

NEWS RELEASE

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On National Day of Mourning, City honours lives lost to work-related accidents

Nanaimo remembers 150 miners killed in the 1887 No. 1 Esplanade Mine explosions

Summary

Observed each year across Canada on April 28, the National Day of Mourning is a time to honour and remember those who have lost their lives, suffered injuries or illnesses, or experienced a work-related tragedy. It also serves as a call to action - renewing our shared commitment to creating safer, healthier workplaces and preventing future harm.

In Nanaimo, this national observance holds deep local significance. On the evening of May 3, 1887, at 5:55 pm, a series of powerful explosions tore through the No. 1 Esplanade Mine, located 260 metres beneath the surface near today's downtown waterfront.

The blasts reverberated through nearly a kilometre of underground tunnels, igniting fires that would burn for two weeks. Due to the extensive damage and lingering dangers, the recovery of victims took several months. Tragically, seven men were never found and their final resting place is presumed to be beneath the Nanaimo Harbour.

The disaster claimed the lives of 150 miners, a devastating loss in a city of just 2,000 residents at the time. The impact on the community was profound - 46 women were widowed, 126 children lost their fathers and the mine itself lost a quarter of its workforce. The explosions of the No. 1 Esplanade Mine are known as the worst mining disaster in British Columbia's history and second worst industrial tragedy in Canadian history, following the Hillcrest, Alberta mine disaster of 1914. A jury blamed the explosion on the firing of an unprepared and badly planted charge that ignited accumulated gas fuelled by coal dust.

To mark the National Day of Mourning and commemorate this tragic chapter in Nanaimo's past, flags at all City of Nanaimo facilities will be lowered to half-mast from Tuesday, April 28 until Monday, May 4.

Visit the walk-through coalmine exhibit in the Nanaimo Museum to learn more about Nanaimo's coal mining history and this tragic accident. Find more information on this award-winning exhibit here: www.nanaimomuseum.ca/permanent-exhibit/the-coal-mine.

Strategic Link: n/a

Key Points

- The National Day of Mourning is a day to remember and honour those lives lost or injured due to a workplace tragedy.
- On May 3, 1887, 150 miners lost their lives to the worst mining disaster in BC history.
- A memorial plaque to remember the miners who passed away from the explosions stands in place of the site of the No. 1 Esplanade mine on Milton Street (1151 Milton Street).

Quotes

"This week hangs heavy on Nanaimo's hearts as we observe the National Day of Mourning, we also remember those lives lost in 1887 and the families who were forever changed by this tragedy. As we observe these days, we remember the past, stand with those affected by workplace tragedies today and recommit ourselves to building safer working environments for everyone."

Leonard Krog
Mayor
City of Nanaimo

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