THE ROLLING THUNDER COAL MINE RESCUE ATTEMPT

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Rescues have a way of interrupting rescue training. Members of the American sump diving community have been meeting in the early winter each year to practice sump rescue skills. Six members met in Gray, Tennessee, on Saturday, November 8, 2025, for our fourth annual two-day Sumposium. We spent the day standardizing our techniques and practicing moving patients underwater. After dinner at the local Mexican restaurant, Chris Garguilo received an unexpected phone call.

The Rolling Thunder coal mine is in western West Virginia. On Saturday afternoon, miners had been digging when they accidentally broke into another mine. Miners have clear rules for maintaining a safe distance from other mines, but the other mine had been abandoned since the 1940s and was poorly documented. Like many abandoned mines, it was full of water. Millions of gallons started flooding into the Rolling Thunder mine.

Foreman Steve Lipscomb was on duty in the mine. He rushed to the incident site and helped ensure all the workers escaped the rising water. Later, when a headcount was done, only Steve was missing.

Fearing that Steve was in a dry section of the mine and was prevented from exiting by tunnels full of water, the mine's leadership started requesting additional resources. One of the mine's safety personnel had been thinking about learning to cave dive. He suggested they request cave divers. The West Virginia Emergency Management Division contacted Bru Randall of the Eastern Region of the National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC), who in turn contacted the NCRC's diving coordinator, Zeb Lilly. After gathering more information about the incident, Zeb began contacting nearby members of the American sump rescue community. Efforts were also started to get resources for the divers, including a fire truck with an air compressor to fill their scuba tanks.

Jon Lillestolen arrived first on the scene. He met with the mine's leadership to get a situation update and set their expectations for how sump rescues are done. Our concept was to find Steve and keep him supplied until the water was lowered. Jon was then driven in a "mantrip," an underground personnel carrier, along the train tracks through the mine to get eyes on the water.

Through the efforts of everyone involved, it was believed that the tunnel to Steve's assumed location was sumped in two places. Each sumped section was believed to be 600–800 feet long. The tunnel was 20 feet wide and six to eight feet high. The deepest that the tunnel's ceiling went below the water was only 10 feet. The water was 55 degrees Fahrenheit. Because of the coal dust in the water, visibility was only a few inches at best. Every 100 feet, the tunnel was intersected by cross-cuts to parallel tunnels.

Laying a nylon cave diving guideline to the dry section beyond the sumps would be very difficult in these conditions, but fortunately, it wasn't needed. Mines hang a continuous cable from the tunnel ceiling to their exit. If all of a miner's lights go out, he or she can find the cable and run his or her hands al-



Rescue Group.
Photo provided by Authors

ong it while walking. The cable has small cones on it that serve as directional indicators, so a miner knows which way is out of the mine.

Other sump divers started to arrive. They included Ian Flom, Chris Garguilo, Chris Howell, Tucker Palmatier, Michael Raymond, and Aaron Thomas. Dustin Schleifer also arrived to help represent the divers to the rescue leadership. After much discussion, it was decided that three divers — Jon, Chris Howell, and Tucker — would dive through the sumps and search for Steve. The divers were trained on the mine's safety equipment, including three-gas air quality monitors, and prepared their equipment. The divers not going on the first trip, Team Two, were sent to get some sleep in their cars.

People who run surface and mine rescues are used to having continuous communication with all of their personnel. This is impossible in cave (and especially sump) rescues due to the nature of the cave and the underwater environment. The miners trained the divers on how to use the telephones located throughout the mine. The miners had the divers spool several thousand feet of communication wire onto a cave-diving reel, which would pay out as the divers swam into the mine, providing an additional means of communication if the existing phone cables were damaged. The divers were also trained how to splice into the existing cables and attach portable phones to them, so they didn't have to rely on the fixed-location phones in the mine.

Dive Team One entered the water early Sunday morning. Visibility was nonexistent. The lead diver had to push logs and other debris out of his way. Both when they emerged into the air bell between the two sumps, and when they exited the second sump, they opened up a Darren Drum they had brought, took out an air monitor, and checked the air quality to make sure it was safe to stop using their scuba regulators.

Team One searched the tunnels beyond the sumps for several hours. The floor here ranged from dry to three feet of water. They did not find any sign of Steve. Communications were a major challenge. The dive reel with the communication wire had jammed early in the dive and was left behind. Many of the phones did not work, presumably because of damaged communication cables. Eventually, the team did find a working phone and checked in with the rescue leadership. It was determined that Chris would swim out of the mine, while Jon and Tucker would continue searching for a short while before exiting as well.

In the command center, there was much debate about the merits of sending in another team of divers to continue searching for Steve. While everyone was still treating the incident as a rescue attempt, there were concerns about the risks involved. After hearing from Team One that there were areas that they had not had time to check, the leadership gave Team Two permission to enter the mine.

Meanwhile, parallel efforts were ongoing to improve the situation. The miners worked to pump out the water. The equipment available was only keeping pace with the flooding and had not yet begun to lower the water level. Ashley Lewis and Vanessa Pinter arrived to give Dustin a chance to sleep. Zeb had additional divers start heading towards the mine, while the state worked to acquire additional equipment and personnel.

Team Two — Ian, Aaron, and Michael — entered the sumps in the mid-afternoon. Beyond the sumps, they also ran into challenges trying to use the mine's communication wires. When they opened a door to search tunnels that Team One had not explored, their air monitors began to alarm about low oxygen levels, and members near the door started feeling dizzy. While the oxygen levels were usable, the team decided to follow the route Team One had used to reach a working phone and search along the way. After checking in with the command center, they were directed to search the area near where the breach happened. Later, after getting on the phone again, they were directed to exit the mine due to concerns about air quality and to allow the miners to start using larger pumps to lower the water level. During the swim out of the mine, the team could hear a pump in the distance. They were concerned about being sucked into it, but this turned out not be a problem.

All the divers reunited on the surface. Chrissy Richards had arrived and helped Team Two clean up. The rescue leadership decided that while they wanted a dive team to be kept on standby, they would focus on pumping down the water. The divers started heading home Sunday night and were all gone by midday Monday.

Steve's remains were located on Thursday morning. The mine had brought in additional pumps and, at one point were removing 6,000 gallons per minute. By Thursday morning, they felt safe enough to send searchers walking into the formerly flooded tunnels. They found the remains about an hour and a half later. They were discovered in a formerly flooded section some distance from the path that the divers had swum along.

The American sump diving community was honored to be given an opportunity to assist the mining community. We have all put years of effort and untold amounts of money into training for and participating in exploration efforts. It was a privilege to be able to help people in need. We learned a lot from the experience. These lessons will be captured in a revised version of the Guidelines to Sump Rescue manual. Members of the community also plan to take mine rescue training so that we can increase interoperability with the mine community in the future.



Rescue groups planning. Photo by Authors