town to pay their respects to the deceased and to their families. Hundreds of miners "marched in honour of their dead comrades" and the funeral cortege took 25 minutes to pass any given point.

The tragedy of loss was further compounded by the trauma of leaving the bodies of mates and loved ones in the abandoned mine. Miners will often go to herculean lengths to recover their mates, even after hope of finding them alive has vanished. A roof collapse that occurred in Renown Colliery on the Western Coalfield in 1941 buried two miners who were extracting pillars. Hundreds of volunteers from around the district, including former miners who had lost limbs in previous accidents, gathered at Renown to extract their comrades from the fall. They worked through a freezing cold night, removing over 20,000 tons of sandy loam and shale by hand to rescue the trapped miners. They were supported by women who supplied food and endless billies of tea. The recovery teams dug a massive crater above the point at which the roof had collapsed. The hope was that the men had been able to shelter in an air pocket but the consensus was that, regardless of their condition, they must be recovered. Leaving their mates in the collapsed workings was unthinkable.

When Alan Walker undertook his sociological study of Cessnock almost 20 years after the Bellbird Disaster he noted that the event had left an indelible mark on the community. He described it as one of the "chief sociological landmarks" that helped shape the community consciousness of the town. He identified a general coalfields culture in which miners daily attended their workplaces knowing that the risk of death or injury were ever present. He stated that: "Few men … are able to forget the perils associated with working underground. Frequent minor incidents which are part of the routine of any coal mine speak too loudly for complacency to develop." Bellbird exacerbated this feeling and created a general sense of dread in the community.

When Walker interviewed residents of Cessnock he noted the recollections of those alive at the time of the disaster. His observations provide an interesting insight into the impact of a disaster such as Bellbird on a community. Miners who opened up to Walker recalled how they were unable to face the danger of the pits after the incident. One man stated: "I had a bad attack of nerves after Bellbird and had to lose a week's work. I found myself jumping out of bed at night dreaming the roof was falling. Bellbird will never die in this town." Another noted that before the disaster miners had considered the

A younger miner made the observation that Bellbird had a particular impact on the women of the town. "Women became very afraid of accidents and fearful of their husbands' safety. At Aberdare mine 50 per cent of the miners were absent for a week after the disaster. People everywhere became conscious of the pit whistles, and it has made us all permanently fearful of accidents."

A union leader explained to Walker how incidents such as Bellbird had an enduring impact on the thinking of miners. "The miner has a psychology of fear. The pit is always a place where danger lurks, especially in deep pits. If gas is noticed in one working, the news spreads rapidly to the whole pit and puts the men on their toes. They will then grasp any opportunity to take a day off. Bellbird has its place in creating this attitude."

The impact of the disaster was not confined to the mining community. Business people and professionals also noted the ongoing affect on the psychology of the town. A doctor noted that: "Bellbird left a definite impression on the whole community. It increased the admiration of the town for those who risk their lives underground. It brought forth hero-worship for those who took part in rescue attempts. These men are still marked out in the community."

Walker concluded that the disaster "had definite and permanent effects on the life of the people. More than any other single incident this tragedy extended and deepened the 'fear psychology' which plays its part in some strikes and stoppages. Women were greatly affected and it further increased their antagonism to mine work." He also noted that the disaster "resulted in an accentuation of the struggle for better and safer working conditions".

The documented response of the people of Cessnock to the Bellbird Disaster demonstrated the enduring impact of mining disasters on the psyche of a community. This impact was exacerbated by the horror of leaving one victim's body underground.

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