

Loss of a mighty figure, a great mate and a mining legend

GAVIN THOMAS B.Sc. (Geology), FAusIMM 1950 - 2014

Gavin Thomas was not only big in stature; he was a man with a big brain and a big heart. He also had the ability to discover enormous epithermal gold deposits.

A brilliant geologist, Gavin Thomas loved mining. He also loved life and shared this enthusiasm and warmth with his family and friends and colleagues.

He would walk into a room or meeting and fill it with his presence.



At the time of his death he was Managing Director and CEO of goldminer Kingsgate Consolidated. In March he announced that he would step down from that role in June but he was indefatigable. Even with deteriorating health he insisted on flying to a site meeting in Thailand in May.

Chairman of Kingsgate, Ross Smyth-Kirk, said Gavin's contribution to the industry and in particular to Kingsgate which he joined in 2004 was extraordinary in both dedication and discovery.

"Gavin's legacy to the mining industry goes well beyond Kingsgate. He had more than 40 years of experience operating throughout the world. Under his leadership Kingsgate evolved from a single operation in Thailand into a geographically diversified asset base", he said.

Thomas took Kingsgate from a single mine operation at Chatree in Central Thailand to a company with assets on three continents. He expanded Chatree, which has produced 1.5 million ounces of gold under his direction and became recognised internationally as the safest gold mine in the world. In Chile he advanced Kingsgate's Nueva Esperanza silver/gold project to a DFS (Definitive Feasibility Study), completed with positive results.

Thomas had a successful career developing mining companies from the exploration phase into mid-tier gold and/or copper production entities. He had international experience in exploring for, evaluating, developing, operating and reclaiming mines in North America, South America, Australia, the Southwest Pacific, Asia and Europe.

He was respected and admired in the boardrooms of Australia, London, Switzerland and the US. He had an innate sense of adventure, an enormous capacity for hard work and all entwined with his love of travel.

He was a good swimmer and a competitive water polo player in his student days. He also enjoyed hard work in his garden in Leura in NSW Blue Mountains. Although raised in Castlecrag on Sydney's North Shore he was a passionate supporter of The Roosters - Eastern Suburbs Rugby League Club, where he was a prominent member of the Chairman's Club.

As a young graduate of Macquarie University he was the first white man tens of thousands of people in Papua New Guinea had ever seen. In an interview with the Australian Financial Review he told the following story:

"Just imagine a spaceship landing here and a crazy person coming out. That was the sort of thing we did. We got out of helicopters... they saw us descending and it would be like six space ships", Thomas said.

During his career he lived or worked in Papua New Guinea for 27 years - a country which he loved.

Former Administration and Logistics Officer for CRA Exploration Peter Symons was the first person to greet Thomas when he stepped onto the airfield at Goroka in the PNG Eastern Highlands in 1970 to start his career as an exploration geologist. He had been head-hunted by CRA's personnel at university.

"He was a big boy with dark curly hair. I was struck by his quiet speech and placid nature. It was near lunch time and I asked if he would like to go to the Goroka Sports

Club for a beer or go directly to the office. His reply confirmed that we had a good one", said Symons.

"A lot of his work was on foot with a line of carriers - it was hard going in the Eastern Highlands, but he handled it with quiet aplomb. It was a tough training ground. "But when he was in town we spent time a lot of time together and he quickly became a noted performer in the food and drink division".

Symons recalls that an annual event was the Asaro River raft race with the rafts based on truck tyre inner tubes.

"It was 1973 we overturned in the raging river and it amazes me that we didn't drown. Our only safety equipment was a pair of shorts and a T-shirt bearing the CRA Exploration logo".

Exploration in PNG wound up in 1974 and Thomas and Symons were sent to the Solomon Islands where they favoured a very fine drinking hole at the Guadalcanal Club which had a club waiter service. Here they spent their non-working time playing snooker, eating, drinking and swimming in the pool.

However work time was spent out in the field travelling on old fishing trawlers from island to island in search of copper.

"Then the Solomon Islands was under British administration and had established a Geological Survey Department where all their geologists dressed in full whites. We concluded they didn't spend much time in the bush", said Symons.

Thomas' career moved south to Cairns which took him out west to Central Queensland but by 1976 CRA had set up a new Exploration and Research office in Canberra and here he met his future wife geologist Barbara Archer. Peter Symons was best man at their wedding in 1978.

Reminiscing about his long-time friend Symons said, "Gavin Thomas was generous of spirit and of purse.

"He was a well-read man, not just in Science but also in English Literature. One of his favourite writers was the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas".

Excitement was never far away from Thomas. By the 1980's he was exploration manager at Kennecott Exploration. The MD was Mike Turbott who went on to become a long-time friend. Thomas has been credited with co-discovering the famous Lihir Island gold deposit in PNG .The US company Kennecott was not

interested in exploration in PNG. So Turbott left and together with Thomas formed a JV with Niugini Mining Company which took up the exploration at Lihir. Thomas went on to become MD of Niugini Mining.

Apart from Lihir, which was a new type of mineralisation and known to be "massive" from day one, the AFR reported that Thomas also made quick and accurate judgements about the Cerro Negro gold deposit in Argentina owned by Andean Resources before it was taken over by Goldcorp in 2010.

While some doubted his judgement Thomas said that within half an hour he knew they were onto a good project.

"I don't think anyone in their wildest dreams would have thought 3 or 3.5 million ounces. But I came back and said 'This is not a small mine, it is worth putting a lot of money in'. And a lot of people made a lot of money", Thomas said.

In 1987 epithermal gold deposits, although further afield, were on Thomas' mind. He tracked down a long-time friend, exploration geologist John Nethery who was on a field trip in far North Queensland. Thomas suggested that he and Thomas's former university tutor Ian Plimer form a JV with Niugini Mining to explore for epithermal gold across the Mediterranean volcanic belt. This they did. The Milos gold deposit was discovered in Greece and from there they went into Turkey and Spain.

Eminent finance columnist and former editor of The Bulletin Trevor Sykes recalls how in 2005 at a symposium Thomas was declared a Legend of the Australian Mining Industry. As such he was awarded a very comfortable Legend jacket, of which he was quite proud.

"He started a competition to see who could wear it in the most unlikely places and won the contest himself by wearing it to Antarctica ", Sykes writes.

"Thomas loved mining, the good life and adventure, spending much of his career in the wilds of PNG and South America hunting for minerals.

Sykes recalls how Thomas was a great supporter of the historic Lockheed Constellation, rebuilt and maintained by HARS - Historical Aircraft Restoration Society - based in Wollongong, NSW. When the 'Connie' made its first flight from Wollongong to Kalgoorlie in 2005, Thomas was one of the passengers.

"The flight was notable in many ways. It was the first Connie to land in Broken Hill since Queen Elizabeth had arrived there 50 years before, so the aircraft's arrival was greeted by a silver band", said Sykes.

"That night was spent imbibing the local carob beer at a dinner where the entertainment was provided by a ladies' choir called Broken Hill Community Voices, singing old union songs. Their charm was such that Thomas and other assembled capitalists finished the night lustily bellowing The Red Flag and Solidarity Forever".

"In 2001 he was managing director of Equatorial Mining - a position which made him the ham in the sandwich between minority shareholders and AMP as the majority shareholder..... AMP held 94 per cent of Equatorial, which they had spent \$85 million acquiring and had made a skinflint \$1/share bid to mop up the 6 per cent minorities... the Equatorial minorities were irate at the AMP offer... a lawsuit ensued and Thomas was vindicated when AMP was reluctantly forced to increase its bid to \$7 but was overrun by Antofagasta plc, which offered a thumping \$11.20.

"The minorities were rescued; even the AMP accepted the bid and Thomas was vindicated" Sykes recalls.

Gavin Thomas was born on December 30, 1950 to Ken Thomas, founder of the trucking empire TNT - Thomas National Transport - and his geologist wife, Anne. He had two sisters, Megan and Elizabeth, and brothers Rody and Andrew.

He is survived by his wife Barbara and their three daughters Ellen, Laura and Jenny, son-in-law Dr Tim Matthews and baby granddaughter, Imogen Anne.

Suzanne Blake
5th June 2014