Scotia inspections relaxed

The Scotia Coal Company mine where 26 men died in an explosion last week was released from a strict federal safety inspection program last September on recommendation of the Whitewater office of the Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration.

In a September 15, 1975, memorandum to MESA district officials at Pikeville, Ben A. Taylor, Whitewater MESA field office supervisor, said that the inspection program, known as 103(1), and other required inspections of the mine would mean the presence of three inspectors at the mine almost continuously.

The reference to 103(1) is to a section of the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, which reads:

"Whenever the Secretary finds that a mine liberates excessive quantities of methane or other explosive gases during its operations, or that a methane or other gas ignition or explosion has occurred in such mine which resulted in death or serious injury at any time during the previous five years, or that there exists any condition of such a mine which is more hazardous than a condition which normally exists in mines, he shall provide a minimum of one spot inspection by his authorized representative of all or part of such mine during every five days at irregular intervals."

Mining companies consider 103(1) the strictest MESA inspection program. The Scotia mine had been put under it by the Norton, Va., office of MESA.

Taylor's memorandum detailing the inspection recommendation appears below:

United States Department of the Interior
MINING ENFORCEMENT AND SAFETY ADMINISTRATION
COAL MINE HEALTH AND SAFETY DISTRICT 6
P.O. BOX 262
MAIN STREET STATION
PIKEVILLE, KENTUCKY 41501
September 15, 1975

To: Lawrence D. Phillips, Acting District Manager, Pikeville, Ky.
Coal Mine Health and Safety District 6.

From: B.A. Taylor
Federal Coal Mine Inspectors Supervisor, Field Office 6001

Subject: 103(1) Inspections at the Scotia Mine, Scotia Coal Company, Overfork, Letcher Co., Kentucky.

This mine was put under the provisions of 103(1) while it was in the Norton, Virginia district. Since the mine has not had the methane liberation, a gas ignition or explosion it was evidently brought in because of other hazardous conditions. I feel that the 103(1) inspections are no longer needed at this mine for the following reasons.

1. Management has adopted resin roof bolting as a means to help control the fragile roof conditions at this mine.

2. The total liberation of gas in a 24 hour period was determined, during the last health and safety inspection, to be 1,050,000 ft3.

3. The required face equipment has been equipped with methane monitors and the tests required by the Act are made with approved methane detectors; this, along with improved face ventilation has reduced this hazard greatly. Very seldom is over 0.5 of one percent detected in the face area.

4. We think that we have had a good improvement in the clean-up and rock dust system.

5. Improvements have been made in the trap haulage system by restricting traffic in certain areas and by control of a dispatcher.

6. The 103(1) along with the regular health and safety inspections, the A.P. inspections, electrical inspections, spot inspections, etc., would require three (3) inspectors to be at this mine almost continuously.

I recommend that this mine be taken off the 103(1) inspection list.

B.A. Taylor
Federal Coal Mine Inspector Supervisor
Whitewater Field Office

Memorandum

The company didn’t tell us the compressor was there

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No one had explored the area of the first explosion, and the company was operating under these conditions.

It was the end of the shift. The crew—three federal inspectors and ten Scotia miners—were about to leave the mine when they turned on the air compressor. A tank containing the compressed air had been at the site for several thousand feet distant. Two members of the crew carried the cable toward the mine entrance. A boxer of this crew turned on the compressor.

One of the men on the work crew, serving as a representative of the Scotia miners’ association, had never been underground before. According to several reports, it is not clear who had authorized him to go. Maybe he was to go, maybe he hadn’t.

The men who had been on the job for a few weeks told him that he could go. They were not clear.

When the men took the trailing cable, protected by being around a corner, were spared the force.

The rest were not. On the surface, the terrible news sank in—after the survivors had grouped their way to a functioning telephone—a second rescue operation was launched. But there was no news from the 11 men in the path of the explosion; tragically, late. MESA officials decided against risking any more lives—and when rescue teams reached the victims they found them all dead, and for all that sealing could be done.

The company didn’t tell us the compressor was there. MESA didn’t tell us. But we knew it was there. We were aware it was there.

Rick Parker, who along with Ernest Collins survived the second explosion, said the compressor was there. Robert E. Barrett, the Scotia Company’s MESA, whose career may or may not survive the second explosion, said he did not know the compressor was there. There is confusion over the facts concerning the compressor, except for some general agreement that it is there now and that it may very well be the fuse mechanism of the Scotia bomb.

There is, in fact, confusion enough to go around. Investigators will be unraveling it for a long time to come. The questions outnumber the answers at this point—by far.

The compressor in question is famous by now—too much to relate. It is part of the motor operated by the two miners who took the track in the intersection of 2 South EI and 2 Left. It operates the air brakes of the motor. As pressure in the air brakes bleeds off, on the surface, the automatic device, energizing the motor until the coal has been loaded into the truck, bringing fresh air at their backs, could have been bringing disaster with it—the fresh air diluted the methane to the point where it would explode.

If so, they were at the "F" stage now—knowing they were to be deeply troubled but not enough to know they were in this latest ghastly tragedy. Hearings will almost certainly generate heat—maybe even shed light. But unless they lead to true enforcement of the 1969 Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act, the only certainty will be that the Scotia Mine Disaster of March 9-11, 1976, will be repeated some other day. And where, how soon, and by what unknown means, visiting a miserable death upon some unknown victims.

Nominations to service academies accepted

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Congressman Carl D. Perkins announced today he is accepting applications for nominations to the Naval, Military, Air Force, and Merchant Marine Academies for the classes entering in June-July 1977.

A candidate must be a high school graduate between the ages of 17 and 22 and must be qualified academically, physically and medically.

Any young man or woman from the 7th Congressional District who wishes to be considered for appointment to one of the service academies should notify Representative Perkins, Room 2365, Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515.