**Courrieres coal mine disaster**

The Courrières mine disaster caused the death of 1,099 miners near Lens, Pas-de-Calais, France on 10 March 1906. The Courrières disaster is Europe's worst mining disaster, and is the world's second deadliest coal mine disaster after the Benxihu Colliery accident in China on April 26, 1942, which killed 1,549 miners.

The majority of the deaths and destruction appear to have caused by an explosion caused by the ingition coal dust which swept through the mine (Coal dust is a powdered form of coal generated during the mining or mechanical handling of coal). The coal dust was probably ignited by either an accident in the handling of mining explosives, or by the ignition of methane by the naked flame of a miner's lamp. The day shift of about 1,665 began at about 5.30 a.m. when the cages descended at pits Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 11. Mining operations proceeded uneventfully until a few minutes before 7 o'clock when, without any warning, a gigantic explosion devastated the complex and extensive underground workings. The dull subterranean thunder of the explosion was plainly heard throughout the small mining town of Courrieres, which had a population of about 4,000, chiefly composed of miners' families.

Word of the explosion spread quickly, and thousands of people flocked to the site to search for loved ones or to aid the rescue efforts. So large were the crowds that the gates of the mine yards had to be closed, and detachments of police and cavalry were called into the area to maintain law and order.

Rescue attempts began quickly on the morning of the disaster, but were hampered by the lack of trained mine rescuers in France at that time, and by the scale of the disaster: at least two-thirds of the miners in the mine at the time of the explosion would be found to have perished, and many survivors were suffering from the effects of gas inhalation. The correspondent of Le Gaulois described the horrific sight of the corpses:

"In the cage the terribly mutilated bodies are heaped up, piled one on top of the other, all completely naked with a slimy coating of sweat. Some are decapitated. There are trunks without limbs and detached hands and feet. There are piles of bleeding flesh; the whole sight is an evil smelling loathsome human morass. When you touch it, it falls apart in bundles which are like pieces of saturated tinder. They are stacked up haphazardly on hand barrows, blankets are thrown over grimacing faces, broken bodies and crushed limbs. In torrential rain these human remains are carried to a room situated at the entrance to the pit, where the miners usually change before going to work."

The rescuers were severely hampered in their work, for in some districts of the mines, which were inter-connected underground, fierce fires continued to rage, and in other parts there were noxious gases and fallen roofs with which to contend. Moreover, a serious health hazard existed as hundreds of human bodies, and the carcasses of ninety-seven horses, began to decompose, generating a nauseating stench.

Periodically, however, the atmosphere of gloom was temporarily relieved as bewildered survivors staggered into the daylight to be embraced by elated relatives and friends. About six hundred miners were able to reach the surface in the hours that followed the explosion. Many were severely burned and/or suffering from the effects of mine gases.

Conditions underground were so perilous that during March only 189 bodies were recovered, and by the end of the month it was almost universally assumed that any hope of finding miners alive was illusory. The mining community was astounded when on 30 March, twenty days after the explosion, thirteen men effectively rescued themselves before being brought to the surface at pit No. 2. This self-rescue became known as one of the most incredible feats of human survival in mining history. For nearly three weeks, and in pitch darkness, the men had wandered aimlessly for miles through the complicated system of galleries, before eventually making their way to the bottom of shaft No. 2. During the last hours of their captivity they had followed a current of fresh air which was being driven into that part of the mine by a ventilator, and as a result had arrived at a barrier formed by a fallen roof through which they were eventually rescued. They kept themselves alive by drinking their own urine and stagnant water, and by eating a combination of putrefying horse meat, bark stripped from pit props, oats found in underground stables, and provisions taken from the bodies of their former workmates.

One additional survivor was discovered alive close to pits Nos. 4 and 11 on 4 April, twenty-five days after the explosion

The conclusion that coal dust was the source of the explosion was of crucial significance, for the danger attached to coal dust by British and German mining engineers had received scant recognition in France, where in some quarters the conviction still prevailed that dust alone, without gas, was incapable of propagating an explosion for more than a comparatively short distance. After having strenuously opposed the coal dust theory for thirty years, French mining engineers came into line with those of other countries, and it became internationally recognised that coal dust in mines, even without the presence of inflammable and explosive gases, could produce dangerous conditions.

**Sources**

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