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## After Roll-of-the-Dice Rescue, a Mine Town Rejoices

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

**Q**UECREEK, Pa., July 28 — In their darkest hours down in the mine, the nine trapped men, bedeviled by rising floodwaters, could hear the steady drilling of rescuers above them. But they still thought it imperative to jot down private thoughts and seal them in a lunch bucket as a parting word to family survivors.

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Blaine Mayhugh on Sunday with his wife, Leslie, after a capsule lifted him and eight others from a flooded mine.

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"They formed a barricade, and they wrote their wills, and they put them in one of the lunchboxes," said Leslie Mayhugh, tearful this morning through her happiness at the survival of her husband, Harry, known to everyone as Blaine, her father, Thomas Foy, and the seven other men who had to face their worst thoughts along with chin-high water before the rescuers finally reached them.

"They heard all the drilling and they knew they were trying, but the water just kept coming," Mrs. Mayhugh said of the miners, who initially thought they would drown as they pushed their faces from the water searching for scraps of air.

"And they were ready — they tied themselves together," she said, weeping at that desperate image, even after embracing her husband, alive and well, early today in the hospital.

"But they're home now and that's all that counts!" she said, summarizing the exultation above ground this sunny day at the success of an

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extraordinary rescue operation that freed the last of the miners at 2:45 this morning.

The turnaround in the men's fate was signaled simply when one of them, far from any last will and testament down below, asked doctors for just one cold beer. He was rebuffed then, but promised time enough to slake his thirst.

Such simple pleasures were celebrated all through this resilient mining country today as the blessing of an extraordinary rescue feat that began with what one official termed a "one-in-a-million shot": the forced feed of compressed air, drilled 240 feet down by desperate guesswork, that somehow found the men and kept them alive for the three days it took their rescuers to arrive.

"When I told the families the men were alive, someone yelled, 'Praise the Lord!' " Gov. Mark Schweiker announced early this morning as the sodden rescue scene in a floodlit farm field hummed with joy.

"It was that kind of uplifting moment."

This blue-collar, Bible-friendly southwestern Pennsylvania town, 60 miles from Pittsburgh, did not hesitate to use the word "miracle" today in describing the intricate roll-of-the-dice rescue operation that freed the men.

At its essence, engineers had to guess accurately in the first hours of the disaster where the men might have fled on Wednesday night, when a torrent of water suddenly burst in on them from an abandoned mine thought to have been a safe distance away.

"We tried to outrun it, but it was too fast," Blaine Mayhugh said of the roaring, rising flood in the mine's honeycomb of paths. At times the waters flowed over the miners' heads as they scrambled for survival in the cold darkness.

Above, feverishly checking mine maps for elevation points near where the miners were working, engineers picked a spot and began sinking a five-inch air pipe. They worked on the basis of experience, blind hope and an informed guess where the best point of survival might be for the trapped men.

Stunningly, the pipe broke through precisely in the tight air pocket, 24 stories below, where the men were huddling for life.

"Those guys could have been anywhere in a square mile down there," said David Hess, the state secretary of environmental protection.

"If we don't hit that on the money," Mr. Hess said, "we wouldn't have the kind of celebration we're having today."

Down below, Mr. Mayhugh said, he was facing death. "I thought, 'This is it.' "

But the air pipe managed to sustain the men, and they began tracking the on-again, off-again noise of the rescue drilling above.

[Down](#) (July 26, 2002)

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The New York Times

The nine coal miners were trapped in a flooded shaft beneath Somerset, Pa.

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The miners fought despair, Mr. Mayhugh said, when the drill fell silent for 18 hours because of a snapped shaft just as the water closed in once more.

Mr. Mayhugh decided it was time to borrow a pen to write a final word to his family on a scrap of cardboard.

"You know, tell them I loved them," the strapping miner said, fighting back tears in the daylight as he described the men's fierce unity in facing the worst even as they prayed for deliverance.

"My father-in-law tied us all together so we wouldn't float away from each other," Mr. Mayhugh said, fairly shaking with emotion in the fullness of life above ground.

In reviewing the 77-hour fight to reach the miners by drilling a 30-inch rescue shaft, Governor Schweiker said the time lost in repairing the snapped drill seemed like "providential intervention" in retrospect. If the shaft had broken through earlier, he said, the drillers would probably have encountered only water at a time when the survival niche was heavily flooded.

"One only knows" what might have happened, Mr. Schweiker said.

Instead, the drill was repaired and the shaft broke through to the men late last night, just after three days of emergency pumping succeeded in lowering the water below them.

The pumping equalized mine air pressure with the ground environment and eliminated the need to use a slow, risky procedure of extracting the miners through an air lock to guard against an explosive decompression that could have injured them.

Rather, rescuers were able to whisk them up in a special capsule, one every 15 minutes. The joy of the rescuers rose as each new miner arrived, drenched and totally smeared with coal dust.

Across the region and the nation, the relief was palpable.

"I'm very happy I didn't have to get involved with this one," said Wallace E. Miller, the coroner here in Somerset County.

Mr. Miller has spent much of the past 10 months dealing with the remains from United Flight 93, which was hijacked on Sept. 11 and crashed into a field in Shanksville, 10 miles from here.

At Ida's General Store in Shanksville, Bill Murray, a store worker, said

local people felt they were due a happy ending. "It's wonderful they found them alive, far better than the other result," Mr. Murray said.

The rescue's success was a matter of perseverance as much as creative engineering. On Thursday, the breakdown of a heavy-duty 1,500-pound carbide drill bit only a third of the way down cost 18 hours, as drillers fished up the broken pieces and replaced them.

As the miners waited, they talked in the darkness of their families and the last things they had done their last day at home.

"The only day in my life I never kissed my wife goodbye before I went to work," Mr. Mayhugh ruefully admitted. "That had to be the day," he said, looking crushed as his wife tearfully beamed and clung to his side.

The miners "snuggled each other," leaning together to ward off the cold and working as a team to warm their spirits as well, Mr. Mayhugh said.

The floodwater was unleashed when the crew's continuous mining machine tore into what was thought to be a thick seam but turned out to be a fragile wall adjoining the old Saxman mine, last worked 50 years ago and believed to have been 300 feet away.

The miners said they had no more than 10 seconds to run, the governor said.

Mr. Foy heard the first roar of the approaching water and, Mr. Mayhugh said, shouted, "Everybody get out!"

The wait turned mutual in the final few feet of drilling, the miners wondering and the engineers pausing to double-check the final approach. The drill broke through at 10:20 last night, although the miners did not instantly realize it in the noisy darkness of the chamber.

Mr. Mayhugh heard a colleague shout: "We got a hole! Everybody come down here."

He said he joined a chorus of shouts into the opening: "Help! Help! Please get us out!"

Above ground, Rob Zaremski, a rescue worker in a yellow hard hat, lowered a microphone and headset down the air pipe, listening for the first possible sounds from the miners since Thursday noon.

He leaned, cramming his own headset on tighter, then suddenly broke into a big smile. Thumbs up, Mr. Zaremski signaled to the crowd of grimy rescuers.

They cheered and shook fists at the sky as Mr. Zaremski took stock of the life below and carefully held up nine fingers for all to see. In one last job, the miners of the Quecreek night shift cleared debris from the hole, the better to welcome the rescue capsule. They decided the order of ascension themselves, based on their relative ailments.

By tonight, the gangs of emergency workers were packing their equipment on flatbed trucks and leaving town in happy rounds of diesel horns. Talk had already begun of when the year-old mine might be secured and miners once more able to earn their bread below.

"It is a beautiful ending," Governor Schweiker said of the rescue as people tried to analyze the gritty mystique that can make a miner hang on below — or heed the calling in the first place.

"It's called crazy," Mrs. Mayhugh said, grateful that her husband was back up with her.

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