

Two mine shaft maintenance workers dead after accident at Mt Lyell copper mine

- by: EMMA HOPE
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THE Queenstown community was last night rallying around the families of two men who fell to their deaths at the Mt Lyell copper mine.

Maintenance workers Craig Gleeson, 45, and Alistair Lucas, 25, both fathers, were working almost 1km underground in the mine's No. 1 shaft when they fell from a platform.

The cause of the accident was unknown last night.

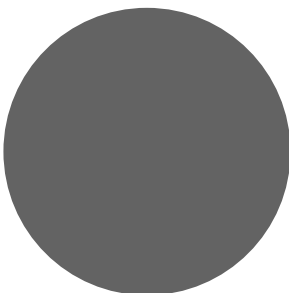
Inspector Matthew Richman, of Tasmania Police, said it was believed the men were working on Level 18 about 9am yesterday when they fell between 20 and 35 metres.

"The men have died as a result of injuries they received when they fell some distance," he said.

"One of the men was responsive and he was quickly brought to the surface but unfortunately he died en route to the hospital.

"The other man was unresponsive when first located so it's believed he died instantly." Insp Richman said the impact of the deaths would be felt throughout the Queenstown community.

Tasmanian mine to reopen after accident



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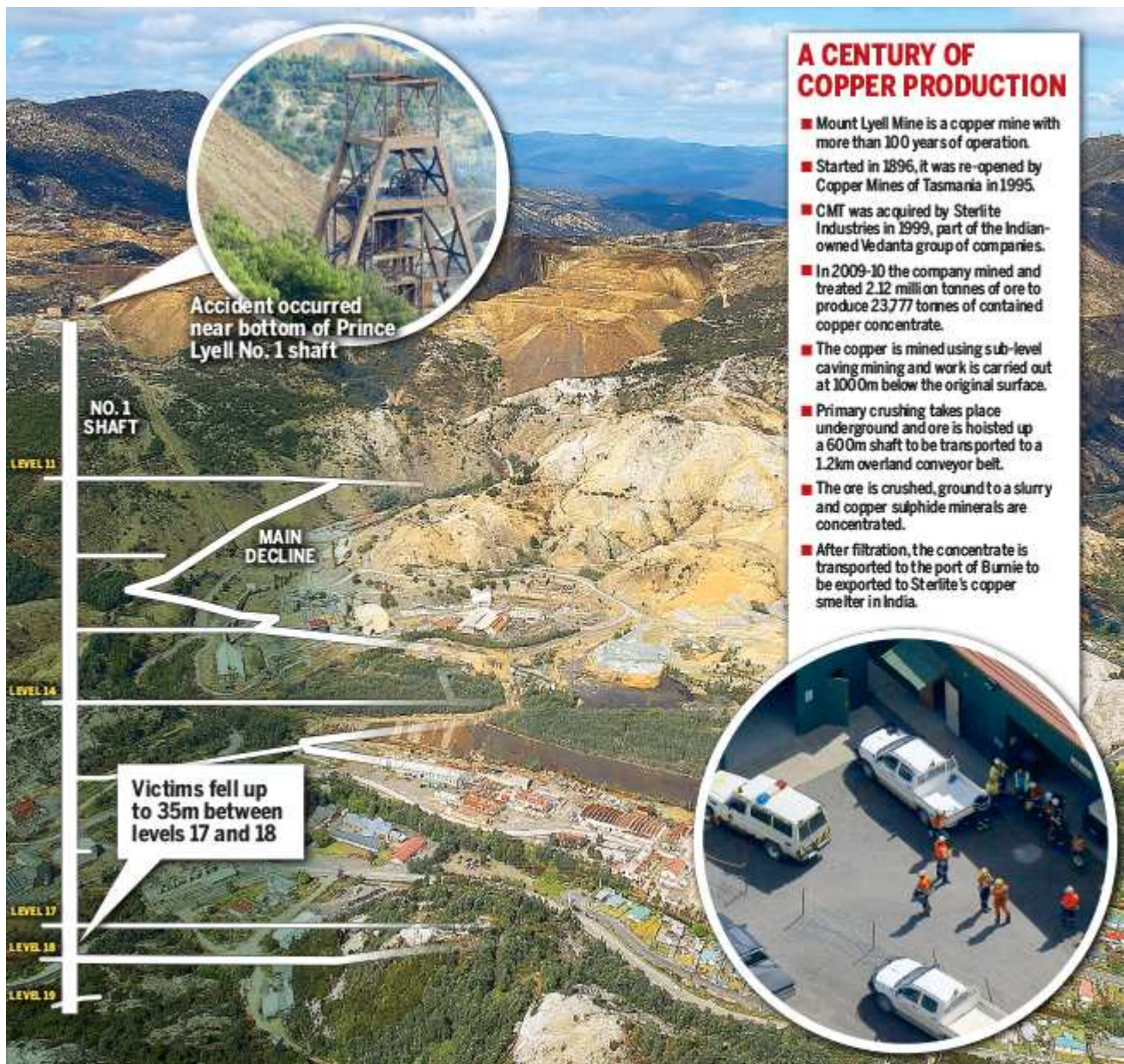
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"Certainly it is a big impact, any loss of life is significant. Loss of life among a tight-knit mining organisation is even more significant," he said.



Mayor Robyn Gerrity described the accident as devastating.

Both men were described as "quiet, yet popular" and well known in the town.

Premier Lara Giddings said: "This is terrible news and our heartfelt sympathy goes to all those affected by this tragedy.

"When people go to work we expect them to come home safely and our thoughts are with their loved ones at this time." Deputy Premier Bryan Green said he was greatly saddened by the deaths.



Two men have died in an accident at the Mt Lyell copper mine in Queenstown. Picture: Richard Jupe

"I know this incident will have a big impact on everyone working at the mine and it will be felt by the entire West Coast community." Copper Mines of Tasmania, which owns and operates the mine, ceased all work at the mine yesterday.



An aerial view of the Mt Lyell mine site in Queenstown. Picture: Richard Jupe

Source: Mercury

CMT general manager Scot Clyde said it was an extremely regrettable incident.

"Our deepest sympathies are with the families of the two workers, their immediate workmates and also our other site employees, who will be saddened by this tragic accident," Mr Clyde said.

Mt Lyell Mines Rescue and rescue teams from nearby Renison and Rosebery attended the incident, as well as police and ambulance officers and Workplace Standards mines inspectors.

"We are offering support and counselling to the families and all of our people," Mr Clyde said.

Investigations into the tragedy will be carried out by the Coroner and Workplace Standards.

Tasmanian Minerals Council chief executive Terry Long last night said the double fatality at Mt Lyell was the first death in the state's mining industry since Larry Knight was killed at Beaconsfield gold mine in 2006.

"It is very sad and these things shake communities and the industry as a whole," Mr Long said.



An aerial view of the Mt Lyell mine site and surrounding hills. Picture: Richard Jupe

Source: Mercury

The body of one of the dead men was taken to the West Coast District Hospital at Queenstown.

It was expected the second body would be brought to the surface last night.

The Mt Lyell mining community has experienced more than its fair share of tragedy in the past.

Last year commemorations were held for the 1912 Mt Lyell mine disaster, an underground fire that killed 43 men.

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Workers lament treasured colleagues

THE mood was sombre at the Empire Hotel last night as workers from the mine sipped beers and talked about the tragic incident that had transpired that morning.

Mine workers spoke about the sometimes treacherous conditions in which they worked and the fragility of life.

They said the dead miners, Alistair Lucas, 25, and Craig Gleeson, 45, both had young families and would be sorely missed by the Queenstown community.



There was a sombre mood at the Empire Hotel last night. Picture: Richard Jupe

Source: Mercury

West Coast Mayor Robyn Gerrity said it was a sad day for the West Coast community.

"People expect to go to work and come home," Cr Gerrity said.

"They're the providers [and] any workplace accident is a tragedy." Cr Gerrity said the incident was devastating.

"My own children went to school with the deceased – they're the same age and my kids have taken it hard."

Meanwhile, workers from nearby mines gathered at the Mount Lyell pub to honour those who lost their lives.

Cr Gerrity said the perils of working in the mining industry had been witnessed by many in recent years.

"It's happened before and it brings back memories of eight years ago and three years prior to that.

"On behalf of the whole West Coast community, my heart goes out to the family and friends of those who died."

Huge underground factory

PHILIP HEYWARD

THE copper mine at Mt Lyell is very large and deep.

The main incline extends 6.5km from the surface to a depth of at least 1km, with a maze of underground passages big enough to drive a truck through.

Mining is done using the caving method, with the ore body drilled and blasted, then carted away.

Sixty-tonne trucks cart the ore to a crusher, deep underground, where initial crushing takes place.

The crusher is about half a kilometre from a main haulage shaft.



The Mt Lyell copper mine at Queenstown.

Source: Mercury

Conveyors take the crushed ore to the shaft, where two skips are used to haul it to the surface.

The shaft is about 900m deep and wide enough for heavy machinery to be lifted up and down.

It also provides access for essential services such as air, water and electricity supplies, as well as pipes used to pump contaminated water out.

Maintenance in the shaft is constant.

Every Monday from 6am to noon, crews of up to eight people, including electricians and other skilled tradesmen, do the essential work.

While mining itself is contracted out to Barmenco, the maintenance crews are employed directly by the owner, Copper Mines of Tasmania.



The Mt Lyell copper mine at Queenstown.

Source: Mercury

The two skips used to haul out the ore usually operate on a pendulum system but, for maintenance, they can be brought together and sit side by side, with workers walking between them on planks.

When maintenance is carried out at the same level as the crusher, there is still a drop of about 30m to the bottom of the shaft.

Crews must be harnessed at all times, according to a strict safety regime.

The mine also contains underground workshops, first aid stations and a pump station.

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