Late into the night on Wednesday, July 24, 2002, coal miners working in the Quecreek Mine broke through a wall that was supposed to be hundreds of feet thick. It was not. As a result, 72 million gallons of water rushed into the mine. Eighteen miners on the 3-11 p.m. shift scrambled to escape a watery grave. Nine could not get out of the mine in Somerset County.

A rescue operation swung into furious motion immediately. The nine miners were trapped 240 feet below the surface in a chamber that was only 4-feet high.

The first thing rescuers did was drill holes to provide air to the men. Others worked to drill holes to pump water out of the mine. As the rescuers worked, the families waited at Sipesville firehall. And waited.

Finally, at 10:15 p.m. Saturday, July 27, rescuers using a drill punched a hole into the mine about 300 feet from the miners. They lowered a microphone and speaker in the hole and learned all nine were alive. Using an 8.5-foot cage-type 22-inch-wide cylinder the rescuers were able to retrieve the miners one at a time, heaviest to lightest after the crew leader who was having chest pains.

The first miner came up at 12:50 a.m. on July 28. The last at 2:45 a.m. All survived.

“Nine for Nine,” as then Gov. Mark Schweiker said.

The rescue site was on a farm owned by Bill Arnold that is now a memorial to the rescue. On the night the miners became trapped, Arnold had been alerted after seeing two men with flashlights “moving suspiciously around their dairy pasture,” according to the Monument for Life Memorial Park website.

“By daybreak, the 212-year-old Dormel Farms would be transformed into the site of the largest rescue effort in Pennsylvania in nearly three decades.”

The Monument for Life Memorial Park is open every day, dawn to dusk. It includes a 7-foot bronze statue of a miner, a museum that includes the rescue capsule and the clothing the miners wore. Nine evergreen trees represent the nine miners.

Here is a timeline of events printed in 2002 by the Associated Press:

Wed., July 24, 9 p.m.: Nine miners become trapped 240 feet below ground inside the Quecreek mine. The mine is flooded with millions of gallons of water

Thurs., July 25, 3 p.m.: Rescuers drill 6-inch wide hole into chamber in an attempt to make contact with miners. They decide to allow the compressor, feeding the air into the drill, to run continuously in an attempt to warm the miners and keep encroaching water at bay.

3:30 a.m.: Rescue workers hear tapping from the area where miners are trapped.

11:30 a.m.: Tapping heard again.

2:30 p.m.: A drill rig large enough to bore a rescue shaft arrives from a West Virginia mine.
6 p.m.: Crews begin drilling tunnel to reach miners.
Fri., July 26, 2 a.m.: Drill bit gets stuck in rock about 100 feet down and breaks.
11:10 a.m.: Digging with new equipment begins on another shaft about 75 feet from the first.
4:45 p.m.: Broken bit is removed from the first rescue tunnel.
8 p.m.: Drilling resumes on first rescue shaft.
Sat., July 27, 3 p.m.: Tunnel reaches depth of 224 ft, less than 20 feet from where miners were believed to be.
7:30 p.m.: Gov. Mark Schweiker announces "We're on the verge."
8 p.m.: Drilling in first rescue shaft stopped briefly at 227 feet to fix problem with compressed air drill.
10:20 p.m.: Drill in first rescue shaft breaks through into the mine chamber 240 feet underground; workers remove equipment used to pump compressed air into the chamber and begin to tap on pipes, listening for response.
10:50 p.m.: A line of rescue workers lower a telephone and green light into smaller shaft adjacent to drill site.
11 p.m.: Smiling rescue workers begin to give thumbs-up signs and hug.
11:35 p.m.: Gov. Mark Schweiker confirms all nine miners are alive.
Sunday, July 28, 12:57 a.m.: The first miner, Randy Fogle, 43, is pulled from the shaft.
2:44 a.m.: The ninth and final miner is pulled from the shaft.

Two days later, The Patriot-News printed this editorial – “Superb Effort//Nifty engineering and Lady Luck combined to save 9 trapped miners”

With some nifty engineering, a measure of good luck and a governor and crew who wouldn’t quit, nine coal miners were brought to the surface alive in a spectacular rescue after being trapped 240 feet underground for 80 hours.

It was a dramatic and emotional scene as, one by one, the nine miners emerged largely unscathed from a rescue capsule lowered into the mine through an emergency shaft drilled especially to get the men out.

“A dash of Lady Luck” was present, as state Environmental Protection Secretary David Hess noted, but the trapped miners and their rescuers did a lot of things right.

The miners stuck together, using their body heat to keep themselves warm, and they built barriers to keep the water, which had abruptly flooded the mine, away from the air pocket where they awaited rescue.

Black Wolf Coal Co., owner of the Quecreek Mine where the accident occurred in Somerset County, almost immediately requested a special drill to provide an air shaft to the trapped miners. It was disassembled and moved from Clarksburg, W.Va. on five trucks with a police escort. Using maps of the mine, mining engineers made an “educated guess” as to where the men were located and began drilling a six-inch hole.

They were rewarded on completion of the hole with taps from the men below on the pipe casing. In a tricky balancing act, the engineers devised a scheme that pumped water out of the flooded mine shaft while hot air was pumped down to the trapped miners.

Meanwhile, a shaft was drilled to bring the men out. It was a remarkable feat of underground rescue that will go down in mining annals as an amazing success story.

Gov. Mark Schweiker, who brought his unstinting optimism to a difficult undertaking, and Hess, who provided pithy commentary on the complicated operation, both performed admirably in their baptism of fire.

Once the most dangerous of jobs, with large and frequent losses of life, mining is far safer today. But the Quecreek accident provides an ample reminder that the hazards of working deep below ground remain significant.

This time, thankfully, a mining accident had a happy ending, which was all the more poignant coming as it did, 10 miles and 10 months from the crash of Flight 93.

Touchstone Pictures would later film a made-for-tv movie based on the event. It debuted in November of 2002 and again in July of 2003 to mark the one-year anniversary.

Join us Wednesday when we tour the Quecreek site on Wednesday’s Early Bird ride.