

The North Lyell mine disaster claims 42 lives

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When a smoldering fire crept through the depths of the North Lyell mine in October 1912, the event became a national news sensation.

The fire sparked to life on October 12, 1912, and smoke and deadly carbon monoxide gas filled the depths of the copper mine. More than 170 men had descended into the copper mine that morning, working at various levels as deep as 1100 feet below ground.

The faint smell of smoke was the first warning any of the miners had that something was amiss, but the smell of smoke below ground was not necessarily a cause for concern - many of the men used candles to heat billies on their breaks.

Deep underground, the levels slowly filled with choking fumes, with smoke pouring down the shaft and cutting off one of the only means of escape. As the smoke became thicker, word spread that management was "pulling the shift" and there was a scramble for the exit shaft. There were many tales of bravery – a miner named Albert Gadd repeatedly dashed into the smoke at the 850ft level to warn his fellow miners of the danger.

Many of those who escaped in the 'cage' were rendered unconscious on the way to the surface. One of those who escaped in the cage was Richard O'Connor, who described the experience as 'horrific'. The scene above ground was equally chaotic.

Men were gathered around the tunnel openings talking excitedly while others lay comatose or seemingly dead in the mud. News soon circulated in the nearby towns of Queenstown, Gormanston and Linda.

The mine's managers ordered the air compressors to be turned to full power, supplying 7000 cubic feet of compressed air a minute to the underground workings. They also ordered that the cage be driven up and down the shaft in an effort to draw out the smoke. The cage soon became stuck in the shaft, meaning it was no longer possible to reach anyone who might be alive below the 700ft level of the mine.

The mine's managers began firing off telegrams seeking the availability of equipment. Throughout the night, repeated attempts to descend into the mine failed. However, on Sunday, four men who had been trapped on the

500ft level of the mine made it to the cage, managed to signal the engine house, and were pulled alive from the shaft.

Later that day, a rescue party made it to the 500ft level and found a body. It was the first confirmed fatality.

Resources began to arrive from across Australia, including smoke helmets from Launceston, Hobart and Victoria, and expert firemen from interstate. The rescuers galvanised their efforts to open up an old, disused shaft in the mine — this was successful and the party was able to descend to the 700ft level. Here they found five bodies near the main shaft, as well as a note pinned to a piece of timber:

"12/10/12 If anyone finds this note, will they give it to my wife? Well dear Agnes, I will say goodbye, for I will not see you anymore. I am pleased I have made provision for you and little Lorna. My mate Lou Burke is done, and dear old V and the driver too. Goodbye with love to all. Your loving husband Joe McCarthy."

The rescue efforts were a media sensation. Newspapers across the country reported regular updates from the mine, with the telegraph operators at Queenstown sending more than 55,000 words in press messages alone to newspapers like The Examiner and The Age.

On Monday afternoon, rescuers near a rope lowered down the shaft were startled when the rope was tugged from below. They quickly hauled up the rope and found a handkerchief tied to it, wrapped around a tobacco tin. Inside the tobacco tin was a note:

"40 men in 40 stope. Send food and candles at once. No time to lose. (J. Ryan)."

There were in fact some 50 men alive below, but the 1000ft shift level boss John Ryan can be forgiven for miscounting in the dark and fumes. Once it was known definitively that there were men alive below, the rescue effort intensified. On Tuesday afternoon, two Victorian firemen, Arthur Moore and Penny Peasnell, descended successfully to the 1000ft level of the mine using smoke helmets.

"I shall never forget the scene when Fireman Moore and Penny Peasnell arrived," miner Mick Dutton recalled. "Men who were lying as if dead jumped to their feet and kissed, cuddled and hugged the arrivals. Hands were stretched out from all directions; I never saw so much joy in my life before."

Firemen descended again on Wednesday to the trapped men and brought them all to the 700ft level. From here, they were brought up in small groups to the surface through a maze of tunnels, chain ladders, makeshift platforms and ropes.

The Examiner was posting regular updates on the walls outside its offices as new information came in by telegram. As more and more men were rescued, the crowds outside the newspaper offices ballooned. At 7.20pm, the last miner from the 1000ft level, Richard Lonsdale, left the tunnel mouth and walked into the change house. The crowd cheered three times.

Forty-two miners died in the disaster. A Royal Commission into the fire found there was no evidence of a deliberate fire, no proof that the fire was caused by electrical malfunction, and a lack of evidence that the fire had been started accidentally by candles.