

P L O D E S S A Y :

Rest in Peace

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, (Give them eternal rest, O Lord,)

et lux perpetua luceat eis. (and let perpetual light shine on them.)

This is the beginning of the Requiem Mass. Requiems have been sung for centuries, written by such great composers as Mozart, Verdi, Fauré and the list goes on. The Requiem is not always religious, but it is always in honour of the dead.

The *Miners' Requiem* written by Larry Hills will be performed by the Bass Coast Chorale, members of the Citizen's Band and full orchestra on the 19th and 20th of June as part of the Wonthaggi Centenary. It focuses on the 20-Shaft Disaster of 1937, but it is dedicated to all those miners who lost their lives at the State Coal mine over almost sixty years.

There are still many families in Wonthaggi who remember the loss of a loved one down in the dark shafts of the mine. Now, the loss is maybe a generation or two back and so the tragedies, even though they are still very personal, have also become part of town legend. They fit into the public narrative of Wonthaggi being a community of hard-working, courageous, heroic people, who defended and protected each other, who risked their lives for each other.

For as long as the mine was still working, the mine whistle had more than one purpose. There are people today who must still shiver every midday when the old whistle blows. Not only did that sound indicate start and knock off times at the mine, it also indicated disaster. Anytime, there was an emergency, the whistle blew three long and three short blasts. Over and over. Three long and three short. The whistle could be heard throughout the town and everyone was galvanised to action.

It is not difficult to find detailed descriptions of fatalities in the mine. The old newspapers contained coroner's reports of some deaths. Other reports are held by families as treasured heirlooms in honour of their dead.

Not only do these reports tell a distressing story, but they give an indication to the reader of what it was like to work in conditions where you were always on the look out for danger. Always, running your eye over a seam, watching out for water, checking the air, sounding the rock, listening for movement, testing the ground, examining potential for slips, testing the timber in sets... Down in the mine, it was a neverending routine of caution and hard work. You were always looking out for others and passing on warnings.

The hard part about reading the coroner's reports is that it was the men – the mates – working the bord with the deceased, who had to give evidence in the hearing about what they thought happened. They would have to go over and over the incident to one official after another: firstly, a dictated testament to the Crown, then to lawyers, and then finally to the jury. In the case of Arthur James

Allen, who died in 1931 in a part of the main tunnel in Eastern Area called the Main Heading, his mates, Williams Simmons, Stephen Flanagan and George Haley, all had to stand up in the court and speak publicly to lawyers – Mr Platt and Mr Russell – and to the jury with the grieving family, representatives of the mine and the public sitting before them. It must have been a painful ordeal that could have scarred them for life, to say nothing of what they



had actually witnessed.

In the 7 February 1913 edition of *The Sentinel* was a report on the death of James A. Mitchell, who was crushed in "M2, M West. No.5 Shaft".

Here is how it is described:

"James Trevellian, a miner employed at the State coal mine said that on the 28th January last he and his mate had just fired a shot and they went to the next bord, where the deceased was working; saw deceased there; he was sitting working underneath an overhanging slab of coal; noticed a parting between the coal and the roof and said to him, 'King, I wouldn't work under that if I were you,' deceased then sounded the coal and said, 'It's as

safe as church”, he also said, ‘I have a wedge in it, and will fire a shot and knock the lot down in a few moments’; we then left his bord; next heard a shot and shortly afterwards a cry for help; returned to where the deceased was working and found him underneath the coal; assisted to extricate him; it is customary to sprag the coal in cases similar to deceased’s; didn’t see any sprags used on this occasion; deceased was a careful miner.”

You can tell by the strange punctuation and the official language that none of this is direct quote except for the remembered words of James Mitchell, himself. One can only imagine what Trevallian really said and how he referred to his dead mate. He may have been dismayed at the way his testimony was reported, for it seems cold-hearted and that is most certainly not how he would have been feeling.

We can see more directly how his mates spoke about Arthur Allen. Terri Allen, his granddaughter, has kindly let us see the actual (photocopied) coroner’s report from 1931. Even though the cause of death was written, “Deceased met his death in the East Area Mine from injuries received by a fall of stone and such injuries were caused accidentally and no blame is attachable to any person”, it is clear that William Simons, who was working with Allen when the accident happened, is overwhelmed by the accident and feels natural guilt. In his deposition, he writes (or dictates):

“Arthur and I were putting timber in Main East area tunnel doing repair work. We were driving laths from a girder over a false set placed in front. We had all the laths in but three when suddenly the false set came forward and I think pushed the girder set out. [Arthur] was standing behind a skip with a hammer in his hand. He said, ‘I will put a stull [or a Tom] up.’ I said, ‘Alright.’ That was the last time he spoke... when the accident happened I could just hear Arthur groan.”

Simons went to Allen’s side, could not help him alone, ran for help. Two men came and another called for the doctor and got a stretcher, but the skip had slammed into Allen’s chest, pinned him held fast there by tonnes of stone fallen behind it. Allen was completely winded and unable to take a breath. He suffocated.

In his testimony, Simons repeats over and over that it seemed safe, that he had years of experience as had Allen “a capable and experienced man”. When Simons says, “Every precaution was taken to prevent an accident”, you can hear the pain and irony in his voice.

In the 1913 *Sentinel* article, there is a report of James Mitchell’s funeral:

“A short service was held by the members of the Salvation Army at deceased late residence before the funeral started for the cemetery. The Salvation Army and Miners’ Union Bands (combined) marched in front of the hearse and played the Dead March. About 1,000 people followed the remains to the graveside where a very impressive service was conducted by Brigadier Sharp... Mr Mitchell was bandmaster of the Salvation Army

Band. He leaves a wife and two children... to mourn their loss.”

Members from the Wonthaggi Citizens’ Band will participate in the Miners’ Requiem next weekend to replicate the tradition of walking the funeral in a processional to the gravesite.

In order to write the *Miners’ Requiem*, composer Larry Hills read all he could find about the dangers of the mine. He studied the events of that hot day in February 1937 when 20 Shaft blew. He interspersed the traditional Latin of the Requiem mass with language taken from reports of the disaster. Here is an exchange sung with male voices in the *Dies Irae*:

Deputy 1: My God, what’s happened I cannot move!

Deputy 2: We must be trapped

D1: There must be some way that we can be saved

D2: My greatest fears have come to pass

D1 They’ll pull us out of here. We’ll just have to wait. But if there is gas we won’t last long

D1&2: They’ll do their best to get us safely home; the town will rally to our aid

D1: I think I hear them

D1&2: They’re coming through!

D1: They’ll never rest until they get us out. I think I hear them

D1&2: It must be them

D1: Just stop. Be qui-et. Lis-ten

D1&2: Listen.... (*silence*)

It is usual for a requiem to be sung in a church, but this *Miners’ Requiem* will be sung at the Union Theatre. This is where all the striking miners were, voting to go back to work, when they heard the blast of 20-Shaft exploding.

And then they heard the whistle blowing: Three long. Three short. Three long. Three short.

The *Miners’ Requiem* begins with that sound.

Don’t miss it.

Dona eis requiem sempiternam (grant them rest, eternal.)

