

latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-dolan-sce-20100609,0,139188.story

**latimes.com**

## **Anniversary of a disaster: Edison's Mohave Generating Station explosion**

**First, there is the focused attention, the outrage, the compassion, the demands for answers and corporate accountability. And then there is the forgetting.**

J.D. Dolan

June 9, 2010

On a blue-sky afternoon 25 years ago today, just as the second-shift crew was about to begin work at Southern California Edison's Mohave Generating Station in Laughlin, Nev., a massive re-heat pipe exploded, unleashing high-pressure, superheated steam into the plant's control room with such force that it knocked down a wall and sealed the exit doors shut. Sixteen people were severely burned in that explosion; six of them died. One was my 39-year-old brother, John Dolan. Advertisement

I think about my brother often, partly because I have a son named for the uncle he will never know, and partly because the same type of industrial disasters continue to happen. This year, the Massey Energy coal mine disaster in West Virginia killed 29 people, and the BP oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico killed 11 people.

The specifics and the death toll may vary, but the aftermath is always the same. First, there is the focused attention, the outrage, the compassion, the demands for answers and corporate accountability. And then there is the forgetting.

Much as we might like to, not all of us can forget. One year after the Mohave Generating

Station disaster, SCE dedicated an immovable symbol of its corporate sorrow at the plant: a 28,000-pound marble memorial. I didn't attend the dedication, though my sister Joanne did. Howard Allen, the company's chief executive, also showed up. He had been with the company since 1954, when he'd begun his career as a lobbyist in Sacramento. That day, he didn't engage in the same sort of chummy handshaking he'd no doubt perfected as a lobbyist, since some of the survivors in attendance had lost their hands. Some had also lost their legs, parts of their faces.

"He couldn't take it," Joanne recalled. She worked at SCE's corporate headquarters and knew Howard Allen. When he saw her at the dedication, he threw himself into Joanne's arms, sobbing, and said, "Please forgive me."

A few weeks after Allen's tears had dried, SCE issued a report that absolved itself of any wrongdoing: "Edison examined past and present maintenance procedures at the Mohave plant and found no indication that any operation or maintenance practice had an effect on the failure."

But a 1991 report written for the Public Utilities Commission found good reasons for the CEO's emotional, if private, *mea culpa*:

"The June 9, 1985, accident was the direct result of SCE's many years of operation of the reheat system above the design temperature, its failure to attempt to ascertain the effect of excess reheat temperature on the integrity and safety of the pipe, and its failure to institute a reasonable inspection program. Other factors contributed to the accident, but SCE's grossly negligent operation of the reheat system and inadequate inspection program, given the nature of operating conditions, were primary and critical factors in causing the accident."

SCE, not surprisingly, strongly disagreed with the report's findings. But my mother, who was 70 when her oldest son was killed, didn't need a report to feel certain she knew what had happened. A few weeks before the disaster, John had told her he was afraid of the way the plant was being run. "That living, breathing plant is going to blow," he said.

After John's death, my mother wanted to sue SCE for punitive damages, though she was astonished to learn that she had very little legal recourse. A multitude of laws put in place or protected by skilled lobbyists limited SCE's corporate liability or deflected it onto its contractors and subcontractors. My mother received very little in the settlement for John's death, none of it from SCE.

Of course, no amount would have been enough, but a large judgment against SCE might have changed the way other large corporations operate — corporations like BP and Massey Energy. It might have bought some executives a prosthetic conscience. But for American corporations, disasters don't create a moral crisis; they create a public relations crisis. Witness BP's full-page newspaper ads. "We will get it done. We will make it right," the headlines read. But in smaller type, that same ad qualifies the gesture: "We will honor all legitimate claims."

BP will no doubt be helped, as corporations tend to be, by laws, limits, excuses and unintended consequences that emanate from high places. Massey Energy apparently made use of a safety violation appeals process that one legislator said helped coal companies avoid steeper fines and possible shutdowns. Congress had already established a \$75-million cap for damages in oil spills — chump change for a major oil company. And the Supreme Court's January decision in the Citizens United case overturned decades of established law when it granted corporations the same rights as individuals to engage in — which means pay for — political speech.

As President Obama translated it, the decision was "a major victory for Big Oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and the other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans."

Everyday Americans like Danny Norman, Michael Bowman, Ernest Hernandez, Terry Leroy, Howard Turner and my brother, John Dolan. Their names are carved on the 28,000-pound marble monument that, a few weeks ago, SCE had dug up and hauled to a local cemetery — close to the graves of two of the victims and far from where SCE's corporate officers might be forced to look at it. SCE, facing costly environmental regulations, decommissioned the Mohave Generating Station in 2005, and it has plans to dismantle the structure and develop the site.

And SCE has continued to thrive. Howard Allen is responsible for much of that success. In his 1998 obituary in this newspaper, Allen was remembered as "the colorful former head of Southern California Edison Co. credited with orchestrating the utility's phenomenal growth into one of the country's top suppliers of electricity."

And though Allen is dead, his corporate progeny live on. They enjoy even greater influence with their elected officials. They are safe inside their legally fortified headquarters. And when things become too much for them, when they *just want back their lives*, they will hop on their corporate jets and fly at such a great altitude that all they see is blameless blue serenity far beneath them.

But sometimes, in rare moments, on a grim anniversary, when they are confronted with the reality of their actions, they might weep like the rest of us.

J.D. Dolan, who lives in Michigan, is the author of "Phoenix: A Brother's Life."

Copyright © 2010, [The Los Angeles Times](#)