



NO FEAR OF GREAT DEPTHS

Kent Armstrong – A Portrait

It was a matter of tradition. After all, Kent Armstrong's hometown Sudbury in Ontario, Canada, is nicknamed The Nickel City. In the beginning of the 1970's, most of the town's 100,000 inhabitants worked in mining – and so did Armstrong's family. "It was just what people would do after high school," says Armstrong. So he started working in a nickel mine for a company now called Glencore.

More Manual Labor

The calm Canadian remembers his first working day as if it was yesterday. A pit cage took them underground. "It felt quite natural," he says in retrospect. Armstrong had no difficulties dealing with the depth: "For me, it felt like working in a subway tunnel. Being 50 or 5,000 feet underground doesn't really make a difference. It is just a number." Back then, the mine he worked in was 1,500 meters deep – today, some mines are three times as deep. "I am afraid of heights, but I was never scared of depths," he says, laughing.

In the 1970's, the work was much less automated and required much more manual labor, which made it physically demanding. The devices used were also quite different. For instance, the mine he worked in used air-driven drilling systems. Today, equipment and drilling systems are partly diesel-powered and technically much more sophisticated.

Switching Sides

Armstrong mined metal for two and a half years and then decided to go to college instead. That was not what people usually did: "Most of my friends remained in the industry," he says. After all, good money was paid in the mines, and workers who were prepared to work hard even got bonuses. And apart from that, the atmosphere was good. Armstrong too felt very much at ease: "It is a nice atmosphere.

Mine workers have a very special culture that is different from other industries. They are loyal, hard-working people, productive and safety-oriented." Therefore, he decided to remain in the industry and simply switch sides –he has been responsible for the equipment of the miners ever since.

Looking back, Armstrong says that starting to work for Dräger in 1994 felt just as natural as his first day in the mine. "Dräger already had a good reputation when I was working in the mine," he explains. The nickel mine also used products of Dräger. "In addition, underground rescuers called Draegermen taught us how to deal with emergencies and how to give first aid. So I already knew the name when I was a young man."

Hence, when the managing director of Dräger Canada asked the mining expert if he could imagine introducing the newest product of the BG4 respiratory protective device series, it didn't take him long to say yes. In 1994 he started working for Dräger and supervised the first tests for the Canadian market. In 2001, the product was finally launched on the market.

From Canada to the Big Wide World

From this point on, work became more and more global for Armstrong. Until 2006, he was Sales Manager for Canada, and was then also given the responsibility for the US and the Mexican market. In 2013, his area of responsibility grew even more, extending across oceans: Since then, the man with the engaging smile has been working as Business Development Manager Mining on a global level.

His friendliness is helpful as he is constantly in touch with customers all over the world. "I spend 75 percent of my time traveling to mining companies and governmental authorities," Armstrong explains. For him, Canada, the USA, South Africa, Australia and China are still core markets. Apart from that, new regions play a more and more important role, such as Central and South America, as well as Asian countries like Indonesia and Vietnam.

Thus, he is traveling all continents. To counterbalance his job, he prefers to take it easy in his spare time. The Canadian lives near the five Great Lakes, and, appropriately enough, fishing is his favorite hobby. He also loves to play golf. "Most miners feel like I do," says Armstrong – their job is all the excitement they need.

Small Industry, Small Regional Differences

Armstrong works all around the globe, and so do the mining companies. This is not only true when it comes to discovering new raw material deposits, but also with regard to their best practices. For instance, companies set out global standards for all their mines – so Armstrong doesn't need to pay too much attention to regional differences. "I visited mines all over the world, from the Mponeng Mine in South Africa, to Russia, the USA and Canada. Often, when I am underground, I have no idea which country I'm in," Armstrong summarizes smiling.

Of course, every country has its own legislation. But even here, more and more international standards are defined, such as thresholds for fine dust and polluting gases. Furthermore, the best practices are similar in all mines: "Often, even the miners working in a mine come from all over the world. For instance, many miners from South Africa work here in Canada. Miners love to travel".

Much more important than regional differences are the different types of mining. Coal production on one end of the scale and metal mining on the other pose challenges of a quite different nature. Armstrong explains the most significant difference: "Coal burns. This is why safety in coal mines is a completely different subject."

Trust Is Crucial

The expert has three keywords to summarize the general trends in the mining industry: "Deeper, farther, quicker". These trends are rooted in the incredible technological breakthroughs of the recent past. "In the last five years, there has been more technological development than in the 20 years before that," says Armstrong. He assumes that the limits to this trend are of economical rather than of technical nature – because, the deeper underground, the more complex and expensive things get.

This also applies to the safety measures that must meet higher standards. Dräger products live up to this challenge: "Our products are reliable. They meet the requirements of very deep mines," says Armstrong. "We have the technology required to rescue people, even if the mine is 4,000 meters deep. We are also able to comply with the laws that are getting more and more strict."

After so many decades, Armstrong still feels comfortable in his job. This becomes clear in the way he talks about it, which is at the same time dedicated and calm. He loves the international aspect to it just as much as the cooperation with big companies. And especially, he appreciates the atmosphere: "My job is not as physically demanding as working in the mines, but still, I am surrounded by the same culture, the same kind of people. In my job, trust is crucial. I believe that I understand the needs of the industry – and that gives me a good feeling."

