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 Whitesburg office of the Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration.

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

The reference to "103(i)" 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 in such mine other expecially hazardous conditions, 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(i) 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 reasons for his 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

Phone 606-437-9616

September 15, 1975

Memorandum

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

From: B.A. Taylor
Federal Coal Mine Inspection Supervisor, Field Office 6003

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

This mine was put under the provisions of 103(i) while it was in the Norton, Virginia inspection district. (District C) Since the mine has not had the methane liberation, a gas ignition or an explosion it was evidently brought in because of other hazardous conditions. I feel that the 103(i) 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 fragil 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 498,000 ft.^{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 0.2 of one percent detected in the face area.

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

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

5. Daily accident prevention inspections are being made in the areas where accidents have occurred that has caused the frequency rate at this mine to be above the national average.

6. The 103(i) 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(i) inspection list.

B.A. Taylor

B.A. Taylor
Federal Coal Mine Inspection Supervisor
Whitesburg Field Office

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.

'The company didn't tell us the compressor was there'

No one had explored the area of the first explosion.

It was the end of the shift. The crew—three federal inspectors and ten Scotia employees—had trammed a roof bolting machine to the intersection from a point several thousand feet distant. Two members of the crew carried the cable toward a sub-station; the next shift would handle the energizing of the equipment and the bolting. 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 wanted to go; but he had no business there, underground for the first time in a mine that had blown up.

While he was there, it blew up again.

The two men with the trailing cable, protected by being around a corner, were spared the force. The rest were not.

On the surface, when the terrible news sank in—after the survivors had groped their way to a functioning telephone—a second rescue operation was launched. But there was no saving the 11 men in the path of the explosion; tragically late, MESA officials decided against risking any more lives—and when rescue teams had reached the victims and found them all dead, the mine was cleared once and for all so that sealing could begin.

"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, says he knew the compressor was there. Robert E. Barrett, the administrator of MESA, whose career may or may not survive the second explosion, says 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 in 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 untangling 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—much too late. It is part of the motor operated by the two miners who took the track inby the intersection of 2 Southeast Mains and 2 Left. It operates the air brakes of the motor. As pressure in the air brakes bleeds off, the compressor is automatically activated, energizing the motor until pressure has been built up again. Every time the cycle repeats, the compressor may be generating an electric arc in the lethal atmosphere of the mine. As such, it is an obvious source for an explosion—although there are others that may actually be doing the job. What is not obvious is why Scotia— whose officials are reportedly now refusing all cooperation with MESA on the advice of counsel—did not tell MESA about the motor and its compressor. The next question is: Why didn't MESA ask? Why didn't MESA follow a thorough checklist of possible hazards before sending men back into the mine?

MESA has a fairly precise set of guidelines, adopted in April, 1974, to provide a uniform set of mine rescue and recovery and accident investigation procedures. These guidelines appear to have been largely if not totally ignored during the recovery operation between March 9 and March 11. Why?

The two highest-ranking MESA officials, administrator Robert Barrett and deputy administrator John Crawford, both left Kentucky to return to Washington on March 10, leaving the exploration of the mine to local inspectors with limited disaster experience and company employees whose experience with disasters was zero. Why?

A senior MESA official has told The Mountain Eagle: "With hindsight, you can see that the ventilation system at Scotia was marginal at best." From all reports thus far, that appears to be a kind way of describing it. Hindsight, in this case, may be helpful, but it will not bring back the 26 men who appear to have been the innocent victims of longstanding complacency. Even a single blitz inspection, involving at least five inspectors so that every active section of the Scotia Mine could be checked for air simultaneously, might have saved the lives lost at Oven Fork last week. That's hindsight, too, of course, and useless as such, but the fact seems to be that there were never any such inspections. There are other mines in Letcher County with bad air. Will they be blitzed? When?

There may or may not be a methane feeder—a continuing and constant source of methane from one or more places in the coal seam—in 2 Southeast Mains inby the intersection with 2 Left. Barrett believes there is.

"I learned of it after the second explosion," he told The Mountain Eagle this week. "I heard about it from the company employees—bathhouse talk. I asked the mine superintendent about it. I felt he was evasive. I asked the general superintendent about it and he said there wasn't any methane feeder up there as far as he knew. But I believe it's there, and I wish to hell I'd been told about it."

The feeder—which might be no larger in diameter than a pencil—could be the ultimate killer in the silent sealed recesses of the Scotia Mine. It could have worked this way:

If in fact air was being robbed from 2 Southeast Mains inby 2 Left, then there was no way to dissipate methane from the section. Suppose the feeder is there and suppose it was there when the two men on the motor entered the section with their motor.

It's unlikely that they would have taken methane readings. Ironically, they might have been entering an atmosphere saturated with methane—more than 15 percent of the atmosphere. In such concentrations, methane rarely ignites. But the men moving up the track, bringing fresh air at their backs, could have been bringing disaster with them—if the fresh air diluted the methane to the point where it would detonate.

If.

We are at the "if" stage now—knowing enough to be deeply troubled but not enough to know where the blame really lies in this latest ghastly tragedy. Hearings will almost certainly generate heat and may 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 somewhere else, at some unknown time, visiting a miserable death upon some unknown victims.

When? And why?