

Looking Back

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A tribute to four Bulli coal miners: Memories of the 1965 disaster

Mick Roberts / November 9, 2020



The funeral at A.S. Cole Funeral Parlour, Bulli, of one of the four miners killed in the 1965 colliery tragedy. Picture: The Tribune Collection, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, compiled by Noel Hazard.

FOUR underground miners sadly lost their lives when they suffocated in the Old Bulli Colliery on November 9 1965 after a pocket of gas ignited causing a fire in a panel a few hundred metres from the main shaft.

Three of the four miners died in shunt where the fire had started, and the fourth miner died of noxious gas poisoning more than an hour after the fire began. One trapped miner escaped by running through the fire, suffering severe burns to his body.

Other miners who escaped the explosion were trapped underground by the fire and were marshalled in muster areas to allow rescue teams to use the transport system to enter the colliery.

One of those men working that fateful shift and eventually brought to the surface was my dad, 30-year-old Neville Roberts. He later told me that he, along with other men, were brought to the surface through the "old workings", where in 1887, another explosion had claimed the lives of 81 men and boys.

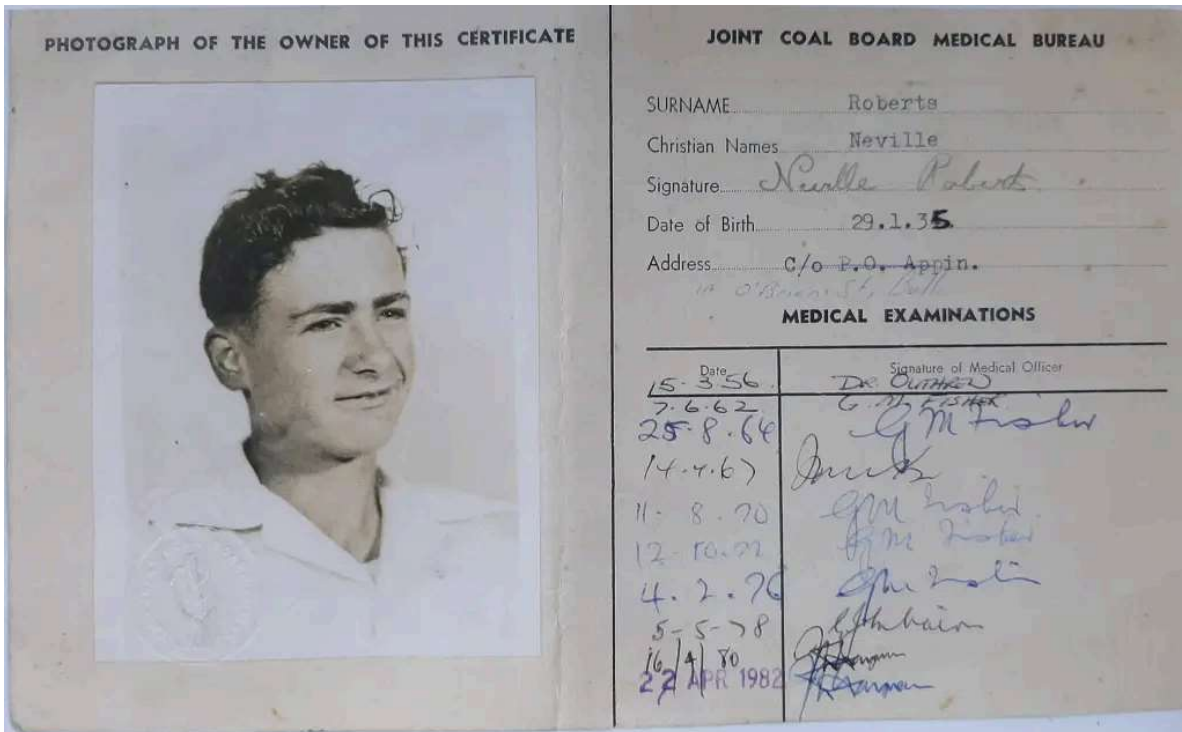


Funeral procession of the victims of the 1965 Bulli Mine Disaster that killed four men held on November 11.
 Pictures: The Tribune collection, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, compiled by Noel Hazard.

1 / 9

This story is in memory of those four local men killed in the tragedy – Fred Hunt, Henry Smith, John 'Jack' Murray, and Bobby Stewart.

Our family was one of the lucky ones. My dad, a miner since his late teens when my grandfather, Jim Orvad, secured him a job in Thirroul's Excelsior Colliery, escaped with his life. He lost a good mate, Bobby Stewart, that day, which affected him deeply.



My late dad Neville Roberts' medical examination certificate from 1956 to 1982. Dad is pictured in 1956 when he began work at The Excelsior Colliery, Thirroul. From Excelsior, he gained employment at Bulli Colliery, followed by South Bulli (Russell Vale) Colliery. He ended his working life under ground over at The Valleys Colliery.

My mum often reflects how she lived in constant fear every day her husband left to work in such dangerous conditions so he could bring home a wage for his family. The following notes were taken down by my mother, 80-year-old, Rita Roberts, as told to her by my late dad, Neville Roberts, after his retirement from the pits.

"Fire broke out about 9.15am Tuesday 9th November 1965 in the Old Bulli Mine, number 8 section, right pillar extractions. Charlie Stewart was the deputy at 8 right and 11 men were on day shift."

My mum was 25 years of age on that day. These are her memories:

On November 9 1965 about 9.15am I was at home with my three kids, Sharon (2-year-old), Tony (8 months) and Mick (4-year-old), when I heard news on the radio that there had been an explosion in the Old Bulli Mine.

As I was walking up Point Street, we past my cousin, Joyce Upton's home. She lived with her husband Jack and their kids three doors up from our house.

Joyce was standing on her front verandah and yelled to me: 'where are you going?' I told her that I was going to the mine to see what had happened.

Joyce told me: 'Go home; Neville will come home to you and the kids'. I did, and he did too. I was sitting in the kitchen worries sick, and words can't explain how relieved I was when I eventually seen Nev walking-up the footpath towards the back door.

Our family was one of the lucky ones. Thank God.



The 1965 Bulli Mine Disaster hearing held at the Bulli Court House in December of the same year. Picture: The Tribune newspaper collection, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, compiled by Noel Hazard.

An inquiry later found that the mine management "tolerated concentrations of noxious gas which drew complaints from the workmen. Its method of dealing with this gas was a mere improvisation for which no justification could be found in mining practice and which was dangerous in the extreme."

The report also found that management had ignored the fundamental principles of ventilation. Arising from the inquiry were recommendations for significant improvements be made to the Coal Mines Regulations Act to require more stringent gas monitoring and detection, and the compulsory carrying of self rescuers.

RIP: Robert Stewart, Frederick Hunt, Henry Smith and Jack Murray.

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