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FIREMAN HERO

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It has been said that disasters bring out either the best or worst in people.

One disaster which occurred in Tasmania in 1912 brought out the best in a community, despite many misgivings about the cause of the tragic event, it was the making of heroes.

This is the story of one man who took a leading part in the aftermath of the disaster. His name was Harry E. Trousselot, Superintendent of the Hobart Fire Brigade.

On Saturday 12 October 1912, the North Mount Lyell mine near Queenstown on the West Coast of Tasmania was the scene of one of Australia's most tragic mining disasters.

A fire broke out in the timber pumphouse and supports on the 700 ft level of the mine. The fire eventually claimed the lives of 42 men out of 170 miners at work at the time. Smoke in the main shaft of the mine prevented the escape or rescue of many, and most of the victims were killed by carbon monoxide fumes generated by the fire. But for the heroism of the miners and those who assisted, the loss of life would have been greater. There was no emergency warning system in the mine and down below thick smoke billowed through the shaft driving the miners to lower levels to escape.

By Sunday 13 October, over 100 men still remained trapped on the lower levels of the mine. They could not be contacted and it was decided, because of the lack of suitable rescue equipment, to seek assistance from the Hobart Fire Brigade and the Victorian Government.

On Sunday evening (13 October) a locomotive and one carriage carrying Superintendent Trousselot and special diving equipment left Hobart.

A few hours later the LADY LOCH and the LOONGANA were racing from Melbourne carrying firemen and rescue gear. The train reached Queenstown at 10 p.m. on Monday, and in the early hours of Tuesday, Trousselot, wearing a smoke helmet, went into the main and walked through the smoke to the shaft.

He saw that the fire had burnt the legs of

the mine timbering and that hundreds of tons of rock blocked part of the level.

He crawled through a small gap and noticed that the air became clearer. To ease the burden of the heavy air pipes he removed his helmet. Slowly his legs weakened and he wanted to lie down.

John Pearton, who had guided Trousselot to the plat, saw the big fellow collapse. Although he had no helmet he rushed along side and assisted Trousselot to the winze. As Trousselot's air-proof armour was too cumbersome for the confines of the mine, the rescuer waited for the efficient Draeger helmets which the LADY LOCH was carrying from Melbourne!

When the rescue equipment reached the mine, men wearing the new helmets were lowered in search of the miners. Trousselot and another man re-entered the mine to see what happened to some of the men on lower level, but they were too late. They returned exhausted.

The suspense outside the mine was not as cruel as inside where 50 men awaited rescue. On Monday night they had had enough and sent up a terse note through the shaft "Try to get us out as soon as possible - we have had enough. Losing confidence?" Gradually many of the miners were rescued but many were left in the shafts. As soon as the last man rescued was brought to the top of the shaft Trousselot and another man wore helmets down to the 850 ft level to learn of the fate of men who were known to have assembled at the most distant end of the level. Trousselot found ten bodies huddled together in a small drive.

By the following Friday horse waggons loaded with forty-two coffins rattled through the silent streets of Linda Valley up the rough track to the North Lyell Mine. But no bodies were brought up to the surface as fire and fumes were so dense as to prevent any further rescue attempts. The Mt Lyell Company reluctantly decided to seal the mine.

A month later thirty million gallons of water had flooded the mine.

The North Lyell disaster inspired many heroic deeds. Some were recognised, others will never be told.

The Royal Humane Society awarded thirty-two medals and certificates to the men who risked their lives in rescue work.

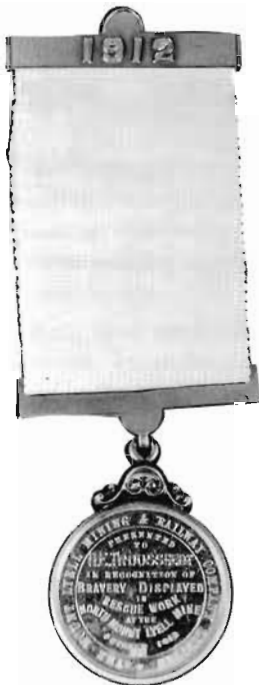
H.E. Trousselot received the Royal Humane Society's Bronze Medal.

The Mount Lyell Company issued a special Gold Medal and awarded it to two people who took part in the rescues. Albert Gadd and H.E. Trousselot.

The obverse is a standard Stokes obverse with the words HONOUR TO WHOM HONOUR IS DUE.

The reverse states:
THE MOUNT LYELL MINING AND RAILWAY COMPANY LIMITED./PRESENTED TO/H.E. TROUSSELOT IN RECOGNITION OF BRAVERY DISPLAYED IN RESCUE WORK AT NORTH MOUNT LYELL MINE OCTOBER 1912.

A Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the disaster but its findings were not conclusive despite many accusations of sabotage and deliberate arson (see note below).



Who was H.E. Trousselot?

In 1909 H.E. Trousselot was a station officer with the Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade which he joined in 1902.



In 1909 he applied and was successful in obtaining the Superintendent's position with the Hobart Fire Brigade and was formally appointed to the position on 17 November 1909. Trousselot took up his duties shortly after. He re-organised the Hobart Fire Brigade and instituted discipline and pride in the volunteer firemen.

In 1915 Trousselot enlisted as a private and saw active service in the front line with the ANZAC Corps, and then with General Headquarters Staff where he was mentioned twice in despatches. Part of his duties included more than 18 months as adviser to the British government on matters relating to fire services during wartime. At one time he was responsible for the orderly fire control in the British ammunition dumps. He returned to Tasmania in 1919 with the rank of Major and was decorated with the Military Order of the British Empire. Many of his wartime innovations became standard fire brigade practice throughout Australia.

Early in 1941 he was recalled from the reserve list of officers and served until 1942. By this time his health was failing and he asked the Hobart Fire Brigade Board to relieve him of his Superintendentship and on 27 August 1942 he resigned after 32 years with the brigade.

After his retirement he spent many years working as a part time reader with the Examiner Newspaper in Launceston. He died in Launceston on 20 April 1957.

Trousselot received the King's Coronation Medal, the Hobart Fire Brigade Long Service and Good Conduct Medal, the OBE (Military Division), Royal Humane Society Bronze Medal, Mt Lyell Mining Company Gold

Medal 1912, as well as his service medals for World War I.

His medals are on display in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's Medal Gallery.

Author's Note:

The Mount Lyell Mining Disaster is currently being researched by myself for eventual publication.



REFERENCES

- 1 *The Peaks of Lyell*, Geoffrey Blainey Melbourne University Press 1954.
- 2 *ibid*

GENERAL WORKS

Helmets and Hatchets - A History of the Hobart Fire Brigade by Roger V. McNeice 1983 State Fire Commission.