

Special Edition—Remembering Scotia

Guest Column

Forty years ago, on March 9, 1976, an explosion at the Scotia Mine in Oven Fork, Kentucky, took the lives of 15 miners. Two days later, on March 11, eleven more died in a second explosion.

We thank Bob Cornett, retired MSHA District 3 Manager, for allowing us to share his firsthand account of the Scotia coal mine disaster as it unfolded.

Bob is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and has extensive engineering and operating expertise in underground coal mining for various coal companies, as well as a career with MSHA working to keep our miners safe. Many in NM know Bob from his days in the District 9 office in Denver, and from his email group, which is a tremendous source of safety information that can be used for training, tool box talks, on the job and at home. If you would like to join Bob's group, write to him at bobecornett@aol.com.



REMEMBERING SCOTIA



Remembering Scotia has been difficult, but it is a story to be told that may inspire or prevent another occurrence.

There are several in the group who went through this with me, maybe in dif-

ferent ways and I realize each of us has our own memories and thoughts. We were asked to put a presentation on at Kentucky Smokeeaters and this showed me just how deep the scars are and always will be. I wish I had a copy of the Powerpoint and pictures, but more so the comments of all who spoke.

I must start before the explosion. I started work at Scotia in May 1974 in engineering. I had been in an explosion in May 1975... after this Scotia sent me back to

college in Engineering and I worked night shifts and went to school during the days.... Maybe this saved a couple of more lives as Ronnie Biggerstaff and I were not there that day.

The first explosion occurred on March 9, 1976. We had worked third shift the night before and gone home, which would normally put us getting home at 8 or 9 and grabbing a couple of hours of sleep before heading off to classes. On March 9, this changed my life forever.

I got a call maybe noon that an explosion had occurred and many people were missing, I needed to get to work to help however I could. My mind was racing as I had many close friends and Big Earl was one of them. He was working in an area of the mine where they were blasting and all that went through my mind was I had lost someone close to me. When I got to the mine I found out it was another section.

Now to give you some background on this area and explosion, 2 Southeast had been driving off Northeast Mains and had gotten into coal higher than the miner could reach, so we had backed up maybe 1500 feet and turned a section parallel to Northeast Mains. What this meant in the explosion was that the section was not ventilated as it should have been. The section was turned off and the areas just inby this area had been curtained off to force the air to the working section... but it also meant the straight area they had pulled out of was not being ventilated. Those of you familiar with gas should note the area inby here went uphill, so the gas would build up back in that area. 2 Left off 2 Southeast had developed over a few hundred feet and work was being done to build overcasts to properly ventilate the entire area and have no "dead" zones.

On March 9 it was decided to send two miners on a locomotive to pull back rails inby the 2nd Left section, which meant the locomotive would have to go past those curtains into an area that was not ventilated. These were two very good friends of mine, Sack McKnight and Lawrence Peavy. They were very conspicuous because both of them were huge men. Very tall and very big men. They were also on a locomotive I was familiar with and it had an air compressor for brakes. When the

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pressure dropped, the compressor would kick on and create an arc. So as they proceeded past the curtains, they took air with them to an area that had gas building up in it. Speculation would be that at some point the compressor kicked on and the explosion took place. Sack and Lawrence were at ground zero for the explosion. There was enough gas to propagate back toward 2nd Left. Those men not in the direct line, those working on the section, were spared by the blast as it swept past the section... but those in direct line were killed by the blast as it swept past.

Those men on the section were within hundreds of feet of the explosion and those who were killed. All communication was lost and the survivors had no idea just how much damage was done or where the explosion came from. It is speculation that a debate was held as to what to do... and a decision was made to try to barricade themselves. Maybe there was some disagreement because one man decided to try to get out and was later found dead with self rescuers several hundred feet down the return entry.

Rescue teams began trying to get to the mine as we had no rescue teams there at the time. Finally several teams did arrive and began exploration. The 2nd left section was approximately 4 miles from the portals, so the exploration would be slow.

I will step away from this portion and try to tell you about how to prepare for these events and the importance of a plan. The main offices, where our engineering office was located, was next to the mine shop. This was just across rail tracks from the bath house and mine office. Police were set up at the main gate, maybe a mile from the offices, but it seems control of people accessing the property was not the best. The families were brought to the bath house as their place to meet. The mine rescue teams were also in this area, so communication between teams and family members was not controlled. The media also made their way inside this area and were able to communicate with family members.

Our part in engineering was to provide maps for



people. It should have been more controlled, but in the excitement of the time, it was not. People came for maps and discussed what we knew about the area... there were so many people there, we did not know everyone and I am sure we gave maps to the news media as well. I remember walking to the bath house at times and having family members who knew me come up to talk with me. Rumors were rampant and people clung to any hope they could get.

We were like in fog. I remember as the rescue teams began to find bodies, it was evident there was little hope. They did find the barricade, crudely built and all dead behind it. That was maybe around midnight.

The one thing that will haunt me all my days is when they told the families all the men were dead. We tried to close the doors and block it out, but hearing the families scream and cry will stick with me.

The entire day had been so rushed and hoping for miracles that it was like being in a bad dream. Ronnie and I, along with several others, stuck around to help, and in the early morning hours the teams began to bring the bodies out after all the families and media and others had left. They drove a motor with cars of bodies into the mine shop and we helped unload the bodies and place them in the shop for the coroner to examine them. I remember blood from one of the bodies when I helped get them off the stretcher. I remember bodies where you saw shirts burned off, but no marks on the body. I remember some cut, some not. I remember Sack and Lawrence because they were so big you knew it had to be them, but both burned beyond recognition and bodies more like jello stuffed into human form, but charred beyond recognition.

We laid the bodies out in a line and watched helplessly as the coroner examined them... at this point I can remember feeling dead inside. We went home around 10 that morning to rest. We were to come back the next day.

For me, I tried to sleep. I had very little sleep for several days and sleep came hard. When I was awake, people wanted to know what had happened. When I

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went out, this tragedy was the subject of all conversation. It was a pretty sleepless day, feeling drained and empty inside.

Just as I thought maybe I would get some rest, a call came that another explosion had occurred and 13 more miners were missing. I headed back to the mine feeling completely empty and like a zombie inside. The feeling was like, what else can happen. I think we were all in shock and had blank looks.

Teams had been put together to begin the investigation and an area of roof that was poor needed to be roof bolted on the track where the switch from Northeast Mains turned on 2 Southeast. Thirteen men including inspectors had been bolting the area. But to preface the second explosion... the motor with the brake compressor had never been disconnected from the battery source. It remained this entire time bleeding off and kicking the compressor on.

Two of the miners had gone about 200 feet away and around a couple of corners to a power center, to disconnect the power to the roof bolter, and the miners were about ready to come outside when the second explosion occurred.

The two miners who had gone to disconnect the power survived, but 11 others died in the second explosion. These two men were in darkness and dust, and could not see. They knew general directions so they 'felt' their way back to the track and followed the track back toward the outside. To do this, they felt the rail rather than saw it and followed it. Probably about 2000 feet away the air cleared enough to see and they found a mine phone to call out what had happened. A mine foreman took a ride and went to pick up these two men as they were more than two miles from the portal where they were located.

The entire event of the second explosion and all that went on was like a bad nightmare. Like this cannot really be happening.

Rescue teams could not go back the way they had

previously because of damage from the second explosion, which covered a far greater area than the first explosion. We did have a shaft maybe half a mile to a mile away from the intersection where the men had been working and a hoist was put in place to drop a bucket of rescue workers down the shaft and try to get to the men from that direction. This took a lot of time, but really it was as if time stood still. The teams did get to the bodies and made sure all were dead, but the methane was building up again and the potential with the air compressor creating more explosions was too great to risk more lives trying to get the bodies out.

The decision was made to seal the mine with the 11



miners' bodies in the mine until the atmosphere stabilized enough to attempt recovery operations in the future.

I cannot explain the emptiness inside me at the time... the sleepless nights. During the next year we did train rescue teams at our mine and I eventually became a member of our rescue teams.

These explosions changed many people. The people who worked the rescue and recovery were changed forever as well as the entire community. The families were devastated. But for those who survived, if there is something positive to come from it.. several worked for MSHA. At least four future MSHA District Managers were in the groups working this. There were people who later became corporate safety directors; some have been inducted into the Mine Rescue Hall of Fame. It changed lives forever and as for me, I live with the screaming and crying, unable to block it out. The voices are with me always....

