

4 copper miners fatally crushed

Tons of ore hit as workers attempt to clear passageway

By Jim Walsh,
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The Arizona Republic

SUPERIOR — Four miners were crushed to death late Tuesday, apparently while they were trying to clear 60 tons of copper ore that was blocking a steep passageway 4,000 feet underground, authorities said Wednesday.

The ore slide at the No. 9 shaft of the Magma Copper Co. mine was the worst mining accident in Arizona since 1982, when three miners were crushed in the same mine, authorities said.

Magma officials identified the victims as Alfred Edwards, 56, of Globe; John H. Dalton, 38, of Miami; Jeff Christiansen, 21, of Claypool; and Nicholas Truett, 19, of Superior.

They died instantly when the wet, mucky copper ore broke free inside what is known as an ore pass, a 6- by 8-foot vertical chute into which ore is dumped for eventual transport out of the mine, authorities said.

The rock came down with such force that it ripped out the last 150 feet of timber and steel used to line the ore pass.

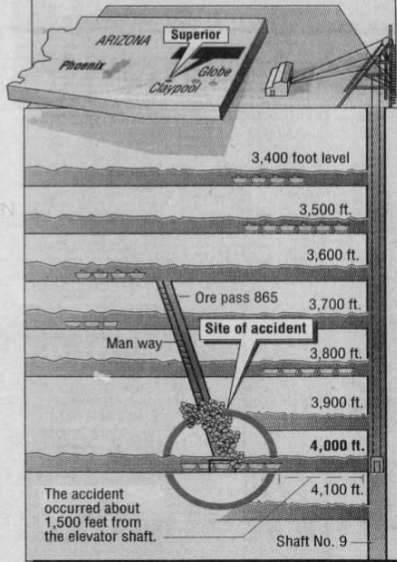
Magma authorities estimate that the accident occurred between 9:30 p.m. Tuesday, when the crew last was heard from, and 11:15 p.m., when the crew failed to get on an elevator to be hoisted to the surface.

Workers used picks, shovels and their bare hands in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the men, whose bodies were recovered Wednesday.

Mine operations were shut down Wednesday but are expected to — See 4 ARIZONA, page A16

MINE ACCIDENT

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Joe Willie Smith/The Arizona Republic



Tom Story/The Arizona Republic

At right, Kelly Stolp (left), safety manager for Magma Copper Co., and Douglas K. Martin, state mine inspector, lower flags outside the Magma facility to half-staff Wednesday in honor of the four miners who were killed.

1993 Magma Copper Mine Ore Fall



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Fri, Jan 5, 2024

4 Arizona miners are killed as tons of copper ore fall

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Earlier Tuesday, authorities said, the mine had passed an inspection by the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration.

"In fact, Mine Safety and Health (officials) just completed their quarterly inspection of the mine, and they gave us high marks," said Doug McGregor, general manager of the Superior mine. No citations for safety violations were issued, he said.

Although the investigation of the accident is continuing, Arizona Mining Inspector Douglas Martin said the victims apparently were trying to clear what miners call a "hang-up," which occurs when rock jams up in ore passes.

He said investigators found the safety belt of one miner hanging in a "man way," a narrow passage that runs parallel to the ore pass and allows miners access to it. That could indicate that one of the four had climbed up to look at the hang-up through an opening in the ore pass, Martin said.

The blockages, which are not uncommon in underground copper mining, usually are cleared either with a small dynamite blast or a pneumatic gun that shoots a blast of air, he said.

But it is unclear what measures, if any, were taken to remove the blockage Tuesday night, Martin said.

McGregor said there is "no evidence that an explosion occurred."

No one witnessed the accident, Martin said, because the four were working alone, about 4,000 feet down in the mine.

The Superior mine is one of only two underground mines in the state; the other is Magma's operation in San Manuel.

John Yecdo, 39, one of the miners who dug through the muck in hopes of finding survivors, said the rescuers worked with great caution.

"Any type of rescue, you try to secure the area before helping somebody else," he said. "You can't help anybody else if you get caught in a cave-in yourself."

Although he and his colleagues were shaken by the accident, Yecdo said, "everybody basically kept a cool head down there and proceeded with the work."

As he worked, Yecdo said, he thought about the missing miners.

"I was just hoping and praying they'd be OK when we found them," he said, adding, "We all take care of each other."

Yecdo said he knew Dalton and Edwards and was poignantly aware that he could easily have been a victim. "It could have been anybody."

"We (miners) sort of know the risks," he said. "We have to take the proper precautions, but sometimes they don't even work out."

McGregor said that until Tuesday night's accident, there had been no fatal accidents in the Superior mine since it reopened in 1989.

According to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, 23 of the 24 people killed in Arizona mining accidents in the past 11 years have been copper workers.

But Martin called it "very rare" to have multiple fatalities in mining accidents in Arizona.

In 1982, three men were killed when a shaft collapsed at the Superior mine, shortly before plummeting copper prices shut the mine for seven years. It was reopened when prices rebounded.

Martin said state and federal investigators will examine the scene and interview miners who were working in other parts of the mine.

Perhaps most important of all will be what other miners heard just about the time the men were killed, he said.

"It creaks, it snaps," Martin said of the mine.

Yecdo said such noises can be a warning that timbers used to support the mine need reinforcement.

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