[00:00:02.800] - Rod Mickleburgh

Welcome to yet another edition of the highly esteemed podcast On the Line, the only podcast we know of that brings to life stories from BC labour's fascinating history. In this episode we look back on a terrible tragedy that is pretty well forgotten today. I'm referring to the deadly avalanche that swept down on the remote Granduc mining camp about 40 km north of Stewart, nestled on the Canadian side of the border with Alaska. 26 workers lost their lives. They were among 150 workers on site when the massive slide came down the nearest mountainside with a terrifying roar on February 18, 1965. Most were part of construction crews just starting work on a 17 kilometre- long tunnel that was to run under three glaciers and three mountains to transport the mine's copper ore via a high speed rail system to milling facilities closer to the ocean port of Stewart. Almost all were members of Local 168 of the Labourers International Union of North America. There were also underground miners who had already started mining the copper, camp cooks and other staff at the mine. Just 28 feet of tunneling had been built when, without warning, shortly after 10am the avalanche hurtled down on the unsuspecting camp, smashing buildings and burying men without mercy.

[00:01:48.380] - Rod Mickleburgh

Among those at the camp was none other than legendary labour relations mediator Vince Ready, then a 22 year old miner and union organizer. As you will hear, he survived in large part because of a fateful decision to stay up late, writing letters to his family back in Ontario. Vince recounted his dramatic, narrow escape and what happened at the site after the avalanche in an interview with myself and Carmela Allevato for the BC Labour Heritage Center's Oral History Project. You will also hear from another survivor, Art Vibert. His account is posted on the website of the Stewart Museum, which devotes considerable space to both the killer avalanche and the operation of the mine itself. There has also been a documentary on the tragedy as part of the series Disasters of the Century.

[00:02:44.050] - Video clip

Winter in the upper regions of North America is a cold fact of life. As temperatures dip below freezing and snow covers the ground, residents adapt to inconvenience and make the most of what this season has to offer. Winter also holds many dangers, silent killers that strike hard and fast and transform drifts of mountain snow into a juggernaut of death and destruction and turn a mild prairie morning into a frozen hell. You can access this documentary on YouTube, just search for Disasters of the Century, season 7 Granduc Avalanche or check the reference list for this podcast. Vince Ready was born in Renfrew, Ontario. He left his parent's farm when he was 15 and soon found work in the mines. On his second underground shift at the Bancroft Uranium

mine, he got involved with the union thereafter. Like many single men of the time, he traveled around working in different mines across the country. Despite his young age, he had come to the notice of leaders of the storied Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Union who hired him as an organizer. He was assigned to Granduc, where the mine was just getting underway. Vince worked at the mine while trying to sign up his fellow workers into the union. And he was there when the avalanche hit.

[00:04:16.660] - Vince Ready

I was sleeping when the thing happened. Come down, took the half, right half of the bunkhouse right off. I was about three rooms back. It just cut it right off. Huge, huge slide. Yeah. If it had have happened another hour and a half, it would have probably got 300 people, you know, because it was the kitchen which it would have hit. It was right in line with the kitchen and it wiped the kitchen out and that's where it got all the cooks, in there were all killed. We came out and it was just, it was just amazing. It just cut the front end of the bunkhouse off, it just like took a chainsaw at it, it just cut it off. And the snow came down and it went up and it rebounded and it did as much damage on the rebound as it did coming down. It's funny, it came up one side of the mountain, right back down. And I had a friend who was mining, he was outside. There was two people outside. There was a 40 ton mucking machine. That's how much it weighed. And it took that thing just like a dinky toy and took it down into the valley on the rebound. Cap Palmer, my friend, was in front of it. He got killed. Another chap was behind it and he didn't even get touched. It was just the flow of the snow.

[00:05:30.500] - Rod Mickleburgh

But were you involved in trying to rescue people right after that?

[00:05:33.260] - Vince Ready

Yeah, well, we all were. We all were. It's a weird thing about when there's an avalanche that big, it triggers a whole bunch more and you can hear them, you know. We were up all night, you know, and it's hard to bring yourself to believe, but the safest place to be in an avalanche is right on top of it because the snow's already come down. So we just kind of stayed up out there all night and people were taking turns digging for people and that sort of stuff. But we had to take loading sticks, you know, you use underground to load powder and you had to poke around. That's how they found a lot of people. Some people were buried quite deeply, others weren't, you know, others were, yeah.

[00:06:17.240] - Rod Mickleburgh

There was also the immediate problem of getting word of the disaster from their isolated location to the world outside.

[00:06:25.560] - Vince Ready

We were fogged in. We couldn't get, well in those days there was no Internet or anything like that. There was always a bunch of geeks around camp that set up transistor radios and so they kept sending out the signal. And finally there was a ship in the Aleutian Islands picked up the SOS or the help signal and then they sent the American Air Force rescues in. But there was quite a few people that were hurt badly, with broken limbs and backs and all that. So we had them lined up. There was a first aid guy there that was pretty good at organizing stuff. So I think we were in there two days before they could get a helicopter in. And then they brought in the Sikorskys, the American army come in. We got out after about three days. They took us out. I should tell you, there's a great story about how we got out of there. They got all the injured people out in the helicopters and then they took us up and they landed us on I guess up in the Aleutian Islands, I think, and they landed us and then they took us over in a 12 foot boat over to the scow and we went into Ketchikan, Alaska on a scow, open scow in the middle of the night, two o' clock in the morning. Anyway, the boat we were in, we were overloaded, but it was dark. So the goddarn thing started taking on water. So we took off our muckers and that's how we were getting the water out of the boat.

[00:07:50.930] - Rod Mickleburgh

So you survived the avalanche and then you almost drowned?

[00:07:54.450] - Vince Ready

Yes.

[00:07:55.610] - Rod Mickleburgh

And have you ever reflected on how lucky you were?

[00:07:59.360] - Vince Ready

I guess you do, I mean...

[00:08:00.400] - Rod Mickleburgh

How much did it miss you by?

[00:08:03.200] - Vince Ready

Well, I was two or three rooms down from where it hit the bunkhouse. Yeah. And there was nobody in the front two or three rooms. I guess they were all on shift. Yeah. And the only reason, you know, the only reason that it missed me was that night -- In those days you used to write letters, you know, -- now you don't do that anymore. But I had only I just got in there and I'd written a letter to my mother and I'd written a letter to my sister and I sat up doing that and doing whatever else. But anyway, I didn't go to bed till about -- I was on afternoon shift, so I didn't go to bed until quite late after getting off afternoon shift, so I'd slept passed. We used to always gather for coffee in the morning in a little coffee shop, it got wiped right out. Yeah, we knew where they stored the food. They stored the food in the warehouses and so we managed to dig our way into there and we got into the food supply. Then we lit a fire on top of the avalanche and this guy, we had no frying pans or anything, so he just used the shovel and he fried the steaks. So you just did what you had to do, you know.

[00:09:09.980] - Rod Mickleburgh

Surprisingly perhaps, there are no songs about the Granduc Mine disaster, but Stompin' Tom Connors does have a song about another mountain coming down. The Alberta mining town of Frank was obliterated on an early morning in 1903 when half of Turtle Mountain broke loose, killing as many as 90 people. Stompin' Tom's song, How the Mountain Came Down, gives a sense of what happens when nature decides to take a hand, as it did at the Granduc Mine, too.

[00:09:43.000] - Music: How the Mountain Came Down by Stompin' Tom Connors

That rock had been surveyed by the mining engineers who said the mountain would be standing there for another thousand years. So nobody listened. And the old man, he left and the miners were now descending for the midnight shift. The whole town was quiet now like nothing was afoul. But a dog was heard to whimper with the strangest kind of howl. All the men were working now on the coal down below and the monster rock was moving ever slow, slow, slow. The stealthy mountain creeping sealed the mine like a tomb. On the 23rd of April, on that dark day of doom. The sun had almost risen but the miners in despair from the top of the Turtle Mountain it went rising up in the air. With a mighty beastly grumble like all hell was at the door. The giant rock had tumbled all across the valley floor. And oh my God, how that mountain came down oh, how the mountain came down, down, down. The whole town of Frank was buried in the ground. Oh my God, how that mountain came down.

[00:11:10.380] - Rod Mickleburgh

Another survivor of the avalanche was Art Vibert. He wrote a first hand account that he called Ten Feet and Ten Minutes From a Killer Avalanche. It's published on the website of the Stewart Museum. He and his partner were air compressor mechanics and they had headed to Granduc to set up a new compressor. To get there they took a CPA flight from Vancouver to Prince Rupert, then boarded a Grumman Goose for an hour-long trip to Stewart. There were no overnight rooms in Stewart, so they crossed into Alaska to the border town of Hyder, where they were hyderized, a quaint local custom that involves downing straight alcohol. The following excerpts from Art Vibert's account are read by John Mabbott.

[00:11:59.370] - Art Vibert's account

We bedded down in a new motel in Hyder and slept until 6:30pm. We then had supper and drinks, including a new one called Snake-Bite. One ounce of 100% overproof alcohol, the only ingredient. Went to bed early and woke up at 7:30am to a peach of a day. Something for that part of the country. Harold Fowler, in charge of getting supplies etcetera from Stewart to Portal Camp, said, 'better get you boys in while this weather holds. Your compressor left last night by tractor train'. We flew up to camp along with a mine doctor, a mine worker and various supplies, in one half an hour, landed on the glacier and were met by tractor train and snowmobile.

[00:12:46.770] - Rod Mickleburgh

Two days later disaster struck.

[00:12:49.170] - Art Vibert's account

It was snowing when we arose at 6:30am for breakfast. We both had a good breakfast, our last meal for the next 14 hours. As we ate our hearty meal, little did we know that time was running out. Back at the bunkhouse, Raoul and I were busy playing cards when SWISH, BANG. The lights went out and the cards flew in the air. My first words were, 'let's get out of here'. We went to the door and discovered snow blocking the doorway. Cy McLennan, the superintendent, who was in the same bunkhouse, rushed up and was the first to get out of the hole that had been dug away by hand. The chap ahead of me started out and stopped, frozen with fear at the sight of the devastation. We talked him into moving out and then I scrambled out with Raoul right behind me. What we saw was a mile square area of snow that looked like sloppy mashed potatoes. Mixed in this mess were pieces of tin, wood, etcetera. I said to Raoul, 'if we get out of this mess alive, I'll buy you a drink'. This whole area had been busy with working men and machines minutes earlier: a bulldozer down by the warehouse, three men shoveling snow off a roof, a mechanic working that area, as well as six carpenters at different job sites. The scene before our eyes now stood still and quiet, with no sign of life and hardly a building left standing.

[00:14:23.210] - Rod Mickleburgh

The silence was soon broken, however, as survivors sprang into action, desperate to find anyone still alive underneath the snow.

[00:14:32.110] - Art Vibert's account

Six men that were in a small coffee shack next to the cookhouse had disappeared along with the shack. Kelly, the radio operator, was busy trying to get word to the outside on a makeshift radio that he could not receive on. The big question was, what could we do now? How could we help with no tools to dig with? The only equipment salvaged were four hand shovels which were in constant use. The powerhouse, where we would have been working had the compressor arrived in time, was completely flattened as well as the machine shop. All the men working in these two shops were lost. The entrance way to the tunnel was half covered in snow and everyone was busy working at what seemed like a hopeless task. There was an injured man laying between the tracks. As the men uncovered a buried survivor, the doctor would rush out of the mine to administer morphine. Everyone was busy digging.

[00:15:33.770] - Rod Mickleburgh

It didn't take long for a rescue system to be established, as Art Vibert outlines in his vivid account.

[00:15:40.730] - Art Vibert's account

A hospital had been set up in the back portion of the office. There was a bonfire burning outside the office. And best news of all, Kelly had got word to the outside. This was verified by the fact that he had picked up a Vancouver radio station on his transistor that was broadcasting the tragedy. This did a lot for our morale. We were getting tired, hungry and soaking wet. Finally, our turn came to move out. The S55 chopper landed in a cloud of swirling snow kicked up by the machine's huge blades. A carpenter foreman stopped the chap ahead of me and scribbled a phone number on part of a cigarette package saying, 'phone this number when you get out and tell them I am okay'. The door was locked, the engine revved up and we lifted off. This was the moment that I had been waiting for for 14 hours. I had to kneel on the floor, but I didn't mind it at all. It was a long ride to Stewart with the weather touch and go all the time. I knelt at the small window looking at this cruel, rugged north country with its jagged mountain peaks covered in snow and ice. In the hour and a half it took to make the trip, I didn't spot a sign of life, human or otherwise. Stewart was a very welcome sight.

[00:17:06.440] - Rod Mickleburgh

As the surviving workers were slowly airlifted out, no one realized there was someone still trapped under the snow, but alive. Eino Myllyla, a 39 year old Finnish-born carpenter, was buried for 79 hours underneath the area where the huge rescue helicopters were landing. Miraculously, he was found alive, trapped in an air pocket after a bulldozer knocked off a cap of ice that was covering him. He was evacuated to a hospital in Ketchikan, Alaska, frostbitten, dehydrated and deprived of oxygen. But he recovered with the loss of only several fingers and toes. A government investigation into the disaster cleared Granduc Mines of any negligence or safety violations. But afterwards, the company brought in an avalanche expert to advise on how to go forward with the mine and its extraordinary tunnel. After a year's delay and well over budget, ore began to flow through the tunnel to the mill. And it continued to do so until 1984, when the price of copper fell so low the mine was no longer profitable. Today, the Granduc Mine is remembered for the tragedy of 26 lost souls, but also for the bold engineering feat that pushed through some of the most remote and harshest landscape in the country to mine and transport copper ore to waiting ocean cargo ships in Stewart.

[00:18:42.830] - Speaker 2

Last year, on the 60th anniversary of the Granduc Mine disaster, the town of Stewart held two days of events to commemorate the tragedy. To mark the anniversary, Local 1611 of the Labourers International Union of North America announced an annual $2,000 scholarship for a worthy student graduating from Stewart's Bear Valley High School. It was a thank you for the community's rescue efforts during those dark days of death and destruction 60 years earlier.

[00:19:17.970] - Theme song "Hold the Fort"

Hold the fort for we are coming, union hearts be strong. Side by side we battle onward, victory will come. Look, my comrades, see the union banners waving...

[00:19:41.390] - Rod Mickleburgh

We hope you've enjoyed this dramatic tale of the Granduc Mine disaster. Thanks as always to the other members of the podcast collective: Donna Sacuta, Executive Director of the BC Labour Heritage Society, which produces On the Line, Patricia WeJr, who did the research and script, and John Mabbott, who brought the words of Art Vibert to life. John was also the producer who put it all together. Thanks as well to Ron Goetz of the documentary series Disasters of the Century. The great Stompin' Tom Connors wrote and sang 'How the Mountain Came Down'. I'm your host with the most, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.