

Nine US miners rescued after three-day ordeal

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All nine coal miners trapped underground for three days in a southwest Pennsylvania shaft were brought to the surface by rescuers early Sunday morning. The men, who were working 240 feet down when their mine flooded Wednesday evening, emerged in various states of hypothermia, dehydration and near-starvation, but all were alive and expected to recover from their ordeal.

The near-fatal disaster occurred at the Quecreek Mine near Somerset, 55 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. The nine rescued miners are: Thomas Foy, 51, of Berlin; Randall Fogle, 43, of Garrett; Ronald Hileman of Gray; Blaine Mayhew, in his late 20s, of Meyersdale; David Mullen of Gray; John Phillippi of Gray; Mark Popernack of Somerset; Robert Pugh, 50, of Ferrelton; and John Unger, 52, of Gray.

Shortly after 10pm Saturday, rescue workers who had been drilling a shaft to the trapped miners since Thursday broke into the air pocket that had protected the men, lowered a telephone and spoke directly with them. This was the first confirmation that the men were still alive since Thursday noontime, when seismographers picked up the sound of tapping from the four-foot cavity in which the men were huddled.

Work then got underway to lower a 10-foot-long capsule down the 29-inch-wide shaft and bring the miners up, one by one. The first miner reached the surface just before 1am Sunday, and the others followed roughly at 15-minute intervals. The last miner was pulled up at 2:45am.

All of the men were in relatively good health, considering what they had endured. Of the six who were transferred to Conemaugh Memorial Medical Center in nearby Johnstown, three were released later on Sunday, and three, as of this writing, remained under doctor's care. Of these, all three had mild hypothermia. One had a history of cardiac problems and complained of chest pains, and was consequently under intensive care. Another miner is being treated with medication for a rapid and irregular heartbeat. The third is being treated for "bends", i.e., a painful condition caused by bubbles forming in the bloodstream as a result of a rapid reduction in air pressure.

The mine flooded shortly after 9pm Wednesday as two crews of nine men each were working underground. One crew digging in a new direction broke the wall into Saxman Mine, which was abandoned in 1950 and had filled with water. The miners were able to make their way to higher ground and were protected from the rising water by an air pocket that had formed. They warned by radio nine workers in the other crew, who were able to escape after making their way through neck-high water.

The accident occurred more than a mile from the mine entrance. Rescue workers feared that the miners, if even partially submerged in the 50-degree water, would soon die from hypothermia. To avert this, they raised the temperature of the fresh air being pumped down to the miners to 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

They also increased the air pressure to 90 pounds in an attempt to enlarge the air pocket and give the miners some dry space. Water pumps were installed to drive the 50 million gallons of water out of the mine at a rate of 12,000 gallons per minute.

By Saturday afternoon, the drilling had reached within 30 feet of the trapped men. Rescue workers had to be very careful at this point since air pressure was holding back the water. There was concern that a break into the four-foot cavity could release the pressure and allow the water to rush back in and drown the men.

Instead of risking breaking the air bubble, the rescue team decided to slow the drilling to allow more time for the pumps to reduce the water level a few more feet. This, they hoped, would give the miners sufficient protection, even without the added air pressure.

The nine men spent 77 hours standing in three to four feet of water, hugging and rubbing one another to keep warm, and encircling the coldest among them. They wrote their last words to family members and placed the slips of paper for them in a pail. Then they tethered themselves together, so if they drowned, all of them would be found.

A high level of technological equipment, engineering know-how, resources and manpower were used to save the

miners, but the same cannot be said of the operation of the mine itself.

While mining remains the most dangerous occupation in the United States, and coal operators have always been more concerned with their profits than the safety of their workers, enormous advances in technology and, above all, the struggle of mine workers over generations have combined to sharply reduce the number of accidents and deaths in the industry, as compared to the carnage that prevailed in the first half of the 20th century.

Over the past two decades, however, the government has spearheaded a ruthless offensive by the coal and energy companies to dismantle the past gains of the mine workers, especially as they impact workers' health and safety, and the leadership of the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) has collaborated in this assault.

The decade of the 1980s was dominated by union-busting attacks on the miners, in which the coal bosses, backed by the government at all levels, revived the use of armed goons, court injunctions and deadly violence to either break local unions outright, or impose conditions in UMWA facilities that were previously seen only in non-union mines. At the same time, the federal government made its mine health and safety watchdog agency even more toothless.

The result has been a drastic reduction in the percentage of coal dug by union miners, and a dramatic erosion in the conditions for miners who continue to have nominal union representation. The site of last week's disaster is one of many regions that have been transformed over the past two decades from union stronghold to largely non-union production. Quecreek is a non-union mine.

The UMWA has virtually abandoned the area. It closed its District 2 headquarters in nearby Ebensburg and combined it with its District 5 office in Rostraver, a town closer to Pittsburgh.

Mine officials and government safety experts have been quick to blame faulty maps for the Quecreek disaster. Indeed, the maps with which the miners were working showed the Saxman mine as being 300 feet from the spot where they hit it.

But it has long been known that the 50-year-old maps are far less accurate than today's mapping, which can pinpoint mine digs to within centimeters. Moreover, it was common practice for mine owners to dig coal wherever they found it, even if they had not bought the rights for the coal. Mine companies did not map such illicit excavations.

To compensate, two techniques have been widely used throughout the mining industry, especially when miners are operating near abandoned shafts. Neither appears to have been used by the owners at Quecreek.

The first is to conduct a two-dimensional seismic profiling

of the mine. Seismic readings provide data on the location of faults, fractures and voids, which often fill with water. Ed Blott, a consultant with the Littleton, Colo., company ExplorTech, told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that the cost for such a profile for a mine the size of Quecreek would be only about \$80,000.

Another, even less expensive method, is to have miners drill a test hole in front of where they plan to dig. These probe holes are usually less than 2 inches in diameter, but up to 30 feet long. They can expose dangerous pockets of underground water, and then be quickly and safely plugged.

The operation at Quecreek reflects the depression that has hit the US coal industry since the late 1970s and devastated entire sections of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Somerset County has seen scores of mines close down and thousands of miners lose their jobs.

As a result, a number of small non-union mines such as Quecreek have opened which employ miners at only a fraction of what unionized miners received and with far lower benefits. They specialize in reaching coal seams, using mainly human power, that were unprofitable for the larger mines to dig.

The Quecreek mine is less than two years old and employs some 60 miners who work the mine in three shifts around the clock. Quecreek produced 15,000 tons a month last year with about 40 employees, and currently produces 50,000 tons a month. Larger mines average 500,000 tons.

Since opening, Quecreek has been cited 26 times for safety violations, but has been only fined \$859. Of the 26 citations, 16 were levied in 2001 and were considered "significant and substantial."

This year, the company has received no fines for its 10 citations, even though five violations were considered "significant and substantial" and six took place below ground, including misuse of combustible materials and insufficient guards for mechanical equipment.



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