

Nine For Nine I

Charlie Ernst got the call before dawn on Friday morning, July 26, 2002. The Quecreek Mine rescuers wanted our Texoma drill to start Rescue Shaft #2. At 1:05 AM Friday morning the drilling at Rescue Shaft #1 was stopped at 105 ft. Yost Drilling had lost their drill bit in the hole and their efforts to retrieve it were unsuccessful. Governor Schweiker did not want to wait until it was retrieved; it may take hours or days. Our Texoma Taurus XL auger was capable of drilling a 12 ft. diameter hole 120 ft. deep. It was the fastest way to drill and case a new shaft to rock before a second rock drill from Falcon Drilling could take over the hole.

The Texoma drill, augers, casing pipe and tools were mobilized in four hours and on site drilling at 11:10 AM Friday. Wally Ream and Lou Kuhar got the 170,000 lb. load over forty-nine miles of highway safely and in minimum time. The load was unpermitted and as illegal as could be, but saving lives took precedence to get to the mine on time. When our team arrived, Governor Schweiker greeted Bob Craft with: "I'm glad the Merlo Team is here".

They started drilling immediately because the Kelly bar was already installed in the Drill at the shop. Within 40 minutes, Charlie drilled a 36" hole 30 ft. deep. The casing was set in 50 minutes. This gave Falcon Drilling the Rescue Shaft #2 hole four to five hours sooner than had occurred with Rescue Shaft #1.

Our Texoma was then directed to drilling and casing starter holes to dewater the Mine. This was an equally important task. The water level in the flooded Mine had to be lowered from an elevation of 1870 MSL to 1820 MSL, if the rescue could hope to be successful. During the afternoon and evening of July 26, the Team drilled Dewatering Holes #4, #5 and #6 to approximately 20 ft. and set casing in each.

Meanwhile, Bob Stoppe volunteered to run our Cat D5M LGP which had been mobilized to the site early Friday. Bob was supposed to be on call because he lived minutes from the Quecreek Mine but, more important, three of his buddies were trapped in the Mine. He worked cutting road, spreading stone and building ponds until he fell asleep while talking to Craft and was relieved by Bob Bozic. After four hours sleep, Stoppe was back.

After finishing the Mine dewatering holes, Charlie Ernst went over to Rescue Shaft #1 and helped fish the bit out of the hole. He also ran the soap injection system for Yost. All in all, our people and Texoma performed flawlessly, from Friday through Saturday night. Many worked forty-three hours straight, motivated solely by the thought of nine trapped miners. At 11:32 PM Governor Schweiker reports: "All nine are alive!"

Our Team consisted of Bob Craft, Charlie Ernst, Bob Stoppe, Jeff Lanzendorfer, Paul Watson, Lou Kuhar, Barry Duca, Leo Gressick, Bob Bozic, Mark Lansberry, Wally Ream, Larry Dino, Chris Mauro, Ed Fingerhoot, Corey Poraczky and, of course, our Texoma Taurus XL drill! All in all, they did us proud!

On August 4, two members of our Team were picked to participate in a meeting with President George Bush and the Quecreek Nine in Pittsburgh.

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