

Media management – Beaconsfield Mine collapse

Case study by Const. Phil Pike, Tasmanian Police

The collapse of the Beaconsfield Mine Joint Venture (BMJV) on the eve of ANZAC Day 2006 soon became an incident that swiftly captured the attention of state, national and international media and has continued to do so long after the actual event of the rescue concluded.

The event became an incident unprecedented in media management within Australia.

Ironically, the collapse at the BMJV occurred just three days before the tenth anniversary of the Port Arthur massacre – another event that also set new standards in media management within Australia.

The collapse on the night of the 25th of April was signified by localised seismic activity in the Beaconsfield area. The tremor caused the local police sergeant to run out of the station, fearing it was going to collapse. Residents of the West Tamar

town did the same – fearing the worst from what many described as “a mini earthquake”.

Bells ringing from the mine, in the centre of the small mining town, quickly indicated a disaster was unfolding. Most of the underground shift at the mine emerged uninjured, telling mine staff and responding emergency services about a collapse in the shaft at 925 metres.

A check found three miners missing and unaccounted for. None of the other miners who had escaped could identify the location of the three men and a rescue operation was immediately put in place.

Mining accidents in Tasmania have always attracted a strong level of media interest. In early 2006, local media drove for up to four hours to attend the isolated site of a mine accident on the State’s West Coast.

In the West Coast incident, three miners were involved in a truck accident in a decline mine. Following the accident, the vehicle caught fire causing the three miners to take refuge in a safety chamber until they were rescued some hours later.

Media response in the initial phase of the Beaconsfield rescue operation involved mainland based media, in addition to local media.

What should be explained at this stage is the presence of major mainland based media in Tasmania is an unusual response and only occurs at a time of a major incident or disaster. Such a response to the island state would only occur 5 – 6 times a year at the most.



The minehead of the Beaconsfield Joint Venture as seen from the 100 year old Grubb Shaft.



News crews prepare their positions for the extraction phase.

Constable Phil Pike and Peter Morris, a senior reporter with Channel Seven, both worked at Port Arthur ten years before. They agreed the media response to the Beaconsfield Mine collapse equalled, and in some parts exceeded, the media response to Port Arthur ten years before.

In addition to news crews, the major networks also provided crews for their respective current affairs programs and morning shows. Channel Nine also had an additional crew from *60 Minutes*, which included veteran journalist, Richard Carlton, who was to later die while covering the story.

Supporting the large contingent of journalists was an equally large contingent of photographers – with News Ltd sending multiple photographers from *The Mercury*, *The Herald Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph* and their flagship newspaper, *The Australian*.

As the incident evolved into a protracted rescue, using a remote control excavator within the collapsed area, a number of major stakeholders with a significant interest in the mine collapse were defined. All had to be included in the communications processes to varying degrees.

These stakeholders were:

- The Beaconsfield Mine Joint Venture (management and staff),
- Allstate Explorations NL (the managing body of the Beaconsfield Mine),
- The West Tamar Council,
- Tasmania Police and emergency services,
- Department of Justice (Coroner's Office),
- Workplace Standards,
- Chief Inspector of Mines,
- Australian Workers' Union,
- Tasmanian Minerals Council,
- Launceston General Hospital,
- The missing miners and their families,
- The wider West Tamar community, and
- Responding media.

During the initial stages of rescue, BMJV generated media releases via a Sydney based communications specialist and used the media contact stream via Tasmania Police Media and Marketing.

Information flowed with reasonable regularity via this means, although some releases were disseminated post midnight – outside the news cycle of most Tasmanian based media.

In the initial phase, the point of contact for BMJV was the Sydney based communications specialist. There was no spokesperson at the mine and an initial reluctance by the mine manager, Matthew Gill, to engage the ever-growing media across the mine boundary fence.

Part of this reluctance was an imposed restriction by the mine administrator who was present at the mine offices. BMJV and Allstate Explorations NL were placed in administration some years earlier – despite Beaconsfield containing the richest gold bearing ore in the country.

The restriction bought with it a conflict between the need to:

- a. protect reputations;
- b. engage the media; and
- c. satisfy the legal needs of the administration to limit certain information.

It proved restrictive throughout the duration of the incident despite strong efforts by Mike Lester of CPR who later became the contracted media adviser to BMJV. The resulting information vacuum consistently proved to be a battle undertaken by Government communications staff deployed to assist the West



Inspector Paul Reynolds prepares for a Channel Nine interview with Tracey Grimshaw and Karl Stefanovic.

Tamar Council, Tasmania Police, emergency services and the Beaconsfield community.

In this information vacuum the Australian Worker's Union gained much credibility, with AWU national secretary, Bill Shorten and official Paul Howes always readily available for comment and willing to engage the media.

Initially the union officials discussed their proposed media interviews with mine management – agreeing to leave the issue of blame until after the rescue of the trapped miners.

The unionists later broke these conditions – appearing in Richard Carlton's last story on 60 Minutes openly blaming mine management for sending miners into what was described as "bad ground."

To be fair in this debate, the management structure of BMJV had limited depth with the mine manager, Matthew Gill, not only needing to supervise the rescue processes, but also needing to liaise with mining staff, their families and the media contingent.

As the rescue processes moved slowly, Gill developed better media awareness skills – making regular appearances at media conferences.

At one conference, he immediately fronted the media after a visit to the rescue site, dressed in overalls, mining vest and belt and holding a miners helmet complete with lamp.

Gill's practical involvement added a level of credibility to his role as a spokesperson, however holding a media conference only every 24–48 hours allowed the AWU to retain the initiative with the media contingent by being readily available.

The initial rescue period also saw a growing sensitivity against the media contingent amongst the miners who were working long shifts underground in hazardous conditions to find their missing workmates. This sensitivity saw mine staff erect large tarpaulins around the boundary fences and legs of the mine head, limiting media access to vision and photographs.

The move by BMJV to limit media access saw the major networks bring in their helicopters, with Channel Nine having a state of the art camera mounted on the underside of their airframe. The resulting vision was clear; showing close up shots, while being filmed several kilometres out.

The limited access by the mine saw consistent flying of media helicopters over the mine site – even drowning out conferences relating to the underground rescue at the mine operations room.

An attempt to have a no-fly zone implemented over the town didn't gain approval and the sound of the helicopters remained constant over the area during the protracted incident.

The miners made a decision that no miners, including those in charge of the rescue, would be interviewed by the media until after the rescue of Webb and Russell. This decision also included NSW mine rescue experts and NSW paramedics who were advising Tasmania Ambulance Service staff.

Two days after the collapse, the body of Larry Knight was recovered from the rock fall around the telehandler where he and fellow miners, Brant Webb and Todd Russell, had been working.

Knight's body was photographed by forensic police and removed in a mortuary vehicle during the night. Some photographers managed to take an image of the vehicle leaving



Media conference in the public park.

the mine head – a significant coup considering the limitations of the tarpaulins on the boundary fences.

Tony Scott (Department of Premier and Cabinet) and Jodi de Cesare (Tasmania Police) provided media assistance at the surrounding site was provided by On the evening of the discovery of Larry Knight's body, they arranged the media conference during which mine manager, Matthew Gill, announced the discovery of the body.

With the recovery of Knight's body, the jurisdiction for the incident fell under the Coroner's Office – with Tasmania Police responsible for the investigation and preparation of the file for the Coroner.

George Town Divisional Inspector, Paul Reynolds, would later undertake this role on behalf of the Coroner while also spending many hours at the mine and Council Chambers assisting throughout the wider operation.

The public park around the Museum carpark, mine boundary and West Tamar Council Chambers became a camping ground for the fast growing media contingent.

The discovery of Webb and Russell saw an explosion in hired campervans, broadcast vans and media tents.

Some media organisations hired vacant shacks in the Beauty Point area, buying stretchers and other camping gear. Those in campervans bought local camping stores out of warm jackets and polar rated sleeping bags.

Melissa Doyle and David Koch presented *Sunrise* from a steep bank overlooking the mine while Nine's Karl Stefanovic did his crosses to the *Today* show in front of the impressive brick facades of the Grubb and Hart shaft. In the evenings Tracey Grimshaw and Naomi Robson presented their respective current affairs shows from the same locations.

Under the only barbecue shelter, Channel Ten and SBS presented their news and ABC shared the muddy bank with Channel Seven. Local ABC Radio moved quickly and hired the local St John Ambulance hall nearby.

During gale force winds, driving rain and sleet, a small hall became the media centre and a majority of interviews took place amid a tight crush of journalists and cameras.

The resultant media scrum proved daunting for some spokespeople fronting the media for the first time but unavoidable considering the inclement weather.

With the search operation continuing nearly a kilometre underground, there was very little to fill the news bulletins or newspapers in the way of vision or images.

The discovery of Webb and Russell trapped 925 metres underground gave the story fresh angles and momentum. The competitive nature of the media, particularly between Channels Seven and Nine, gave rise to rumours of cash offers to miners on the rescue team.

There were rumours of television stations offering \$10,000 for a miner to take images and vision of the underground rescue area. This resulted in the bags of all miners being searched prior to the commencement of shift – added stress for the rescuers in an already difficult situation.



An interview with mine manager, Matthew Gill.



Broadcast vans fill the small Museum car park.

To assist in the media management of the growing contingent, Constable Phil Pyke (Tasmania Police) and Shaun Rigby (Department of Premier and Cabinet) joined Tony Scott and BMJV's Mike Lester at the site.

Later Mark Franklin (Tasmania Police), Julie Pellas, Mandy Smith (Premier and Cabinet) and Adrian Lacey (Health and Human Services) attended the Launceston General Hospital to assist media staff there.

An immediate plan was developed to overcome the information vacuum. This was achieved by producing spokespeople who had worked underground and been in communication with the trapped miners – with paramedics from the Tasmania Ambulance Service proving popular.

As the collapse, and subsequent rescue, had impacted upon the whole West Tamar community, it was appropriate the Mayor of West Tamar, Barry Easter, became the reassuring face of the local community.

This process was of major benefit during the Port Arthur tragedy with Tasman Mayor, Neil Noyes, presenting a reassuring face to the Peninsula community.

Barry Easter soon became a much sought after spokesperson with regular appearances on *Sunrise* and *Today*. Although limited in media experience, Barry had a strong on-air presence and steered away from speculation and judgement.

The next step was negotiation with mine management to take down some of the tarpaulins on the boundary fences and seek approval for camera crews to film the mine head and yard from a viewing platform at the Museum which overlooked the area.

This was achieved and gave the media different points from which to gain vision and images. Access to the viewing platform presented the idea of positioning a television camera and a photographer there to obtain pool vision on the extraction of Webb and Russell.

Requests to mine management for pool vision and images from underground had been refused but the viewing platform presented an ideal, and non obtrusive, position with the Museum prepared to cut out a section of fence.

Negotiations moved to engaging the Tasmanian Ambulance Service, psychologist and mine staff. Initial discussions revolved around decoy ambulances and other methods to prevent the media covering the extraction of Webb and Russell.

Thankfully these notions were quickly halted and further negotiations took place between mine rescue staff and the families of the trapped miners. Their approval was paramount for this pool site to be opened to the media.

A concession, which was to have a major impact on coverage of the extraction, was achieved at this time. This concession was departure of the ambulances, containing the rescued miners, through the mine gates and down the road through the middle of the media camp.

This would mean the networks could broadcast live as the gates opened and the ambulances rolled out through an honour guard of rescue miners.

Within the media contingent, the competitive nature between the networks raised its head — with two days of discussions undertaken to find a suitable (and trusted) cameraman.

This was similar with the photographers with a heated discussion on a suitable pool photographer taking place in the main street of the town and being reported to police as a disturbance.

Finally the pool cameraman was selected by the media advisers — a local ABC cameraman. His vision would be live linked to the networks with a contingency camera provided by Channel Ten.

An international award-winning photographer, from Getty Images, was finally elected to take the images. The contingency photographer was from the Tasmanian newspaper, *The Examiner*.

Radio was to be syndicated through 2GB and the vision from the pool camera was also broadcast directly



A Tasmanian Ambulance Service paramedic is interviewed after completing his underground shift in the rescue area.

to a large screen in a campervan from where other radio journalists could watch and broadcast.

Media management of the final stages of rescue and extraction became a police operation under Inspector Paul Reynolds with the mission of “ensuring the assembled media are managed in such a way that the patients can be transported from the mine unimpeded whilst allowing the media to obtain suitable footage and pictures for broadcast purposes.”

Sections of the carpark, media camp and public park were barricaded off as media marshalling areas. Each network selected their own site and there was a pool area for television cameras and photographers.

Any camera crew or photographer wishing to step over the barricades during the departure of the ambulances to cover public reaction to the rescue had to seek permission from the Government media advisors prior to the event.

With the drilling getting closer to the trapped miners, the media contingent grew rapidly — preparing to split resources between Beaconsfield and the Launceston General Hospital.

A Government media team was already in place at the hospital with an area set aside for media operations and arrangements had been made through BMJV's Mike Lester to notify the media once the miners were rescued via SMS.

Such a plan required cooperation from all media. As the drilling underground drew closer, expectations of an impending rescue grew. Channel Nine and Ten were preparing to broadcast live from midnight on Saturday the 6th of May — however it was another three days before the miners would reach the surface.

Producers and senior journalists were called to a meeting at the West Tamar Council Chambers on

Friday 5th of May where the media management plan for the extraction was outlined to them.

A wholesale agreement was obtained from all media organisations to abide by in order to obtain the pool vision and images — following approval from the families of the trapped miners.

Two issues came close to jeopardising this agreement for pool vision. The first saw mine staff locating a web camera mounted on the facade of the Grubb Shaft, overlooking the mine head. BMJV removed the web camera, contracted to News Ltd, resulting in strong discussions between News Ltd management and the Government media staff.

The second issue related to a remote camera owned by Channel Seven. This camera was mounted on a teleboom that the network often raised over the rear fence of the mine yard.

Mine staff retaliated by raising the tarpaulins higher — effectively cutting other photographers out of their ideal positions.

As the rescue and extraction of Brant Webb and Todd Russell unfolded, the pool site provided the media with the vision and images for which they had longed.

International interest was also strong with CNN's Hugh Williams breaking into a broadcast of Oprah Winfrey in the United States.

The decision to leave the ambulance doors open came as the result of a request by Webb and Russell — proving an added coup for media crews.

The provision of spokespeople, including senior mine rescue staff, immediately as the ambulances departed was a deliberate aspect of the media management plan. This was designed to prevent media crews chasing the ambulances along the highway into Launceston.



Paramedic Matthew Eastham faces a media crush during an interview in the small media centre.

Police officers at the bottom of West St were also to be used as a delay for any pursuing crews. However, no crews undertook any pursuit given the access to Webb and Russell after they stepped from the shaft lift.

The media management of the Beaconsfield Mine collapse was a success. The facilitation approach to media liaison certainly gained the confidence of the media during the protracted nature of the rescue.

It was its protracted nature that certainly sets the incident apart from other similar incidents across Australia.

An experienced international journalist, Hugh Williams from CNN, applauded the overall management processes.

“The plan to have a live TV pool camera (and photo), a road corridor for ambulances, and lock-down positions for the news organizations was crucial to the success of everyone’s coverage when the miners finally emerged,” Hugh Williams said.

“If this hadn’t been sorted out in advance, and all of the journalists hadn’t agreed to be asked to stay put...I think the outcome might have been a lot different.”

“While some journalists might complain about access restrictions to certain stories; if they can be explained, and compromises made, then everyone will usually be happy with the outcome.”

“It’s important that all journalists get equal access, and I am a big fan of pool coverage as opposed to NO coverage.”

A number of lessons in media management evolved from the Beaconsfield experience.

These were:

1. The media management approach of facilitation was adopted by all on-ground media advisers
2. Know your key stakeholders and media people
3. Prevent the information vacuum – in the absence of information speculation will take over
4. Listen to media requests and create or facilitate opportunities
5. Seek media cooperation and encourage their input
6. Aim to present fresh spokespeople on a regular and planned basis
7. Plan for all media reactions, including competition between organisations
8. Work closely with other media advisers and operate on a common plan that supports all stakeholders.

About the Author

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