

# against all odds

The hero of *Alive* recounts his own version of the greatest survival story ever told.



**SOLE SURVIVORS**  
Nando Parrado's teammates cheer at the moment of their rescue, December 22, 1972.

In October 1972, a Fairchild twin-engine turbo prop carrying the Old Christians Rugby Club from Montevideo, Uruguay, and several of the players' family and friends went down in the Argentine Andes. Forty-five people had been onboard, and it would take the sixteen who survived the crash and ensuing ordeal 72 days to escape the mountains. After a little more than a week, stranded in the snow and ice at 12,000 feet, they subsisted on human flesh.

The book *Alive*, by Piers Paul Read, and its film version have made this a well-known story, and its inherent horror makes it an unforgettable one. Still, it seems unlikely that the tale will ever be better told than in **Miracle in the Andes** (Crown), a long-meditated firsthand account by Nando Parrado, the second-line forward who ultimately led the two-man expedition that saved his surviving teammates' lives.

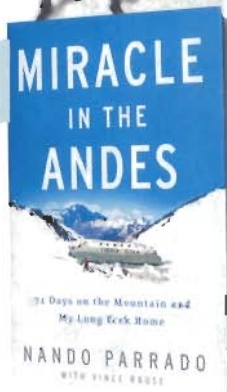
The remarkable fluency of Nando's English prose may owe something to his coauthor, Vince Rause. But a strong impression of Nando's personality comes through: decent, rational, and generous, an attractive and unusual combination of intellectual power and emotional simplicity. Indeed, a rare false note is struck in the title; Nando, we learn, isn't one for miracles. At first, the devout team captain insists that God will not abandon them. Nando, however, has already lost his mother and sister, Susy, as a result of the crash

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and does not suppose that God is paying attention.

Bighearted but no sentimentalist, Nando forthrightly admits to having been the one to broach the subject of cannibalism. A few survivors told themselves that "drawing life from the bodies of their dead friends was like drawing spiritual strength from the body of Christ when they took communion." But for Nando, "eating the flesh of the dead [is] nothing more than a hard, pragmatic choice."

After weeks in the Andes, Nando emerges as a leader through his insistence that the survivors stop waiting for rescuers long since called off. He presents his plan—that he lead a mission out of the mountains into Chile—as mere necessity. Yet it's hard not to suspect the presence of another thought: The survivors have refrained from using his sister and mother for meat, but surely, given enough time, Nando will be faced with an unbearable dilemma. Perhaps he wants above all to escape the crash site before it comes to that; certainly a trek across the frigid Andes in layered blue jeans and rugby cleats stands little chance of success. When Nando departs, he authorizes those left behind to use his family members according to need. His friend



and expedition partner, Roberto Canessa, tells him, "Now let's go die together."

The line sounds like something out of *Henry V*, which is appropriate to the story's high drama and deep feeling. Despite Nando's nonsense attitude and

spare language, *Miracle in the Andes* puts you continually in mind of the noblest accents and saddest cries of poetry. When an avalanche pours into the broken fuselage, suffocating eight people, it's suddenly *King Lear*: "The worst is not/So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" And, in later years, when Nando—having gone on to enjoy a career as a race-car driver and TV broadcaster—recollects the bravery and ingenuity of his Old Christians teammates, it's pure Yeats: "And say my glory was I had such friends." —**BENJAMIN KUNKEL**

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### BEFORE THE CRASH

The team on the eve of the ill-fated flight; Nando, top row, sixth from right.

