

# The high price of coal



Coalmining is considered the world's most dangerous occupation, with mining disasters occurring throughout the world. In Australia, coalminers have a one in twenty-eight chance of being killed over a forty-year career. The number of fatalities tends to worsen as the demand for coal grows.

Mining disasters produce stories of heartache and grief but also stories of valour and determination. One such story took place in the small town of Springhill, Canada.

In 1956 an underground runaway coal cart snapped live power cables, causing a coal dust explosion. This generated dangerous gases, which seeped through the shafts, hindering rescue attempts for men trapped 1800 metres below the surface. With great presence of mind the trapped miners punched holes into a compressed air hose that pumped fresh air into the contaminated mine.

Dr Arnold Burden was called in to help. He volunteered to descend into the gas-filled mine. He had never been down a mine before. The first fatalities discovered were the bodies of his former schoolmates. Dr Burden knew other men would still be alive but seeping gas could cause sporadic fires, which could trigger larger explosions.

Progress was slow. Dr Burden entered a pocket of gas and passed out. Rescue workers were able to revive him. At this point it would have been realistic for Dr Burden to withdraw from the operation. He had a wife and family, but he resumed the search for the trapped men.

Hours later the rescue team reached the trapped miners. Dr Burden was one of the last to emerge from the mine. The disaster cost thirty-nine lives but eighty-eight miners were rescued.

In 1958, a second and deeper mine was jolted by seismic shock. Floors crashed into ceilings and methane gas flooded chambers.

At the 4500-metre level men were found alive. Some men had been buried alive, others were up to their shoulders in coal rubble. Rescuers painstakingly removed coal, piece by piece, to prevent further injuries. In the first two days eighty-one miners were brought out. Mine management called off further rescue attempts believing there could be no more survivors.

Rescuers, relatives and friends refused to accept the decision. Six days after the shock they heard a frail voice. Trapped behind a thick fall of coal, miners heard the scraping of a shovel against a metal pipe. One trapped miner shouted for help down the empty pipe. Rescuers broke through the fall the next day, saving twelve men.

On the ninth day, 4 kilometres underground, a miner was found alive, followed by six more.

The mine was closed in 1959 after costing Springhill over 200 lives in less than 100 years. The price of coal was too high a price to pay.

Source: *Disaster Across Canada*  
by Art Montague, 2006.