

# Underground heroes



NEWS STAFF/PHILIP BARR

Mourners gather together Tuesday in Brookwood to share their burden near a memorial for miners killed in explosions.

## Families say mine's victims loved life, job

By CAROL ROBINSON  
News staff writer

Charlie Nail knelt beside his friend, a miner who was pinned under rock after the first explosion in the Blue Creek No. 5. "He was holding his hand," his wife, Janice, tearfully explained on Tuesday. "The last they saw, they looked back and he had taken off his safety mask and was putting it on him."

Nail, a 25-year veteran, was half a mile underground with flames filling the deepest coal mine shaft in North America when he gave up his oxygen supply. The coal seam became the stage for many valiant acts Sunday after two explosions killed 13 men and injured three others.

Ten victims were miners who rushed to the aid of coworkers after the first explosion, which erupted when falling rock struck a battery charger and ignited a spark. A larger explosion 45 minutes later claimed those inside. It was the worst American mining accident since 1984.

"These men are heroes," said George Richmond, president and chief executive officer of Jim Walter Resources. "Their actions offer us all a lesson in unselfishness and caring for our fellow man."

► For a closer look at the 13 men who died, see page 8A.



Janet Johnson holds a rose Tuesday in memory of her husband, Wendell. He made it out of the mine after the first explosion but, like the others, went back. "He was probably leading the charge," Mrs. Johnson said. "He did what he felt like he had to do. I know that with all my heart."



Wendell Johnson

## Miners' kin grieve; gas, fire remain

By TED PRATT  
News staff writer

BROOKWOOD — Crews started pumping water into Blue Creek No. 5 mine Tuesday to extinguish fires and disperse deadly methane gas as efforts began to recover the bodies of 12 miners killed in an explosion.

Workers also starting drilling an 11-inch-wide shaft that will eventually reach 2,000 feet to the area inside the mine where the explosion occurred. The shaft will be used to monitor methane and carbon monoxide levels so search crews will know when they recover the fallen miners. One critically injured victim was carried out Sunday but died later at a Birmingham hospital.

Late Tuesday afternoon, more than 100 family members, coworkers and friends made a tearful trail to the main gate at No. 5 to weave roses into a chain-link fence as a tribute to the dead miners.

Weeping women and teary-eyed men approached the fence with long-stemmed red and yellow roses. Some placed stuffed white lambs — distributed by Red Cross workers — into the fence links.

Throughout the day, workers and family members congregated at the United Mine Workers Local 2368 union hall in Brook-

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## MINE: New shaft started to help recovery

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wood for consolation and comfort.

Michael Boyd, whose brother Clarence was among those lost, said his brother and the other workers will be remembered as heroes for their efforts to save those injured in the first of two mine explosions.

"He wasn't going to leave anybody — he would have been the last one out," said Boyd, who also works at No. 5.

Officials with Jim Walter Resources Inc. said federal, state and union officials will work together with the Mine Safety and Health Administration before giving approval to any recovery efforts.

"Obviously, our goal is to reopen the mine," said Kyle Parks, spokesman for Walter Industries, parent company of the mine operator. But Parks cautioned that it's too early to talk about when the damaged mine will be ready to produce coal again. "We're taking it one step at a time."

Crews used lines already inside the mine to flow water into the sections where fires are believed to be burning. Officials said only enough water will be used to extinguish the fires; they don't intend to flood the entire mine.

"It's not uncommon to have water in the mine," said Dennis Hall, spokesman for Jim Walter Resources in Brookwood. Pumps will be used to drain the water.

Company officials said the investigation into what caused the Sunday explosions is still under way. Blue Creek No. 5 is the deepest vertical mine shaft in North America at 2,140 feet. The mine is also recognized as one of the most gaseous, making coal recovery an especially dangerous job for the 402 workers employed there.

Sunday's first explosion was triggered by a partial roof collapse, which dropped rock and debris onto a battery charger inside the mine. Roof collapses an release pockets of methane gas, which would ignite quickly in the presence of a spark.

Hall said the No. 5 mine has some of the largest coal mine ventilation equipment in the world, capable of pumping 2 million cubic feet of air each minute.

Some miners said rising levels of volatile methane gas had been ignored by officials with Jim Walter Resources Inc., the mine operator. The explosions Sunday night have been blamed on methane gas igniting after a cave-in.

"They wouldn't listen. They didn't do anything," said Shirley Hyche, a miner for 20 years at No. 5. Other miners nodded in agreement as she spoke.

Hyche said there had been three "ignitions" in the mine in recent weeks. In each, she said, methane gas quickly flared and went out. "It was like a little bomb," she said.

Other miners refused to discuss details of operations at the mine, saying they wanted to first mourn their dead co-workers.

Parks said the company would not discuss the complaints at this time.

"Until the investigation is over, we don't want to talk about what happened," he said. "That's why there's an investigation."

Cecil Roberts, international president of the United Mine Workers of America, has scheduled a news conference at the Local 2368 union hall for 10:30 a.m. today.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



Mourners line up Tuesday at the mine to remember their loved ones with flowers.

## Where to send donations

Donations to help the families of the injured and dead miners should go to the No. 5 Mine Memorial Trust Fund. Checks can be delivered to any SouthTrust bank location or sent to JWR at P.O. Box 133, Brookwood, AL, 35444.

Officials at Jim Walter Resources and its parent company, Walter Industries Inc., are collecting employee donations. Walter Industries, based in Tampa, will match all employee donations.

## 'A lesson in unselfishness'

The 13 men who died in Blue Creek No. 5 called themselves brothers below the ground, but they also had families above. Here is a closer look at the victims:

### Ray Ashworth

The 53-year-old Ohio native moved to Alabama in 1980. He was married and father to a son, a daughter, a stepson and a

stepdaughter, relatives said. His passions were refinishing yard-sale furniture and playing with his only grandchild, 20-month-old Matthew Paulik.

"He was always with Matt," said Ashworth's son-in-law John Paulik.

After the first explosion, Ashworth returned to help the others. He was the only one to come out of the mine alive after the second explosion, but later died at University Hospital in Birmingham.

"We almost couldn't recognize him," Paulik said. "We talked to him but I don't think he understood. We just told him we loved him."

### Nelson Banks

Banks, 52, lived in Bessemer. He worked for Jim Walter Resources for 24 years. Efforts to reach his family failed.

### Dave Blevins

The 52-year-old Blevins lived in Tuscaloosa. He worked at the No. 5 mine for seven years. Efforts to reach his family failed, also.

### Gaston Adams Jr.

Known to friends as "Junior," Adams died doing what he loved, relatives said.

"He saw his brothers were needing his help," said niece to Ann Edmonds. "He was just an amazingly giving man."

The 56-year-old Bessemer man, who worked at the mine for 13 years, looked intimidating but was as gentle as could be, Mrs. Edmonds said. "He was a big old teddy bear."

He used to race cars — his was named The Black Widow — but he gave that up long ago and devoted his free time to his family and his car and boat repair shop.

He was a husband, a father of two and grandfather to four.

He played the guitar. "He'd come in when we were little, sit down and make it sound like a harp," Mrs. Edmonds said.

### Clarence Boyd

Nicknamed "Bit," the 38-year-old Boyd started mining 16 years ago. He liked to hunt turkey and deer, and he fished. He had played football at Brookwood

High School.

Boyd married his high school sweetheart, Teresa, and was a father to four sons.

"He's got such a big heart and he was always there for everybody," Mrs. Boyd said. "He's saved many people before."

"I know he was the first to raise his hand to go back in," Mrs. Boyd said. "I wish he wasn't so brave, but that's just him."

Wendell Johnson

The 52-year-old Coaling man moved to Alabama from Virginia five years ago when mining work there ran out. He worked seven days a week for the past five years at he No. 5.

"That was his life," said his wife, Janet.

A father of three and grandfather of four, Johnson spent his free time playing chess and gardening.

He made it out of the mine after the first explosion

but, like the others, went back. "He was probably leading the charge," Mrs. Johnson said. "He did what he felt like he had to do. I know that with all my heart."

John Knox

Knox, 44, lived in Pleasant Grove. He mined for Jim Walter Resources for 22 years. His relatives declined an interview Tuesday.

### Joe Riggs

Riggs, a 51-year-old Cottondale man, moved to Alabama from West Virginia in the mid-1980s. He mined for 25 years, the last five at Blue Creek No. 5.

Just last week, the Vietnam veteran explained to his 6-year-old grandson about war. He told the boy that men and women have, and will, die for the country with honor.

The same goes for Riggs, his son-in-law said.

"Man is not born heroic, heroism is a trait one finds from within," said Steven Monroe.

### Terry Stewart

The 44-year-old Cordova man worked for at Jim Walter Resources for 22 years. Alice Early, his sister-in-law, said she wasn't surprised at Stewart's bravery.

"In their hearts, they felt they had to go back and help the others," Mrs. Early said. "He's always been that way."

### Joe Sorah

Sorah, 46, lived in Duncanville. He worked for Jim Walter Resources for four years. Efforts to reach his family failed.

### Charles Smith

The 44-year-old Brookwood man worked at the mine for four years. His family declined an interview.

### Charles Nail

After 24 years, the 59-year-old Nail had enough seniority at No. 5 to work outside, but he chose to stay down in the mine.

"He loved underground," said Janice Nail, his wife of 42 years. A father and grandfather, Nail

was devoted to his family. He often cared for his invalid mother-in-law, and his other time was spent in his vegetable garden or spoiling his wife.

"He was so good to me," she said. "I could never find anyone like him again."

### Dennis Mobley

Mobley, 56, thrived for 22 years mining, most of his time at No. 5.

"He loved it," said his son, Brian Mobley. "It was as much a part of him as waking up."

Married for 35 years to his wife, Linda, the two shared a passion for Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

"He was real quiet," his son said. "If he knew you real well, he'd talk your ears off."

"They told us he was one of the ones that went back in."

News staff writer Ted Pratt contributed to this report.



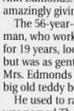
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