



CHAPTER 13 – Bennett's Two Rivers Strategy – The Price of Success



THE PORTAGE MOUNTAIN EXPLOSION

At 8:30 on the morning of August 26, 1964, two workers were killed when an explosion occurred at the Portage Mountain dam site. The explosion took place in a powerhouse access tunnel which the WCB (Workers' Compensation Board) had shut down two months earlier because of high levels of methane gas leaking from the numerous coal seams in its rock. The Board had also taken the unusual step of issuing special regulations governing work in this tunnel, among them a prohibition from any work being done there without first testing it for gas. Ten days before the explosion, the tunnel's mouth had been sealed off by a controlled blast set off to stabilize the rock face above its entrance, after which the only work that took place in or near the tunnel was clearing away the rubble blocking the portal. This task wasn't completed until August 25, the day before the fatal explosion.

Any tunnel which has not been worked for a couple of months will tend to collect pockets of what is called "bad air" and must be ventilated before work restarts inside it. In a hard rock mine, this bad air is usually composed of non-explosive gases such as carbon monoxide and the principal danger is asphyxiation. At Portage Mountain, because of the presence of extensive coals seams, the bad air pockets in the tunnels also included a highly explosive gas, methane, which was a well understood and even at the time preventable hazard of coal mining. However, few if any of the Portage Mountain dam tunnellers had coal mining experience: most were hard rock miners with no knowledge of either the hazards of methane or the safety precautions required when it is present. Before the WCB shut the tunnel down, they had been lighting cigars inside the tunnel because they enjoyed watching blue flames flare and shoot around its walls. On one occasion, these flames had melted a whole section of plastic ventilation pipe, but management failed to take notice of the incident or any steps to prevent its repetition.

Although responsibility for the explosion was to be disputed, the actual events of that morning are fairly clear. Three LiUNA Local 168 members were working in or near the tunnel entrance. Michael Shields and Charlie Robertson (later Local 168's Business Manager) were connecting ventilation pipe forty feet inside the tunnel. Robert Sebescen was working with a power saw on the roof of an eighty-foot long timber extension to the entrance. They all saw John Gillis, a fifty-year-old hard rock mine electrician from Burnaby with twenty years' experience, many of them as a foreman, walk past them in the direction of the tunnel's ventilation fan, which was about 500 yards from the tunnel entrance. There was nothing remarkable about this: now that the rubble at the entrance cleared away, work in the tunnel was restarting and the ventilation system had to be turned back on. But shortly after Bro. Gillis walked past, a major explosion took place, seriously injuring all three LiUNA members. (They would later be treated in hospital for injuries which included broken ribs, severe lacerations, concussion, and in Bro. Shields's case, gas poisoning.)

Bro. Sebescen was injured when the extension roof collapsed beneath his feet. Bro. Robertson's injuries occurred as a result of being blown 120 feet through both the tunnel and the extension, his head, as he later put it, "snapping 2x4 cross-bracing like so many matchsticks." Though severely injured, Bros. Robertson and Sebescen were now outside the tunnel and so out of further danger. But Bro. Shields had been knocked down where he stood and was still inside the tunnel: he was in serious danger of asphyxiation. The next day he described his experience to the *Vancouver Sun*:

"Gillis had been in the tunnel several minutes when the blast suddenly tore at us. It was like being in the barrel of a huge cannon. The blast tore out all sorts of stuff, and wrecked the timber extension we'd been building. The last I remember was being hit in the back of the head with something."

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In fact Bro. Shields would have died if other tunnellers working outside the portal had not risked their lives to drag him to safety. When he regained consciousness he was being dragged out of the tunnel by John Durack, a twenty-eight-year-old miner from Cobden, Ontario. The Sun's John Olding, covering the subsequent coroner's inquest, reported on the successful attempt to rescue Bro. Shields, describing the "gallant attempts of ill-equipped men who made rescue bids in a lung burning, gas-filled tunnel" and men rushing into the tunnel with nothing but handkerchiefs over their faces.

Although Bro. Durack had managed to rescue Bro. Shields, the workers clustered round the tunnel portal knew that John Gillis, the electrician, was still lying somewhere inside it. If he were still alive, he was almost certainly trapped by debris from the explosion and it would require at least two men to free him and drag him to safety. Yet Bro. Gillis was too far from the tunnel portal to be reached with nothing but a handkerchief over one's mouth: his rescuers would need self-contained breathing gear to reach him. Unfortunately, no proper mine rescue gear was at hand but someone did manage to find a scuba tank and mask. And so Bro. Durack and another tunneller, Morris O'Brien, decided that if they shared the scuba gear, they could risk going back into the tunnel to search for Bro. Gillis.

Norman Grutzmacher, a first aid attendant, arrived within minutes of Bros. Durack and O'Brien deciding to go back in. He immediately realized that he had better follow them, using his ambulance's oxygen tank and mask so he himself could breathe. He later told the coroner's inquest:

"I met Eddie Lefurgy [another tunneller who was trying to help, but without breathing gear] coming out and he said O'Brien and the other guy were in trouble. We ran back and found Durack lying face down with O'Brien trying to pick him up."

Bro. O'Brien was clearly in no shape to help anyone, so Bro. Grutzmacher told him to get out of there, found a stretcher, and put Bro. Durack on it.

"I put the oxygen mask on Durack and tried to get the scuba working [O'Brien had dropped the mask into the muck while trying to help Durack] but all I got was a mouthful of water. I was getting pretty weak."

At this point Bro. Lefurgy began to collapse and Bro. Grutzmacher had to tell him to leave. He then tried to drag out the stretcher holding Bro. Durack by himself:

"But I couldn't move it at all. I was pretty weak. I can't say what condition Durack was in at that time, but I got the mask, and I got out."

THE CORONER'S INQUEST

Perhaps because of the dramatic nature of the rescue attempt, the deaths of Bros. Gillis and Durack and the subsequent coroner's inquest attracted a considerable amount of media attention. The Social Credit government did not welcome this attention, being concerned that the inquest might find the government itself to blame and attribute the men's deaths to poor safety practices caused by the cost-cutting measures and speed-ups the government had required of the Portage Mountain project's management. Fortunately for the government, the evidence of its guilt involved issues too technical and obscure for the media, or the coroner's jury, to grasp.

Although the explosion itself had made it impossible to determine its cause with absolute certainty, the jury found that the trigger was probably a spark caused by John Gillis turning on the ventilation fan, a spark which then ignited an accumulation of methane gas inside the tunnel. This appeared the most likely explanation because the fan's switch was not spark proof. As for blame, the testimony of Premier Bennett's Peace Power Constructors' managers left no doubt that they held the two dead workers, as well as those other workers who had participated in the rescue attempt, solely responsible for the tragedy. But the jury, in what observers believed was an attempt to spare the feelings of John Gillis's family, found that no blame should be attached in either of the two deaths.

Because the two deaths had two distinct and entirely separate causes, management had prepared two separate responses to the question of who was at fault. In the matter of Bro. Durack's death, their response was revealing. While the *Vancouver Sun's* reporter covering the inquest clearly admired the courage of the men who had made "gallant attempts" at rescue inside the "lung burning, gas-filled tunnel", this was not the position of Robert Kidd, the dam's safety superintendent. He told the inquest that "Anybody who is a professional miner should have had enough sense not to go into that tunnel. They didn't need anybody to tell them." No one connected to the inquest seems to have questioned why, once they arrived at the scene, neither Mr. Kidd nor Douglas Joss, the acting mine superintendent, thought it necessary to take charge and begin directing rescue operations—perhaps preventing improperly equipped would-be rescuers from even entering the tunnel. Instead, both superintendents seem to have thought it was their responsibility to drive the wounded to medical attention. As for the fact that Bro. Durack died because of the absence of proper mine rescue equipment, the jury recommended that "suitable and sufficient" rescue equipment be readily available on site, perhaps unaware that the WCB regulations already required

Peace Power Constructors to ensure that sufficient mine rescue equipment was available onsite.

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As for Bro. Gillis's death, when questioned about the WCB's special regulations governing work in the tunnel, Douglas Joss, who had been hired as acting mine superintendent twelve days before the

explosion, told the inquest that he was unaware of them, saying that "in tunnelling work you go by past experience. There are regulations put out but I didn't see them." Nevertheless, despite claiming to be unaware of the regulations, he also testified that the day before the explosion he had told Bro. Gillis not to enter the tunnel until it had been tested by a gas inspector, a requirement of the WCB's special powerhouse access tunnel regulations but not of its standard regulations. Indeed, after the inquest, the WCB felt it necessary to issue a press release saying it was "reasonably sure" that its inspector had in fact discussed the regulations with Mr. Joss before the explosion.

THE REACTION TO THE VERDICT

The jury's attempt to spare the feelings of Bro. Gillis's family with a verdict of no blame did not succeed. The family was fully aware that the verdict's actual effect was to allow the real culprits to escape scot-free. Bro. Gillis's widow demanded a judicial inquiry into his death, a demand which Premier Bennett's Attorney-General denied. She refused to apply for a WCB widow's pension because she felt that by so doing she would be condoning the jury's finding. His daughter Yvette told *The Province* of her father's almost fanatical concern for safety, of the impossibility of him knowingly risking anyone's life.

Neither the family nor LiUNA Local 168 were satisfied with the verdict. As a mark of respect, the union voted to send Morris O'Brien, the other tunneller who had set off with John Durack to rescue Bro. Gillis, to Bro. Durack's funeral in Ontario. The union also demanded, to no avail, that the project's Safety Superintendent Robert Kidd be dismissed. In the union's view, the coroner's jury verdict did not take into account clear evidence demonstrating that the Portage Mountain project's management had consistently ignored WCB mine safety regulations and that this failure was the cause of both deaths.

That government and management understood where the blame did in fact lie was obvious from their unusually swift response to the jury's recommendations. These were that suitable and sufficient rescue gear be readily available onsite; that only explosion-proof electrical equipment be used underground; and most importantly, that all tunnelling work fall under the *Coal Mines Act*. Within three weeks of the inquest the government announced that it would provide every tunneller with twenty-four hours of onsite mine safety and rescue training. Five self-contained breathing apparatuses were ordered for the project. And all tunnelling work was placed under the *Coal Mines Act*.