Sense of duty took the Viper Mine Rescue Team into the Sago Mine disaster.

Selfless Sacrifice in Time of Need

Pictured with Mike Woods (DNR Division of Mine Safety and Training) are (from left to right) Ty Hunt, Paul Perrine, Pete Bryant, Woods, Alan Setzer, Brett Bushong, Brad Kauffman and Brandon Sanson, members of the Viper Mine Rescue Team.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photo By Adele Hodde

Mine rescue team members are a special breed of coal miner.

He'd heard the phrase for years, but when reflecting back on the January 2, 2006 West Virginia Sago Mine explosion, Pete Bryant no longer took the phrase for granted.

With nearly 20 years of service on mine rescue teams, and now serving as trainer for the Williamsville-based Viper Mine Rescue Team, Bryant has spent hours each month preparing a select team of miners to step up to service in the unlikely event of a disaster. Viper Mine is a subsidiary of the International Coal Group, which also owns the Sago Mine.

"Looking into the eyes of the team members as they prepared to enter Sago Mine—a situation that put them in an unsafe, and potentially lethal, environment—I saw calm determination and a sense of duty," Bryant said of the seven-member Viper Mine team. "Hours of consistent practice and training paid off and all 15 rescue teams present worked to reach the trapped miners as quickly and safely as possible."

The tragic Sago Mine disaster drove home the need to protect those in Illinois working to produce an estimated 32 million tons of coal annually.

Illinois' underground and aggregate mine safety record now stands at 38 consecutive months without a fatality. Four additional state coal mine inspectors were hired in June, bringing the total to 12 Department of Natural Resources (DNR) inspectors. These inspectors routinely inspect the state's 12 underground coal mines for proper ventilation, hazardous conditions and safe work practices.

According to Mike Woods, manager of DNR's Division of Mine Safety and Training, additional safety measures are forthcoming as a result of recent state and federal legislation.

"Under federal law, the mine rescue response time has been cut to one hour," Woods explained. "In addition, the Illinois mine rescue force will be doubled to 48 people working through our four mine rescue stations—Springfield, Benton, Harrisburg and Sparta."

And to be further prepared for stepping up in time of need, mine rescue teams must now attend two mine rescue competitions annually. During these friendly competitions, teams are presented a problem-based scenario and required to map the simulated mine, noting hazards, extricating survivors and ventilating the mine.

"The need for activating any mine rescue team is an unfortunate call," Woods concluded. "But miners, their friends and families have the comfort of knowing highly trained teams will be on hand in time of need."