

Lance Waldon

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook



I was born in 1937 and I started in the mines when I was 14 year old. I left home early in life at 12, worked on a couple of farms, and when the drought got bad, the farmers got me a job in the mines at United No. 8, at the bottom of the Tallegalla Range in Rosewood.

So my schooling was RS. I turned up on the Monday, as advised by whoever got me the job. I was shaking like I'm shaking now, like a kid from the bush in the big city of Rosewood. It was then – to me, anyhow. I asked a bloke where the Manager was, who I see about a job, and he said, "There's the Manager over there, leaning against the..." The Manager's office was just a little office as big as this room. Just a little shed. He said, "Go and see him." So I went over and he looked at me, and he said, "What do you want, son?"

I said, "I want a job, Sir." "So how old are you?" I said, "I'm 14, Sir." He looked me up and down. He said, "You look like bloody 16 to me." He said, "There's a job underground if you want it."

As I learnt later, they'd just brought in the underground age was 16 to start, and I also

learnt that there was a lad away that day and they couldn't replace him, so I got his job.

*Interviewer: Were you terrified?*

Well, the blokes were ribbing me a bit on the surface. It was 7.00 o'clock start, and I walked down the tunnel with the rest of them. They told me to go and see Johnny Hayes, he was the winding driver underneath, and I was going to be his rope rider – whatever a bloody rope rider was. I didn't know. But I soon learnt, and there were many strikes in them days, and I got buried there when I went on the coal at a very young age, once again. I got buried, and to be quite honest, I packed the shits.

They said, "Oh, we think you should change mines," so they got me a job out at Westphalen Mine out at Langfield.

Who owned it? One of the big companies at Ipswich bought the Westphalen one, anyhow. Kathages owned, they actually at the time had mines at Thagoona, and then they shifted down Ipswich way. So, anyhow, I went out there and, bugger me dead, a few weeks later on I got buried again. The seams

are very low seams in Rosewood, anything from 2'6" to 4 feet.

*Interviewer: So it was a crawling job, scraping your back?*

Right, knuckles and---. At the end of the shift you had to brush the roof, which was rock, so you had to clear that to get enough room to move your wagon through.

And you would make it so that you could just get it through, and if you were pulling your wagon and you had your knuckles on the top, and you forgot to put it on the side at certain places, your knuckles all get broken – yeah, I lost them two, but that's not from boxing, that's from hauling wagons.

*Interviewer: So did you stay there after you got buried that time?*

Oh, yeah. We used to go all over out along Mt Walker Road to Lanfield Extended – Nicky Roots owned it. It was a terrible pit.

It had been flooded and there was still water pouring in. You worked with water on your back, and it was a very low seam.

So I was digging a hole to set a prop one day, and my mate had hold of a slab. My old mate, Big Bill Ahern, and of course it was early morning. Bill had been on the grog a bit and went to sleep, let the slab slip over, and cut my big toe nearly off. They stitched it back on, anyhow. I've still got it.

Anyhow, from there I come down to Ipswich, I got a job at Whitwood Collieries (at New Chum). I was about 18.

No, actually, I had five or six years out of the pits. I always wanted to be on the farm, buy my own farm and, you see, after I got married we decided we'd sell the little house

we'd bought and buy a farm. So a bloke sold me a few acres up at a place called Prenzlow, the other side of Minden, and I worked in the pits for 12 months. I used to knock round with his family – and Johnny Bamblin said to me, he said, "Look, you come and cut timber every weekend for me for 12 months, and I'll pay you in a Jersey cow." So we stocked the farm up. Another good gentlemen give me a sow pig and a boar pig to start the pigs off. We had the little farm running really well, and on Boxing Day morning early my brother came over from Mulgowie and he said, "I want to go down the Coast for the day." I said, "No, I can't go. Take the wife down" – because then at Christmas time everyone went down to the Coast for a holiday, in tents. Old mother-in-law had a spot where the RSL is now at Tweed Heads.

So, anyhow, they talked me into going. We came home, a kangaroo was shot dead at the back door, and a greyhound dog – I used to have greyhounds then – and I said to my brother, Trevor, "You go down and ring the Police," because not everyone had a phone in them days. He come back and he said, "Shit, you're lucky!" I said, "Lucky, be f---ed," I said. "Ten of me cows are dead, and me pigs are all dead." He said, "Yeah, but you're still bloody lucky. A bloke's gone berserk. He's killed two people over there and he's killed a bloke down there, and shot another lady over there."

So, anyhow, I was a fair boxer at the time. I hadn't fought for 12 months because that was part of the life, to go farming and give boxing up. So they brought him back, he give himself up on the next farm, ran out of bullets. I said to the copper, "Just turn your back for five minutes, eh?"

I went back to coal mining because truck driving wasn't my cup of tea, so I got a job

at Whitwood Collieries, what used to be the New Chum. I was in my late 20s.

Whitwood was a big colliery. It had one shaft, but they were working three shifts, see, and machinery was brought in, of course, so you wasn't on the contract; you was on day wages. In the early days you were on contract.

You only got paid for what you done, what coal you filled.

*Interviewer: Which was better?*

Oh, day wages, I think, love, yeah, because the other way you worked your guts out. You probably got a little bit more money, but you had to work hard. Anyhow, I went to the colliery, Walkers owned it, they closed it up and they brought us of course to United, Aberdare No. 8, to Bundamba, over from where the high school is now.

So I went down there as a miner, and one Saturday morning, of course, when you get married and you get a couple of kids, you're looking for all the overtime you can get. So this Saturday morning I was there, sitting on the surface, and old winder-driver, Col Greasley – he was a Sar-Major in the Army, they tell me, and that's the way he spoke to you – he said, "Well, there's no f-ing one getting winding licenses now." That's the shaft that used to pull the men up and down the tunnel, on the little rakes and things, you know.

So he looked at me. He said, "What about you, son?" I said, "Don't be bloody silly, man. I didn't go to school." "No," he said, "I'll tell you what you've got to do, but you wouldn't have the guts to do it with." Those were the words he used. He said, "You have to put 100 hours of your own time on that set." That meant you didn't get paid for a

long while, "But, he said, you wouldn't have the guts to do it." I said, "When do we start, mate?"

Then he said, "Well, I tell you what, at the end of that 100 hours you've got a written exam." I said, "Well, that's bugged that, hasn't it?" "No, no, no," he said, "We'll teach you." So I put the 100 hours in, I did it, and I sat for this written exam, Mines Department in Brisbane. That put the shits up me, going down there, for a start.

Anyhow, a fortnight later – I could tell them everything, but I couldn't put it on paper, to be quite honest. He came over to me and he said, "Hey, you're not going with the crew today." He said, "You've got your ticket."

And I said, "Don't be bloody silly. I didn't do the written. I couldn't do much of it." "No," he said, "but I'm the Chief Examiner. I told them what you can do." So I went on the haulage and set underground.

Another old Deputy from Rosewood knew me. He said, "We had a pretty brainy lad, Lance," he said to me – and he was, too, and he still is – he said, "Why don't you get Bettie's ticket?" I said, "Oh, turn it up, Les." "No," he said, "what you do is, you go down to the Rescue Station," and that's how I became involved in the Rescue Station.

So I goes down there and I meet old Joe Spagon. He's another old Rosewood bloke – he was the Superintendent. Joe knew me, because on a Friday night at the Rosewood dances, one of Joe's sisters had died, and he reared her two young lads, the Macklin boys. Now, they were what you call bodgies, what we used to call bodgies, and dressed nice, you know, really nice. Now we can say that. We used to call them "poofers."

I used to fight Chester nearly every Friday night nearly, because I had a little sort that he wanted. He ended up – I won't tell you. Anyhow, I went and see Joe and Joe said he remembered all this. He told me the same thing as old Col did, "Oh, you wouldn't have the guts to do it." That was in the training, you know. So, anyhow, I did. I got inducted into the Rescue Brigade and what happened then? We'll get onto the parts we don't like.

*Interviewer: Did you do your Deputy's ticket then?*

Yes, I did get my Deputy's ticket. Four goes at the written.

Finally passed the written. Anyhow, they rung me after the fourth go, and they said, "Do you know Reg Hardy? – Reg was the Mines Inspector in Ipswich – and I said, "Yeah, I know Reg." They said, "Well, we're going to get you an oral exam. Go and see him and make arrangements." So then I passed it pretty easy.

So anyhow, I was home one Sunday night and I got a phone call about 11.00 o'clock or something like that, that said, "You have to go to the Rescue Station, pick up Wally Butterfield on the way." So sets off, gets to the Rescue Station, and they say, "Oh, there's a big fire out at Box Flat. Get your gear on." You gear them days was just a pair of overalls if it was winter time. We've just gone on the anniversary last Sunday.

And you had a black sort of a jumper thing you put on. So I did this, and we went out. Me and Wal went out, and old Joe was away on holidays so Merv Jensen was in charge. Old Merv said, "Well, get ready. You're going underground on the next rake." So all right, we're sitting on the rake, Wally Butterfield, Max Peattie and myself, on the

back rake. I still remember it, on the back, like.

But in those things you have the brains and you have workers, you know, and actually, I was a worker. So just before I went down he come over, Jensen came over and he said, "Well, there's no f---ing one here to fill the sandbags" - because they were going to sandbag and lock the air off. So he said, "Petie, Butterfield and Waldon, get a few off and drop off." So that's what I was doing. I filled the sandbags, I had a hold of the sandbags, and Max, he was filling them. We were right on the tunnel mouth, and we heard it coming, and Maxie said, "Let's get the f---ing hell out of here!"

The next thing I remember, sliding down the bathroom wall which was some 100 metres away, and I still remember grabbing for my helmet, which I've still got at home. You know, I don't like talking about Box Flat.

So, anyhow, I picked myself up and I heard blokes screaming, and I raced back. Johnny Hall was caught under the Deputy's cabin. The wall had fallen on him, a brick wall. So I said to old Buttery, Wally – he's dead now, he got hurt that night too bad and died later on – I said, "I'll lift the bastard. You pull him out." Johnny ended up with broken pelvis and all that stuff. He's still alive.

So, anyhow, someone said, "Go over there. They're all assembling over there towards the office." How the bloody hell I got blown – I must have got blown ahead of the explosion as it come up, because when I went back, all the bloody gantry and everything had fallen down and round everyone and everything.

So anyhow, I went on my way back over there, and Merv Jensen's laying in the middle of the road. I can still see it today.

He had brick sideways in his head, and this is fair dinkum. No bullshit. Buttery looked at me, and he said, "Righto, Waldo, your bloody turn this time. I'll hold him and you pull it out." So I did pull it out, and I ripped my flannel off and stuffed it in his head.

Then Ronny Hollett came along and he said, "Look, I've got the ambulance here now. We'll go over there." So, yeah, Merv survived for many years after that. He's died now. My injuries were these scars are still on my chest. Do you want to see them?

*Interviewer: That's significant scarring, isn't it?*

That's them. That's my legacy of Box Flat. You can feel the bastards.

But, anyhow, we're still here. So, anyhow, I gets home. They sent us home, and I was just talking with the wife. I said, "Well, bugger it, I'm going to back to truck driving to - and we got a phone call. It was the Manager of United Aberdare No. 8, Pat Farrell. Old Pat said, "I want you to go to work tonight, Lance." I said, "Well, you know what you can do with your f---ing pit, Pat!"

He said, "No, listen and I'll just explain it to you." He said, "If you don't go to work, the other winder driver will have to work 24 hour shifts. There's a set on the surface, and one set underground." So I said to old Pat, "I'll be on the surface, Pat." He said, "No, you won't, mate." He said, "I want you underground, and I'll have a man there with you all night." Now, them days when you wasn't pulling wagons, you were walking round inspecting belts and things. He said, "That's all you've got to do, sit on that set." So you do the Australian thing, and away you go to work.

*Interviewer: That must have been so hard!*

It was. So, anyhow, I put ten years in the Rescue. I got my Rescue ticket and I stayed on.

They have dog-watch Deputies now. On dog-watch you get 25% of your wages on top of your wages, so when you've got a couple of kids you're all risk. So they wanted a dog-watch Deputy at Rhondda Colliery, so I left Aberdare and went across to Rhondda Colliery.

So then after a few years at Rhondda, I got conned into going out to New Hope. Bevan Kathage, he conned me into going to New Hope because they dog-watched every time. Now, I won't tell you too much about it, but the first night on there, this old bloke comes down the hill, drops his billy, his oranges and apples, everything's rolling down the hill, his lunch billy. So I goes over and gives him a hand to pick it up. Oh, geez, they had an Underground Manager on then by the name of Early Diddle, South-African Rhodesian fellow.

So I said to this bloke, "You better come with me," so I went over to the Under-Manager and he was sitting there with the men. I said, "Now, this bloke's not going down the pit tonight. "Why?" he said. I said, "He's f---ing drunk." "Oh," he said, "If you don't let him go down the pit, the other blokes will go home." I said, "Let them go home."

So I said, "Now, I'm the new Deputy here, you blokes. If I catch grog on any of youse, that will be it. Home you go." So he went home.

*Interviewer: And did the men stay?*

Oh, yes. So next morning when I'm getting on the rake to come up, here's a big note: "Doctor Spot." And that's what they called me from there on. So I said to the Manager next morning, he said, "What do you think of the place?" I said, "I'll be out of this place as soon as I so-and-so can." Bevan said, "Why?" so I told him. "Oh, he said, well, that's what we got you here for, to straighten them up."

It took me 12 months to get out of that pit. I was at the Rescue Brigade one night and the bloke, Ronny North, said to me, "Would you like to change pits, Lance?" I said, "What for?" He said, "Come down to Westphalen and work." Now, Kathages were a hard mob, but they were very safety-conscious, so I said, "Well, I'm coming to have a look at the so-and-so place before I take a job."

So a couple of mornings later I arranged with them to go down and inspect the place after I'd knocked off dog-watch at, you know, and I said, "I'll let you know tomorrow." So I went home and discussed it with the wife. I said, "Well, you know, it's a lot closer to home. It's a very safe pit." So I took the job. I went back the next morning and I told him. I said, "Yeah, Ron, I'll take the job," and he had the door to the lamp room closed, where we were standing outside. "Oh," he said, "Lance, I can't give you the job."

I said, "Now, I've got an idea why." I said, "Now, is Otto in there?" He said, "Oh, you don't call them Otto or Bill – it's Mr Kathage." I said, "Bill or bloody Otto's in there, listening." I said, "Now, there's two sides to every bloody story. I'd like to tell mine." So he said, "I'll go and see Mr Kathage." So he come out and opened the door, and he said, "Mr Kathage will see you."

I said, "How are you, Bill?" They said, "What's your story?" I said, "Well, if I come to work here and blokes turn up bloody drunk, what do you want me to do?" "Oh, Jesus, we don't have that here." So, anyhow, they said, "You've got the job." I was half an hour talking. I said, "No, you can shove it."

So that evening I was walking my greyhounds, and when I came back the Missus said, "Ronnie North's been here. They want you to go and work there, but I told them I didn't think you would." I said, "Well, I've thought about it and I will." So I worked at Westphalen until I closed, which was another ten years.

*Interviewer: So it turned out all right?*

Yes, it was a good pit. I retired from the Rescue Brigade after ten years, because they used to call me, "Lift one/drag one." They pensioned me off for injuries, which was very, very hard, I can tell you – the worst two years of my life, I think. When they closed the pits down in Ipswich I tried to get jobs up North, but they wouldn't take me.

It was hard, yeah. So, anyhow, the night of Box Flat was the coldest, darkest bloodiest night ever put in, and I don't mean that as a swear word.

*Interviewer: Yes. And it's obviously with you as if it was yesterday, you re-live it?*

Yes. Always in your mind. Sunday was the Memorial Day, and it was a beautiful day, as the weather went. It was a sad day.

*Interviewer: So you finished as a Deputy on dog-watch; is that right? Is that what you did at Westphalen?*

Yes, actually, while I was at Rhondda Colliery, Johnny Hall said to me, he said, "Why don't you come over for a couple of hours every day" because John never worked underground again. They put him in the Open Cut. "Come over to the Open Cut and get an Open Cut licence?" So I did this, too. I took John up on his word and, yeah, I did get an Open Cut Examiner's licence, yeah.

*Interviewer: You did really well for someone who had no schooling.*

Well, you don't get all your education at school, Love, as you've probably learnt yourself.

In the meantime, I was a fair old boxer. I got conned into boxing at Rosewood and I was a Queensland Champion, runner-up to Australian Champion, as an amateur. I raced greyhounds since I was 17, still racing them.

Well, for years I tried to get a memorial for everyone who was killed, but no-one would go along with me, sort of thing. Then Beres Evans come on the scene, and he got right into it, and I'm very, very pleased about that. We hope it goes ahead.

They're talking about it now. I was happy with an Honour Board just out the front here, but it's snow-balled since then, of course. The Mayor's got hold of it, but he don't want it at Cooneana. He wants it in Queens Park, of course. The Mayor has put up \$100,000 towards it.

*Interviewer. So that's to honour all the men in the whole district who've died in the mines?*

I think it's 280 something men.

Joanne Miller (*State MP*) a couple of years ago took us down to give us blokes, half a dozen, down to Cessnock to have a look at theirs. It's terrific.

Everywhere else has got a memorial, yeah, but they've also got, like a display. There's a mining museum, at Collinsville, Scottsville, wherever you go. We should have had it years ago when the mines were all here.

So, yeah, that's about it. They pensioned me off and now we have our little gathering here every Tuesday. We have our room down there with all the gear in, and the machinery outside we're getting together, so I'm still mixed up in it all.

My boy, who had a 950 TE Score from Christian Brothers, wanted to be a bloody coal miner.

I mean, they used to have a competition every year between the different Rescue Stations and Booval had their own, the different groups, you know. This year I was in the winning group. They used to have a big dinner at St Mary's Hall. Someone rung the Missus up, I'd had a few beers or something, to come and pick me up. So she brought the boy up to drive me car home, and going home he said, "Oh, I was talking to a bloke named Beres Evans." I said, "Oh, yeah," and he said he wanted to know what I was going to do, and I told him I wanted to be a miner. He said, "Well, you're too bloody brainy for that," he said, "Come and see me before you leave school, and I'll put you on a Manager's course."

So I said to him, "Oh, don't take much notice of that, son. He's half full of piss." So anyhow, before he finished school, Evans rang him up to come for an interview, so he did. Yeah, he worked in the mines for ten years. Then he went back to the University

and he got right up in Health & Safety, and yesterday morning he tells me he was flying out to Vietnam to work for three weeks, working on some oil rig. He's mixed in all this gas and oil and everything, out in the West, you know.

Interviewer: And did your other child become a miner?

No, she's a girl. No, she did not. She become a Mum. She's got two girls.