$500K FOR 23 WEEKS WORK? THAT'S GOLD!

EXCLUSIVE ADRIAN RAUSO

Specialised blue-collar workers on WA mine sites are raking in more than experienced surgeons thanks to the gold rush created by soaring bullion prices.

Red-eyed and sullen, "Nathan" trudges back to a block of dongas with his face and high-vis gear caked in grit and dried sweat. A brief check of his bank account before he crashes for the night will cheer him up.

The thirty-something Nathan, who requested anonymity to prevent salary envy from his colleagues and friends, is part of an elite tier of underground "jumbo" operators in WA's gold industry earning roughly $3000 a shift.

That daily haul is comprised of an $1700 base rate topped up by bonuses tied to each metre he advances a mining tunnel.

Nathan does this by manoeuvring a massive mechanical rig — called a drilling jumbo — to punch a grid of holes into solid rock face.

Some holes are meant for the "shot" — explosive charges destined to tear open new frontiers of ore.

While other holes are for the "stitch" — heavy-duty rock bolts installed by the jumbo that act as the mine's skeletal system, holding back the crushing weight of the world above.

With big incentives on offer to get the job done as quickly as possible, jumbos like Nathan constantly walk a fine line in the subterranean dark between speed and safety.

Blast holes drilled in the wrong spot could lead to hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of gold being rendered worthless. Even worse, a poorly installed rock bolt could cause a mass-casualty cave-in. It's a high-stakes role that requires years of on-the-job training, but no university degree.

Jumbo pay, bad rep

Working underground was historically an extremely uncomfortable and dangerous proposition. Modern ventilation systems and safety protocols have improved conditions considerably, yet the bad reputation of going below ground has stuck around.

"Most people are still not keen for one reason or another to go underground," Nathan told The West Australian.

"Being a jumbo is tough and dirty work even in current times but I'd be taking home a fraction of what I am now doing a trade in Perth.

"Jumbos have pretty much always been on good coin but it's gone to the next level now, pay has basically doubled in the past couple of years."

Local gold mining companies eager to capitalise on record prices for the precious metal are vying for a shallow pool of jumbo operator talent, according to Underground Training consultant Andrew Knight.

"When gold pushed through $3000 an ounce (in late 2023) the huge pay rises for underground jumbos started and it hasn't stopped," Mr Knight, pictured below, said.

"I know of a few of the top guys on more than $500k or $600k at the moment, getting a minimum of $3k per shift. Most jumbos work even-time rosters, so with annual leave that means they work 23 weeks a year for that $500k-plus pay."

In comparison, a ninth-year emergency surgeon in a public Perth hospital has an annual salary of about $485,000, according to the Australian Medical Association's latest industrial agreement.

A spokesman for Barminco — a prominent underground mining contractor — said the $3k per shift figure "applies to a very small number of highly specialised (jumbo) operators" and was not the "typical rate" across the broader market. Beyond competitive pay, Barminco's ability to offer international work opportunities to its WA operators has been a key factor in retaining good talent, according to the spokesman. "The training standard in WA is high, so our jumbos are like the Ferraris of the underground mining world, everyone across the world wants them," Mr Knight said.

From nipper to skipper

Getting to the jumbo summit takes at least five years of climbing the jobs ladder.

Most start their careers driving mining trucks or fetching supplies for operators. The latter is a role known colloquially in the industry as a "nipper".

"At Underground Training, we specialise in training people so they can get a job as an entry-level nipper or truckie — one of them just started on a truck for $540 per shift," Mr Knight said.

"More and more gold and base metal mines are going underground as open pits become exhausted, so the demand for jumbos is only growing. And with gold cracking $A7000/oz the mine operators are still laughing even if they have to pay $3.5k a shift."

Chamber of Minerals and Energy WA chief executive Aaron Morey said demand for a wide range of specialised mining jobs, including underground jumbo operators, remained "near historic highs".

"One of the biggest benefits of a strong resources sector is that West Australians with no more than a driver's licence and a positive attitude can walk into entry-level roles paying six figures — and the wages only increase as skills and experience grow," he said.

"Vacancies for a wide range of resources jobs — including operators, drillers and shot firers — are near historic highs."

Golden future for all?

While minted gold producers can easily absorb jumbo pay rates, miners of lower-margin commodities are feeling the heat. "The lithium and nickel operators would very much be struggling to compete at the moment," Mr Knight said.

Surging jumbo salaries could be another nail in the coffin for WA's ailing nickel industry.

BHP Nickel West's Cliffs, Wyloo's Cassini and Zeta Resources' Savannah are all underground nickel mines in care and maintenance.

On the lithium front, industry insiders pointed to Liontown — the owner of Australia's first underground lithium mining operation — as potentially the most vulnerable company. But Liontown's flagship Kathleen Valley operation near Leinster is not struggling to attract jumbo operators on reasonable base rates, according to chief operating officer Ryan Hair. "Jumbo operators have the luxury of choosing where they work and gravitate towards the mines with the best ground because there is usually a productivity component to their pay," he said.