I'll never go back in a gassy mine again'

(Continued from Page 2)

shorter in the face is a Left. Left, robbing 2 Southeast Mines of fresh air by the intersection. On the morning of 9, the men in the battery-powered motor—only the sparking, as most motors do, when it was, about 4:00 a.m., they brought 2 gear-entered 2 Southeast Mines without the intersection with 2 Left, pulling down the air flow flat to the rails. If the air in 2 Southeast Mines was 9, there was little or no danger from the Machinery in the mine. If the air wasn't moving—or wasn't moving much—the men were armed and waiting for a spark. Methane is natural gas. In the night, methane is highly explosive. You can smell it from a far off in your nose, because the gas company puts a smell into the pipeline to warn you of a leak. You can't smell it in the mines. Or see it, or taste it.

Methane is no danger in a well-ventilated mine. Methane is a colorless, odorless gas. Methane is not found in coal seams above the water table, and most mines in this area are developed in such seams. The Imboden Seam, is here below the water table, and contains methane. The Scotia Mine, which is under the Imboden seam, is liberating about 300,000 to 500,000 cubic feet of methane every 24 hours. Methane is liberated from the coal seam by a process called 'fracturing' or 'fracturing' the pressure drops, methane finds its way into the mine. Methane is flammable, and when mixed with oxygen, it is highly explosive.

Barometric pressure drops rapidly when a cold front moves suddenly across an area. A few minutes after a cold front moved across Eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia on the morning of March 9, the MESA office in Norton, Virginia, reported a number of miners fatigued by telephone—mostly miners liberating thousands of cubic feet of methane daily. But not Scotia, where the methane danger was thought to be relatively minor, according to the 'mining Atlas.

At approximately 11:30 in 2 Southeast Mines the methane bomb went off.

"We knew about the gas. But nobody took it seriously. They'd go to welding without making any kind of methane check. We didn't know. I'll never go back in a gassy mine again.

The massive bomb detonating in 2 Southeast Mines could not go up into the slate and sandstone above the mineral rock strata below. It could only follow the path of least resistance, tearing through the ore, crushing the ore, and until it hit something. If the explosion was not thousands of miles per hour, covering thousands of miles in the space of a few seconds, and disrupting its final self as it ran out of methane.

Most MESA inspectors and members of the mine were in the mine later that day at approximately 11:30. The explosion was triggered in the vicinity of the motor by the intersection of 2 Left in the mine (see map)—and the logical assumption is that the explosion was triggered by the motor explosion. Later, investigators would wonder if the explosion went far enough—later, after another explosion and more deaths.

For the men caught directly in the path of the blast, death was instantaneous and almost always certain. The two men working on the overcasts probably were never aware of what was happening until they died. In the intersection, the men on the overcasts probably had time to live much longer.

There were nine men in 2 Left section when the explosion took place. Sweeping through the intersection, the methane explosion would have expanded into any available air supply, such as the mouth of 2 Left. The foreman, thirty feet or so (and who first checked out his ventilation problem), died instantly. An instant before the blast, two miners were killed, probably by the concussion.

Six men survived the blast. They may have been stunned, but they were able to put on their self-rescuers—chemical filters capable of converting carbon monoxide into breathable air. The self-rescuers would function for up to one hour. In that hour, the men made a critical decision whether to proceed to the intersection and then to the mine portal three and a half miles away, they chose to barricade themselves at the face of 2 Left and wait for rescue.

It is easy to say that they did the wrong thing, or that their decision was guided by their desire to save the mine. They preferred to leave the mine—themselves to help their friends. The teams persuaded them to leave the mine, but they refused to leave. They heard the gas, but they refused to leave.

Two days later John Hathcock went into the mine again, as part of the work crew beginning recovery operations. He held the mine, a victim of the second explosion. He had a wife and child and was 29 years old.

The mine rescue team from International Harvester's Benham Mine was on site by 3:00, looking at the mine map and discussing the situation with MESA inspectors. Teams from U.S. Steel's Lynch Mine and Westmoreland Coal Company's Bullitt Mine arrived soon afterward. Benham's team was the first underground accompanying MESA inspector Charles Sample, with Monroe West and the Lynch team following. The teams were able to ride in battery-powered personnel carriers up the track entry for about one and three quarter miles, to the junction of 2 Southeast Mines and Northeast Mines (see map). There they met about a dozen miners who had refused to leave the mine—had refused to leave to help their friends. The teams persuaded them to leave the mine, but they refused to leave. They helped the men, and two others could not be found.

The men turning back each other, the rescue teams explored forward. They held the mine until about 8:00 p.m., when they encountered the mine with the methane problem. They were delayed until the tenth crossing of 2 Southeast Mines—about 800 feet from the intersection with 2 Left—now for nearly two hours, until blown-out rescue rooms could be expanded. Then, moving on, a Westmoreland team in the lead found the first of the bodies at the 15th crossing.

In the space of the next three hours, the rescue teams from the three nations—National Mines, Clifton Coal and MESA found the remaining victims and began the long and slow job of bringing them out of the mine. By 5:00 a.m. the recovery operation was over.

The mine was silent, dark, devoid of life. But somewhere in the jumbled wreckage of 2 Southeast Mines, there was another bomb.

"The men weren't afraid of the gas. They never had any trouble with gas... Scotia has been awful good to me. Scotia didn't push me. I never had any boss raise my voice. They paid well."

Thursday

The second bomb went off at about 11:30 on the evening of March 11. It was a methane explosion far more powerful than the first. Actually, it may not have been the second explosion; there may have been other explosions in the mine. No one knew for sure—and there were no instruments in place sensitive enough to give MESA an accurate reading.

The other explosions—if there were other explosions, were harmless, because the mine was empty. But at 11:30 on the evening of March 11, there were 13 men at the intersection of Northeast Mines and 2 Southeast, about three-fifths of a mile outbye the site of the first explosion. According to MESA, they were in the mine to bolt a section of unstable roof in the track entry—slate jared loose in the first explosion—so that other crews scheduled to come in the mine later could use vehicles to carry rock bolts, cement and ventilation materials. The slate could have hit them, but they had refused to leave the mine. (Continued on Page 16)

Scotland ignored closure order

Scotland Coal Company failed last October to observe a closure order issued by an inspector for the local office of the Mining Enforcement and Safety Agency. When Sumters returned to the mine at 9:15 a.m. on the morning of Oct. 23 he found the mine in operation.

A memorandum regarding the incident is reproduced below. (A 104A order was issued under the federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 when a violation which does not create an imminent danger to the miner or the safety of the mine has not been corrected within a prescribed period of time. The order requires the withdrawal of all workers except those needed to correct the condition. It prohibits them from re-entering the mine until a Federal Mine Safety and Health Inspection has been made.)

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
PARKVILLE, KENTUCKY 40650

October 23, 1975

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

From:
Ronald D. Sumters, Federal Coal Mine Inspector

Subject:
104B Closure Order at the Scotia Mine, Scotia, Kentucky

Memorandum

October 22, 1975 I issued 104B Order, No. 1 RD5, 77-1110, on the Scotia Mine, located at 9:15 A.M. on the Scotia Mine, State Rock bottom. (shuttle car) which includes each coal producing section at the mine.

October 23, 1975, I arrived at the Scotia Mine, new return airway section (205c) at 8:15 A.M. Coal was being transported by belt from the faces to the surface. At 5:30 A.M. I observed coal coming out on the main top, which could seep to the main top (205c) in the Scotia Mine, State Rock bottom. (shuttle car) which includes each coal producing section at the mine.

At 9:00 A.M. I talked with Charles Kirk, Safety Inspector. I informed Mr. Kirk that Scotia was working under an order. Mr. Kirk made no comment. I left Scotia Company, and at 11:30 A.M. Coal still being dumped from the belt conveyor, new return airway section (205c) was issued.

Arrived back at the office 10:00 A.M.

Ronald D. Sumters, Federal Coal Mine Inspector