

Sago Miners
Hickam

Sago Miners Memorial Remarks

by

Homer Hickam

January 15, 2006

Families of the Sago miners, Governor Manchin, Mrs. Manchin, Senator Byrd, Senator Rockefeller, West Virginians, friends, neighbors, all who have come here today to remember those brave men who have gone on before us, who ventured into the darkness but instead showed us the light, a light that shines on all West Virginians and the nation today:

It is a great honor to be here. I am accompanied by three men I grew up with, the rocket boys of Coalwood: Roy Lee Cooke, Jimmie O'Dell Carroll, and Billy Rose. My wife Linda, an Alabama girl, is here with me as well.

As this tragedy unfolded, the national media kept asking me: Who are these men? And why are they coal miners? And what kind of men would still mine the deep coal?

One answer came early after the miners were recovered. It was revealed that, as his life dwindled, Martin Toler had written this: *It wasn't bad. I just went to sleep. Tell all I'll see them on the other side. I love you.*

In all the books I have written, I have never captured in so few words a message so powerful or eloquent: *It wasn't bad. I just went to sleep. Tell all I'll see them on the other side. I love you.*

I believe Mr. Toler was writing for all of the men who were with him that day. These were obviously not ordinary men.

But what made these men so extraordinary? And how did they become the men they were? Men of honor. Men you could trust. Men who practiced a dangerous profession. Men who dug coal from beneath a jealous mountain.

Part of the answer is where they lived. Look around you. This is a place where many lessons are learned, of true things that shape people as surely as rivers carve valleys, or rain melts mountains, or currents push apart the sea. Here, miners still walk with a trudging grace to and from vast, deep mines. And in the schools, the children still learn and the teachers teach, and, in snowy white churches built on hillside cuts, the preachers still preach, and God, who we have no doubt is also a West Virginian, still does his work, too. The people endure here as they always have for they understand that God has determined that there is no joy greater than hard work, and that there is no water holier than the sweat off a man's brow.

In such a place as this, a dozen men may die, but death can never destroy how they lived their lives, or why.

As I watched the events of this tragedy unfold, I kept being reminded of Coalwood, the mining town where I grew up. Back then, I thought life in that little town was pretty ordinary, even though nearly all the

men who lived there worked in the mine and, all too often, some of them died or were hurt. My grandfather lost both his legs in the Coalwood mine and lived in pain until the day he died. My father lost the sight in an eye while trying to rescue trapped miners. After that he worked in the mine for fifteen more years. He died of black lung.

When I began to write my books about growing up in West Virginia, I was surprised to discover, upon reflection, that maybe it wasn't such an ordinary place at all. I realized that in a place where maybe everybody should be afraid—after all, every day the men went off to work in a deep, dark, and dangerous coal mine— instead they had adopted a philosophy of life that consisted of these basic attitudes:

We are proud of who we are. We stand up for what we believe. We keep our families together. We trust in God but rely on ourselves.

By adhering to these simple approaches to life, they became a people who were not afraid to do what had to be done, to mine the deep coal, and to do it with integrity and honor.

The first time my dad ever took me in the mine was when I was in high school. He wanted to show me where he worked, what he did for a living. I have to confess I was pretty impressed. But what I recall most of all was what he said to me while we were down there. He put his spot of light in my face and explained to me what mining meant to him. He said, "Every day, I ride the mantrip down the main line, get out and walk back into the gob and feel the air pressure on my face. I know the mine like I know a man, can sense things about it that aren't right even when everything on paper says it is. Every day there's something that needs to be done, because men will be hurt if it isn't

done, or the coal the company's promised to load won't get loaded. Coal is the life blood of this country. If we fail, the country fails."

And then he said, "There's no men in the world like miners, Sonny. They're good men, strong men. The best there is. I think no matter what you do with your life, no matter where you go or who you know, you will never know such good and strong men."

Over time, though I would meet many famous people from astronauts to actors to Presidents, I came to realize my father was right. There are no better men than coal miners. And he was right about something else, too:

If coal fails, our country fails.

The American economy rests on the back of the coal miner. We could not prosper without him. God in His wisdom provided this country with an abundance of coal, and he also gave us the American coal miner who glories in his work. A television interviewer asked me to describe work in a coal mine and I called it "beautiful." He was astonished that I would say such a thing so I went on to explain that, yes, it's hard work but, when it all comes together, it's like watching and listening to a great symphony: the continuous mining machines, the shuttle cars, the roof bolters, the ventilation brattices, the conveyor belts, all in concert, all accomplishing their great task. Yes, it is a beautiful thing to see.

There is a beauty in anything well done, and that goes for a life well lived.

How and why these men died will be studied now and in the future. Many lessons will be learned. And many other miners will live because of what is learned. This is right and proper.

But how and why these men *lived*, that is perhaps the more important thing to be studied. We know this much for certain: They were men who loved their families. They were men who worked hard. They were men of integrity, and honor. And they were also men who laughed and knew how to tell a good story. Of course they could. They were West Virginians!

And so we come together on this day to recall these men, and to glory in their presence among us, if only for a little while. We also come in hope that this service will help the families with their great loss and to know the honor we wish to accord them.

No matter what else might be said or done concerning these events, let us forever be reminded of who these men really were and what they believed, and who their families are, and who West Virginians are, and what we believe, too.

There are those now in the world who would turn our nation into a land of fear and the frightened. It's laughable, really. How little they understand who we are, that we are still the home of the brave. They need look no further than right here in this state for proof.

For in this place, this old place, this ancient place, this glorious and beautiful and sometimes fearsome place of mountains and mines, there still lives a people like the miners of Sago and their families, people who yet believe in the old ways, the old virtues, the old truths;

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who still lift their heads from the darkness to the light, and say for the nation and all the world to hear:

We are proud of who we are.

We stand up for what we believe.

We keep our families together.

We trust in God.

We do what needs to be done.

We are not afraid.