

Wilberg Mine Fire

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History/6 period
Mrs. Carter
May 10, 1996

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My name is Stewart Foster, I was a member of the Mine rescue Team in 1984 at the Wilberg Fire.

The night of the Wiberger fire I was going to work on the grave yard shift. Usually we would leave Price about 10:45pm. Because of a storm coming in we left about half an hour earlier. I met my car pool riders at our usual place, 7-11 going south out of price on Carbon Ave. We usually got something to drink or eat at 7-11 before we left for the Deer Creek Mine. When we went in the store we saw some of the company people from the central warehouse who I knew. They asked me if I knew about the fire and the 27 trapped people at Wilberg. Because we had left early that night I had no chance to listen to the 10:00pm news or receive any phone calls.

I thought about the fire all the way to work. When I got to Deer Creek Mine everyone tried to play it down. Finally I talked the grave yard mine foreman into calling Wilberg Mine to see if they needed any more help, as I had not received a phone call. The mine foreman Chuck Buynum told me to leave right away and take any other trained person for mine rescue with me. I asked Robert Hill and Bob Davis if they wanted to come with me. All three of us left for Wilberg in my car. The storm was bad and a lot of snow was falling and sticking to the road.

When we arrived at Wilberg things were in a state of confusion. We had one mine rescue team from our Mining Co.

underground. Ray Guyman asked me to go with Bug Light to monitor the fan and take samples every hour to check gases and make sure there were no explosive mixtures coming out. Bug Light, whose real name I can't remember, and I went along the path to the fan, which was about 300 to 400 yards from the bath house. The smoke and other fumes coming from the fan were so thick, I couldn't see in front of me. We had our mine rescue apparatus on, other wise we would not of survived. All I could see was the reflective tape on the back of bug lights apparatus. If I looked down I could see the trail in the snow to the fan. I didn't know it at the time, but if I would of walked off to the right of the trail I would fall off the mountain.

Each time we went to the fan to get samples, we had to reach in front of the fan with our arms to fill the sample bags. The creosol, or burnt waste products from the fire stuck to our hands, face and hair. It was hot black sticky material that burnt your skin if was on to long.

At one point the people in charge decided they wanted to put more diesel fuel in the tank to keep the fan running. Bug light and I were assigned to find the tank up in the mountain above the fan. Because of the heavy black smoke and not knowing the area or the location of the diesel fuel tank we had a hard time locating it. A truck with diesel backed up as close as it dared. Bug Light and I drug the hose up the mountain to the tank in the black smoke, feeling our way along the pipe that went up and across. At one point I couldn't get any oxygen so I went back down. I was tugging at my mask with one hand and pulling my hand

away with the other. I thought I was a goner. I finally got down to the truck where I was able to clear my head and push the bypass valve to allow me to breathe. I think working hard and pulling the heavy diesel hose up the mountain exhausted me and got me in trouble. The people at the truck could tell I was in trouble. They tried to make me stay in the truck while they went for help. I told them I needed to get back to my partner. When their backs were turned I headed back up the mountain to where Bug Light was with the diesel hose and tank. We filled the diesel tank above the fan and headed back down the mountain.

A lot of friendships were made at the fire. People get closer together, because their lives depend on it. I remember on the second or third day of the fire, Bug Light and another fellow were partners going down to the fan for samples. This other fellow was one of the other people who worked with Bug Light on a daily bases before the fire always teased Bug Light about his standards. Bug Light was a good L.D.S. man with good standards. The other men in the mine made fun of him. The one fellow who had to go with Bug light to the fan, on the third day of the fire, got in big trouble and passed out. Bug Light drug him to safety so he could breathe again. This man was one of the biggest offender of teasing Bug light. When he came to, he didn't know how to thank him for saving hi life, and was quite embarrassed. A lot of miners have nicknames, Bug Light was one of them.

This interview is with Michelle Scovill who was a wife of one of the victims of the mine fire, Phillip Bell.

I asked if she remembered what the day was like when she heard that there was a fire. She said, "It had been snowing all day and I had gone to Ferron earlier that day to take the kids to dancing and when she got home her husband (Phillip Bell) had called and said he was staying longer because they were close to breaking a record and then at about eleven or eleven thirty the phone rang it was my mother and she heard that there was a fire at the mine, so I called the mine and asked if there was a fire inside the mine and he said, "yes, yes ma'am there is" and I said, "Is Phillip Bell in there" and he said, "I don't think so." Then I hung up and then a little bit later we found out that he was in there and then for the next, Gosh, what was it three days yes I think it was three days we just sat and waited for phone calls and watched the t.v. and just all of that. Then there was the report that they found the first nine bodies and he was one of the first nine and then it was just shortly after that, that they decided to seal the mine and to stop it and so none of the bodies were removed at that time. My mom asked, "and then did you have a memorial" yea we had a memorial the day after Christmas no the day before Christmas yea it eas because it was the same day that we had the big Memorial here. I asked, "do you remember when they gave you the news?" "did your kids

understand?." Jason wasn't there he was at his grandmas and Brindie was 2 months old and Camie was 6 and I don't think they understood at all and I'm not really sure when they did really understand it was such a big blur I think the initial shock really hit after every thing started calming down and I think for the kids when things started happening like baseball practices and things like that when they didn't have their dad there and thats when it actually hits when the times that you had them there for you. My mom asked "How has this changed your life." Michelle said, "It has changed alot in every aspect of our lives and I don't think that you ever really adjust you just learn to deal with it you just learn that you have to go on. My mom Asked if any good thing have came out of it and she said that "Good things have came out of it" It makes you understand that you really need to be careful because things can happen to you, you think that it is always going to be somebody else but when somebody walks out that door in the mourning you never know if they will walk back in and you be sure you always end thing the best way you can. Don't take things for granted and you do until something like this happens. I asked,"what did you do the day you found out that they found him in there" Well the day I found out, the reason I kinda knew I was sitting in a chair in front of my t.v. I found out they found the first nine bodies and I heard that on the t.v. so I went over to the phone and they had a line where the families could call and I called that number and I asked

for Don Childs cause that was who I talked to every time and he would give me all the information I needed and they told me he wasn't there and I asked if you could tell me the nine miners that they found and she said that they don;t have a list of them yet but right then when I knew Don wasn't there I just had a funny feeling and then I was sitting in a chair looking outside and Don Childs and our Bishop pulled up outside and so right then I knew and I think that I just kind of fell apart at the time and I knew that I had to still go tell Jason and Phillip's mom and dad and so somebody took me down there and I can't remember who and I went down and told his parents and the actual funeral was a year later and we didn't have a service at the church we just had a burial service and it was a year later on veterans day that we buried him and that was harder to go through that than it was the rest of it, well no well I that just really did finalize it that he really was gone but the hardest thing for me through the whole thing was the media how they just stretched the truth so much and they just went so overboard with everything and they would show the pictures constantly on the news and it was just constantly talked about and it just made it so uncomfortable and almost to the point to where you couldn't get on with your life because it was thrown in your face every time you turned on the t.v. to me that was the hardest part of the whole thing and it was a year later they had some big thing and five years then ten years to me its nice to remember them but it

is almost like they have to bring up all the awful stuff that has to be brought up it nice to remember them the way we want to remember them and not have all that stuff forced on you and you know Channel 5 news had the picture of the smoke bellowing out of mine in their opening credits for about two years after that happened and I finally sent a letter into them and told them every time I seen that, that I didn't think it was fair it was like rubbing it in your face the media just wasn't fair the said things that weren't true. My mom asked "if you keep in touch with any of the wives" and she said, yes, a few but every time I see them that's what I think about and it was really, really hard. After the taped stopped she told us this" The day she found out that there was a fire she called her mother in law to see if she knew that there was a fire and her mother in law said yes and I'll be right up so Michelle got off the phone and went to the window to watch for her mother in law and it was snowing really hard and right then and there she had the most unexpressionable felling come over her and she could never express what it felt like and now she thinks that at he time she felt that was the exact time that Phillip died.

This interview is with James Behling, who was on the Mine Rescue Team at the time of the fire.

The first thing I asked Jim was how did he find out about the fire. He said he was home and the Warehouse called him. He said he was laid off at the time and had been laid off for ten months. " They hadn't updated the employee information so I was still the Captian and was the first one to get called, I was home when they called and told me about the fire at Wilberg, and I said I wasn't working and they told me my name was still on the list so come to work. So I told them I would be there, this was Wednesday night about nine o'clock". "I went in that night with Chief and Cruiser and those guys and I'm not for sure exactly the first time". Then I asked him what it was like in the mine and what was he feeling like. Jim said, "There was a bunch of guys trying to fight fire with no apparatus' on and it was pretty slow and they were all up there with hoses spraying the fire and then there was a cave and the hot smoke came right over the top of all of us and all the guys without apparatus took off running and dropped the hoses, that was the last time we saw them there. Then I got the hose and got up to the fire." Jim also said "I didn't know who it was at the time but it was Dick Cox was one of the guys and he ran right over the top of me because I had an apparatus on so I just stayed there, those guys that didn't have one, all that real hot smoke went over the top of them.

That's happened to me before at the Beehive fire, the same exact thing happened to me the hot smoke came over the top of me so I knew it was either a cave or an explosion and if it's not real violent it's probably a cave and if it's an explosion then your ass is gone anyway, unless it's just a little explosion it could be one of the two. If it pops most of the time it's a cave." Jim continues, "I got there Wednesday and the first day I got home was Saturday I slept for maybe an hour a couple times and that's kind of hard to figure out how you can do that then, cause you can't do that in a normal situation. They had their Mine Rescue teams we would go out side and they would send us right back in and there was people up there that never went in the mine I know there were some times I was in there fighting fire, I didn't know the mine I wasn't from there there was this guy named Gilbert Madrid he was the longwall superintendant, he had one fire hose and I had another one I had an apparatus on he had one of those SCSR (self contained self rescuer) I don't know if you've ever seen one of not, they don't have a face mask they just have a mouth piece it goes in your mouth and he was telling me to follow him, he said we need to go this way, we were climbing over top of caves and the fire was all around us and pretty quick he turned around, pulled out the mouth piece and yelled he was hot and told me to spray him down, I turned the fire

hose on him and I'm squirting him down, he was like on fire. It was so smokey I couldn't see so I kept my light out and just looked for glowing hot spots and we were moving so quick I felt heat behind me and I turned around and there were flames behind me, we had walked through the fire and fire had come around us so we had flames all around us and we were in the middle of it, so we got that out. Probably the neatest thing on fire, fires are pretty neat to watch, get the whole thing out except on one side and all of a sudden you get fire gases and it was like a ball of flame just shooting off from this side to that side and what we had out exploded into flames again, and we had it completely out, another thing that was pretty neat the way fire burns is I watched stoppings (solid brick wall) burn, that was one of the sad things about Wilberg is that we lost water pressure a couple times we'd be gaining and then we'd lose water, you'd be standing in front of a cinder block stopping and the whole thing turns orange and then it just starts crumbling, it get really loud. Have you ever listened to a fire like in a stove how it starts popping and crackling well imagine think about standing inside the stove that's basically what you are, you're inside the stove because the air is going right over the top of you and its going out so you're in and all that noise, its really loud. I watched a stopping completely

crumble. We fought fire steady from Wednesday until I think it was Friday, it was Friday when we found the bodies and I remember we kept trying to go in and they wouldn't let us go in, MSHA wouldn't. They finally let a Kaiser Team go in, I don't why but they did, let them go in first but they did. They went in and one Mine Inspector I think it was Dick Jones they put an apparatus on him they went in and found the bodies right there, the first nine that was right inside the stopping that we had been standing next to for quite a while and they had to come right back out because Dick Jones' apparatus messed up and we walked in there and looked at all of them and you could see that they were so close. The first two bodies were within 25 feet of the door, if they could of got through that door they would have been in fresh air and that whole first nine were within 200 ft of the fresh air if they would of kept going, some of them had SCSR on and some of them nothing on and some of them had the W-65 (another type of self rescue that does not provide oxygen but protects the wearer from CO only) you could see that their mouths were all swollen up from the heat. None of them got burned they just all died from the carbon monoxide" Jim said. Then I asked "When did you find the rest of them." Then Jim continued, I trying to remember what day it was that we found the rest of the bodies if it was before I left or on Sunday when I came

back when we went in and found the rest of them I think it was Saturday morning that we went in and found the rest of them that were further in the mine I think it was one guy from our team that went down to the headgate of the longwall and found a bunch of them there I trying to think how many there were there was like four more just as you were going down the belt line and there were eight or nine more at the head gate of the long wall just right around the corner of the others and then I went in there with the bunch I was with and I know Earl Snow was with me I can't remember who else was with me on that initial exploration and we went down the longwall and we went down in the bleeders and we could see footprints but we couldn't see anybody and we went as far out as we could go and the news media said there was a safety chamber in there which was a crock it was loaded with CO as much as anywhere and there was no ventilation so it was just sitting in there and then we went across the face and out the tailgate and we found a couple more bodies down there and we came up to a cave and the only way to get over the cave was, and that was the reason they couldn't get out because of the cave it was sealed off, bur the one cave there we could see footprints there and the only way to get over it was to take your apparatus off but we didn't want to do that we were a long ways from fresh air and a long ways from a phone we had only

taken the phone half way down the long wall face so we didn't have communication where we were at we were a long ways from fresh air so we turned around and went back and then right after that was when I went home and when I came back I came back Sunday there were still two bodies missing and they decided to seal it and they were going in to try to see and the return was just full of flames and it was to hot and then the gases go to explosive coming out the return so we ended up evacuating the whole mountain that was Sunday afternoon. We tried to take the bodies out but they wouldn't let us until a year later in fact when we would go in exploring the whole thing about mine rescuer is that you go in trying to find survivors so if you find a dead person you know he's there and you know that there is nothing you can do for them so your basically trying to find survivors so when we went in we left body bags sitting there on the bodies and we went in and we had to write their name and social security number on the little tags and tie it on them it wasn't a real fun job and then we started putting them in the bags and we had but I'm not positive I think we nine of them out in the fresh air base and we loaded them in the truck and headed outside and the truck got a flat tire and so they unloaded them took the truck out and they never did get back in to get them before they sealed it so there was nine of them

already in body bags just sitting at the fresh air base when we sealed the mine and it was a year later that we got them out alot of the reason we didn't bring them out was out of the first nine there were more company guys than union guys I not sure how many union guys were there but there weren't very many in that bunch so that was one of the complaints but as far as we were concerned it didn't really matter union or company I was union at the time and most everybody that was with me was union and all we cared about was getting the first ones out then go get the next ones and it really didn't matter what they were but during the whole recovery alot of that kept coming up the union people from back east they were wanting to seperate union from the company alot they didn't have the same relationship we have here. I remember finding some of those bodies there was a couple of them that looked like they were praying there were two of them on there knees they were next to each other and I can't remember which ones were where you could see that they were really trying to make it out and then some of them like the fireboss we found him sitting and he had his flame safety lamp between his legs and had his notebook out and Kenny Blake made the comment a few times that he had to keep on forcing himself to keep on going he would be walking and just want to sit down and go to sleep and that is what carbon monoxide does it makes you want to go to

sleep he said he kept finding himself falling down and closing his eyes and dosing off and thats why alot of these guys didn't look like they were on the run or trying to get out but that CO gets in you system and all you want to do is go to sleep and I don't know why they didn't make it that drives me nuts to think that, I don't think they knew that was the way out and the noise I think scared the hell out of them because I know when that fire way a roaring in there it made alot of noise and the smoke you couldn't see anything you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. I asked what Kenny Blake did that was so much different than the others. I really don't know other than unless he had a stronger desire to live or I know he said he ran into Tom Hurst at about the same place that those nine bodies where found which was right by the dog leg and Tom Hurst said follow me and Kenny was following him and then Tom turned around and went back in and Kenny said he was trying to get him to go with him and he didn't but he heard Tom he had to save his crew so Tom went back in toward the section and Kenny kept on going and I think the original nine if they would of kept going with Kenny they probably would of made it to but either they didn't know the way out which I don't think any of them did but I think Kenny knew enough from listening to Tom that, that was the way out I think Tom knew the way out but Tom wanted to go back in and save

his guys and he had already sucked too much carbon monoxide by then that is was built up enough that it just killed him but I think Kenny once Tom said this was the way out that he kept going and I think Tom went back in and found the other guys and started back out and never made it and Kenny had an SCSR and some of those other guys, the original nine didn't they just had the W-65s which don't give you oxygen and every thing Kenny said, because alot of people didn't believe what he said he did but everything turned out right he said he went in and turned off each breaker and when they went in and checked it they had been Kenny said him and some other people stopped in one certain spot and put their self rescuers on and when they went to that spot they found the lids to all the rescuers so what all he said actually did happen so Kenny and some other people were the putting their rescuers on which was right next to that dog leg and they only had to go 200 feet and they would of been in fresh air from that point and Kenny made it and the rest didn't and a year later when we got back in I found Gordon Conovor and he was going out the bleeder and he had taken his SCSR off and threw it on the ground and opened up a new one but had not activated it yet because I think he thought he was in fresh air because there was no smoke but there still was alot of CO there and if he would of put the new one on I think that he would of made it normally

that would of been fresh air but the fire had burned out the overcast which circulated the air so you would have fresh air but it was filled with CO but If they knew the things then that they know now foam generators we would of had the foam generators we have now we might could of controlled the fire. We had the foam generators at that time but none of us had ever seen them or tried them before and they brought some in and we couldn't get them to work worth a darn we got some to work a little bit. Another thing I was at another place we had a foam generator going and then we had a rock duster going right next to it, well since that time I've found out that rock dust knocks down the foam, so any foam we were making we were knocking it down. It was an education because none of us knew what we were doing. There were some of us that was in the Beehive fire and some of us we knew how to deal with the smoke and the heat, but as far as foam generators, see none of us got near the fire at Beehive the closest any one got to the fire was a thousand feet away, nobody got near it, but at Wilberg we were right at the flames fighting first hand. There were transformers burned up and alot of things ruined by the heat like the pictures of that fan, the fan blades were just gone." Then I asked "Was they moving the long wall at the time?" Jim said "They were in the middle of a long wall production, they were trying to break a record.

The thing about this record from talk from other people they weren't ready to try it, the conditions were ready but they didn't have the materials and equipment and they probably shouldn't have been doing it they had been running for quite a few hours without stopping before the fire started, they had alot more people in there than they normally have, and I don't think they were looking for problems and stuff like that, all they cared about was getting the tonnage out. It wasn't the long wall that started the fire, the long wall was two thousand feet away from where the fire started, the problem was is the intake air that goes in to the longwall went right over where the long wall is right over where the fire was.

We had to seal the mine completely and then we had to go back in and we ended up mining around, it took a year to get back in there." I then asked. "Is it running now?" Jim answered, "Actually Wilberg is completely mined out, and Cottonwood which is the mine right next to it is mined out, they are at Trail Mountain now. Wilberg at the time of the fire, the fire was in fifth right, there was a longwall in there and a longwall in 13th right which was further in the mine. After the fire and after the recovery a year later we got back in there. We finished mining 13th out and then 4th right, 3rd right, 2nd right, and that pretty much finished the mine."

I then asked, "What did you hate the most?" Jim replied, " Just that people got killed. As far as going in and fighting fires and putting them out I can handle that, its alot of work but and your dad probably feels the same way its challenging but alot other people wouldn't want to do it because it is real dangerous. You could get hurt or killed real easily by doing the kind of things we did and we learned alot, we saw alot of things we never saw before and really I hope nothing like that ever happens again, besides it killed 27 people, it changed the lives of everyone around here. It was the demise of Emery Mining Corp. It changed the ways that people thought about coal mining and mining in general, in alot of ways it helped improve safety and thats sad that it takes something like that. The death of 27 people."

This is the interview with Gordon Larsen and Forrest Addison (Cheif) who were both on the Mine Rescue team at the time of the fire.

I first asked, " Where were you guys at when you first heard about the fire?"

Gordon: We had mine rescue training Thursday and Friday scheduled and I was on graveyard shift and I had come on Wednesday morning after graveyard shift and I had stayed up all day messing around and I had just got

in the shower around 9:00 o'clock in fact I had to get out of the shower to answer the phone to head up there.

Tyson: Who called you?

Gordon: I can't remember, it was Ray Guymon's secretary. I remember that it had snowed a whole bunch we had 8 or 10 inches of new snow, and when I headed up the back road up Mill Canyon road there was one other set of tire tracks and I figured it was Kevin Tuttle, and then I found out that Kevin and Dickson maybe headed up in front of me.

Tyson: Was it Crusier that went with him?

Gordon: Crusier was up there on shift.

Cheif: Well for me, Monday and Tuesday I was sick and Wednesday I went back to work and I was on day shift. I had come home and went to bed early and got a phone call from a neighbor's wife, someone had called her. Her husband was in the mine at that time. She talked to me for a minute wanting to go the mine to see if he was all right and then just hung up and then I got called by Ray's secretary to come there. I drove up there and there was a lot of commotion up there, alot of smoke coming out of that thing.

Tyson: What was the first thing you all had to do when you got up there?

Gordon: As soon as I walked Ray grabbed me and had me go in and sit down and start calling other mine rescue people, like Brian Jex was not working for the company

at that time and Jim Behling who was laid off or something, I called some other teams and put them on stand-by at least for time being. I remember he brought in a list of the people that was trapped at that time and their was like sixty people on the list. I'm going this is bad... but then my wife called too while I was on the phone and it was really fast how the word spread down in the towns. I remember seeing Kenny Blake he was already out of the mine when I got there, even though I thought I was up there pretty soon, Kenny was already out. One thing that I thought should have probably happened I found way later as soon as Kenny came out they took him back in and made him fill out a deposition type thing about things he had seen and heard, what he could remember. We never ever got that word. I saw it way later and he talked about people in the dog leg and stuff and when we were in there actually fighting fire I never heard that there was somebody that knew that there were people right there or not.

Cheif: Well when I got there I got dressed and there were a bunch of other miners outside and I asked Bill where Johnny was because he usually dresses right by me and he said he was in the fire area and the longwallers and so I knew Bob was in there. His wife was the one who called me first. I got dressed and took an apparatus and they called us in to the head of the

Fifth. Some guys were already fighting fire with water hoses and I can't remember who was with me, Gary or Brian but I think Brian was already up there and they were changing guys on the hose that were bare faced. I remember going into the return entry of the dog leg was and I think Brian Jex is back on the hose. Somebody asked me about the door of the man hole in the dog leg, like where does this go and I said I don't know I've never been in that part of the mine. I didn't know any thing about that. I didn't hear any thing about Kenny Blake. I know it was pretty crazy.

Gordon: Ya, I went in the mine pretty quick I rode in with Gary because when we got to where they had their fresh air base, Gary turned to one of the miners from Wilberg and said how do we get out of here. I'm so confused, if there is an emergency how do we get out and someone said, well the next entry right over here is the belt line and the walk way is on the one side, get on that side and get the belt on your left shoulder and you can follow the belt line right out so Gary made sure that everybody that rode in with us knew that. I was surprised to how many guys were there barefaced.

Tyson: What about the cave ins?

Gordon: They had sent me up with a detector a little black one that read all three gases an equalizer. I remember walking up there with my apparatus on and here is all these guys barefaced and they stopped and looked

at me like man if you're here with your apparatus on what am I doing here barefaced! Then we either had a hydrogen pop or a cave, everybody kind of left then. That was probably the end of the fire fighting for the non trained people.

Chief: They were all in the intake, they were putting water line together or curtains and some others that went to 4th right, I guess that overcast melted out or gave away later some time that night.

Gordon: The non apparatus were working on getting us supplies. It was solid people all the way out the intake.

Chief: Ya I remember that and there was some guys on the beltline running the duster and pumping dust into the return.

Gordon: That was one problem we had, we would set up a foam generator and a hundred feet away set a duster that would blow dust over the top of the foam and the dust would knock the foam down so it would not extinguish the fire.

Tyson: Jim talked about the cinder block wall that you guys built.

Gordon: That would of had to of been right across the entry from where the dog leg went in was a stopping that had a door in it a little man door

Chief: There was one either there or somewhere in that area there was one and for about 3 or 4 hundred feet

right there we were at the intersection putting water on it and at the other entry were other people were fighting fire to I think they were a 100 feet back from where we were but they had to run a curtain down the entry because there was about 2 or 3 hundred feet of crosscuts on fire cause we put holes in the stoppings with water hoses in them and that was when Jim went through that man door into the other entry.

Gordon: Gary and Bob and I went over and cooled it down in fact when we got there the door was hot enough that the rubber seal was melting and burning away and it was so hot that when we would spray that the steam would come back on you and about cook you so we had wrapped our arms and our necks and stuff with rags and the one that was going to sit right at the door and actually shoot the water on the flames they would spray him down and get him all wet and then you would stick the hose in and spray until you couldn't take the heat anymore until you were almost burning then you would back out and let somebody else have rags wrapped around their arms and neck and spray them down and let them do it. We did get in there one time we came out to get our apparatuses checked and I told Ray at one time that I thought we had it kind of controlled to that one entry and about 300 feet long and I thought that we pretty much had it but when we went back in it had really taken off, but I remember Jim going in that door

and he went because there was a little ways that there was no caves and then he went up on top of the cave that was out in the intake.

Tyson: Where was it at that you found the first nine?

Gordon: We had gotten chased out a few times to they kept every time they got a bad reading on their gauges they would send us out but the first and it wasn't our team that went in first.

Chief: They went into that dog leg and I was told it was Ervin Cox and Kevin Tuttle and a few others when back and Ervin said that they walked over all the bodies they didn't see them because the smoke was so thick and then somebody tripped on the way back out and then they started looking and that was when they realized that there was bodies laying there wrer they were walking and they said it started about twenty feet away from the door.

Gordon: Well the first body that they found was just right there by the door and everyone else was just kinda strung out against the ribs a little bit and they had walked up the middle of the entry.

Chief: I think it was like 200 feet or something because there was timbers in there and they said that they followed it through the smoke and the smoke was really thick you couldn't see anything it was that kind of a deal I remember Ervin and Kevin were the ones that

went in with the Kiasser team and they identified the bodies.

Gordon: For a long time they didn't want any of the bodies moved at all but they started getting reports back like one team would go in and say that they found a body at the toolboxes and another team would say they found one at the shop cars but actually it would be the same body but they would write down they found a different guy and pretty soon they had more than the 27 accounted for and so they knew it wasn't right so Gary and I took a team in and I remember that Russ Larsen and a couple of guys from Deer Creek we picked up Carl Bessy and Jed DeMill and then Bob Hill who really Didn't want to go in where the bodies were but we went in for the sole purpose to actually look on the belt and making sure who was where and Gary had a pretty map by then he wrote down everybody's name and number.

Tyson: What did MSHA think about this?

Gordon: They didn't want us to disturb any evidence that might help them decide what had happened for a long time we were in the same section as the bodies and you just kind of left them alone you just stepped over them and kept going.

Chief: Everybody was just looking for survivors more or less. I know that teams would be going in or out some having problems with their apparatus some team would be scheduled to go in for a couple of hours and

then in a hour it would be you turn again you go outside for what was suppose to be 2 or 3 hours but you end up going back in a hour or less. I know that I jumped around alot mostly in the fire hose area and return and I got the chance to go into the belt line with other teams and I built alot of things in the belt line with the Sufco team and Kenny Valdez and Madrid and Dan Brinks they went up sixth right the return entry and then Kenny came back because there was a problem in sixth right and they needed us to go up there and we went up there and found Madrid over come with CO and Dan Brinks they both down so we put a mask on Brinks and left him there and Jex had his mask off so we put it back on him and then me and my partner drug Madrid back out and by the time we were almost out the Kiaser team come in and helped us with getting the other people out.

Gordon: Kenny and Madrid had tried alot of different ways to get into the caved part of the section and they had been up clear around the bleeder where they ended up finding Gordon Conovor and that was when they had their problems with their masks and I was outside because I remember they came and grabbed me cause I was a E.M.T. and they said they were going to need some help cause they had guys coming out that were down with CO and there was alot of panic outside at that time and they had got reports that one of them had stopped breathing on the way out alot of doctors and stuff

that were up there at the bath house did some pretty good work on them as soon as they got out.

Tyson: Didn't the Conover guy about make it out the bleeder?

Gordon: Yea, actually Kenny and Madrid had went up the bleeder entry and clear across to sixth right and it was kind of caved they didn't know that there was a little way behind the timbers to get around through it so they went to that cave and figured that was as far as they could go and so they turned around and came back but they had a extra self rescuer with them and they left it hanging between sixth and seventh and Gordon Conover actually stopped and picked up that extra one and he had broke it open and got it all ready for when he needed to use it but he left the plug in and he had left it out of his mouth I assume that he thought he was in clear air and didn't think he was in CO knew that he was in by the fire because he had been in by the mouth of the section and knew that the fire was there and knew that he had fire to go by so he was probably saving it for when he needed it so actually if timing if we had any luck with timing Kenny and them might have run into him.

Kollette: How long would they let you work before you got any rest?

Gordon: They wanted you on for in the mine for like four hours and then they would try shipping you out and they wanted you out for a minimum of four hours but like Chief said there was alot of time that you would get out and you

were suppose to be out for four hours and somebody would be running around saying that they need one more guy to go in with to do something and you would grab your apparatus and go or the teams that were right in front of you something would go wrong and they would change their plans and you end up going back in pretty quick.

Chief: Ya I got to go home once for about six hours but I remember twice trying to sleep up there, in the warehouse there was an area and in the bathhouse there was an area. I didn't sleep very long cause I had to go back in. I do know they took Kevin and Earl out because they were there for something like thirty-six hours. The Doctor would come and check them after that long.

Gordon: Okay we were talking about resting, like Chief was saying there were some places that they had put up some cots and tried getting the guys to rest, but most people wasn't getting alot of rest. I went home sick one time and got to stay home for about six hours because I ran a real high fever and threw up and then I laid down for a couple hours. Got up and felt back to normal so I headed back up again. Alot of people didn't want to leave because they didn't think that the Jeep Posse and the road blocks wouldn't let them back in so they would stay up there. If they wasn't positive they could get back in they just stayed up there the whole time. Up until the time they started to chase them off the property because they were afraid the mine was going to blow up. There is a couple stories, this

is after things had gotten really bad. We had started getting some of the bodies out at the fresh air base and they started losing the intake, the stoppings were starting to burn through. They had crews working building extra ones. Once the fire got going down through the return it ripped through there big time they had one place quite a ways out that they had a backdraft they would open a door and immediately all the smoke because by the time the fire had went down the return it had burned as much as it could burn because all the oxygen was gone but the air was still moving along but there was no oxygen there when they got out where, and that was why it kept on getting into the intakes to get to the oxygen and these guys opened a door in the return and all of a sudden it had all the oxygen it needed so it rushed to that oxygen and filled the return with smoke as soon as it got out there and started getting the oxygen it ignited then it sucked it all back in they said it was like a cartoon all the smoke came out and filled up the whole entry and then all the sudden it just sucked it back in it scared them so they shut the door and as they shut the door there was enough back pressure going back in that it sucked a stopping in that was a hundred feet away from them but all that happened when we were all but out of there.

Chief: Ya I heard stories about those guys that were building those stoppings as fast as they could and dumping rock dust behind it then they would get done and they would watch the stopping they were building against just crumble

away but they just kept on going at it even though as they were making one they would here the one they just made crumble to the floor.

Gordon: Each fire that I have been to had been completely different the one at Desbee we never go to where we actually fought the flames but when we sealed it, it was really bad. Wilbergs we for reasons because of the bodies and the people we tried fighting it until it was too late to seal it. I had to go down into the return way down below one time and get some bag readings, but other than that I never really did go down into the return down past the fire but really by that time it was beyond hope, beyond catching it.

Chief: Ya the only three areas I can recall being in was the belt, the intake, and that return entry and the tunnel where you were going in and out of the mine was about it.

Gordon: We were in a position where we a I mean in the section the CO level never even got really terrible they never got anywhere it was during the recovery I mean high enough levels that it would kill ya but never into the 1% range just 4 or 500 parts. I remember being clear up in the section that started down the intake and I remember it being kind of hazy smokey but you could see a couple hundred feet further and there was a flashing light that I seen and it kind of shocked me because we were the only ones in the section and it ended up being a light on top of a piece of equipment that was parked in there. There's a lot of spooky

type things that happened I mean just being in there and knowing that there were people there was a little spooky but most of the time you had your mind set just on one thing to the point that you really didn't think about the spooky stuff to much. I do remember looking at the fireboss tags and finding it really amazing that the fireboss was in the section and was one of the ones that died because I know how fast that firebosses walk and for him to get into this section he had to go through the area where the fire was, and to walk in 22 crosscuts and turn and to start to come back out it shouldn't of taken him more than ten minutes. He was in the belt line on cross cut six or eight. It has always bugged me that he was in there because he had to walk through where the fire was and if there had been a fire then he wouldn't of come in the section and if there was no fire when he headed the section it had to of really blown up, or started from nothing to where he could detect it walking by to full blown by sending gases up the intake into the beltline to kill him before he could get in and back out. So we are looking at ten to fifteen minutes, in my opinion. It went from nothing to having enough gases up there to make him ill, at least enough to make him sit down.

Chief: Everybody has a different opinion of how it started. Fire bosses have their opinions. I fire boss and I have a hard time trying to figure out how you miss something that you looking for and not see it.

Gordon: I talked to some people about him (fireboss) because it bothered me so much, and they said that normally he would start in at 13th right after lunch and start his preshift and work his way outside, but that day they thought he'd been doing some weeklies or something but he ended up in 5th right and that's where he ate lunch. So he had started his run backwards and was working his way in the mine. In my opinion he probably would have been hustling even faster because he knew he had to get in there and either find a ride out or get in there fast enough to walk out or catch the crews coming out. I really don't think he would have been wasting any time but yet there was no way he could of got in the section without, because he found a book out in the intake in the roadway where he'd signed, and a book in the intake of sixth that he'd signed, so he walked in the intake, come across the head gate there and headed down the belt line and found one book he had signed. I just don't know how he could of missed the fire in the mouth of the section and had it get big enough to kill him before he got out of the section. Something we will probably never know. I know I talked to Kenny Valdez and he is just positive it started on the Super 500. He was there shortly after it started and he said when he was there, there was no fire in the intake it was all in the Super 500 area. But still any way you look at it, it still had to of been going enough that the fire boss should of seen smoke, smelled

smoke before he ever headed in and obviously he didn't or ignored it if he did.

Chief: I remember recovery when we went back in there because we were one of the first teams in there and we found them other five and we went into the belt area and there was nothing left in there except the belt and it was like licorice and everything else in there was just gutted out you could barely see the 500. You could see the stopping by the dog leg had big spaces between them where styrofoam had melted out, and let the air go through the stopping and contaminate the air in the other entry. The stuff that was burning was putting off toxic gases and the filter rescuers that we found on some guys wouldn't filter that out. Lynn had three around his neck when we found him. Those things only filter out carbon monoxide.

Gordon: It amazed me how many people we saw didn't have anything we saw some that had the little w-65 (self rescuer) and their mouths had swollen up from the heat and there were two people in the first nine that were sharing a rescuer sitting side by side and one open sitting between them, and then there were some that didn't have anything cracked open. I only saw one set of goggles on. The oxygen generating rescuers come with goggles and have to wear them so you won't absorb the CO through your eyes. Even though there was stuff to put on, either they didn't think it was as serious as it was or they just didn't have the time.

Tyson: Who was Kenny Blake with that showed him the way out.

Gordon: Tom Hurst. He was an older miner from back east, that alot of people respected. He had a construction crew in the mine at that time that was helping put in roof support.

Chief: He had quite a few years under ground he had survived a mine fire in a pot ash mine. He was well liked and well respected.

Gordon: Tom told Kenny and the rest of the people to go out the dog leg. Kenny and Tom started out that way the smoke was real thick and Tom realize the crew was not following him, so Tom went back for the crew and Kenny continued on his own. The smoke was so thick that he got completely turned around and he ran into a block stopping and panic hit him so hard he tried to tear it down with his bare hands. Realizing he couldn't break through the wall he just continued to feel his way along and eventually found a door that led to the return and fresh air. In this process he would of had to pass the first nine that were already dead, but the smoke was so thick he didn't even know they were there. Once he got through that door the smoke was still really thick. He noticed the smoke somewhat lighter towards his feet so he knelt down and there was clear area about one to two feet above the ground. He was then able to see the smoke coming out of the longwall section into the return where he was. He went up past where the smoke was

coming into the return and then he was completely out of the smoke. Then he went over to the intake and found people there that was fighting the fire. At first they didn't even know he had even been in there and they just more or less ignored him. He finally got someones attention and told them where he had just come from and that there were people trying to get out of the section. He was then taken to the surface.

Tyson: What bothered you the most or hated the most?

Gordon: Probably leaving the bodies in I guess. It was bad when we found out that we had bodies and there was not much chance of finding survivors, but when we actually had to leave and leave the bodies there, and the way the fire was going then and that we wasn't going to be able to get back to the bodies. That was bad.

Chief: The bodies. It was probably hardest on alot of the guys, especially leaving people you knew and you don't ever get enough training to deal with that one. You can train to fight a fire and do alot of other things but the bodies shook alot of people up. Everybody handled it differently.

Gordon: One of the guys on our team, it made him sick he had to turn around and go back out. He stayed in the mine and continued to fight fire but didn't go back in where the bodies were. Another guy didn't want to go in at all but ended up going in anyway and handled it by not looking

at the bodies and focusing his attention elsewhere. Some it didn't bother at all

I find it amazing the devastation it put out County in losing 27 people. It was terrible all the trouble and heart ache it caused.

As a final footnote of my report, after interviewing these five people and talking with other mine rescue team members, there has been some good come out of this disaster. They all believe the mine are much safer now and many steps have been taken to help ensure todays miners from this ever happening again, from improved safety standards, extensive detecting equipment and improved self rescue devises, todays miner is better equip to handle a disaster or this nature, but all of these people to the last man believe it can happen again.