

3 Minute interview with Coen Louwarts – Principal Risk Engineer

Q. What inspired you to be a mining engineer?

Engineering runs in my family, with my father being an electrical engineer and my brother a mechanical engineer. The international aspect of the mining industry was very appealing, and I found that the mining faculties at Delft University of Technology and the Royal School of Mines in London were very welcoming and 'family like' which also was an attraction. The mining course was great. I did a field trip to South Africa and worked as a student in Australia, Germany, UK and Holland. However, it could have been so different, as my school careers advisor did suggest I become a stuntman!

Q. Why did you want to become one of IMIU's Principal Risk Engineers? Why did the role attract you?

The role appealed to me because of the variety of sites to survey, having the opportunity to see the best and worst case practice and make professional recommendations that will impact and improve these sites. It is very satisfying to be able to see the benefits of your role in a relatively short term time period. I am really looking forward to getting back to a more technical role.

Q. You worked with BHP Billiton for 5 years at 4 Australian coal mines (Peak Downs, Blackwater, Goonyella Riverside and Moura). Were there any projects that you were especially proud of?

At this time I was on the graduate programme with BHPB. The scheme was designed to give graduates as much experience as possible through 6 month rotation periods. You did a bit of everything: short-term planning, working in the field, marketing and long-term planning, which gave you a good grounding in the day-to-day running of large scale mining operations. After the graduate scheme, I was appointed Drill & Blast Manager at Moura Mine, where I was responsible for everything D&B related, including supervision of the drill crews and blast crews. I was really thrown in the deep end – especially with the blast crew who had been doing the job for 20-30 years. I worked hard to get a good working relationship with all the crew. I listened, learned and gained their trust. I was in this role 1½-2 years. There was one project that is quite memorable. I designed a blast – 2km in length – a 'Throw Blast'. About 5 minutes after setting of the blast I did get a call from the geological survey in Canberra (1500 km away) asking if there had been any earthquakes in the area. Perhaps I overdesigned this blast!!

Q. You have a few hours to kill, it's a sunny day, is there a sport you would choose to do?

I enjoy being outdoors and walking and would love to spend more time in the Alps. I also do road cycling and enter races a few times a year. I train in Richmond Park in London but it can be quite a task to avoid all the deer! Sometimes I just hire one of the bikes in the city and spend time cycling round the streets and seeing it all.

Q. You have an unusual hobby, fencing, how did that start?

I find fencing physically and mentally challenging. You have a choice of weapons: foil, epee and sabre. I use the foil, it's a thin, flexible blade. I have a reasonable fencing skill but recently experienced being set against a 70 year old man who had had a recent hip replacement and he still won 10/nil.

Q. Mine Planning – what are the pros and cons?

Mine planning is probably one of the most important aspects of a successful mining operation, both short-term or long-term. It really helps everyone to focus and get organised so you can get rid of or reduce any future surprises. It forces you to think about and identify any issues, and develop a plan to manage these. One of the downsides is of course, as with any plan, as soon as you finalise it, things will change!

Q. You worked at Rio Tinto for 6 years in two different roles. In one role, you were a member of the Joint Venture Technical Committees for Grasberg (Freeport McMoran) and Escondida (BHPB). What were the challenges in these roles?

I was part of a small team and we used internal technical expertise if and when needed. Rio Tinto did not have a majority stake in these sites so it was non-managed. The challenge, of course, was to build good relationships with the partners, so we could work together and influence. The work could really have an impact on the industry since Escondida and Grasberg are some of the largest copper mines in the world. At the time, both sites were going through significant expansions and we had to review and provide our professional opinion on the expansion projects and long-term effects. There was a lot of work, a lot of travel and site visits and constant day-to-day monitoring/reviewing.

Q. Do you have a bucket list – if so, what is on it?

I want to go and see the southern point of Argentina (part of Patagonia). I would really love to sail around Cape Horn too. I sail on my friend's boat on the Solent but would really enjoy sailing around the Mediterranean. If I had the time, I would love to spend a ski season in the Alps and become an instructor but would need a bit more practice.