



THE DISASTER OF ABERFAN

It was 10.30am on Friday October 21 1966. '8CS5 from crime squad office at Cardiff. Will you pick up the murder bag and report to police headquarters at Merthyr?' A detective sergeant in No 8 (Welsh) Regional Crime Squad, I was on patrol in Newport with DC Alan Parsons. I had recently completed the murder administration course at Scotland Yard and thought that we were to assist the Merthyr borough police in a murder inquiry.

Returning to the squad office to pick up the kit, we were told by our typist that we were to help at Aberfan where a school had collapsed and some children were trapped. I could not see at that time how my index cards and action books could be of any use in such an accident but, as ordered, we travelled on to Merthyr.

By 2.30pm my system was set up in a mortuary at Bethania chapel in the village of Aberfan. Together with other RCS officers, under the command of our co-ordinator, John Parkman, I was involved in one small but essential part of the tragedy that was Aberfan. Over the next two weeks we were to identify the bodies of 116 children and 28 adults whose ages ranged from six months to 82 years. The disaster is well documented and my role was only a fragment of the huge operation to recover and identify the victims.

As a result of a long period of heavy rain and broken drainage pipes, an 800ft coal tip, one of several on the mountain overlooking the village, had descended like an avalanche. Thousands of tons of coal slurry and waste had demolished Hafod Tanglwyns farm on the mountainside, killing one adult and three children inside; the Pantglas infants and junior school, where most of the children were at morning assembly; and a number of houses in Moy Road.

It is just 21 years since the Welsh mining village of Aberfan lost 116 children and 28 adults when a coal tip turned into an avalanche. Charles Nunn describes his part in the operation to recover and identify the victims

There were no other suitable premises in the village so we were forced to make the best of the limited facilities of the chapel only a few hundred yards from the school. The chapel had an upstairs gallery and a small Sunday school room at the rear with a toilet, single cold water tap and small gas stove.

Bodies were already arriving from the disaster site wrapped in blankets. Quickly mobilising some local nurses and young Salvationists who volunteered, we received the bodies in the school room. They were placed on trestle tables and the filthy black slurry washed from them.

Each body was fully described on a cross-indexed card system and allocated a number. Clothing and property on the body was also card indexed. Because of the terrible pressure generated by the collapse of the tip, many body parts were received which, at that stage, were given a separate body number. We were to allocate 158 body numbers for the 144 dead before the operation was completed.

Once the recording was finished the body number was tied to a wrist and ankle and the body wrapped in a clean blanket. With clothing and property in plastic bags it was taken into the chapel.

The children were small enough to be laid down on the chapel pews. The adults

were placed on stretchers across the tops of the pews. The male bodies were laid to the left of the chapel and the female ones to the right. By the fourth day we were forced to use the upper gallery: the bodies had to be carried up a narrow staircase from the ground floor.

As soon as the word swept around Aberfan that the bodies were being taken to Bethania chapel, parents and relatives arrived at the front door. They waited in a long patient line to be permitted in, to try to identify the daughter, son, wife, husband, mother or father. Because of the cramped conditions in which we were operating we could only deal with two sets of relatives at a time.

When we had established the age and sex of the person they were seeking they were shown all the bodies that matched. The task was not made easier by the fact that most of the boys wore grey short trousers and the girls a standard dress and cardigan.

Where a body, because of severe facial injuries, was marked 'Not to be viewed' the relatives were shown the clothing and property in the hope that this would give us a provisional identification. If a full identification was made, an officer from the control point was summoned and satisfied himself that the identification was correct before writing up the body book. The body was then moved to a part of the chapel marked off for the pathologist. The necessary statements were taken from the relatives for the coroner.

When a number of bodies had been identified the pathologist would examine them and record the cause of death for the coroner's officer before they were released to the undertakers. There were no post-mortems at Aberfan. The cause of death was only too obvious: asphyxia and multiple crush injuries.

Where a body had been only pro-

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DISASTER SCENE: A police officer tries to identify a body being brought out of the wreckage (top); an anxious group await news of the disaster (middle); and a body is lowered out of the school (bottom)

visionally identified, corroboration was sought from two other areas. Fingerprints were taken from the body and compared with prints found in a bedroom or on a favourite toy. Where the body was that of a school child the teeth were compared with dental records kept at the education office in Merthyr. We were fortunate that, when military help came to Aberfan, it included a Royal Army Dental Corps captain who worked with us for the whole of the operation.

In many cases the relatives were unable to find the person they sought among the bodies which had arrived at the mortuary. I vividly recall the resignation with which they accepted, after numerous attempts at facial or property identification, that their child still lay under the filth and debris at the school. They then left the chapel to rejoin the line, mother replacing father throughout the days and nights waiting, in the rain, to go through the attempts at identification again and again.

Another team of RCS officers were engaged in the rewriting of the school registers by talking to the few surviving teachers and pupils. They also compiled a list of everyone missing from the flattened houses in Moy Road. They told us of the two brothers who, late for school, entered the playground just as the school was engulfed and by a miracle survived.

One of the main tasks of the pathologist was to try and piece together the body parts in order to establish how many bodies we were dealing with. This was done in a small screened-off area of the chapel with the normal work of the mortuary going on only a few feet away. Some of the pathologist's work involved outside inquiries by members of our team. One leg had a women's shoe on the foot: it was identified by the local cobbler as having been repaired by him, and he was able to name the owner.

In another case, part of a female torso was identified because a single wellington boot was on a leg. This had a few chicken feathers stuck to it. One of the elderly residents of Moy Road, missing in the disaster, was known to have kept chickens. An inquiry with a relative produced an identical pair of wellingtons bought at a local market at the same time.

Many of the local clergy came to the mortuary to comfort the families. Most spent as little time as possible in what was an appalling place.

Towards the end of the first week they were joined by a 'monk' complete with robe, crucifix at the waist and sandals. He spent a long time each day in the mortuary with the few local Catholic families, 'praying' by the dead. John Parkman, an outstanding detective, and keen observer of human behaviour,

thought his constant presence in the mortuary unusual. He originated inquiries which revealed that our monk was totally bogus. He was a necrophiliac who used his monk's robes as a passport to any disaster scene and had a number of convictions for breach of the peace in the south of England.

He was never prosecuted at Aberfan for the legally trivial but morally abhorrent offence he had committed. We were much too busy with the job in hand — and the relatives of the children and others buried by the tip certainly didn't need the headlines that such a prosecution would have provoked. Our monk was escorted from the village in circumstances which nowadays would give rise to a major inquiry by the Police Complaints Authority.

The mortuary soon settled in to two 12-hour shifts with bodies arriving and relatives identifying throughout the night. We ate our meals and drank our tea among the mass death which surrounded us. This was no callousness but the ability of the human being to adjust to most things no matter how dreadful. The Salvation Army supplied us with six bottles of brandy each day that we were in the mortuary to top up our hot drinks and insulate us from the necessarily unheated chapel.

The cold and the pervading smell of disinfectant became so much a part of our working day that we were almost oblivious to it. Royalty and politicians visited the mortuary almost like intruders to stand and look at the true horror of the disaster before leaving with hardly a word being said.

During the second week we left a small crew in the mortuary and attended the mass funeral in the little graveyard on the side of the mountain with its steep and



TRAGIC VICTIMS: Rescue workers surround blanket-covered bodies lined up on stretchers, awaiting removal to the mortuary

twisting access road. We buried 81 of our children that day and one mother who was buried with her two children. Laid out on the mountainside was a huge cross made from the hundreds of wreaths which had been sent from all over the world. The service was brief and simple: two children's hymns and a short prayer.

There was little weeping at the burial. The enormity of the emotions that flooded the valley was in the silence. I remember the tears on the cheeks of one of my colleagues as a teddy bear was placed on top of a tiny coffin. It was that same hard detective who, before the day shift handed over to the night team, would move quietly through the chapel wrapping up the small bodies in their blankets as if to comfort them through the long cold night ahead.

On the 15th day the 144th body was brought down from the site and identified. We were now satisfied that no more bodies remained to be found. The next day I packed up my cards, books, labels and coloured pens. The completed records were handed into the care of the coroner's officer and we left Aberfan.

Much is written these days of post-disaster stress. This was an unknown

subject in 1966. Apart from a few stomach upsets and a general feeling of tiredness, I don't recall that we experienced any other problems after Aberfan. The few we did suffer from were more likely to have been caused by our diet of sandwiches and hours we had worked over the two weeks. We were all experienced detectives used to working as a team and, perhaps most importantly, we were well led from the front by John Parkman.

I returned to Aberfan several years later. The chapel was now demolished and a new, modern one erected in its place. The disaster site had been cleared as had the tips which had towered over the village.

I walked down to the beautiful memorial garden with its rose bushes and quiet seated areas. Around it were memorial stones of the 144 victims, many with photographs of the children. The names and faces brought instant recognition. I had lived with them for many days.

Walking back to my car I was conscious of the few toddlers and babies in prams. There were no teenagers: their generation lay in the little cemetery on the mountainside. ○



MASS BURIAL: The mourners of Aberfan stand shoulder to shoulder at a mass funeral for 81 children and one woman (left); (right) two officers watch over a row of tiny coffins

