

13 Die, 253 Escape In Miracle Blast; Miners Tell of Joy

**Most Unusual Catastrophe Is Recorded in Century
Of Coal Mining in West Virginia; Trapped Men
Walk Out Unaided Into Arms of Relatives**

By Richard B. Boyd

Welch, W. Va., Jan. 15.—(AP)—A freakish mine disaster, in which the explosion force was mostly spent in wrecking equipment today, killed 13 men and injured 36 others from a total crew of 267 underground. Out of the Havaco No. 9 Mine near Welch came 253 miners in one of the most amazing escapes in West Virginia mining history.

In all there were 41 injured, five of them women and children struck by flying glass or debris as the blast shook buildings and homes hundreds of feet from the tippie.

The death toll was reduced from 14 to 13 late tonight after the name of Earl Carter was eliminated from the list.

Albert Cardea, a checker, said someone had stolen Carter's belt two days ago, and after it was found it was first believed that Carter had been killed. He was found unharmed.

Five miners had been discharged

after treatment for minor wounds.

Three or four others remained in serious condition.

Because the force of the explosion went upward instead of spreading out on the two levels of the 400-foot deep Havaco No. 9 shaft mine, officials said the survivors made the most miraculous escape from death in the history of West Virginia coal mining.

General Manager P. P. Kerr of the New River and Pocahontas Consolidated Coal Company, which operates Havaco, said he had no idea what caused the blast, which damaged above ground buildings as far

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Mine Blast

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as 1,000 feet away.

He added that State Mines Chief G. R. Spindler is expected to start an investigation tomorrow.

Blast Near Shaft

Officials agreed that the explosion must have occurred close to the shaft.

Thirteen of the 14 known victims apparently were killed outright, while Luther Tolley, 34, of Havaco, died several hours later in Grace Hospital.

267 Men Were At Work

Company officials reported that 267 men were at work when the deep rumble first warned the disaster-wise section that a blast had occurred.

The "miracle" aspect of the explosion was that with so many in the blast area, so few were killed or injured. In most catastrophes of this kind, seldom do more than a few of the trapped come out unscathed.

Within an hour after the blast, the first survivors walked out unassisted up an emergency stairway which somehow remained intact although the "head house" of the opening and the tippie were destroyed.

Most Walk Out Unaided

All through the day as the familiar disaster crowd of relatives, nurses and others assembled around or within the roped-off area, workers continued to emerge from the wrecked workings.

Most of them walked upright unaided. Some appeared dazed and leaned heavily on their buddies. Others had to be half-carried or dragged.

Some of the more seriously injured were hoisted out by an improvised cable and bucket arrangement through an air shaft.

The identified dead, all of Havaco, were:

Luther Tolley, 34; Earl Belcher, 35, mine foreman; Albert Miller, 47, mine foreman; Luther Calent, William Cooper, Negro; Ernest Bell, Ira Alderson, Earl Carter, James Gibson, way boss; and Ed Ambern.

Four of Dead Not Identified

Four were not identified.

The injured, all in Grace Hospital, included:

Lester Mathes, 33, Welch; Oscar Chandler, 23, Havaco; Luther Hampton, 36, Roderfield; James Craggett, 23, Havaco; James Bell, 30, Roderfield; Jack Tolley, 26, Welch;

Cass Frazier, 56, Havaco; James Williams, 23, Havaco.

Sol Goins, 49, Havaco; James Z. Bridgeman, Havaco; Pete Wimmer, 58, Hensley; George Day, 29, Welch; Charles Dixon, 41, Hensley; Jerry Hatmaker, 50, Roderfield; Oliver Mabry, 43, Welch; Clarence Hale, 24, Havaco, and Estel Murphy, no address available.

All Believed Accounted For

Whether any other dead will be found in the mine remains to be seen, but E. I. Chatfield, inspector-at-large of the State Mines Department, indicated they did not expect to find any more.

Rescue workers, with Chatfield in charge, entered the workings without the traditional gas masks, the inspector explaining that the air below was unusually good.

General Manager P. P. Kerr of the company declared it was a miracle that more were not killed.

Eastern area headquarters of the Red Cross at Washington reported it was shipping 200 units of blood plasma to Welch for use in treating victims.

Requested By Doctors

The organization said that Welch physicians had requested the material.

So forceful was the explosion that school children in their building more than 500 feet away were injured by shattered glass.

Welch hospitals were filled with dazed and shocked survivors of the blast.

The first reports of the situation came from some of the survivors.

Estle Murphy, boss of a crew which worked at the base of the mine's 400-foot shaft, reported that "eight of my crew were killed and two others injured."

500 Normally Employed

Another worker, from his hospital bed, said he had "counted five men who looked like they might be dead."

The Havaco operation normally employs about 500 men.

The disaster, eightieth major bituminous catastrophe in the State's history, was described by Elmer Mitchell, 32-year-old European war veteran.

Mitchell, taken to a hospital for treatment of minor injuries, said that "artillery barrages were nothing to compare with this."

The area around the tippie was roped off as rescue crews and State mine officials began the tedious and dangerous job of trying to find out what had happened.

The first men to reach the surface after the explosion were Edward Mullins and his son, James, who were not injured. The senior Mullins said they were working about a mile from the bottom of the shaft when they heard the tremendous noise and began running.

Train Lights on Rails

So dark was the mine that the father and son made their way out by bending over to train their lights on the steel mine rails.

The Mullins described that the locale of the explosion as in the "dip entry" but could not estimate how far back in the mine that would be.

Welch is a city of 7,000 population, about thirty miles from the Virginia border and the center of one of the nation's largest soft coal fields. Mines are scattered up every "holler" and on almost every hill for miles around.

The blast marked the first major coal disaster in the State since March 25, 1944 when 16 were killed near Lumberport, Harrison County. The first recorded disaster killed 39 men in January, 1886, while the greatest was the Monongah blast of December, 1907, when 361 died