

Background Briefing

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Moura Mine Disaster

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Transcript

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Matthew Peacock: Welcome to Background Briefing. I'm Matt Peacock. Today, the Moura coal mine disaster. Last August an explosion ripped through the mine, entombing eleven men. It was the third incident of its kind in less than three decades, making Moura one of the most dangerous coal mining locations in the world.

And the evidence in to the mining warden's inquiry on why the men went down the mine that night has revealed an ignorance and incompetence on the part of the mine's operators, BHP, which could have a profound effect on the industry as a whole.

Above ground at Moura is the glow of methane flares. They're burning a gas that before the explosion flowed up from the coal seam at the rate of sixty million litres a day.

Below ground, the combination of gas and flame is fatal. When coal is mined it is exposed to oxygen and it reacts- giving off heat and carbon monoxide gas. If it's ventilated it cools, but left alone then, like a haystack, it will heat up and eventually burst into flames. And the warning sign is smell... fire stink.

Bill Allison: When you smell these heatings, it's a very distinct smell. Hard to describe, but a smell you never forget. Once you've smelled it, you never forget it. It's called 'fire stink'. It's a unique smell, sometimes described as benzene smell, or tarry smell, or whatever. It's very frightening.

A fire underground is probably one of the most dangerous things that miners have got to contend with. If you've got a fire underground, well, you've got an ignition source. And if you've got methane gas, an ignition source...miners know what can happen.

Matt Peacock: Bill Allison knows. He smelt the heating that caused the Kianga explosion in '76, and after that experience he became a union District Inspector. He smelt the same smell in Moura Number Two mine ten years ago. That section of the mine was sealed, blocking the oxygen and

choking the fire before it blew. Three months later, Number Four mine, just above Number Two, did blow up, killing twelve men.

And now, on Friday, August the sixth, 1994, Mick Caddle smelt the fire stink again, in Number Two.

Mick Caddle: The only reason why I knew at Number Two - or I thought I knew at Number Two - that there was a possible heating in the panel, was I'd smelt the same smell at Number Four after it had exploded, after we'd gone in and got the blokes out and done the investigation in the section.

Matthew Peacock: And what happened that night? You'd gone down?

Mick Caddle: Yes. I saw the Under-manager when I came on shift on the Friday afternoon. And he explained to me they thought they may have had a problem in the section but it was finished and they were going to seal it that weekend. So he said, 'Could you go down and check?'

Well, I went down and walked right to the back of the panel with another miner and checked it out, and didn't actually see a haze but I smelt the smell. And I thought then that there was a problem. I went back to the group table and reported that to the Under-manager and they took it from there.

Matthew Peacock: Were you concerned?

Mick Caddle: Yes, I was concerned. But with the section going to be sealed off, I passed it on to my superiors and I thought they'd take it from there.

Matt Peacock: So you reported this to the Under-manager and what happened then?

Mick Caddle: Well he said he'd see the Manager of the pit, which is George Mason, and they would decide when they would seal it or decide what they'd do. And I just put it in my report for future deputy's references because I wasn't working the whole weekend, I wouldn't be back at work until the Sunday morning and this was on the Friday night.

Matt Peacock: Caddle's report that fateful weekend was just the latest in a series of reported smells in the suspect panel over a period of months. It prompted a recommendation that five-twelve be sealed. Once that's done, it's a race against time. Deprived of oxygen, if there is a fire, eventually it will go out. But in the meantime, the mixture of methane and oxygen can become explosive.

BHP now says that it sealed the panel purely as a precaution, not because a heating was suspected. The evidence of two men who built the wall to seal it, though, was that they were called in to stop a heating. One is now dead, but in the dead man's diary on that Saturday is the note, 'George Mason requested 1 pm. that I go in because of concerns over heating.'

Smell is one of the more subjective early warning signs of a heating. The rapid rise in carbon monoxide is another.

At Moura, like many mines, was a gas monitoring system. Tubes suck samples of gas up from the mine to a computer. If a gas exceeds a set level, then an alarm flashes red on the screen and a siren sounds. To stop the siren, it must be acknowledged. And this one won't start again unless it's reset. The screen alarm keeps flashing until it's acknowledged and reset on the computer.

On that Sunday night shift, the siren never sounded. But when he arrived for work, Jim Parsons didn't like what he saw on the computer.

Jim Parsons: We got out there about five to ten, walked into the bathroom to get changed. We got changed and got our work clothes on and went to the lamp room and got our battery and some self-rescuer on, and we just walked outside to the start point or whatever you like to call it, the go point, and filled our thermos up.

And I happened to have a look at the Mayac screen. I knew we'd sealed the place, I'd worked on the Saturday night and I knew we'd sealed the place. And there was talk of a heating, so I had a bit of a look at the monitor and I seen where the CH₄ gas level was a bit high, and I remarked to the bloke I travel to work with, John Owens, about it was nearly into the explosive range.

And I said to John that I didn't think... I wondered whether we should go down tonight or not, with the gas just about in the explosive range. And John said, 'Yeah,' he said, 'I don't know. They used to do it once, but they haven't worried about it lately, with the last two places we sealed, sections we sealed, 4 South 11 and 4 South B, everybody stopped down there while it went through the explosive range." So, I never thought any more of it, and nobody else said anything to us.

Matt Peacock: Deputy George McCrohan, too, says that when he saw the readings, he was surprised the men were going down.

George McCrohan: There was a hell of a climb. It was getting towards the, coming towards the explosive range. And I thought, well I was a bit surprised that they'd gone down actually, I thought, well they must have known something that I don't know. So I said, well it must be, must be right.

So I said to Michael Squires, I said, 'Well, I'll walk the belts and I'll go in and check the 5 12 seals before Kenny Gessler' - he was coming in at one o'clock, taking over at one o'clock. I said, 'I'll walk the belts and go in and see them, check them out.'

Matt Peacock: Did you have any idea that there might have been suspicion of heating, or had there been reports of the stink, and that kind of stuff?

George McCrohan: No, not then I didn't, no. I didn't know. Even some of them on Saturday afternoon, on the shift I was working, said they could smell it, but I couldn't smell it. But no one said anything to me. Because I never saw anyone except the Manager, the Under-manager, that night. And then, when I was walking down the cut I saw Terry Vivien and Bob Parker. They pulled up and asked me did I want a lift, and I said, 'No, I'll walk, it's easier to walk down than to walk up.'

Matt Peacock: And they were going down to do their shift?

George McCrohan: Yeah, they were going down, yeah.

Matt Peacock: So you knocked back the lift? If you'd taken the lift, you would have been with them?

George McCrohan: Yeah, that's true too, yeah.

Matt Peacock: What the men didn't realise as they went down, was that the night Under-manager, Michael Squires, had actually discussed with his boss the possibility that they might refuse to do so. It was in a telephone conversation recreated here from the evidence at the inquiry.

Michael Squires: George told me if the men refused to go underground, to make sure I did, as a matter of principle. I told him I had no problem with that. I asked George if he wanted me to talk to the shift check inspector and deputies about it, but he replied, if it was not raised, not to raise it myself.

Matt Peacock: Squires was asked more about this statement by counsel assisting, Frank Clair.

Frank Clair: Mr Mason told you that you were not to raise it with the men or the deputies or the check inspectors. What does the 'it' mean? What were you told not to raise?

Michael Squires: Oh it's taken in the context, with me asking George about the 5 12 panel that had just been sealed, going through the explosive range. And during that conversation, I had suggested that he... well, I asked, did he want me to raise it with the deputies and the check inspector. And he said that if they had any concerns, that they would raise it with me, and not to raise it with them.

Matt Peacock: BHP's QC, Phil Morrison, asked him more.

Phil Morrison: Did you get some comment made to you by him if the men didn't go down, but you thought it was safe, what you should do?

Michael Squires: Yeah, well, he told me that if the men decided it wasn't safe and wouldn't go down, he asked me whether I felt it was safe, and I said, 'Of course.' And he said, 'Well make sure you go down as a matter of principle.'

Phil Morrison: And did you have any problem with that?

Michael Squires: I didn't have a problem at all. I told him I would go down and kiss the seals.

Phil Morrison: You were serious about that?

Michael Squires: I'm serious about that.

Matt Peacock: George Mason, the Under-manager, told his side of the conversation to counsel assisting.

George Mason: Michael asked me how I wanted him to approach the subject at the start of the shift, and did I want him to summon all the men together and give them a rundown of the events that had transpired. I told Michael there was no need to do that. I didn't believe there was any need to do that, as quite a number of the people who worked permanent night shift had been involved with those events on the weekend.

They had been there through the sealing, there were the deputies that had been at work through the sealing and the shifts preceding and the shifts subsequent. I told him I thought that the men would be well aware of the situation as it was.

Frank Clair: But when you said 'the situation as it was', what are you referring to there?

George Mason: Well, that course of events that had transpired over the weekend.

Frank Clair: But I'm just interested in what you mean when you say, 'the men would have been well aware of what the situation was'. Can you explain that reference? 'The situation as it was'?

George Mason: Well, all those things that we have spoken about up...

Frank Clair: Just run through them.

George Mason: That the panel had been sealed as a precautionary measure as a result of a number of observations that had been made. I guess basically, that's it.

Frank Clair: The men that were to go down on the night shift that night, do you say that they would have been aware of this report from Mick Caddle about a slight tarry smell on the Friday afternoon?

George Mason: I believe they would have been, yes.

Frank Clair: How would they have become aware of that?

George Mason: Well, the people who were involved in the sealing process had that, had those circumstances explained to them.

Frank Clair: But not all of these men that were to go down on the Sunday night had been involved in the sealing process, had they?

George Mason: That's correct.

Frank Clair: So on what basis did you expect that those people would have become aware of this report of Mick Caddle on the Friday afternoon, of a slight tarry smell?

George Mason: Well, news around the mine. There's quite a good grapevine at work, people always seem to have knowledge of events that transpire in the mine.

Frank Clair: So you were relying on the grapevine, in effect? Is that what you're saying?

George Mason: Yes.

Frank Clair: The smell that was reported on the Saturday, and the haze - the same considerations apply to that?

George Mason: The smell?

Frank Clair: There was a report of a stronger smell, you've told us, a stronger smell that was mentioned to you on the Saturday morning. And a report of a haze. Well, let me ask you this: how did you expect that those fellows that were going down on the Sunday night shift, that hadn't been involved with the sealing the previous afternoon, would become aware of the fact that there was a smell and a haze that was reported on the Saturday?

George Mason: I guess by the same process.

Frank Clair: The grapevine?

George Mason: Yes.

Matt Peacock: For the families following the inquiry, it was an extraordinary admission. Rosemary Hogarth, who lost her husband.

Rosemary Hogarth: (sigh) The grapevine! As far as I'm concerned, their bloody grapevine... we could have done it. But... when it came out that half of the men that sealed that area off, they knew about it, so when the night shift crew went in, apparently they were supposed to have got wind about it. But I know for a fact Darrell didn't know a bloody thing about it. Didn't know nothing.

Matt Peacock: Above the ground, the computer alarms were silently flashing red, unacknowledged for five hours. Nearly three hundred metres below, Jim Parsons and his fellow miners had begun their shift. Another crew was working nearer the panel that had just been sealed. Each man had a miner's light on his hardhat. And each had a self-rescuer, an emergency mouthpiece which converts the deadly carbon monoxide to carbon dioxide. It lasts for about an hour.

Jim Parsons: When he went to turn the water sprays on for the miner, we noticed the hose on the off-side driver's side was busted. So we just finished then and we rang up for a fitter to come down to fix the water hose. So we just waited till the fitters got down, and they walked down to the bays, proceeded to start fixing the water hose, and I went back to the intersection. I went and sat on a miner cable and, well, got me book out to have a bit of a read, and I'd just sat down and all of a sudden this noise erupted.

I don't know how you could describe it, but it's nothing like I've heard before. I've heard a fall before, and a big fall, but this was something that sounded like that, but this just kept on coming and coming and coming.

Matt Peacock: Getting closer and closer?

Jim Parsons: Yeah, it seemed like if it was getting closer and closer, so, well I did not know then that, I thought it was a fall but it just kept on coming. And I got that big of a fright, it blew the bag down behind me, and I don't know whether I was blown over or fell over - in that big of a hurry to get away. Because I didn't know whether the rib was going to fall in or what was coming.

But I ended up on my hands and knees about ten feet away in the middle of the road. And then it seemed to settle down then. We just yelled out to see if everybody else was all right. And all of a sudden our ears popped then, or mine did anyway, and it was very painful. And then we had to walk back two pillars from the face to the crib table where we'd parked the transport machine.

And we could smell it, and taste it....then we knew. Then everybody thought of 5 12 then, and we all got our crib bags and gear and just turned the Rover round, turned the Rover round and waited for the fitters over in the Rover behind and we proceeded to head outbye. When we got one pillar from the crib table we had to do a left hand ninety degrees turn, and we run into the dust which was that thick it was just like running through a brick wall, and our eyes were burning from...which I didn't know till later when we got up top...somebody said it was the CO [carbon monoxide].

And from then on it was just touch and go whether we got out or not. Everybody had pulled a clip on their mine rescuer, it's got one clip and then you pull it an extra clip and the lid will come off. Everybody did that but one bloke had a bit of trouble because he only pulled it to the one clip, and he was hitting the bottom of it with a wedge trying to knock the bottom off, to get it off.

So I reached over and I see - we couldn't see but I could see by the light what I was doing, so the dust wasn't that thick, you could see a little bit then, this was as we were just taking off - so I grabbed that off him, and I pulled it again and the clip came off, pulled it out and handed it back to him. And he put it on then and we were just around the corner then.

Matt Peacock: You knew at that stage, because of the taste in your mouth, if you didn't do that quick...

Jim Parsons: Yeah, we would have been gone. But, we were lucky, everybody got it on, and Lenny's minder went off then. That's the gas detectors, for detecting methane. It went off. Visibility was probably about eighteen inches, if it was that much. And we just drove by from one side of the road to the other. When we hit one rib on the other side or that, we just kept driving.

And if we looked like hitting the other one, when we got real close, because the stone dust was there, you could see when you got about six inches from the rib that you were nearly into it, so you could just steer off it.

Matt Peacock: How far underground were you then? How far did you have to go to get out?

Jim Parsons: Probably two to two and a half kilometres. But you couldn't tell how far that's the

blokes behind, they run up the back of our Rovers two to three times, it was that dark, and even with the light in front they still couldn't see how far in front it was. After we'd got to the 6 South conveyor belt, I was standing up in the back of the Rover and I could see when we got to the belt because my head nearly bumped the belt and I had to duck to get under it and I knew we were a pillar away from the 6 South turnoff, to go to the main dip.

So I jumped out of the Rover then, and proceeded to walk in front of the Rover to see if we could find the intersection that we could get out of the mine with. But visibility was that poor, and that dark and black you could not see where the intersection was to turn. And I walked around and I felt, and I couldn't feel anything, and I couldn't see anything...

Matt Peacock: What did you think?

Jim Parsons: Well, I climbed back in the Rover and I just said, well I thought to myself when I climbed back in the Rover, 'Well this is it. I'm not going to get out of here.' And I started to think all silly things then. Not silly things, you know, things that... about the missus and the kids and... what was going to happen to them if we didn't get out.

But, somebody must have been looking after us, because they all stood up in the Rover then, or a few of us stood up in the Rover, and somebody's - as it was very low, probably only about eight or ten foot high on the roof there, and they had two four inch galvanised water pipes with an air-line hanging from the roof, and one of the lights hit that and we knew we were in the right place to get out.

But we still couldn't find it, so I got back out again, and they backed the Rover up and I walked, I got out and I could see where the thing was, so I walked ahead of the Rover then, till we got out to the main dip. And I could tell when we got out to the main dip because there's a big mirror, probably a two foot round mirror there so we could see if we're coming out of one section if anybody was coming down transport you could see, but as we got real close to that you could just see the glow in the dark.

That's when we found we were in the right place then, so I jumped back into the Rover then, stood up and hung on the back and we proceeded outbye then, till we got... everything was okay. It was very slow, but if we had to walk from where we couldn't find it, no, I don't think we would have made it. I don't think the rescuers would have kept us going much longer, with the visibility the way it was. We proceeded then until we got to about 14 Cross Cut. And that's where George was.

Matt Peacock: But by that time George McCrohan was already crawling his way to safety. He had been by himself, inspecting the belt, when the blast hit.

George McCrohan: My ears popped. And I was just about to put my date and initials on the drive head motor when I was just blown back, about three metres. So then I tried to get up, and I couldn't. So I rolled onto my side and I crawled over to the rib. And that's when the wind and dust, small

particles of coal were coming, I had me helmet over the side of me head trying to protect me face from the particles of coal, trying to get me self-rescuer out with one hand.

It seemed like it must have went on for five and seven minutes, but actually it probably only would have been four or five seconds. But then I got up and put it on, and then I couldn't see anything. Just bounced me way out, from one side of the belt up to the rib, back again.

Matt Peacock: Did you have any idea what had happened?

George McCrohan: Then I did, yeah. Because I've been in some big falls, but never like that. I was on hands and knees by the time I got out, I couldn't have went in much further. And when I got out I tried to ring up on the BMA communications system, but it was out of order. So I walked over to the substation, I rang Bobby Davidson in the bathroom and I said, 'There's been an explosion. Get someone down to pick us up.'

So he said he would. And I come out of the substation, I could hear two PJBs coming. Like, I could hear a PJB coming, actually there was two of them. They were coming out of the tunnel mouth then, and it was the crew from the First Northwest.

Jim Parsons: And as we got outside, the coal cut was full of dust. Visibility was still very poor in the cut, and we seen George McCrohan was standing just outbye. And he got onto the Rover and we proceeded to go the bathroom. And when we got up there everybody got the shock of their life I think, when they heard the Rovers coming out. At least, they thought, somebody got out.

And I tried to ring me missus and tell her before somebody else did, that something had happened. And I told her what had happened so, not to panic. I didn't tell her what, I said there's nobody else has got out of it yet. I didn't name any names but I said we still had eleven missing. But we don't know whether they could get out, but after an hour we knew that if nobody was up in an hour, that nobody else was going to get out of the place.

Nora Parsons: Jimmy called and said there had been an accident out there and that he was okay. And my immediate reaction was, what about Michael next door? And he said, don't ask. So in the middle of being really pleased about him being safe, at the same time it was unbelievable sadness that Michael probably wasn't. And a real Catch 22 situation there, where I couldn't go and tell her everything was okay.

It was like, lock yourself in the bedroom so you didn't hear the police car come down the street. Because it was a guilty feeling then, because I didn't feel I could comfort her in any way, because I felt guilty that I still had a husband and she didn't.

Matt Peacock: Eleven Moura men never came back that night from the mine. A second explosion a day and a half later sealed their fate. And the question still remains: in a coal area that's notorious for its propensity to ignite, why weren't the men kept out as the sealed panel went through the explosive

range?

Two senior BHP Managers not present at the time, Phil Reed and Joe Barraclough, said they would have kept the men out, knowing what was known.

As the evidence at the inquiry emerged, it's clear that warning signs were there. BHP suggested that some of the men may have made up their own version of events, inventing smells that weren't there to be in the centre of the action.

But in the week before the explosion, the tell-tale levels of CO increased by 50%. Because of the ventilation in the mine, a more accurate measurement of CO involves measuring wind velocity and calculating how much CO is actually made each minute. It's called a CO make. Late in the inquiry the Mine Under-manager dropped a bombshell.

In this re-enactment he's being questioned by counsel for the Department of Mines and Energy, Alan McSporran.

Alan McSporran: Of course at no stage, to state the obvious, did you check yourself or enquire of anyone else what the CO make was doing about this time?

George Mason: That's correct.

Alan McSporran: It was just never looked at, at that stage, was it? To your knowledge?

George Mason: No, at that stage, no. Before I went down the mine on Saturday afternoon I did make a CO make calculation myself. I made it from Deputy Newton's report, I believe.

Alan McSporran: When did you do that?

George Mason: Before I went down the mine on Saturday afternoon.

Alan McSporran: Why did you do a CO make calculation on Saturday afternoon, 6 August?

George Mason: I believe I wanted to see what the CO make level was. I used... I believe I used Deputy Newton's report and Deputy Gleeson's report.

Alan McSporran: Have you mentioned this before?

George Mason: I don't believe I have.

Alan McSporran: Did it just occur to you, did it?

George Mason: I've not been asked a question about that before.

Alan McSporran: We've spent a couple of days talking to you about CO make, haven't we? And your understanding of the significance of it?

George Mason: Yes.

Alan McSporran: Didn't occur to you to tell us before now that you in fact, yourself, had done CO make calculations on the Saturday afternoon, 6 August?

George Mason: Did not.

Alan McSporran: Well, did you get the figures of... I should ask, perhaps, what figures did you achieve on your calculation of the CO make?

George Mason: I'm... not sure. I believe they were in the... around about 19 litres per minute.

Matt Peacock: That's a CO make of 19 litres per minute taken the day before the explosion. A manual issued by the government lab SIMTARS from a seminar on spontaneous combustion held in 1989, and attended by Moura management, says: 'Experience in Australia indicates that carbon monoxide makes of more than 10 litres per minute require investigation, and more than twenty litres per minute indicates that a heating is well developed and that urgent action must be taken.'

Although the experts now agree that this standard was developed from German experience, and a trend rather than absolute values of the CO make is the important thing, the fact is that the SIMTAR rule of thumb had been accepted in Australia and was known at Moura. Mr Mason gave this explanation to counsel assisting, about his belated recall of the vital document, which he'd months ago given to the BHP legal adviser, Miss Gibney.

Frank Clair: You see, what I'm really interested in is, given that this question of CO make, and in particular the fact that on the evidence as it stood it appeared that nobody had actually calculated a CO make on the Saturday, and that's been the subject of some considerable questioning - I'm really interested in this aspect. How could you, Mr Mason, have forgotten about the existence of that piece of paper throughout all of the time since you first produced that to Miss Gibney last year?

George Mason: I don't know, sir. I can say to you honestly I did not recall it until Sunday evening.

Frank Clair: Given all that's been said and asked about, sometimes ad nauseam, about this question of CO make, how could you forget until the weekend - this weekend - that you'd calculated the CO make on that Saturday night?

George Mason: I don't believe I held that piece of paper in any significance.

Frank Clair: Well, the thing is, that when you did produce the piece of paper to Miss Gibney, you did realise the significance of the piece of paper. You told us that yesterday afternoon.

George Mason: Yes.

Frank Clair: So you knew at the time you produced it, that it was a piece of paper that contained your figures that you used to calculate the CO make. But you say that you forgot all about it after that. Is

that so?

George Mason: That's correct.

Frank Clair: Well, you see, I would suggest to you that there were any number of points along the way, up to this weekend, when your memory would have been prompted about these CO make calculations, if in fact you had forgotten about them in the first place. What do you say about that? Any number of points at which your memory would have been prompted.

George Mason: I say it wasn't.

Matt Peacock: At which Mr Clair then proceeded to quote back the transcript of the proceedings to Mr Mason.

Frank Clair: 'When you have a report of a tarry smell, you've had a report of a haze, and you've got Michael Squires reporting to you that a Deputy was actually down there and had just taken a reading of 8-9 ppm CO, now why didn't you ask for the CO make to be calculated at that point? Answer: I don't know why I didn't ask for the CO make to be calculated at that point.'

Again, let me ask you: did you make... or, why didn't you mention at that stage in your evidence that you had in fact used that very reading to calculate the CO make yourself, later that afternoon?

George Mason: I believe the answer that I gave you to your question was an honest and full answer.

Frank Clair: You don't think that it would have been natural to say, 'Well look, I used that information, and I calculated the CO make'?

George Mason: I gave you an answer to the question you asked me, Mr Clair.

Frank Clair: What, were you just being particularly careful that you answered my question, but that you didn't...

George Mason: I tried to be careful in answering everything.

Frank Clair: I've noticed you've taken your time with answers you have given, at least to my questions, but what...

George Mason: I think that's expected of witnesses, sir.

Frank Clair: Was it the case that you didn't want to reveal that you had calculated the CO make later that afternoon?

George Mason: I believe that's correct, yes.

Frank Clair: Why didn't you want to reveal that you had calculated the CO make later that afternoon?

George Mason: It would have been embarrassing for me.

Frank Clair: Why embarrassing?

George Mason: One, that I had forgotten about it. Two, that I did something, I carried out a calculation and didn't know what to do with the information that I received, that it gave to me.

Matt Peacock: In closing submissions, even counsel for the Colliery's Staff said that it was untenable that mining officials with up to twenty years experience had such limited knowledge in relation to important safety matters. The Department of Mines said, simply, Mr Mason's evidence was not credible.

Frank Clair: You see, this must have been screaming in your brain when I was asking you these questions, that you had calculated the CO make, you had calculated it later that day. And here was a whole series of questions to you about why wasn't the CO make calculated on that Saturday morning. On that Saturday morning! Did you take any steps to have somebody calculate the CO make? This whole gamut of questions designed around this burning, ultimate question - was there a CO make calculated that day really? And you didn't at any point think it was appropriate to say, 'Look, I calculated at CO make.' Was that the case?

George Mason: No it is not. I answered. I responded to the question when it was put to me that I did make the CO make calculation.

Matt Peacock: Other vital equipment, like a gas chromatograph installed at the mine after a long battle by the union, simply wasn't used. It would have resolved within minutes whether or not there was a heating.

BHP says it's not appropriate to pre-empt the findings of the current inquiry. However, its General Projects Manager, Chris Seymour, was prepared to speak to Background Briefing - in general terms - about Moura.

Chris Seymour: Moura was, as an underground mine before the accident, was better than the average underground mine in Queensland. I shouldn't say that...

Matt Peacock: What, in terms of safety you mean, or just generally?

Chris Seymour: In safety. In terms of their safety record in fact. And had been greatly improving in the last three years, as the Inspectorate recognised. What happened at Moura, or the procedures they had at Moura I don't think were particularly unusual in Queensland mining practice. And I think we do need to look at the practices across all of the industry.

Matt Peacock: That is cause for alarm, isn't it? Given what happened and given some of the deficiencies that everybody agrees have been highlighted in this inquiry.

Chris Seymour: What was different at Moura was that they were particularly vulnerable because of the spontaneous combustion problem and because of the very gassy conditions there. But certainly the rest of the industry needs to take notice of what recommendations come out of this inquiry. And we can all learn from what happened at Moura.

Matt Peacock: Yeah. Things like not even using the gas chromatograph, and the alarm system, various things like that. There were serious problems in communication, weren't there? Ignorance too.

Chris Seymour: I think there were a lot of details that could be improved at Moura in terms of reporting. And certainly there are a lot of things that we can learn as to how to improve our training programs. And we are learning those.

Matt Peacock: On your training program, you say that there was substantial compliance with legislation. Is that good enough? 'Substantial'?

Chris Seymour: It's certainly always necessary to comply with the law. I think we have to go beyond the law in training and ensure that people understand the hazards of the particular mine they're at, and take the right attitude.

Matt Peacock: But it should be at least 'full compliance', shouldn't it? Not just 'near enough' - 'substantial'?

Chris Seymour: Well, I think again we're getting into details that concern this particular inquiry, and the particular situation at Moura. However, there's always a grey area of whether you are complying with a particular event or not. What we've seen during the inquiry is that Moura has been put under a very intense microscope where everything has been examined in great detail.

And I think any organisation that has that, you're bound to find some things that are not quite correct. And it's always possible to make a great deal of those things. However, we need to remember that we've spent thirteen weeks examining every little detail of what happened at Moura.

Matt Peacock: It's always easy to be wise in hindsight, of course. But would you see major revisions to your practices after this inquiry?

Chris Seymour: We have one other underground mine in Queensland. And we have been very careful to make sure that we learn the lessons from Moura at that mine. For example: we have put into practice a stricter reporting procedure where oncoming shift Under-managers looked at the reports from the previous shift - that shift report covers safety and inspection details more thoroughly than before; we have reviewed in great detail our gas monitoring program; we are sending all of the mine officials from Cronan to training in gas monitoring, management of underground mine atmospheres, management of spontaneous combustion - that's a class that's being put on by SIMTARS. We are following up to make sure that we do not have a repetition of the Moura incident.

Matt Peacock: Is it possible that mining underground there could resume again one day?

Chris Seymour: There are a lot of underground reserves left at Moura. We always look to the different kinds of coal that need to be produced, the seam situations, the technical specifications that are required. And right now we're opening a new mine at Cronam, which is near Emerald. At some point maybe Moura would become attractive again, and we would look at opening a mine there when the conditions were right.

Matt Peacock: BHP's Chris Seymour. But for the Union's Bill Allison it's not enough.

Bill Allison: BHP's attitude at this inquiry has been that, well if the men don't worry about it we certainly won't be. So, if the men don't say, 'Hey, it's dangerous, I'm not going to go down there', well, what BHP said was, 'Well, it's not up to us to tell you that it's dangerous. You've got to find out.'

Basically that's what it was about. In fact one of the young daughters of one of the men who was killed came to see me at the inquiry. She was very, very upset that her father hadn't been told what the conditions were like underground. She said, 'Why did they expect him to find out through the grapevine? Why couldn't they have told him what it was like?'

And I found that quite upsetting. This young kid, fifteen or whatever she was, she's lost her father. And I think that's the sad part of this inquiry - that sort of thing has been lost. The fact that eleven men have lost their lives, women have lost their husbands, kids have lost their Dads, that's been just forgotten, just been lost. The protection of BHP, that's all they've concerned themselves with.

They've talked about deregulation. BHP's been a big pusher for deregulation in the coal industry. And I've got to admit that I think we might have been conned for a period of time, that we believed that there could be different approaches to safety and to regulation, to try and bring about a culture, if you like, in the mines, where we could have a safer work environment.

But there is absolutely no doubt in my mind, after sitting in this inquiry for thirteen weeks, that we really need some very proscriptive-type legislation, with severe penalties for these people.

This is the third explosion in Moura, and up until this point of time no one has even been fined ten dollars. There was thirteen killed in the first one, there was twelve in the second, that's twenty five, there's another eleven. That's thirty six people have been killed as a result of explosions. There's been several killed in Moura as a result of other fatalities, I think there's about fifty six all up. No one's even had a ten dollar fine.

Matt Peacock: The Miners' Union's Bill Allison. Back at Moura, the problems are just below the surface. Jim Parsons, a former coal-shovelling champion.

Jim Parsons: I still don't sleep properly. I might get two to three hours a night, that's probably four or five nights a week that happens. The only reason I do get a good night's sleep is if I have a fair gutful

of beer now. You know, then you sleep. You can't do that every day - which I don't.

But I seem... I can get on, I just got to get on with me life. I just can't say, you go off on stress, or whatever. You just got to try and beat it, you got to get on with your life, you just can't sit around and mope around. You just got to get on, and try and figure out what are you going to do, or what's going to happen to you or...

Matt Peacock: Jim's wife, Nora, has been a teacher at the school for nearly twenty years, and just discussing the tragedy brings out all the memories again.

Nora Parsons: You know immediately the phone rang, that they're dead, somebody's dead. When you work with underground miners you know that there's no second chances, if there's been an accident they're dead. And that nobody will say that for days.

And it's a feeling you can't describe. This morning I did the same thing as I did then. You put your shoes on, you go for a walk, you cry. You go past the Kianga Hall, there's a memorial to the men from the first one. And you look at the statue, there's a monument to all the men in the second one. And it's just... it's all happened again.

And then, then it's the anger. You get so angry. And the anger comes out in funny ways. You put it away, you try and redirect it, and you redirect it at the media. You say, 'For Christ's sake, why don't you leave us alone!' And then, in the next breath you say, 'For crying out loud, why don't you tell it like it is.' It's so silly, because you don't want to talk to anybody, so you don't, nobody tells them what's going on. They print what they think.

And in a way, you hope for something on the news, you hope for something in the paper so that you can get really angry about it. Because the anger's coming out. And it's not being directed at someone you know, it's just 'The Media'. It's really something you grab at. Because when something happens like this, you pick up the pieces of your life and you stuff them back into a container of normality and you try and stuff them back in a cocoon of mundane-ness and hope that one day it will all be back together again.

And the first couple of days, I went to school and the kids would say, 'Why don't they just dig 'em out?' You'd say, 'For crying out loud, they're dead. It doesn't matter if they dug the whole place up, they're still dead. Nothing will change that.' And yet, they didn't know that, because they've got no concept of explosions. They just thought because the papers and the reports said they're trapped, they said why don't they dig them out?

They can't believe that there's no hope, because everyone clings to that bit of hope. And you'd go to your classes and they'd be, talk talk talk, about the thing and I'd... they didn't know, they just didn't know what was going on. I just said to them, 'I'll tell you as much as I know. For ten minutes we'll talk. You can ask me all the questions you like. Then you won't talk about it.' And that's another, like 'shut it out, don't talk about it, we'll get on with maths.'

And that's the whole, the reactionary thing, all the time. And I would answer their questions as best I could. But then, they'd start to talk about it and they'd say, 'Don't talk about it, here she comes!'. And you shut it out. The only way you deal with it is to shut it out. And it's just exactly the same now. We do the same sorts of things, all the time.

Matt Peacock: What makes the tension in the town worse is the feeling by many of the men, the Deputies and even the rank and file miners, that they should have done more, that they should have spoken out about going down that night. There's a cynicism, too, about the inquiry. Will its recommendations, like the last two, be forgotten? And already the Queensland Government is backtracking on a promise for a mobile emergency lab.

For the widows and their children, like Diane Stuart, seven months pregnant at the time of the explosion, it's all still hard to accept.

Diane Stuart: If they'd gone down not knowing, no one knew, and it had happened when they were down there, that would have been as hard to accept. But they knew, and still let them go down. And I felt someone should... someone is to blame, someone should take the blame.

Matt Peacock: So how hard has it been for you, getting over what's happened?

Diane Stuart: Very hard. Still is. Especially with Georgia..

Matt Peacock: Georgia's your little girl?

Diane Stuart: Mm.

Georgia: (squeal)

Diane Stuart: It's been pretty hard on Maggie, I think. She still has nightmares, and cries, and carries on and comes in...

Maggie: No I don't.

Diane Stuart: Well how come you were in my room the other night, crying and carrying on?

Maggie: I wasn't.

Diane Stuart: You wasn't?

Maggie: It was good fun.

Diane Stuart: And Georgia will never know her father. And I feel all the Deputies should lose their tickets until they're retrained, until they're trained properly. Because it'll happen again. They said it wouldn't, in 1986 they said it would never happen again. Look what happened. I bet you none of them recommendations were ever brought down. And I don't feel that any of these will be neither.

They'll say they're going to do this, this, and another nine, ten years it will happen somewhere else.

Matt Peacock: Do you ever go out there now?

Diane Stuart: Yes, every second day, or third day if I'm home.

Matt Peacock: Why is that?

Diane Stuart: I've got nowhere else to go.

Matt Peacock: And what do you do?

Diane Stuart: We've got a little place out there where we can take flowers and... I should say a lump of dirt where we can take flowers. Because that's all we bloody got.

Matt Peacock: And do you go out to the mine too, like Di does?

Rosemary Hogarth: Yes, I've just come from the mine this morning.

Matt Peacock: So what do you think when you go out there, these days?

Rosemary Hogarth: I just cry. Because they shouldn't be bloody out there, it should never have happened. Go out there and sit on their damn stupid dirt - I feel like throwin' it in their bloody faces!

Matt Peacock: And you're going to stay in Moura?

Rosemary Hogarth: Got nowhere else to go. And there's more memories here of Darryl than anywhere. So far, yes. But I hate coming back into Moura all the time. I hate leaving it, I hate coming back here. I hate bloody everything!

Matt Peacock: That's all in today's program. Research was by Suzan Campbell, production assistance by Linda McGinness, and technical production by Judy Rapley. And our executive producer, Jeune Pritchard. Actors were Ron Haddrick, Les Dayman and Tim Ritchie. Until next week it's goodbye from Background Briefing, and Matt Peacock.

Sunday 9am
repeated Tuesdays 7pm

