This Date in Safety History: July 26, 2002: The Quecreek Mine Rescue



History is replete with mine disasters of all sorts. Sadly, tales of heroic rescues are far more rare. So, the story of the nine miners trapped 240 feet below ground in the Quecreek Mine in Pennsylvania on July 26, 2002 is extremely inspiring, especially since it unfolded in real time as a worldwide audience looked on.

The Miners Get Trapped

The saga began two days earlier, on July 24. At 8:50 pm, a barrier pillar between Quecreek Mine and an adjacent abandoned mine was breached, releasing a flood of 50 million gallons of groundwater into the mine. Two crews were underground. The 1st Left Crew made it out alive after alerting the 2nd Left Crew of the danger via the mine phone.

But the nine miners in the 1st Left Crew were unable to escape. They'd remain underground for another 78 hours, huddled together in a 20-foot-high, 4-foot-wide air bubble, above frigid water, unable to move to higher ground.

The Rescue Operation

For rescuers, the immediate need was to find a drill rig large

enough to bore a hole for the escape shaft. In the meantime, pumps were set up and drilling of a 6-inch hole began. It reached the miners at 3:30 am. Rescuers bustled with optimism when they heard banging on the drill—a signal from the miners. A current of hot air was pumped through this chamber to hold back hypothermia and rising water.

The drill rig was in place at 2:30 pm and by early evening rescuers began to dig out a rescue shaft. That's when the problems began. At 1:50 am, after boring down 105 feet, the 30-inch drill bit was lost down the hole. Rescue efforts were brought to a standstill. The next 19 hours would be marked by a series of frustrating delays.

At last, the drilling resumed. At 10:20 pm, drilling broke through into the mine. A microphone was lowered into the hole. Were any of the miners still alive? Or had they succumbed to the cold and/or lack of oxygen? We all waited intently to find out.

Word finally came. And it was the word we all had prayed for. All nine miners were alive and well. The escape capsule was lowered into the hole and retrieved each of the miners one-by-one. They were shaken but still in one piece.

Aftermath

Later, it was determined that the incident was caused by the use of an undated and uncertified mine map of the adjacent abandoned mine. The success of the rescue was attributed to a group effort of various government agencies, volunteers, and the miners themselves, beginning with the initial alerting of the 2nd Left Crew, their knowledge of proper escape procedures and the decisions made by the nine trapped miners. The main reason they were able to survive is that they stayed and worked together as a team.