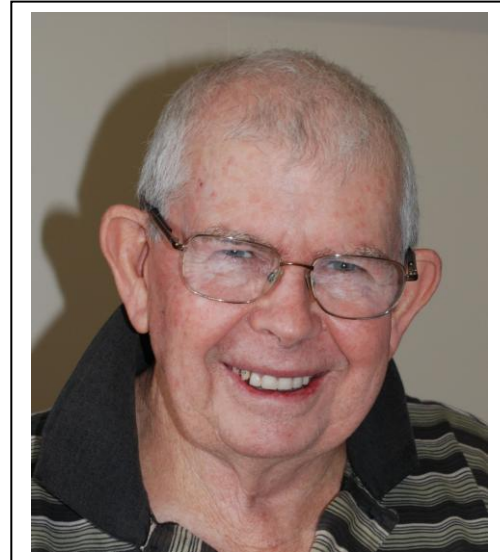


Alan Brims

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook



G'day. Alan Brims. I first got interested in mining, I think it was in 1966. I had just finished my apprenticeship as an electrician and I went to the Ipswich Tech College inquiring about a Mine Electrician's Course, and how to get a job as an electrician in the mines. Donny Livermore happened to be there and I think he must have been a teacher. He said, "You've got to work in the mines initially to do a Mines Electrician Course." Donny said, "Do you want a job in the mines?" I said, "Oh, I don't know." That's where it started.

I completed Junior in 1960. I was 22 years old having completed a five year electrician's apprenticeship.

Interviewer: So you worked at the railways?

Yes, railway apprentice.

Interviewer: You were a qualified electrician?

Yes a ticketed tradesman. Whether Donny invited me down, or I went somewhere else – I don't know which mine now –the idea was to go underground and have a look around. Now, here's where the trouble started. I arrived at the pit and I was sent to the tunnel mouth and directed, "Get on this little wagon," not "in a wagon," but "on a wagon," a little flat one that must have carried timber, I guess. Someone belled it away – they called it – and I thought, "Struth, what am I doing on this?" I had no idea how to get off for a starter, let alone stop it.

So the further down I went my heart went faster – luckily I never had a heart attack! When I got down the bottom, much to my relief, I saw about ten pit lights. I don't know the mine now. It could have been Cornwall; it might have been one of the Blackheath ones. I saw lights. They must have been working a short wall, not bord and panel. They must have been shovelling onto a belt or similar apparatus. The

seam was low, so I had to bend my back to walk under the timber. I don't recall anything else about that visit.

Interviewer: And you'd never been underground before?

No, other than to the tunnel mouths.

That's where my mining career started. In the same year I obtained a position at Cornwall Colliery but only stayed a short time. I went around with one of the electricians. I was bemused with how they did not get lost. We went in one road, and the sparkie said, "Oh, we'll go round and we'll go up somewhere else." I thought, "I hope you know where you're going".

I wasn't keen on Cornwall. In some places the roof stone would fall from between the timber in small pieces. They used to do what they called slabbing ahead to hold the roof up in some of the roads.

Lunches were taken in billy cans to keep the rats out or mice out. I don't recall seeing rats and mice in the same tunnel. When some of the men would be in the lunch room, they would feel the scampering of tiny feet across their bare legs. You would hear "Arrrgh! Rats!" In later years, when Styrofoam lunch boxes came into use, new starters would use those underground with bad results as the vermin would chew through the boxes to get to the lunches, so you had no lunch – or you wouldn't want to eat it, would you?

Working conditions were pretty primitive, I guess. On most occasions you didn't wash before eating. The lunch often had a layer of grease or coal dust added. If working with electrical gear before eating, there was the extra spice of burnt electrical cables to add to the aroma! Today, they don't know what they're missing.

I'd never seen this type of electrical equipment before. It was completely different to other industries, most of it being flame-proof gear, requiring Allen keys to open and close the covers and feeler gauges to check the gap of machined matching faces.

While at Cornwall I was sent to No. 6 of the Blackheath tunnels for a week or a fortnight, as the electrician was absent. After work I had to drive to the showers at another tunnel's bathroom to clean up. I felt that was a bit slack because you were in dirty clothes, getting in your clean car.

I resigned from Cornwall and went to Southern Cross #9, Green Gully. The tradesmen had also maintained the adjacent No. 11 tunnel which was still in contract. If the skips came off in No. 11, they would stay upright as the props were close in some places.

No. 9 was still on conventional mining methods and the company purchased a continuous miner. I left Southern Cross and worked for three years in the power industry. However, I yearned for

the mines and the companionship of mining men.

In 1970, I started at New Hope. The mine electrician was Brian Jordan, and as I had worked under Brian at Southern Cross I obtained the position. This was the last colliery of my mining days. Several Mine Electricians led the electrical department during my years there, until the closure of the colliery. In 1996 I locked the workshop and the bathroom. That was the last of New Hope Collieries as such. Now it is New Hope Coal Australia.

In that time the wage staff would have peaked at 13 electricians, 17 fitters and many miners. Three shifts were worked, two in production and the dogwatch was maintenance. Work conditions were good. The company erected a new building for showers and clothes, lamps, offices, first aid etc near No. 5 and adjacent to the workshops and stores. The change room catered for 200 men.

The management, I would say, was very good. We had our rows, like everywhere else, but you got up, you had your arguments, and that was the end. Next day it was, "G'day Roy. G'day Allen. G'day Jim." Everybody went around and did their job at hand. There was no sulking.

For a while I was the Shop Steward and I enjoy telling the story about the section electrician who was reluctant to do his job. I was an outside electrician.

I wasn't in a crew. I had been but was taken out. This was when Albert Winstanley was the mine electrician at New Hope. Ab (to one and all) was a great boss and a good tactician with us sparkies!

Interviewer: So you were a floater, is that it?

Yes, floater outside and come and help if needed. I went into this section and the crew said something was faulty on the miner, and would I fix it. I said, "No, where's your electrician?" "Oh, he's in the dinner camp." The boiler pressure started lifting the safety valve. To him I said "Get in the board. They need you to fix that miner." "No good staying in the dinner camp. Go and sit in the rib coal ready for next time. You're here on production. If you don't want to do your job and management suspends you, I'm backing management." Silence.

He said, "You can't do that. You're a union man." And I replied, "Try me on." I repeated, "Try me on." He did the correct thing, fixed the problems and stayed near the miner. It's my belief, you get a just pay for a just day's work, and my philosophy in the mining industry was to minimise electrical downtime.

I used to be pretty fit those days, could run a plug of a shuttle car cable over a shoulder, till I ran out of traction, then go back for another grip on the cable. Most of the drivers would assist without being asked. Usually on arrival,

the operator would be removing the faulty cable and placing it rib side. We would plug in the new cable and switch on the supply, wind on the cable, toggle it and back under the miner for coal. I would proceed to hang up the cable out by the toggle point while the section was back in production.

However, I have had staff put the wrong downtime against the electrical section of the colliery. Against me, that's not on. One report said "two hours electrical downtime". No, no, no. Allie watches the clock. It might take 35 minutes or whatever to change a cable, depends on the site of the breakdown, position of the spare, accessibility to cable compartment, conditions and grade of the road etc. "You put the right time, work out why that machine has stopped" If supplies are being unloaded, oil into the miner, bad roof being supported or bag being hung off the miner, that is downtime. That's one of the things I would blow up about – downtime.

We had a manager there – he's passed away now – Jim Lawrie, Jimbuck. If you were a dog man, race dogs, you were AI with Jim – oh, you were really clickety with poor old Jim.

The No. 5 tunnel mouth was near the workshop. The old bathroom being up near No. 4, about 400 yards away. Some of the boys would come up early, staying in the workshop till time to go up the hill to the showers. Their billy cans standing on the workshop floor,

when a shout "Here! Jimbuck's coming." The miners would run and hide and leave their bloody billies. Jim would say, "Gee, you electricians are a hungry mob."

Whether he cottoned on I don't really know. Another day we were standing around and he came through the shop on his way to the store. He reminded me of a little fox terrier; he'd bite your heels and then scoot. One of his favourite saying was, "I'll sack the lot of youse," – and no grin on his face.

I said, "Oh, don't worry, Jim, we'll get another job. You won't." Back he came. "What did you say, Brimsie? What did you say?" I said, "We are tradesmen. You are a Mine Manager." It dawned on him, if the mines shut, Amen.

New Hope was a big mine. We would go down in the man rake. I think there were five seats across and five facing you, and maybe 40 in this wagon and 40 in the next. They were pretty big. It was a 3'6" gauge in the finish. When you get off at pit bottom of this rake, you'd have to walk the rest, and it was a fair way down.

So as soon as you get out of the rake, you'd take your big coat off and hope the hell it would be there at the end of your shift when you came back.

Interviewer: So you worked in a singlet for your shift?

Shorts and singlet most of the time. I can remember taking a spare singlet down the pit with my billycan. We'd start at half past 7.00, and by the time I'd get down the pit to do my statutory duties, I'd be wringing wet and I'd have to change singlets before 9.00 o'clock. I went to get the singlet that I'd put on my billy – no singlet. Then I checked and I found that one of the stinking sods had taken my singlet as a rag. He said, "Oh, I thought it was only a rag." I said, "That was on my billycan, through the handle."

Oh, there were some adventures underground. One was a miner driver (Andy) was fastidious for hosing the road to keep the dust down. That's all right. This day I was working on a breakdown, Andy got the hose out, and the water got in my blimin' tool bag, the steel toolbox. I tell you, I was wild. I don't know whether I swore at him but I thought, 'If I go over and punch him one I'll get sacked here,' so up I go, and I planted a kiss on his cheek. He may have dirtied his pants because he knew he did wrong. I said, "Well, there you are, because if I hit you I'll be sacked, but cop that, boy, and if you do it again, look out. You're not gunna". So he never did it again. That was the end of putting water, spraying bloody water in my toolbag, see?

I've been in crews of men that have been killed, and that was sad. At my own determination I got a First Aid Ticket, and that created a disagreement with some miners. In particular with

the Deputies because they had to have a First Aid Ticket as part of their statutory requirements and I didn't. It took a lot of doing. I'd go over to the Railway Institute over at North Ipswich but I wouldn't get out of my car. I'd sit in the car and I'd come home again. Next time I'd go to the front door, and come home again.

And they had their sort of practical course for the Railway people, but if you were public you had to do the theory and all. Anyway, I finally got the courage to do the course and I got top marks.

A big Railway shield hangs in my lounge room. I was very proud of that. I did it all on my own, all that going to that gate and the door, and not going in, and coming home and Faye saying, "Gee, you're home early," and I never went in. So it took a lot to do it.

So that didn't go over with these blokes. Now, they had the Deputy Ticket, and their First Aid, as far as I'm concerned they might as well forget it, because they'd done a First Aid Ticket and Resuscitation when they got that ticket – not all of them, some of them – probably 30 years before, and the rules had changed so much.

In my production crew there were two first aid men, the Deputy Bob Moore and myself. He was the one that got hurt. He was standing along a level and a shuttle car bumper bar picked up a W strap and drove through the back of his

leg, just above his ankle. It was a wonder it never took his leg off. The shuttle car came out and the driver said, "Brimsie, will you get the stuff? Bob's hurt inside." I said, "Yeah, righto." We had a little canite port to carry the first aid gear, and a plastic bucket had the blanket rolled up in it, waterproof bucket, you know, with the lid, and a stretcher. Okay.

Of course, I click into a different mode, but I get the shakes, really get the shakes at a thing like that, when I get nervous. A couple of them said they don't want me helping if they get hurt, and I thought that's a sad thing to say, because I know my job very well, mining conditions can be very primitive. None of this nice table you're on, sloppy ground. We got Bob out and got him in this PJB Berryman man-carrier. It had a narrow gap at the back through which we had trouble lifting Bob.

At the surface the Ambo brings out this little stretcher, and I said, "We should have put the Ambo on this stretcher," when he saw the size of Bob against the size of his stretcher.

Now, pillar sections – I'm changing round a bit – pillar section working is hazardous but exciting. Well, I think it is. In pillars you take the total block of coal. We split it down the middle and then we do this herringbone method. We work our way back up the hill, all that standing on timber, and you can

actually see the timber breaking, bending like that.

I can't hear too well, but I can hear that cracking! If it's already fallen in front of you it goes up fairly high, say, the height of a power pole or a bit higher, and it will start dribbling off that lip under pressure up where you've just got the timber, and of course the old heart gets racing.

So you check your way to get out in a hurry, up beside the machine, and when it does come I've been caught not under a fall, but in that vicinity, and the air pressure is unreal – just WHOOSH! – and up she comes, the pressure. I've tried to run out one day, got on the wrong side of the ventilating bag, which is the return side, and it's just white stone dust, limestone, and you can't see a metre in front of you. If there was another light you wouldn't have seen it, it was that thick. I thought, "Where the hell am I?" because I was on the wrong side of the bag!

Then we had a few young blokes in the crew. We used to split the crews for lunch. Half would go for lunch and the other would keep cutting coal, and would be working down there. I've seen them pull the miner back, leave the cable where it's working. I said, "You've got to get that back. If you don't, this miner's going to be trapped here if it falls on that cable."

These are young blokes working there, you know, they've got to understand that safety is paramount in the mines. You can laugh later. Sometimes they'll leave the miner with the picks up in the air near the car instead of putting the heads on the ground, for the exact reason if it's dusty and you've got to run. There's nothing worse than running into a set of picks, you know, so it's paramount to lower the heads.

And one of my favourites if the roof would be getting a bit heavy, I'd say, "I've got to go out and check a drive head," probably about 200m outside, and I knew that it was going to fall, you'd feel the pressure. When I came back in and they'd say, "You rotten old b--- you knew it was going to fall," and I'd say, "No, no, no." So they were good times, you know, in hazardous situations.

They'd bring the big miner back and put maybe four breaker legs in front of it, which were a bit thicker than standard pit props. A pit prop might be 6 inches, 8 inches; these would be 10, 12 inch ones. So they're up into the roof holding that roof with their breaker legs. The machine's sitting back just behind them, with the light still on, and that roof would fall, right up to those legs every time. They'd leave them in and just cut in to the left or right of that and take the next bit of coal out.

I did not like surface work. I preferred the underground with the same men all

the time, the machines are identical, and I couldn't see any point in shifting sections. So I took the dip workings – so you can imagine that slop and water and heat in the dip, and mud. I worked in gumboots sometimes, not all the time. I used to get a rash. You had to make sure your socks came higher than your gumboots, or you rub the skin off your legs.

Now, trust in your fellow worker on shift work is important. You stand your timber, and the next shift comes in and works under your roof conditions, your props and your bolting, your crowns and that, and you work under his. On occasion when on the levels the machine, the picks would not cut the top side of the seam, because the seam is dropping, say, 12 degrees from left to right down the grade in the, you know, upgrade, and you're going across the level. So if you cut this top coal, you've taken two-thirds of rock or stone roof on the other side to get that much coal, if you can imagine trying to do that.

That coal will let go if there was a good parting on the roof. But if it wouldn't let go, the boys used to get a maul, which in other parlance is a sledgehammer, and stand a wooden wedge on it. Now, the wedge would be, say, ten inches long and taper from zero to an inch and a half, and he would try to get that wedge over that block of coal and bring that top side down.

Now, Sonny Beale was on the mine this day and he couldn't reach the top side

coal, so he stood on the roof bolting gear, and I held onto his pit belt, and he gets the wedge over the top. You've got to use two hands to knock that wedge in, so I'm holding his belt.

A Manager used to come down the pit, and carried his light in his hand. We knew Griffo – Rex Griffiths, it was. "Griffo is coming." I was cutting a prop with a miner and as soon as he came in I stopped out of respect for the heavies coming through. The first thing he said, "Get on that saw and help that man cut that." I said, "Not my job, Rex," but as soon as he went, I went again!

That's how I was brought up, one man, one job, and do the best you can, like this mining history I'm doing. It takes a lot of effort, but I enjoy mining and the history of mining in this city and elsewhere.

I took some relatives in one day down the pit and someone said, "Well, won't they be frightened to go down the pit?" and I said, "Well, the trick is to go at night time." It's already dark on the surface and you've got a pit light, which I showed them, and I said, "Come and we'll go underground." "Oh, we've got to get off this rake now? We've got to walk the rest." They say, "Are we underground?" and I say, "Yes, we've been underground for the last half an hour" and they didn't know because that's the trick, do tours at night.

I worked three shifts. I've worked dog watches out there, and that was on maintenance shift. It used to be a bit of a tear on dog watch on Sunday night, trying to get a sleep before going to work at midnight. You just can't do it, as I said, children running round, no air-conditioning, couldn't lock yourself in the room. Anyway, I put up with it. When Box Flat blew up I was underground that night. There were two fitters, Siddy Lewis and Jimmy Brown and Eric Mottgheimer was the Deputy. Gordon Sutherland was the motor driver, so that's all of us who were working at New Hope the night Box Flat blew up.

I came up over Box Flat Hill. There was white smoke coming out of the exhaust fan, few cars around, and I thought they must be stone-dusting in the main return, for this dust to be coming out of the thing, not knowing there was a damned fire down there. So I continued to our pit. We were about a kilometre straight through behind the Powerhouse from Box Flat, but you had to go past Swanbank to get to the pit. When Box Flat blew up, I still believe that our coal ribs came over beside the machine we were working on, and Gordon Sutherland rang through and said, "Box Flat's blown up." I said, "Struth." To me it was the wrong pit, it may have been New Hope because of the coal dust that was everywhere in New Hope.

Interviewer. Okay. So you were just lucky?

I think we were.

Anyway, I wrote a story for the QT, for the anniversary, I think, of that Box Flat, the 30th anniversary, how we just bolted the machine down, got it ready in case they wanted it the next day, and got out of the pit. Then we discussed what we were going to do. We decided we were going home. What was the good of being here? We were all on edge as it was after hearing that, because it was THE mine of the West Moreton. I think it was.

I went right through to 1996, I stayed there.

Interviewer. Did you think about giving up?

I did when Box Flat blew up. I nearly put my notice in then, realising the danger.

I was on afternoon shift, and when I got there all the men were still there, the day men are all dressed on the surface, and that means, to me, it could be a fatality. We've had a few out there. I thought, "What's going on here?" She's heating up and after Box Flat, the staff didn't want the same problem. They found work for us. The trades were okay, we had plenty of work to do in the workshop stripping down – I think we were lucky, there was a big miner there that everybody, like bees into a honeypot, got into it.

They put us in an open cut over the other side of the lake from the Powerhouse, and went underground in there, and it was a seven hour shift, and I loved it. I worked the afternoon from 6.00 at night till 1.00 in the morning, never took a billy and I thought it was good because I'd have tea with Faye and the children, I'd go to work and home at be 20 to 2.00. I loved it. It only went for about eight weeks or something, and it was great. So that was when we went over there near the lake.

I told Bevan Kathage we appreciated not being retrenched, and he said, "But you don't know the wheeling and dealing that went on with higher management to try and keep their men at work," so whether the hierarchy wanted to shut us all out, I don't know. I will put my finger to my lips and wipe it down the wall, as that was great, management helping men.

Yes, there were some good times. Another day they decided to go into a pillar entry section from the surface, so we worked from the surface and you had your meals on the top, not in the workshop down the road, so the blokes would have a 44 gallon drum cut in half through the vertical, standing on its end, and it grilled BBQ steaks, but they did not know how to light a wood fuel stove, fires, because at home Mummy or the wife would turn the switch on the wall. I came from a house that had a wood stove, and my Dad used to cook steaks on the top of our wood stove. He was a cook in the Army.

So anyway, they had this big cut off timber that would be too long, all this rubbish that was brought up, and they tried to burn them with – I don't know how. I said, "You've got to put" – I called them chips in my day, or kindling underneath with paper. They'd never heard of it. So anyway, they got this fire, and however the poor blokes would bring out these steaks, that's okay, but if there's a miner driver away down that other tunnel, you've got to go down that tunnel, and there's your steak. So we had a few spare meals.

But overall I miss the mines. On hindsight, I think they were the best time of our lives. As I said, the camaraderie was an important factor in mining history.

And if everybody done their job safety you went home at the end of your shift.

Interviewer: There's a lot of trust, isn't there?

So that's what I like about the mines. As I said, I had altercations with the highest of the high and I give a mouthful back, and I said maybe that's what got me the sack in the finish. I don't know, and I don't really care, because I said my thing was to minimise electrical downtime and if you had an argument you'd get over it and next day have it ironed out properly and get back on your job – and that included management, tradesmen and miners.

Interviewer: Were the electricians staff or wage men?

Mostly wage men. I'm a wages man. The Mine Electrician is a staff man. Now, what they do, we were all ticketed men, but to be a Mine Electrician you go back to college for another probably three years and learn mining law and everything else under the sun. I do not think I had that ability. have that ability.

Interviewer: So was your boss the Mine Electrician?

Yes. However, the manger was the top man at the Colliery.

When the mine closed in 1996, the other electrician was transferred to another New Hope operation at Newhill Colliery, I was notified of my finishing up by the then mine electrician. He wasn't that keen to tell me, "Oh well. When I leave here, there'll be no redress against my character nor my workmanship! You know that". He said "yeah, we do". I've had rows with other sparkies over various conditions including safety and excessive overtime. I don't believe in excessive overtime. I would work reasonable overtime but that ought to be it, unless there is a breakdown.