

JOURNEY INTO COLLAPSED MINE WAS NERVE- RACKING



By GARY TUCHMAN
CNN
August 9, 2007

HUNTINGTON, Utah -- Ever since the Crandall Canyon Mine collapsed Monday, reporters had been kept some distance from it as we covered the story. We asked the owner for closer access; he said no.

But something changed Wednesday, and mine owner Bob Murray told five of us that we could go into the mine as far as we wanted and provide information, video and photographs for all the news media present. This was noteworthy, considering that mines are incredibly difficult places for reporters to get access to, even in normal circumstances.

Twenty minutes after he told us this, we were off. Transported in a van to the mine, we were given coveralls, boots, helmets, a light and oxygen. We were required to take a mine safety course taught by one of the mine employees to make sure we could operate our oxygen canisters quickly in the dark if necessary. We also learned about how to evacuate if there was another collapse. Our course done, we were ready to go in, right up to the collapse site where the rescue workers were drilling to find the six miners.

The mine is huge; you realize that right away when you're put into a small truck to be driven through it. And it's not a short drive in what is in effect an underground city. For nearly 30 minutes, we motor in the darkness at depths close to 2,000 feet under the earth. It is cold and windy. We hear creaks and groans in the coal walls. We see solemn rescue workers arriving at the scene. And then the mine owner tells us, "Right here is where the rescue effort is going on."

We had arrived at the point of no return. The collapsed coal walls were in front of us, and about 20 mine workers -- who are now rescue workers -- were on the scene. Standing there, knowing that

six human beings were believed to be no more than 2,000 feet away from us, was surreal. We were in the same room, separated by tons of coal. Are they alive? Dead? Are they alive with little time to live? All these things were running through my mind.



Outside the mine, it's easy to think: Why don't rescue workers just work faster? But inside, we see how difficult and painstaking it is. They are using something called a continuous mining vehicle, which has a spinning drum contraption with blades. It drills into the coal as workers try to advance just a few feet at a time.

Once the coal and rock are drilled, they are put on another vehicle known as a shuttle car, which stores up to 12 tons of coal. The coal is dumped on a conveyor belt and travels three

miles to a pile outside the mine. The process is repeated over and over and over again. It is painstaking, but it's the way this has to be done.

As we observe all this, something startling happens: We hear a loud boom, and the mine shakes. One of my fellow journalists mouths an expletive. Some of the workers look startled, but probably only a fraction of how startled we are. The mine owner tells us it's a seismic event; similar to at least 10 other earth movements that have delayed this drilling process. He tells us that if we feel it again, we must evacuate.

Murray has said that an earthquake caused the original mine collapse and that these are earthquake aftershocks. The U.S. Geological Survey told us that most likely, the mine collapse caused the seismic readings and the "aftershocks" are actually more movements of the damaged mine. Whatever we felt, it was nerve-racking. It makes you realize the risks these workers are dealing with.

We spent more than two hours in the mine and then took the chilly 30-minute ride back above ground. It was great to see the sky again. It also made me sadder than ever about the fate of the six miners.

[Ed. Note – A few days after this report was filed, a sudden collapse killed three of the rescue workers trying to reach the trapped miners. Rescue efforts ended at that point. The mine was closed, and none of the bodies of the six miners were ever located.]