CONTEST WITH DEATH

Four hundred pounds of coal dust goes up with a roar in a simulated mine explosion at state fairgrounds. Blast opened event.

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Staff Photos by David Lutes

IT WAS a strange sort of contest. Five men, draped with oxygen equipment that gave them the appearance of men from outer space, walking silently in single file down a corridor of ropes, past simulated falls of slate and crawling through low gas-filled rooms.

The electric lamps on their hard-shelled caps probed into the darkness of the Ohio state fairgrounds. Now and then the leader signalled for a halt while he tested the air for explosive gases or deadly carbon monoxide. Then on again past coal cutters and conveyer cars, the only sound the bleat of a bicycle horn—one bleat to stop, two to go forward, three to retreat.

This was the national mine rescue competitions held Oct. 2 at the Columbus fairgrounds. The five-man teams, 15 of them, were the top mine rescue teams entered from six states, vying for the honor of being called the best in the country.

For the mine workers, this was something akin to the World Series for baseball fans. But there was no wildly cheering crowd, no play-by-play description. The game these teams were playing with such grim earnestness might easily be a matter of life and death on some near tomorrow. Disaster and subsequent rescue work is no stranger to the men who go down in the mines.

The roped-off course on the fairgrounds track faithfully resembled the floor plan of an underground mine operation. Branching off the main corridor (or heading, as the miners call it) were three entries or passageways. Each entry, in turn had two side passages which came to the dead-end of the working face where the coal is dug.

Theoretically there had been an explosion and fire in the workings with a number of men still down there. The problem of each of the teams was the same: They had a half-hour to explore all the entries and passageways, make a map of all hazards or unusual conditions observed and rescue any survivors.

These highly trained teams are the first to enter any mine after a disaster. Although the saving of trapped and injured miners is a prime consideration, the maps the teams prepare showing damage or danger areas are invaluable to work parties which will follow to clean up the devastation.

The extreme importance of locating all hazards is emphasized by the scoring system in the mine rescue contest. From the time the men enter the main heading to begin the course they are constantly under the watchful eye of a battery of judges. In the national meet at Columbus, all of the judges were officials of the U. S. Bureau of Mines, sponsors of the contest.

Scoring is by a complicated schedule of discounts. All teams have a perfect score as they begin the course but along the way points are deducted for failure to follow safety rules, lack of good team coordination, failure of oxygen equipment or a hundred other factors which, in a real rescue mission, might prove the difference between life and death.

Points were scored against one team, for example, for "killing" the only live survivor on the mock mine course. This "injured" miner had barricaded himself in at the deadend of a passageway, a not uncommon practice. His barricade of burlap and boards theoretically was airtight to keep out deadly gases such as carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulphide, nitrogen peroxide or sulphur dioxide.

When such crude barricades are found following a mine explosion, the rescue team knows immediately there are men behind it, perhaps still living. If the barricade is opened immediately, however, air currents moving through the mine might circulate poisonous gases to finish their deadly work.

The proper procedure is for the rescue team to build another airtight barricade a few feet down the passageway, sealing themselves off between the two barricades. Then the miner's barricade can be safely opened.

Coming to the crude wall the leader of one team, however, probed through the barricade immediately to see what was on the other side. Inside was a survivor. The leader closed the opening almost immediately, but not before a veteran mine official observing the scene gasped: "He killed him, sure as shootin'."

For the most part, mine rescue workers are young men, many of them ex-GI's. The rules of the contest state they must not be over 45 years of age. It is a young man's work, hot and hard and nerve-wracking even on the contest course.

Using self-contained oxygen units designed by George McCaa of the Pennsylvania bureau of mines, a rescue team can safely pass through any poison gas area. The units will supply oxygen for two hours of the most strenuous exertion.

F. E. Griffith, a burly, gray-haired mining engineer of the U. S. Bureau of Mines and himself a veteran of rescue work at 50 mine fires and explosions, has worn an "apparatus" for 18 hours at a stretch without replenishing the oxygen supply.

"I were out before the oxygen did," Griffith said with a slow grin. His tests were conducted to determine how long the oxygen would last with a man doing a minimum of moving around. Even without expending any energy it was a grueling grind. For the entire 18 hours Griffith bit down on the rubber mouthpiece of the face mask, unable to eat or drink. After a few hours the nose clamp began to feel like an ever-tightening vise.

This McCaa oxygen apparatus is the key tool of the mine rescue worker. Without it, probing into a devastated mine level would be impossible.

At least one spare oxygen unit is carried by each team on their stretcher. A first-aid kit, blankets, burlap trattice cloth for making barricades, hammers, nails and pry bars are also part of their equipment.

Moving along in single file, each of the men holds the lifeline in his left hand. This slim strand of rope is usually on a reel at the entrance to the devastated area. As they probe deeper and deeper into the pitch black maze of the mine, the lifeline is their only contact with the outside, sometimes their sole means of finding their way back to a safe area.

The lifeline is also used for signals: One tug for "stop" if traveling or "all right" if at rest; two tugs for "advance"; three tugs for "retreat" and four tugs for "distress." Three tugs from the reel end at the entrance means "return at once."

Horns or bells are also used for the same signals, with most of the teams favoring little bleating bicycle airhorns. With the oxygen apparatus in use at all times, the men cannot communicate except by signs or the signals.

All mine rescue workers are miners, themselves. Some are workers, others foremen or mine officials.

Although most of the teams are sponsored by their companies, the winning squad was sponsored by the United Mine Workers at Kitzmiller, Md. Ohio teams in the rescue contest were from the Hanna Coal Co., Dan Glen No. 11 mine, Dan Glen, O., and Youghiogheny and Ohio Coal Co., Dorothy mine, at Martins Ferry.

Watching the contests at Columbus with extreme interest were officials of the Ohio Civil Defense set-up. The similarity between mine rescue work and the operations which might be necessary in the event of a bombing attack on an industrial city were grimly apparent.

There, probing imaginary walls and roofs for weak spots, testing for imaginary gas pockets and fixing simulated cave-ins and fire, was a nucleus of highly trained rescue workers. At the contests they demonstrated their readiness for mine disaster work—or a bigger national calamity.

It was a strange sort of contest—played in the semi-darkness with almost complete silence. But on the perfection of the contestants rests the most beautiful sight a trapped or injured miner ever saw—the bobbing head lamps of a rescue team approaching down a Stygian black mine passageway.