Nothing is impossible: Andes plane crash survivor Nando Parrado shares his miraculous story



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The famous story of how a rugby team beat the odds after their

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plane crashed in the Andes continues to inspire millions.

The Spanish filmmaker J.A. Bayona is the latest to depict the story, in Society of the Snow (La sociedad de la nieve) which was released in Spain in December 2023 and on Netflix. It was selected as the Spanish entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 96th Academy Awards in 2024.

It follows 30 years on from the Hollywood movie, Alive (1993), directed by Frank Marshall and starring Ethan Hawke as Nando Parrado.

Thankfully, few will ever face as extreme a situation. But many will have their own unexpected crises that will test their mettle.

In this previously published IESE interview, crash survivor Nando Parrado gives a powerful testimony of his 72 days on the mountain and explains how his teammates summoned the resources within themselves to survive.

In 1972, Nando Parrado was a 22-year-old college student who devoted much of his free time to playing rugby. When his team, the Old Christians of Montevideo, Uruguay, were given the opportunity to travel to Santiago, Chile, for a match, he excitedly invited his mother and sister to come along. Little did he know that the trip would turn into the most trying experience of his life.

On October 13, the chartered plane in which the group was traveling failed to clear a mountain peak. The last thing Parrado remembered was looking out the window and seeing the mountain just below the plane, then noise and darkness. A blow to the head left him unconscious for several days.

When he came to, the true horror dawned. The aircraft had broken in two and crash-landed in a treacherous mountain border area between Argentina and Chile. Many of the flight's 45 passengers had died on impact or shortly thereafter, including Parrado's mother and sister. Their deaths piled another trauma on top of what was already a terrible calamity.

Reflecting on it, Parrado says: "I've often asked myself why that had to happen: why my mother and sister had to have been on that flight with me, why they hadn't survived while I did, in the face of such impossible odds. There were no seat assignments on that flight, so it

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really was luck of the draw how we chose our seats. Something so trivial ended up becoming a key factor for survival. In the end, you have to accept that, for certain questions, there simply is no adequate answer. Sometimes it is nothing more than sheer fate and luck."

Once the initial shock wore off, then began the challenge of trying to survive in some of the worst possible conditions on Earth: stuck at an altitude of approximately 5,000 meters (18,000 feet), with no vegetation or wildlife, and bitter temperatures of 20 degrees below zero.

In such a harsh environment, Parrado had to start thinking quickly about his own survival. The loss of his family members renewed his determination to get out alive and return home for the sake of his father. He would not let the mountain break him.

A leader emerges

Parrado recalls those early days on the mountain with a hint of pride, knowing that everyone had pulled off a remarkable feat, in spite of the incredible odds against them.

"We couldn't think about anything, not even about eating. It took us a few days to adapt to that situation. We were just a bunch of kids, and it was really hard for us to understand where we were and what had happened, and also to come to grips with the fact that we were going to die."

Organization was key. As Parrado explains, the mindset of his teammate, Marcelo, saved everyone's lives during those early weeks.

"Marcelo had always been our natural leader, and he continued in that role up there on the mountain. He was the captain of the rugby team, and we already functioned as a team prior to the accident. So we just kept on doing things that way. Though he was only 21, Marcelo dug deep and found an incredible strength that rubbed off on all of us. He encouraged us the entire time, calming us down and reassuring us that we would be rescued, urging us to eat and organizing our day-to-day plans."

Knowing how to inspire hope and trust was, according to Parrado, one of Marcelo's greatest virtues in those difficult days. His motivation was always to be rescued, and he stuck to that goal to keep the others united and voiced strong convictions whenever anyone started to express doubts.

For example, when some began to worry that they never saw any helicopters flying in the

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area, Marcelo responded by explaining that search and rescue teams wouldn't normally fly into such an inaccessible zone, so logically they had to wait for rescuers to arrive by land, which is why they were taking longer to get there.

Not only did Marcelo keep up his own energy levels in order to inspire his teammates, but he also exercised practical thinking, a key factor for overcoming one of the toughest adversities faced by the group.

"Nights were definitely the worst part of our experience up there on the mountain. In addition to total silence and darkness, the cold was far more unbearable than during the daytime. Luckily, we had the front section of the plane where we could take refuge from the cold, but the other half was missing and one of the walls was gone, too. Marcelo had the idea to build the wall that was missing with what was left of the aircraft, and that idea allowed us to get through those cold nights."

The best in everyone

In the same way that a leader emerged naturally, so did the group's organization: their turn-taking system, the daily order, the democratic decision-making, all came from within. Everyone contributed what they knew how to do — their best skills — and everyone was willing to cooperate on organizing a plan for survival.

"We did everything from scratch, using only our own ingenuity," says Parrado. "Using materials from the wreckage, we invented all kinds of items that were essential for withstanding the elements. We made snow boots with seat parts; we took window fragments to make sunglasses to protect our eyes; we sewed sheets of plastic to make coats and sleeping bags to shield us from the cold."

At nighttime, the organization continued in full swing: "No one wanted to sleep near the walls of the airplane because those were the coldest parts, so we took turns in the middle seats. Strangely enough, even in that environment, we found ways to negotiate and created a sort of market for buying and selling sleeping spots. Among the baggage on board the plane, we had discovered a suitcase full of cigarettes and everyone got two per day. So those of us nonsmokers traded our cigarettes for a center spot with whoever's turn it was that night."

The enemies of cold and time

Despite the group's cooperative efforts, everyone knew they couldn't stay up there forever

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like that, waiting for summer to arrive. “We were constantly breathing on one another to warm ourselves up, but it was of little use. All we had was cold and time. It was torture.” Clearly, the situation was unsustainable.

On top of the inclement conditions, their food supply was running low. Though there was water in the form of melted snow, the icy wind had cracked their lips so that the mere act of drinking made their mouths hurt. After combing through the entire plane, the final food ration for each passenger was a small tablet of chocolate and two peanuts.

As the days droned on, the dwindling group realized that there was only one source of meat available for them to survive, and everyone was thinking the unthinkable.

“When the only important thing is survival,” Parrado explains, “people have an incredible capability to adapt to horrific situations. It was something that could only ever happen at a time and in a place like that, something that in another situation would have never occurred to us.”

Another major turning point came when they heard on the airplane’s radio that the rescue operation had been called off. Marcelo, especially, had held up until that day and kept the rest of the group’s spirits alive by drawing strength from his certainty that they would be rescued eventually. But the radio proved him wrong.

“The pillars of everything that Marcelo was resting on came crashing down in an instant,” says Parrado. “That was when he realized he was going to die. He lost it and went crazy.”

Marcelo was one of eight who later died when an avalanche surprised them during the night.

As they prepared to bed down for another night in the plane’s fuselage, there was a thundering noise and within seconds absolutely everything was covered with snow. An avalanche had come crashing down on top of them, burying all but two of the plane’s occupants. Those two immediately sprang into action, digging as fast as they could for their companions, clearing snow from around their heads so they could breathe. As soon as someone was freed, that person joined in the effort to rescue the others. In this way, they worked like an assembly line.

After a few minutes, everyone had been uncovered. Unfortunately, eight individuals died in that freak event, but 19 survived.

It was yet another cruel blow for a group who had just started coming to terms with their

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surroundings and were devising ingenious ways of dealing with their condition.

However, even when things went from bad to worse, they once again demonstrated how they could rise to the occasion and rally as a team. They were flexible and responsive, and performed arduous tasks with great precision, coordination and collaboration. Parrado has credited this partly to rugby, a sport that “gives you an intense sense of selflessness, unified purpose and moral discipline.”

No going back

Although the future suddenly vanished for the entire team, Parrado had other plans in mind. He knew exactly what would happen, and he, for one, did not want to sit around waiting for death to come knocking. His reaction when he heard the radio was to start walking, to get out of there and try to get home to his father. He would sooner die than sit there doing nothing.

He didn’t have to speak. With his determined mindset and self-confidence, Parrado became a new focal point for the group. “I cannot speak for myself, but according to my teammates, I was conveying a tremendous sense of security at that point in time. Everyone saw that I wanted to get out of there no matter what, and they started to believe it was possible.”

If no one was coming for them, the only option was for them to go looking for help, and that’s exactly what they did.

Parrado and two others, Roberto Canessa and Antonio Vizintin, decided to head off in search of the nearest town, while the rest stayed behind and waited it out in the plane.

Fueled more by fear than bravery, the three readied themselves and set off on their mission. On day three of their trek, Vizintin experienced physical problems and had to return to the group, leaving Canessa and Parrado to continue without him.

From the map they had, Parrado calculated they were relatively near the edge of the mountain range. They figured they would reach Chile in just a few days. Trekking westward, they scaled their first summit.

“When you go climbing in the snow for 14 straight hours, there is simply no margin for error,” Parrado says. “I’m not sure if I’m here today because of what I was able to accomplish up there in the mountains, or because of abilities I already had before the accident, but I know for sure that that experience helped me face all of the subsequent challenges that have

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sprung up in my life since."

After two days of extreme trekking, they finally made it to the top, from where they hoped to glimpse Chile's green valleys on the other side. "But it turned out to be far worse than we had imagined."

Seeing nothing but mountains upon more snow-covered mountains, Parrado realized they had misjudged their location on the map. They were actually 140 kilometers (87 miles) from where they thought they were.

"We were exhausted and we both knew it. And that's exactly when we made the most important decision of our lives. We could go back to the plane or keep moving along one of the paths lying before us. In a matter of 30 seconds, we decided to traverse the entire mountain range that lay before us on the horizon. We picked one of two paths. It was a quick decision, one that saved our lives."

They hiked nearly nonstop for 10 days straight. All they had was each another. "We knew that if we stopped, we were much more likely to die, so we couldn't stop. We depended on each other to keep going and, although we had no physical strength left, we were able to press on, thanks to our will to survive."

Finally, while searching for firewood to spend the night alongside a river, Parrado and Canessa spotted a man on horseback across the water and waved madly for help. The river's current was so loud that they couldn't hear each other, so they tied a note around a rock and tossed it to the other side. The shepherd got the message and brought back rescuers the following day.

Two days later, emergency helicopters made their way to the accident site and picked up the remaining members of the group. There were 16 survivors in all, and they would be home in time for Christmas.

Life goes on

In talking about his ordeal, Parrado insists that he does not feel like a hero: "I don't want any of that. I didn't ask to be out there, and I don't consider it a success story at all."

Paradoxically, the return home was not as comforting as he had hoped. The loss of both his mother and sister, and his feeling of having died while the world went on without him, stirred up complex emotions quite different from what he had expected. Despite having achieved his

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goal and been reunited with his father, once more he had to use everything he had learned to adapt and move forward.

“I asked my father for advice, and he told me that I should live my life and go after success, but to never lose sight of all the things that bonded me with my loved ones.”

Parrado has learned to rise above life’s lowest moments and greatest obstacles, to work as a team under the worst of conditions, to trust in friendship, to make snap decisions when all is lost, to remain strong in the face of adversity and to understand that crises are fundamental for moving forward.

But the most valuable lesson was learning how to live in the best way possible: “Why does a person have to go through a situation as horrific as that in order to see things in perspective? Certainly, in many cases, that’s not always necessary. But it taught me to live in a way that I may never have before. My life is marked by what happened to me, yet it’s far more than that, because the most important thing in my life is the here and now.”

He adds, “I have so much work on my desk that even if I worked 24 hours a day for the rest of my life, I would never finish. So I just work the necessary amount and try to get the maximum enjoyment from my family and friends — they’re the truly important ones.”

“Time, a very good healer, has a put a veil over my worst memories and sorrows. I now remember the most awful parts of our ordeal almost as though I had read about them in a book.” Indeed, he has written a book about his experience, *Miracle in the Andes: 72 Days on the Mountain and My Long Trek Home*.

Since his defining experience in the Andes, Parrado has pursued a career as an entrepreneur, becoming president of the family business, Seler Parrado, and founding two television production companies. He travels the world doing speaking engagements, using his story to help various professionals unlock their own potential and seek excellence at work and in their personal lives. He lives in Uruguay with his wife, Veronique, and two grown daughters, Veronica and Cecilia. “The warmth of my daughters’ embraces or the quiet presence of my wife near me — these are the important, enduring moments” that he treasures.

This article was originally published in IESE Insight magazine (Issue 4, Q1 2010).

J.A. Bayona also directed The Impossible (2012), about the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and starring Naomi Watts as Maria Belon, who shared her real-life story of survival and resilience

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during an appearance at IESE in 2019.

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