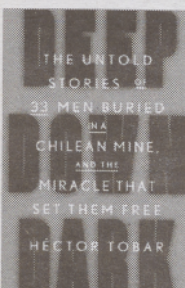


# 2,000 feet below the surface



**Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine, and the Miracle That Set Them Free** by Hector Tobar

BY JOHN BARKER  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The San Jose copper mine in the Atacama Desert of central Chile was founded in 1889. It is a testament to owner neglect. The 121 years of mining have left the mountain honeycombed. The unusually high pay induces miners to travel up to 36 hours to get to their seven-day shift. Deep underground they endure the sounds of the mountain “weeping” from time to time, giving off a thunderous, rumbling wail that almost always recedes, except when it doesn’t and granite-like diorite walls of the mountain’s tunnels start collapsing.

On Aug. 5, 2010, a 770,000-ton slab of the mountain collapsed, trapping 33 miners more than 2,000 vertical feet down in the mine. “Deep Down Dark” is the story of the event, the lives of the miners while trapped and the work of those who carried out the rescue. The story is well-told by Pulitzer Prize winner Hector Tobar of the Los Angeles Times.

Call it claustrophobia, call it speluncaphobia, whether it’s fear of small spaces or fear of caves, “Deep Down Dark” is not a book for those with these phobias punctuated by vivid imaginations. In fact, the narrative of this incredible event is most enjoyable for those who know that the rescue effort succeeded.

The mine owners’ neglect of basic safety precautions meant not only were escape routes unusable after the collapse, but the emergency water supply was just 10 bottles to go with an equally meager food supply. The miners’ access to industrial water stored in tanks and used to cool the equipment was fortuitous. A bit of industrial oil mixed in didn’t make it undrinkable. The food was rationed down to a taste a day.

The story of the 69 days from collapse to rescue moves smoothly between the



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*Trapped miner Esteban Rojas hugs his wife as he prays after reaching the surface to become the 18th person to be rescued from the San Jose mine in Copiapo on Oct. 13, 2010.*

evolution of the miners’ group dynamics as they are forced to strategize for survival, their domestic lives (some including a wife and girlfriend), as well as the efforts of those on the surface to plan and execute a rescue. In each domain, the author is careful not to embellish with unnecessary drama for its own sake; instead, he lets the miners’ reminiscences, the families’ worries, the rescuers’ efforts speak for themselves.

Those with a bent toward engineering will enjoy the description of the work of the American driller called from Afghanistan, where he’s been drilling holes for water for the troops. He’s the best candidate to operate the Schramm T130, the drill thought to have the best chance of reaching the miners. He keeps one foot on the rig while drilling because it’s a job that requires “feel.” His is one of three drills at work to reach the miners and the one that eventually succeeds after 33 days of drilling. He later says hitting the cavern where the miners had sought refuge involved too much luck.

As the drill breaks through, the trapped now have reason to hope that their time in the 100 degree-plus, high-humidity, fungus-ridden tomb may well come to a happy ending. But, it will take several days to test the stability of the newly drilled shaft and

the Fenix capsule that has been designed to bring the miners to the surface before they can begin the process of being lifted out one by one. During this time, the mountain makes sounds that tell another collapse is more than a remote possibility. Another event as catastrophic could doom the miners.

The miners emerge in the Fenix to the bright lights of television, with its worldwide audience of 1.2 billion, their families and those who have saved their lives.

Tobar then moves on with the miners as their lives evolve after the rescue. Their solemn pact that none of them will relate details of what happened underground is fragile, but largely honored. The miners entrusted Tobar with this project. He had unfettered access to the miners, a psychiatrist who counseled them as contact was established and rescue approached, Chilean ministry officials for whom he has more praise than one would expect government officials to deserve, the families of the miners, rescuers, and a wealth of documents.

All 33 miners survived. Not all flourished. Tobar’s very human presentation of that part of the story is as compelling as what precedes it. In all, it’s a story well-told of an event that pushed the participants to the limits.



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