

'MY MIRACLE ESCAPE'



THE DEATH TOLL
John Robert Dullabide, 44, of Moura
Darrell William Hogarth, 46, of Moura
David Brian King, 24, of Banana
Geoffrey Mazzer, 45, of Biloela
Mark Reginald Nelson, 36, of Moura
Robert Allan Newton, 39, of Banana
Robert David Limond Parker, 39, of Newcastle
Christopher Robert Ritchie, 27, of Moura
Michael Edward Ryan, 31, of Moura
Michael Edward Shaw, 27, of Moura
Terry Gordon Vivian, 49, of Moura

■ The statue in honor of the miners who died in the 1986 accident at Moura.

Miner George Ziebell relived the horror of his own brush with death in the ill-fated Moura mines at the scene of the latest underground mining disaster that claimed 11 lives.

A survivor of an explosion at the central Queensland mine in 1986 that killed 12 fellow miners, George smelled death and despair in the midnight air at Mine No. 2.

"The air smelled exactly the same when No. 4 exploded in 1986," George says.

"The whole area was covered in the same big stinking haze of dust and fumes.

"When you go through something like we experienced in 1986, you never forget. It's always in the back of your mind. All of a sudden there was a sense of it happening all over again."

George, an underground miner for 23 years and treasurer of Moura's United Mineworkers' Lodge, was one of the first on the scene when the explosion ripped through No. 2 mine at 11.30 pm on Sunday, August 7.

The blast left 11 workers trapped 265m underground.

Nine men who were working about 2km away and a

As Moura mourns the loss of 11 miners, a colleague reveals how he cheated death

worker in another area of the mine escaped by using breathing apparatus which gives about an hour of protection from mine gases.

As news of the disaster swept through Moura, 180km west of Gladstone, the town's 3000 residents prayed those trapped might be saved. But those hopes were dashed two days later by a second explosion.

The explosion and a series of smaller blasts that followed led BHP Australia Coal, which operates the mine, to declare there was no longer any hope the men were still alive. Gas fires inside the mine left officials no choice but to seal it for safety reasons, thus entombing the men.

The disaster is the third in the past 20 years for the town, where coal is the economic backbone of the community.

■ Colleagues keep vigil in the hope of good news (below). Days later, a memorial service helped people express their grief (right).

An explosion in 1975 at Kianga, 12km south of Moura, killed 13 people. Twelve people died in 1986 in Moura No. 4 mine.

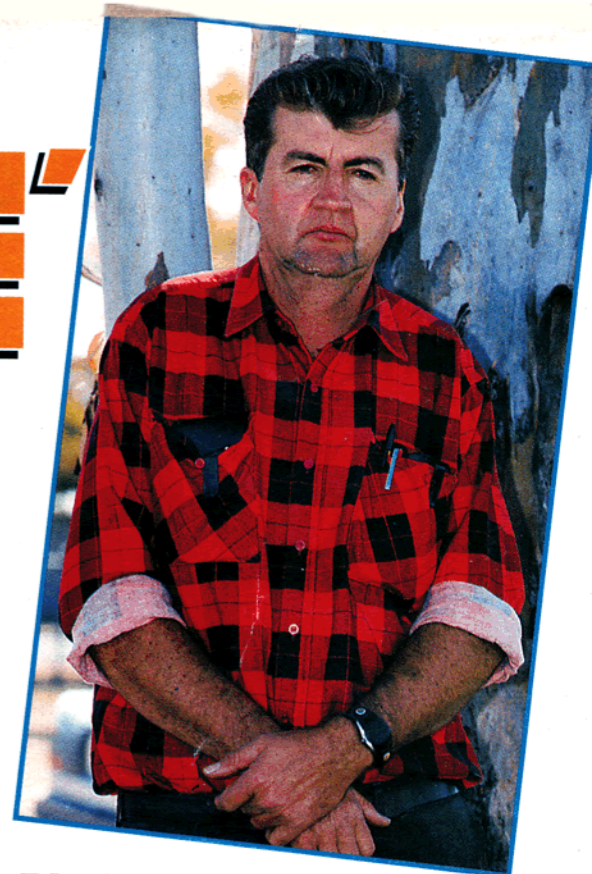
Memories of the 1986 explosion are still alive for George Ziebell, who could have easily been one of the latest victims.

"I was working on that (1986) shift," George says. "I was on my way down, driving past the bathroom attendant, when he pulled me up and said that he had just received a phone call from the chaps saying they wanted something from the compound.

"So I drove back up and as I was making my way back down, I saw all this dust emerging.

"If that bathroom attendant hadn't pulled me up, I'd almost certainly be dead."

George, 45, says he does not dwell on the fact he could have



■ Despite the 1986 disaster, George Ziebell returned to mining. "Returning was something I knew I had to do," he says.

been one of the victims. Yet he has never toyed with the idea of giving up mining.

George was quick to re-enter the mine, which he describes as a dark, dusty "world of its own".

"Returning was something I knew I had to do," he says.

The son of a miner, George says his wife Gwen understood and accepted his decision to continue mining.

"It's in your blood," says George of underground mining, adding there is a strong bond between workers.

"You are down there and the crew and you are working close by with each other, looking after each other."

George worked regularly with all but one of the men who died last week.

"They were all great blokes," he says.

While there is no talk of the town giving up mining despite the pain and loss, there is a sense of bewilderment that they must suffer once again.

"Why has this happened yet again?" George asks. "There is a feeling of wanting to know the cause, to know why it's happening all over again."

Story: Pamela Lesmond
 Pictures: Brett Stevens

