

THIS IS RIDICULOUS.....

At the dubious hour of nine in the morning, Wednesday April the 20th, Team Charlie left the Hôtel Sucre on a photographic mission that was to provide some firsts, some fits, some fears, and some fun....if you can call it that.

Riding with Captain Adams and MSgt Gonzalez, we struck boldly out of La Paz, cresting onto the altiplano, and followed closely by a cloud of dust, we made bumpy tracks for Catavi.

Catavi is in the heartland of Bolivia's tin mine~~x~~ country. Tin, in Bolivia, is synonymous with the right to rebel which is just what the once well-armed miners have done whenever the inclination or politically opport~~une~~ moment struck them. This history of political potboiling did not lend itself to our mental ease. But being Team Charlie, and whatever that is synonymous with, we were movin' on. In fact, we were probably all, seperately that is, planning on movin' on in, and on right out again. Quickly.

Catavi. A few well-expressed whistles (not from girls....scarce as hens teeth, unfortunately) greeted our arrival, and the chickens roosted in COMINBOL's guest house. There, a good meal, four beds for five men, and the announcement that tomorrow (Thursday) begins at 0545, greeted us.

Undaunted by this minor inconvenience, we went to bed, Bob sleeping on top of, or ~~under~~ ^{rather}, among, three sleeping bags on the floor.

0545 arrived early. The guide arrived late. Thus we had time to remove the enamel from our morning teeth with some Bolivian coffee.

Team Charlie was picked up, alone, and driven to the mines where we were passed from hand to hand until three miners, apparently of the security office, proceeded to outfit us for a trip into the hole...er, mine.

The outfit ~~was~~ we were called upon to wear tested our adaptability to the utmost. New miners hats, lamps on the front, pink....yes, pink rubber jackets, and nonfit black rubber boots. Add camera equipment and an expression

of ~~my~~ deliberate doubt, and you ~~xxxx~~ had Team Charley...or what was left of it. To the regular miners, we must have appeared in much the same lights as would a man in double-breasted jacket, striped pants, white and black shoes, spats, and straw hat popping in at the corner Discoteque for a bit of the dance. That was ridiculous.

Anyway. Dressed, we were invited aboard a small electric locomotive which was pulling a car with two benches, back to back. We sat. A bell rang several ear piercing times, and we went. From the eyes of the world. And the last thing you see as you enter that mine shaft is a statue of Mary, Mother of Jesus, and you've left salvation behind. Your life is now in the hands of 50 years of timberwork, holding up a mine full of malcontents.

Travelling along about five miles an hour, one peers intently at stone walls, miners, team members, anything....and all by the light of your miners lamp which is always looking the same direction you are. Unless, of course, you've shut it off. Then you can't peer at anything.

We went some 2350 meters into this tunnel, or mine shaft, which is in a hill 3500 meters wide at that level. Above us, at 30 meter levels, more mine tunnels, to a height of 650 meters above ~~xx~~ the one we were in.

It might be of factual interest to point out that since Co-president Barrientos, in 1963, sent in US trained troops to disarm the miners and put COMINBOL back in the black, the number of workers has shrunk from 8,000 (3,000 of them underground) to 5,000, ~~xx~~ with 2,000 of them underground. And this is Bolivia's biggest tin mine. Nearby is another, Siglo 20, of dubious fame since the miners, in 1961, held an American military officer hostage there.

Where were we? Ah, yes, at 2350 ~~feet~~ ^{meters}. And at roughly 14,000 feet altitude. And no map.

The train eventually stopped. We were invited into an underground office, again under the auspices of security, and passed into another set of hands. This set had some 17 years in with the mines. He was distant, but courteous and vaguely friendly. He certainly was patient with the weird Team he had been passed.

First, we viewed and filmed the drilling of holes for blasting; then ore cars; loading and travelling ore cars; then drilling at the end of a new tunnel where actual ore was being removed; then some inconsiderate fellow, sometime during our filming, set off what sounded like a BC-5 full of dynamite. Our collective ears sang, our senses reeled. This is it, we thought. One each, fox-hole prayer coming up.

But no. All was well and the guide motioned us on to more work. Outside, after an exciting but uneventful ride on the little train, dumping of the ore into the processing chain was filmed. And we went our merry way, the first US Army photographers, near as we can tell, ever to have opened the Bolivian lion's mouth, climbed the full distance of his digestive system, turning around before the moment of truth, and departing, none the worse for wear or fear.

Returning to the guest house, we joined in what aspired to a small international luncheon. Around the table, 8 people: four Americans, one Yugoslav, ~~ixSexty~~ one Scot, one Mexican, and me, the lonely Great Dane.