



Body recovery in mine shaft

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Blythe
1987-027

By Joe Erickson

RMRU received a call to assist in a Mine Rescue. Three adult males needed extrication from a mine near Blythe.

I was able to respond immediately, and arrived on scene much quicker than the law allows. Many agencies were there and I spoke to a CDF worker. He informed me that the subjects had expired and that two other RMRU members were at the mine.

The mine was approximately 1 mile off the main highway and I was able to catch a ride with a BLM truck. I joined Cam Robbins and Rob Gardner and was told of the circumstances and that this would be a joint operation to evacuate the bodies.

I hesitate to provide our readers with details, so bear with me as I develop the scenario.

The mine being explored by these three folks was a vertical shaft 3 to 4 feet in diameter, eighty feet deep. It was unshored and had a make-shift scaffold structure over the entrance. The entrance was in a dry sandy stream bed. An inadequate air supply system was present. Eighty feet down water was seeping in, so these weekend miners had a gasoline-powered pump at the bottom.

Apparently the pump stopped and one of the miners went down to fix it. He became unresponsive so a second person went down to help the first. I am assuming the second person had the air system in use, because he attached the first person to the rope and had the people topside pull the first victim up using a Jeep. As this person was approximately half way up he became detached and fell on the second person.

The rope was stuck down the hole, so the third person attempted to go down this rope hand overhand, he fell also.

Carbon monoxide (CO) is heavier than air and the mine was full of CO and exhaust Fumes. We had air available from the CDF stores and used this to safely proceed.

The details I provided here are so you can better understand what we were getting

ourselves into. here goes;

After strengthening the ;A; frame scaffolding, we set up for a mechanical advantage raise. One of the safety systems set up was that we would plan for only 11-13 minutes of air time. The air bottles fit on your back and you put on a full face mask and regulator.

This makes communication very difficult, and we could not use a hand held radio due to space limitations.

After looking into the lowering/raising system, checking air flow and last minute details, the group of rescuers would help position me over some planks of wood placed over this 4foot diameter shaft. The opening of the boards was about 2 foot square My flashlight would not reach bottom. So there I was, suspended over a two foot black hole, breathing through an awkward BA (breathing apparatus), knowing I wouldn't be able to communicate to those above Me, they asked if I was ready. My eyes went wide and they took that as a reluctant yes.

The lower went well and smoothly. My breathing was very audible and it was difficult to keep it slow and regular. The only thing the top-siders could hear was my exaggerated respirations.

Once at the bottom my light revealed a foot and a half of water and mud, a pump and the bodies. I was able to attach (with some difficulty) the line to one subject and signaled for him to be hauled up. Squeezing under a small hollowed out area, just barely enough to protect me if he fell, I watched him being pulled up. Much too slowly. My emotions were running rather high and by the time this subject was clear, my air time was about up.

Upon reaching the open air again I knew clearly why people would be reluctant to go down again. I gracefully declined going down again for the next subject and another person was selected. In all it took three rescuers to get the three subjects as no one would go down twice. This was not a lack of bravery but a function of limited air time, the overwhelming circumstances and the confining nature of this hole in the ground.

On the drive home that afternoon I became rather ill to my stomach and pulled over at the Whitewater rest stop. I thought I might lose my cookies, and my head hurt a little. After several minutes I felt better and continued home. I think I have been involved in approximately 19 body recoveries in the past ten years and this was the most wrenching. Many nights I have been awakened with these memories and visions. I reach over to my wife and touch her hair or shoulder to bring my heart back on track, never waking her, just needing that reassurance and kindness. Time does heal wounds but it takes so long. My heart goes out to the family and loved ones hurt by this tragedy.

RMRU is a volunteer search and rescue team that covers Riverside County and assists other teams with search and rescue efforts in other counties. Each member purchases their own equipment and takes time off work, without compensation, to participate in search and rescue missions. Team equipment is purchased from contributions from the community. We are a non-profit organization and are funded by [donations](#) from people like you.