

# West Virginia Mine Explosion Claims Twelve

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Staff Writer

2006 began tragically for the community of Tallmansville, West Virginia. On January 2, an early morning explosion at the Sago Coal Mine trapped 13 miners—killing one miner instantly and leaving the other twelve trapped 260 feet below ground. Another group of miners traveling in a separate car behind the first group heard and felt the explosion and was able to escape the mine. Although the cause of the explosion has yet to be determined, death was by carbon monoxide that slowly spread below ground. Killed in the explosion were Thomas P. Anderson, Alva Martin Bennett, Jim Bennett, Jerry Groves, George Hamner Jr., Terry Helms, Jesse L. Jones, David Lewis, Martin Toler, Fred Ware Jr., Jack Weaver, and Marshall Winans. The lone survivor of the explosion, Randal McCloy Jr., is currently at the Ruby Memorial Hospital in Morgantown, West Virginia. The latest information on McCloy's condition states that he has been upgraded from critical to serious condition and that he is breathing on his own. His heart and liver functions continue to improve but doctors are concerned about his

kidney function. McCloy remains in a coma. The Sago Mine explosion is West Virginia's deadliest coal mining accident since 1968. In that explosion, 78 men died at a mine in Marion County; nineteen of those remain entombed in the mountain.

Because of dangerously high concentrations of carbon monoxide, rescuers entered the Sago Mine more than twelve hours after the initial explosion. An Associated Press story on MSNBC.com stated that the miners retreated farther into the mine after the explosion and hung up a fabric covering that is intended to keep out poisonous gases. Each miner was also said to have a breathing mask. Sago officials said that the miners were following their training regarding rescue operations. Rescuers reported finding farewell notes written by some of the deceased miners, assuring family members that they had not suffered.

Government officials speaking on the condition of anonymity stated that the miners were less than half a mile from fresh air and that the miners also had access to an oxygen tank located within the mine. It is speculated that because of the smoky conditions, the miners may not have been able to deter-

mine their proximity. As family and friends gathered at Sago Baptist Church to await word of the miners, erroneous information reached them that the twelve miners were alive—information that also was erroneously reported by newspapers and television stations. Elation turned to disbelief and anger three hours later when word was received that only one miner had survived. Ben Hatfield, CEO of International Coal Group, who owns the Sago Mine, blamed the misinformation on a "miscommunication among rescue crews" and further said that "In the process of being cautious, we allowed the jubilation to go on longer than it should have."

Based in Ashland, Kentucky, International Coal Group (ICG) employs 145 miners at Sago. The Sago Mine processes 800,000 tons of coal a year for electrical power plants. The Sago Mine was cited in 2005 for over two hundred safety violations with seventeen of those being considered serious problems, such as excessive, combustible coal dust. ICG says that they inherited the majority of the problems from the mine's former owner, Anker West Virginia Mining Company. ICG says

that it has spent more than \$40 million in upgrades to its West Virginia mines since acquiring them in 2004. Improvements at the Sago Mine include increasing the amount of air circulating underground, improving the mines' underground transportation system, and improving more than two miles of escape passages.

The Sago Mine remains closed while investigation into the cause of the explosion continues. In the meantime, Sago miners are deciding whether or not to accept work in other mines owned by ICG. Miners are aware of the danger of their jobs; for some, like Ronald Grall, mining is a way of life. Grall says that he has worked in eight or nine mines for 40 years and is eager to go back to work. He says he cannot imagine a job that he could like more. Some have already gone to work in other

ICG mines. Danny Loudin accepted work at another ICG mine he says because "they're excellent people to work for." Another factor for returning to work in mines may be income. The average income for coal miners in West Virginia is \$55,000. Owen Jones, whose brother, Jesse, was killed in the Sago explosion, is not sure if he will return to the mines but "you work for Hardee's or McDonald's...and then you don't make enough money to live."

A memorial service for the miners was held on Sunday, January 15 at West Virginia Wesleyan College Chapel, located in Buckhannon, West Virginia. Candles were lit for each of the miners and first lady Gayle Manchin gave each family a statue of a coal miner. After the service, mourners released balloons.

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