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— A N D —  
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WITH ELLIS HENICAN

against all odds

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## Introduction

# ‘They’re All Going to Die’

Harry

It was the mission we’d all been training for, a life-or-death rescue in remote northern Thailand, deep inside a flooded mountain cave. The whole world was watching. The chances were disturbingly slim. Anyone who knew anything about cave rescue had to recognise that. Thirteen young people were huddled in the chilly darkness, one monsoonal downpour from the end of their lives.

And where was I?

I was 7022 kilometres away, at my usual post in the operating theatre of Flinders Private Hospital in Adelaide, making sure a thyroidectomy patient didn’t wake up from her anaesthesia. I love being in theatre. But *man!* I’d never felt so far from the action in my life.

Early that morning before work, a message had popped up on my phone. It was from the legendary British cave diver Rick Stanton, who had raced to the scene to help save the stranded members of the Wild Boars soccer team.

‘Could you sedate someone and dive them out?’ he wanted to know.

*Rick must be desperate*, I thought. *Or the pressure of the rescue has sent him round the bend*. Otherwise, he'd never ask a question so absurd. Dive a sedated child underwater through the jagged maze of a dark, constricted cave? You'd kill the kid for sure. As an anaesthetist and a diver, the very idea sounded preposterous to me.

'Sedation not an option,' I replied.

It was Wednesday, 4 July 2018. Rick and I had been messaging back and forth for five days by then, ever since he and fellow British diver John Volanthen had arrived in Thailand to help guide the rescue. The boys had been trapped in Tham Luang cave since the evening of Saturday, 23 June – well over a week – and the outlook was grim. Rick hated what he found at the cave: a 'shit show' – Rick's phrase – of ill-trained adrenaline junkies, gung-ho military types, overwhelmed government officials and gullible, preening journalists from around the world sending out ridiculously optimistic updates about the chances of saving the boys. Things were such a mess on the ground, Rick confided, that he was ready to pack up his dive gear and fly home.

'Oh dear' was my two-word reply.

Thankfully, Rick and his guys decided to stay. They clipped on their tanks, spat in their face masks and pressed on. They would, of course, be the first divers to locate the twelve frightened soccer players and their 25-year-old assistant coach, shivering on top of a muddy hill more than two and a half kilometres in. But locating the team was one thing. Navigating the cave's narrow passages and sharp, jutting rocks in zero visibility to guide the boys out – that was something else entirely. That, I hoped, was where Craig Challen, my long-time dive buddy, and I might still fit in.

Ever since we'd seen the first stories about the boys lost in the cave, Craig and I had been angling to help. Both of us had trained

for years in underground rescue. Both of us had decades of medical experience, too – I was an anaesthetist and critical-care doctor, and Craig was a veterinary surgeon. We'd played key roles in a couple of harrowing body-recovery operations. But so far, we had never been part of a live rescue involving so many people, or in such treacherous conditions as this, and no one had asked us to come to Thailand – *yet*.

So we waited at home in Australia, feeling anxious and irrelevant.

By this point, every man and his dog had a theory – not one of which was showing a jot of promise – about how to get these poor children out of the cave. Drill through the limestone from above. Pump the water out from below. Give the boys a crash course in scuba diving and swim them out. The billionaire tech promoter Elon Musk would soon be lighting up Twitter with his own creative schemes, which included an inflatable tunnel and a minisub. Or how about not bringing the boys out at all, but leaving them in the cave for the next five or six months, supplying them with food, clean water, space blankets and maybe some video games – and then walking them out after the rainy season? By the time Rick asked me about sedation, this wait-it-out idea actually seemed to be gaining some currency, a solid indication of just how perplexed everybody was. But if Rick was really serious about sedation as an option, I could think of a hundred ways it could end in tragedy and not a single way it might succeed.

'I should be over there helping,' I texted Rick, not for the first time. 'Craig and I are happy to provide any assistance.'

A couple of hours later, I heard from him again, this time making sure we understood exactly what we'd soon be signing up for. 'You're going to dive to the end of the cave,' he warned. 'You're going to see these kids. They're all looking healthy and happy and

smiley. Then you're going to swim away and probably leave them all to die. Be mindful of that before you say yes with too much enthusiasm.'

Rick's words of warning didn't put us off. How could they? We knew we had to help. It was only after arriving in Thailand that Craig and I would fully comprehend what Rick was trying to caution us about. The plight of the boys was far more dire than any outsider realised. Only if exactly the right team of international rescuers could be assembled would these boys have a fighting chance, and even then they would need to rise to the challenge themselves if they were to survive.

*Against All Odds* is the true inside story of the greatest cave rescue ever, much of it revealed here for the very first time. The heartbreak and the triumph. The petty squabbles and immense satisfactions. The far-fetched strategies that were laughed out of Thailand and the one that would ultimately save the day. Most of all, it's the story of the remarkable band of characters who came together from around the world, hell-bent on saving these stranded boys no matter what the risk.

Rick and his mates, who looked like a ragtag collection of middle-aged hobbyists but were in fact world-class divers through and through.

Three Thai Navy SEALs who would turn out to be the greatest babysitters ever.

A charismatic Thai military doctor who would keep the children healthy, both mentally and physically, long enough to be saved.

The team's assistant coach, who would guide the boys through their ordeal with incredible devotion and a deep, spiritual calm.

Taken all together, it was quite a crew. And what about Craig and me? What could we bring to the scene that might save the lives of twelve young boys?

We weren't certain as we prepared to leave Australia, but we would soon find out.