

Flights of TERROR



When it comes to air crashes, fact is often more shocking than fiction. Fasten your seatbelt and brace yourself for a turbulent ride...

The images of real-life air crashes which flash onto our TV screens are some of the most shocking and dramatic sights we ever see. It is precisely because they are real that they seem far more moving and catastrophic than anything TV producers can recreate on film. The sight of 9/11's twin towers bisected by airliners is forever burned into the world's memory. And in recent months, survivors of terrifying crashes in Toronto, Peru and Indonesia have told us how it feels to believe you are on the verge of death as you nose-dive towards the earth.

Flying through the sky is an incredible feat, and being served a rubbery in-flight meal is unfortunately the least of our problems. Experts say that apart from hijackings, air disasters are usually caused by a combination of factors. Pilot error and weather cause many accidents, but other problems such as engine trouble, fire, failure of the wheels or wings, or even running out of fuel could prove fatal.

Sudden loss of air pressure has been the cause of several crashes, including, it seems, that of the Cypriot airliner which tragically killed everyone on board this August. Because of the height at which planes fly, the air inside all large commercial aircraft is pressurised to a thin but breathable level (that's why it makes your skin and hair go dry). If a loss of air pressure occurs, passengers

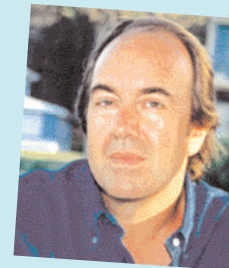
rapidly lose consciousness if they don't get to their oxygen masks in time.

Of course, plane crashes happen to celebrities as well as ordinary mortals. How could we forget Buddy Holly's untimely death at the tender age of 22, when his light aircraft crashed in America's Midwest, or country crooner John Denver's fatal accident in 1997 while piloting his own aircraft. Singer and actress Aaliyah was also tragically killed in a chartered plane crash shortly after take-off in 2001, and in recent years Sandra Bullock and Patrick Swayze have both survived crashes.

In terms of the number of fatalities, by far the worst ever plane crashes were those brought about by terrorists on 9/11. The second worst crash occurred in 1977 when a Pan Am plane and a KLM craft collided in heavy fog, killing 583 people. Website AirDisaster.com lists statistics of airlines with the worst accident rate record. But even Concorde has crashed – in 2000, the supersonic plane's tyre burst, starting a fire that brought it down, taking 113 lives.

Reassuringly, the UK has, overall, an excellent air safety record – almost twice as good as the world average. With UK operators, the chance of a passenger air fatality is one in 46 million, more than twice as unlikely as being killed by a lightning strike. Air transport is almost 20 times safer than travelling by car and four times safer than rail on a fatality per kilometre basis.

MY EPIC AIR-CRASH SURVIVAL STORY INSPIRED A HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTER Nando Parrado, 55, a TV producer, has a true story more incredible than any scriptwriter could have dreamed up. He is the most famous heroic survivor of one of history's most apparently hopeless air crashes, on which the film *Alive* was based



RIGHT & BELOW These actual photos from the disaster show a real-life *Lost*. Nando and fellow survivors of the 1972 crash endured harsh months in the Andes before being rescued



FEATURE Olivia Gordon PHOTOGRAPHS Corbis/Paramount/Empics

It was a Friday 13th in 1972. I was a 20-year-old South American student and rugby player, flying from Montevideo, Uruguay, to play a match in Santiago, Chile. Along with the other members of our rugby team in our chartered plane were my mother and sister.

Usually, planes crash during take-off and landing. Ours was one of the few crashes in history to occur at cruising altitude. And we crashed over one of the world's highest mountain ranges, the Andes.

The reason for the crash was that the pilot mistook his position. We were flying through clouds in light turbulence in what we now know was a plane unsuited to mountain conditions. We had about five seconds warning. I looked through the window and suddenly saw, in between the clouds, a black and white wall rushing past 25 yards away from the tip of the wing. Then I looked inside the aircraft and at that moment the plane crashed. There was an awesome metallic sound. Imagine the ugly sound of a car crash and multiply that by a million. In one millisecond the roof over me broke like a tuna can. The last thing I

had had three crashes in one. First we crashed against the mountain at high speed. Then the front of the body of the airplane had flown 150 yards in the air and landed on the slope of the mountain in front. It had then slid down extremely fast and crashed against a wall of ice on a glacier with a huge impact.

Forty-five people were on the plane and only 29 survived the initial crash. My mother and sister were fatally killed on impact. My friends had thought I was dead and had put me with the rest of the dead bodies until someone saw me move.

We didn't have a clue where we were except that we were stranded on a glacier in the Andes with no medical kits, blankets, food or drink. The temperature was -40°C at night and there was no way to escape the cold. After ten days, we heard on the small transistor radio we had with us that the search for us had been abandoned. We thought this was our death sentence; we were condemned to die.

SHEER SURVIVAL

We survived sheltering in the remnants of the plane for 62 days using just two tools – broken glass, to cut the upholstery from the seats for blankets, and a cigarette lighter, to let us see at night. We had to eat snow for hydration, but because we couldn't melt it, we craved water. And after a week in that

to the rest of us, digging holes to our faces and mouths to let us breathe. But eight of us died because they were not reached in time. I was the last life saved.

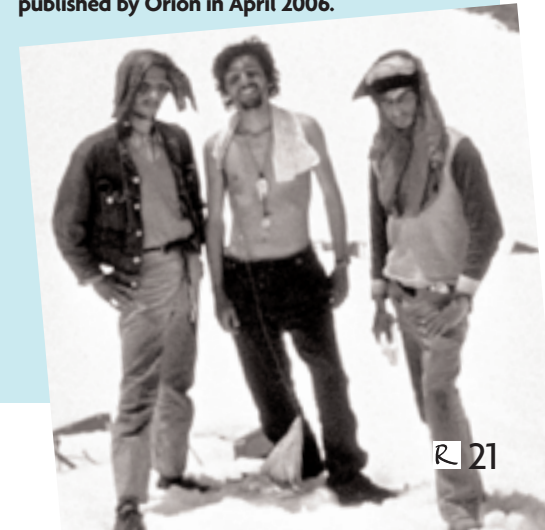
Sixty-two days after the crash, I knew I had to leave before I became too weak and the food ran out. My friend Roberto and I decided to get out or die trying. We were the two strongest survivors and we were everyone's only hope. We trekked for 11 days, crossing the whole range of mountains in blue jeans. We climbed, slid and fell heights of 17,000 feet through everything God has created on mountain ranges – precipices, rivers, crevasses, glaciers, ice walls, boulders. We were not tired – we were finished. But if we stopped, we were dead.

On the last day of our strength, we found a peasant on a horse. It was the first day of the new season; that's why he was going so high in the mountains – to find grass for his cattle. It was a miracle. We found out that we had crashed in Argentina and walked to Chile. It took 20 more hours for him to return with help. When the helicopters came, we flew with them to show them the location of the plane. We found and rescued our friends.

For two years I couldn't go near an airport, and when, eventually, I had to fly for my job, I sweated with fear. But since then I have learned how to be a pilot and now I fly small private planes as a hobby!

I have never looked back. If you keep looking for answers you go crazy. Bad things happen and there is nothing we can do about it. All of us survivors learned that the most important things are family and love.

■ Nando Parrado's new book about his epic mountain trek, *Miracle in the Andes*, will be published by Orion in April 2006.



“WE HAD TO EAT OR WE WOULD DIE LOOKING INTO THE EYES OF OUR FRIENDS

remember was that I was instantly thrown up against the roof with an incredible force I had never felt before. I was knocked out for three and a half days.

My next memory is coming back to my senses slowly – over about nine hours – as if from complete anaesthesia. I saw some grey figures moving and faces looking at me. I couldn't recognise them at first, then slowly I saw that they were my friends. I heard voices saying 'Nando, we crashed. Are you OK? Can you see me?' I looked down and couldn't understand why I was completely covered in blood. I touched my head and it was all broken, with four big cracks in my skull. I felt immense pain, as if there was an alien monster in my head trying to get out.

Looking around, I saw only the front part of the plane was intact. It had been a horrendous, majestic crash. The physical forces that are unchained in an accident of this magnitude are very powerful. We

environment, your mouth is destroyed by the cold and it bleeds. The ice on our lips was agony.

It's very difficult to express how we ate (the flesh of the dead). It bothers me that people won't understand. We would do anything necessary to go back to our parents or children and tell them we were alive and still loved them. Some of us compared what we did to the religious experience of taking communion. We had to eat or we would die looking into the eyes of our friends. A human being gets used to anything.

We waited and waited. I had decided to get out of there, but we had to wait for spring because we had no winter clothing and during winter the snow was too deep to move through. Meanwhile some people died from their wounds.

In the middle of the night, two and a half weeks after the crash, an avalanche fell and completely buried the plane and everyone inside apart from two men who were covered only with inches of snow. In less than a minute and a half, they started tunnelling



Ethan Hawke played Nando in the film *Alive*