

Into the Mountains - an excerpt from an interview with Pedro Algorta

I remember that the flight started to get bad. We went into severe turbulence, and the plane was shaking very much, and through the windows, we saw the rocks - very near to the plane. We just couldn't believe that the plane was flying so close to the mountains. And suddenly, one of the wings of the plane touched one of the rocks of the mountain, and the plane broke down, you know?

And I remember the front part of the plane going down the mountain very quickly. At the end it was just silence. It's the silence of the shock, you know? And everything was very quiet, and little by little, we started to wake up, to get out of the plane, to find out where we were.

One of the first things that I did was realize that I was alive, that I can move my head, my arms - that I can see, you know? And I remember that I went over one of my friends that was dead, and step out of the plane. I had to pass over him, because he was dead, just by my side.

Well, then I jumped into the snow, and the snow was quite deep - up to my waist. I was not able to think on what had happened. I was not able to relate it to my friend that was dead. I just was able to realize that I was alive. There is a moment where emotionally, you are blocked. You are protected from very deep emotions. We all were in a state of shock.

We were in a valley, just below a glacier that was hanging over us, and it was completely covered by snow. When we got out of the plane, imagine at 4000 meters high, the wind will blow very strongly, and we were not prepared for the mountain. We were in summer clothes.

We did what we could - we just opened suitcases, and take some coats and clothes, and put them on top of us, because it was very, very cold, you know? And I remember that I used to wear three jackets, and three pullovers, and four pairs of socks - one on top of the other. That's the way we were protected from the cold.

Well, what we did was to take all of the seats and things that were loose inside of the plane, and we just slept inside, on the floor of the plane, you know? That was our house. Sometimes it was very cold, but not all the time, because it was like an igloo, you know? The snow would cover the plane, and inside it was not that cold. When the night would come, we would get into the plane one by one, in rows. We would sleep, each one in front of another one, with our legs on the chest of your friend. And that was our routine that we made all the days we spent on the mountain.

We were 45 passengers in total, in the plane. After the crash, we were 27 guys left - 18 died in the first two or three days. What we did was to take them out of the plane, and we left them in the snow.

We thought that we would be rescued any time, very soon. At least the captain of the team. He told us that we should be strong because it was impossible that we would be lost in the mountains for one, two, three, four, five, six days and nobody would come.

One day we saw a plane flying on top of us, and we were very happy. We were excited that we were going to be rescued. We had a very small radio, and we were able to listen to the news. Then that day after we saw the plane, we heard that the search has been cancelled, and that nobody was going to come for us. They thought it was impossible that we were still alive, and that because of the weather conditions, the search has been postponed until the summer. And, for us it was bad news.

I had learned to survive in the mountains for ten days, and the fact that they were telling us that no one was going to come only meant that we would have to survive more days, and that we would have to get off the mountain by ourselves. We couldn't rely on the fact that someone was going to come for us.

The hunger - it's different from the hunger you might feel today, in a very comfortable situation. The hunger is the hunger of, how weak you are, you know? It's a hunger that transforms you into a very slow human being, difficult to move, you feel weak and weaker every time. That's the hunger. We were dying there very slowly.

Food was running out, and when we heard that nobody was going to come for us, we realized that, um, we had some food around. And that food was the dead bodies of our friends. And uh, we just realized that if we wanted to stay alive and to continue living, we had to go and eat the flesh from our friends, you know?

Some of our friends were not fully convinced, yet. But I didn't have any problems at all. I just wanted to stay alive. So we went to the body of one of our friends, and made a cut with a piece of glass. And we started to eat, you know? First a very small piece. But then we got used to it, and it was a ceremony of staying alive.

When we got used to it, well we spent most of our time eating, and if I tell you all the things we did now, then you will get a little bit shocked, which is not my purpose, you know. My purpose of telling all of these details is to give an idea of where we got to - the things we had to do to survive, you know? And of course, the way we did it, getting used to it - enjoying it - I really enjoyed feeding myself from the dead bodies of my friends, because that was what kept me alive. You too, would have done the same as we did.

When we started eating we felt that life was going back into our bodies, and that we would have enough energy to make an expedition that would take us out of the mountains.

I think it was about 18 or 19 days after the accident. We were trying to sleep. We had been working hard that day, and suddenly, I heard a big noise out in the mountain. And in a few moments we had a huge avalanche that covered the plane. The snow got into the plane and covered all of us as we were sleeping. I tried to get out, but I just couldn't. The weight of the snow was too much. I was trapped there, and I just couldn't breathe. At some moment I felt I was just falling asleep. I was just dying to my sleep.

Everything was getting dark. And when I was almost gone, one of my friends took out the snow from my mouth and then the air - the oxygen came back into my lungs, and I was able to continue breathing. And then finally, I was rescued. I was able to stand up and realized that I made through, you know, and that it was good to survive the avalanche, too.

We lost eight of our friends. We lost our captain, who had been important at the very beginning. We also lost Liliana, which was the only woman still alive with us on the mountain. She was the mother of the small boys and was a really very strong blow when she passed away.

After the avalanche, we realized that we were just a group of peers with no authority figure. And different personalities started to emerge here and there, and trying to occupy a position of authority. In all groups you have that - politics. We saw everything. We saw people that did very significant and heroic acts. Others tried to survive by themselves and didn't try to cooperate too much. But all the attitudes of people allowed us step-by-step to build and construct equipment of surviving that surviving machine.

Nobody told us how and what to do. We just started to work, and of course, we had different roles. I was the "philosophical guy." That didn't help too much, but that was my role. You know, I tried to read maps to understand what was going on. I kept an eye on the group - how the group worked. I tried to analyze who were the emerging leaders. And I played my role trying to survive. And if I had to work hard digging a hole, for

example, I would do that. You have to produce water, prepare the things for the expeditions that we were making, you had to prepare the plane for the nights. We had to make gloves and make socks. We made a lot of things, you know, working to be alive every day.

Actually, three of my brothers left to cross the Andes, and they walked for 10 days. One of them Came back with the news that Canessa and Parrado were still walking, trying to get to Chile. We thought that they were going to make it, but we were not sure. So we started to think about what other things we should do if they just, died, walking through the Andes which was the most probable thing that would happen.

In the tenth day we were able to turn on the radio which was still working, amazingly, and we heard the news that two people were seen walking through the mountain, and that they might come from the Uruguayan plane that had crashed in the mountain, 70 days ago. In a few minutes, their names were given and we heard that Canessa and Parrado had arrived to Chile, and a search team was going to come for us. And of course, that was very good news. We were very very happy. But it was not an explosion of emotions, you know.

For us it was not a miracle, because we knew what we had to go through. We stayed alive for 70 days working very hard. So, yes, we got out of the mountain the 70th day, very weak, very slim, having gone through very terrible things. But it was not a surprise for us.

My family had given up on me for dead. So for them it was a complete surprise. They were not prepared for this "miracle," because they just couldn't understand how we had been able to survive 70 days lost in the middle of the mountains, you know. We had "died," and suddenly we had come back from death. For a while, they didn't know how to treat us. But happily, in a week or two weeks, in a month, we all have been able to get back to a normal life. I think that's the real miracle of the Andes.

Within a month we started to gain weight again and we were able to walk through the streets without people recognizing ourselves. We were like phantoms when we got out of the Andes. But the point is that three months after escaping from the mountain, I was able to get back to school. I got into a new University in Argentina. And I didn't tell my story. And I didn't speak about that publicly for 35 years. Just doing a normal life with the mountain in my backpack, you know?

But I've been able to marry, to have children, to take them to school. I studied in the United States. Then I did quite an interesting business career. Now that I'm sixty-something, now I'm ready to look back, and try to get in touch again with the mountain, and talk about it.

I don't say that it has not changed my life, or that I don't have the wounds of what happened in the Andes with me. I do have them, but I'm able now to reconcile myself with what happened to us in the mountains, and to understand what happened there with the eyes of someone who has lived 40 years more.