

Rescues, Caves and Celebrity Salvation

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Region: [Asia](#)
Theme: [History](#)

It all risks becoming pornographic, looped and re-run with an obsessive eye for updates and detail about despair and hope. The twenty-four hour news cycle tends to encourage this sort of thing, ever desperate for snippets, obsessively chasing the update. With a soccer team of twelve youths and their coach trapped in Tham Luang Nang Non cave some one kilometre below the surface, the curious, the gormless, and those with an unhealthy interest in the morbid have assumed couch position.

First came the discovery of the team by British divers after the group had gone missing for nine days. They were found on a ledge inside the Northern Thai cave system. Divers **Rick Stanton** and **John Volanthen** were feted as being [among the best](#) in the world, the former having been awarded an MBE for, of all things, services in cave diving.

There was much hooting and tooting in celebration, something prompted by the fact that any hope of finding them alive, according to the governor of Chiang Rai province, was nigh impossible. But the mechanics of extricating the team from the cave started to mount in complexity and desperation, bursting the initial balloon of celebration.

With 2.5 miles of flooded cave between the team and the entrance, a sense of imperilment has grown. This is compounded by a dreaded risk that adds a televisual ghastliness to the tale: the prospect of more heavy rain on the weekend, something that will foil current efforts to drain the excess water.

A village of international rescue experts including military personnel has grown around the enterprise, not to mention a vast hive of media representatives. [Four questions](#) seem to be doing the rounds: to leave the team in the cave till there is a receding of the water level (dangerous given the monsoon season); pumping out the water to an extent to enable the trapped team to wade out; teaching the youths how so scuba dive, something which would be no mean feat given the length of time it would take for them to journey out of the cave (some five hours) and their status as virginal divers; and finally, drilling into the cave system.

Thai Navy Seals have been deployed, and much help is at hand, but the goriness has not been entirely dissipated. The Navy Seal **Chief Rear Adm. Arpakorn Yoo-kongkaew** has been feeding the story to journalists keen to strike the optimistic note.

The Rear Admiral did not disappoint.

“Now we have given food to the boys, starting with food that is easy to digest and provides high energy.”



Thai soccer team gets diving lessons as rescuers prepare for extraction from cave ([Source](#))

He stressed that care has been given to the youths “following the doctor’s recommendation. So do not worry, we will take care of them with our best. We will bring all of them with safety. We are now planning how to do so.” Such confidence was given a dint with the subsequent death of one of his crew, [Samarn Poonan](#), who perished due to lack of oxygen during a dive.

One similar incident stands out to what is currently unfolding in Thailand: the initial loss, the recovery and sanctifying of the “Los 33”, the Chilean miners who became celebrities of salvation in 2010. They spent 69 days in the collapsed San Jose mine near Copiapó. Over time, a process of mythologising began to take place.

It was fame imposed on the ordinary, conformed by the mere fact, as important as that fact was, that they had survived. Like Church miracle artefacts, they were vested with allure, attraction, and sheer pulling power. They were also there to be exploited, used, and interpreted. Otherwise, they were uncomplicated creatures of animal and mineral, many of whom believed that God had been the thirty-fourth miner keeping them resolute.

As the rescue effort unfolded, the minor celebrity bandwagon grew. US radio personality [Ryan Seacrest](#) sent prayers and well wishes hoping, rather insipidly, “to see everyone on the surface soon.” The clownish Irish song duo of [Jedward](#) sent their own message of tinny idiocy:

“All the miners remember it’s not about mining it’s about finding dinosaurs and dragons.”

The late English presenter **Keith Chegwin** expressed some mock shame that “Dig Brother” had ended. “Wonder what Chile 4 will put on now.”

The miners would subsequently add a touch of mysticism to the rescue, essentially sacralising it. **Jorge Galleguillos** spoke of seeing “a white species... a butterfly” falling “like a paper” into the mine. “Faith is nourishment... Faith is life.” Stories abounded of how

medical ailments were healed by prayer. The drill used to tunnel to the miners was guided, according to miner Ariel Ticona, “by the hand of God”.

The miners became the heralds of a modern success story. They were invited as guests of honour to Manchester United. They did the US chat show circuit. As a statement of pure fantasy, they went to that composite of fantasy, Disneyland. Then, for another sort of miracle dream work, they ventured to the Holy Land. Expenses were footed.

Amidst the celebratory orgy typical of myth came a few sceptical qualifiers. The degree of medical danger posed to them, for instance, had been given undue embellishment. **Dr. James Polk**, deputy chief medical officer and chief of space medicine at NASA put this down to “not having all the facts, and things that people did not know about the situation”.

The workers were, for instance, trapped at sea level and could hardly have suffered from decompression sickness. The miners were less confined as was portrayed, able to continue their labours underground. Nor were they at risk of Vitamin D deficiency.

“Chilean authorities,” according to Polk, “anticipated this, and they gave them a large dose of Vitamin D3 as part of their nutritional supplementation.”

Many of the rescued miners subsequently faced the ruination of imposed fame. **Mario Sepúlveda** spoke of “fame but not money. It is the worst possible thing.” The camera that had given him and his colleagues celebrity had also consumed them. His world remains one of anti-depressants and a return to mining, where the darkness comforts.

The “Los 33” effect is very much at play regarding this young football team even as the rescue crews are busying themselves on tactics. The big and the moneyed are seeking their place in the sun, offering advice. Some are constructive; others are simply sentimental. **Elon Musk**, according to a spokesman, has revealed that negotiations are underway on supplying location technology using Space Exploration Technologies Corp. or Boring Co. technology for digging purposes, or providing Tesla Inc. Powerwall battery packs. But to every little bit of brain storming comes the deadly qualifier: engaging such services as that of Boring Co., with its colossal drills, might simply be too dangerous.

Even now, the young team has drawn on the heartstrings of the football community, encouraging a measure of faith. Liverpool Football manager **Jürgen Klopp**, in an official video intended for the youngsters and their coach, spoke of “hoping every second that you see the daylight again. You’ll never walk alone.” Such language, heartfelt yet tinged with a sense of funereal doom.

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