

Called-off rescue in mine death sparks questions

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RENO, Nev. -- A father of five plunges deep into an abandoned mine shaft. Nearly 200 feet down, video images show he is injured but still breathing, trapped by debris.

The century-old shaft, though, is extremely unstable, its walls crumbling. As one rescuer tries to descend to reach the man, he is hit by a large rock, which splits his hard-hat. Other efforts yield more falling rocks and clear evidence: This is going to be a dangerous mission -- maybe too dangerous.

The scenario unfolded underneath Nevada last week, when rescue teams were told to stand down in their bid to reach 28-year-old Devin Westenskow, even as they had evidence he was still alive.

But the ethical questions are more universal: How do you balance the desire to save a human being in peril with the equally important priority of keeping emergency workers safe and alive to rescue another day?

"You're playing God in a sense," said Rob McGee, secretary-treasurer of the United States Mine Rescue Association.

McGee said he can't recall a mine rescue operation that was halted while someone was still alive. But, he noted, a rescue gone awry compounds such a tragedy, adding another layer of grief. Only officials on the ground can know how best to proceed, he said.

"Whoever made the call in Nevada I'm sure they're hearing it from both ends because there's always someone who's saying, 'No, don't give up,' " McGee said.

Indeed, family members of Westenskow praised rescuers for their efforts and, in a joint statement, said they understood when told early Friday of the decision to call off the rescue effort.

"It was extremely difficult for all of those involved with the rescue attempt. We all sat there in shock and disbelief trying to process the terrible news," said a family statement released Sunday by Ronald Schrempp, an uncle of the victim's mother. "Family members offered prayers and said their good-byes to Devin. We asked for the angels to be with him. It was the hardest thing ever to leave Devin on that mountain in the mine shaft."

Such understanding wasn't unanimous, however. As news reports of the trapped man gained national attention, newspaper readers and others online reacted with a mix of comment that included strong opinion that no one should be abandoned in such a situation.

Corey Schuman, owner of Gold Rush Expeditions, a Salt Lake City-based company that locates and files claims on abandoned mines, questioned the decision to stop while Westenskow was still alive.

"I have no doubt we could have pulled him out without a problem," he said Sunday. "It's really not too dangerous. It's a lack of experience that causes problems. Nobody really trains for this and goes into abandoned mines. I have been down shafts 200 or 300 feet and it's not a problem."

J. Davitt McAteer, who directed the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration in the Clinton administration, said that mine rescues may be subject to such intense second guessing, in part because they are followed closely

by the public and media, and tactics in solving the crisis come down to a judgment call.

"There are no rules for mine rescues. Each situation is different and each mine-rescue decision has to be made by people on the ground," McAteer said. "The decision has to be made on a judgment that they won't put the rescuers at risk, and it's a balancing act that they have to decide."

Since 1869, 151 rescuers have died in 39 mine accidents in the U.S. with 17 of those fatalities occurring in three accidents since 2000, according to statistics compiled by McGee's organization, based in Uniontown, Pa. The most recent involved three rescuers killed by a collapse at Utah's Crandall Canyon coal mine in August 2007, in a grim case that also involved fierce debate over whether additional lives should have been risked to save the trapped miners.

Of course, such life or death decisions aren't confined to mining accidents. Firefighters and other first responders on the scene of crises face choices on, for example, whether to rescue people in burning buildings.

Steve Frady, a former fire chief in the historic mining town of Virginia City, noted that "people get emotionally tied into these situations, whether they are friends or relatives of victims or onlookers who don't understand the risks simply because they have not been involved in emergency situations ... It's easy to try to second guess what's going on from the outside."

Top officials with the Pershing and Lander county sheriff's departments were closely involved in the rescue effort, and did not offer comment on details of the rescue effort, including whether one person, or a team, made the final decision to halt the operation. Also assisting on the scene were personnel from Newmont Mining Corp., the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and the Nevada departments of public safety and minerals.

Schrempp said that the family was told that rescuers were able to get within about 50 feet of Westenskow before they had to pull back early Friday, due to the hazards.

Westenskow, of Evanston, Wyo., had children ranging in age from 1 to 9, and was divorced but engaged to be married, his family said. He was an avid hunter and snowmobiler who loved the outdoors. He worked at a geothermal drilling operation in Nevada; he was with two friends exploring Wednesday during his off-hours when he fell 180 feet into the open shaft.

"He was a quiet guy. A hard worker," Schrempp said. "He loved to explore the outback of Nevada and Wyoming."

About 50,000 abandoned mine shafts and openings have been identified as the most hazardous in Nevada, but the shaft where he fell wasn't among them, BLM officials said. Authorities say they plan to permanently seal the shaft with Westenskow's body entombed in it.

"The family feels that if Jesus Christ was buried in a tomb, it's good enough for Devin," said his grandmother, Lois Westenskow.