

How Far Are We Unwilling to Go?

by Chris Anderson

Is it a horror story with a happy ending, the life of Dr Roberto Canessa, a man who ate human flesh and stood for election as president of his country? This is what happened.

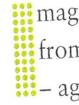
harrowing very frightening
resort to do something bad in order to deal with a problem
trek hike, walk

hen I approach the home of Dr Roberto Canessa in Uruguay, I know I am to meet someone unusual. Someone that has experienced things I have not. When I knock on the oak door of his three-level house, I get the feeling I hear vultures screeching far away. But Canessa greets me with a smile and invites me to his impressive home. It is a showcase; expensive paintings on the walls, an AGA in the kitchen and windows facing the bay of Montevideo. But hidden in a drawer in his bedroom is a battered black pilot's compass from an airliner that crashed in the Andes with the Uruguayan rugby team and friends on board in 1972. Canessa is one of the 16 who survived ten harrowing^o weeks in the snow by resorting^o to cannibalism.

I have been studying this case for months, trying to memorize all the facts and preparing all kinds of daring questions. Now I am finally here. Alongside Canessa's compass is the light clothing he wore, trekking^o with a team-mate over some of the highest mountains in the

world to get help. Nobody in this country has forgotten who he is or what he did. But after the presidential election in 1994, Dr Canessa himself preferred to forget what he refers to as the "soap opera" in his past. "People are too preoccupied with the past," Canessa says when he pours me a cup of tea. "Especially in Uruguay where the sad nostalgic music of the tango was born, people look to the past too much ..." We stroll into his lavishly furnished living-room to find a place to sit down and do the interview.

1. How does the public look upon the survivors after the accident in the mountains?
2. What does Dr Canessa think of others' obsession with the past?

images of Canessa as he emerged from the Andean wilderness – aged 19, with sunken eyes, blisters and a heavy beard – flash momentarily across my mind when I take the first sip of my herb tea. I consider the media image of Dr

Roberto Canessa in recent years: more air time is given to images of him in his doctor's coat tending to his patients; but two decades before, 5 as he campaigned across the country – preferring to travel in one of his collection of vintage cars, rather than by aeroplane – he was almost universally recognized as one of *los muchachos de los Andes*. “But I am 10 only interested in the challenges that life offers for the future,” Canessa says solemnly. I check that my tape recorder is in order, put some 15 honey in my cup and settle down for some Q’s and A’s. I spell out my first phrase when suddenly, quite

surprisingly, someone emerges from a room and interrupts our meeting. It turns out to be an old friend of Canessa’s. Whom I don’t yet know. 5 A limp^o in this friend’s left leg staggers his walk. I get the feeling he has overheard the first words of the conversation here – not that I mind – I am not the one who has secrets here. But Canessa’s friend goes right on target.

“Now, listen,” he says in a deep voice. “People rarely speak about the more delicate details of the 15 accident here in Uruguay today. Those who survived the crash are somehow regarded as untouchable.

limp walking with difficulty because one leg is hurt



The film *Alive* from 1993.

emaciated very thin
stagger walk unsteadily
peasant farmer
avalanche large amount of snow that falls down a mountain
exposure harmful effect of cold weather

For many they became heroes," says Danilo Arbilla, a political editor at weekly Busqueda, I later find out. "But few have forgotten exactly what happened," he continues.

"There has never been a story like it since."

The two men look at each other in silence, as in a mutual understanding I can't even imagine the contents of. Dr Canessa breaks the silence: "Losing the 1994 election didn't bother me too much. I had been in worse trouble ..." This is where I get the whole story from first hand. Canessa and Arbilla can't hold it back.

Four days before Christmas in 1972, the emaciated^o figures of Canessa and his friend Nando Parrado staggered^o down from a high plateau in the Andes and announced to a startled Chilean peasant^o tending his cattle that they had "come from a plane that fell in the mountains." When it became clear that they had come from a plane that had gone missing 70 days beforehand, and that 16 of the 45 on board were still alive, the news flashed around the world as a Christmas miracle.

The Uruguayan airforce Fairchild F.227 had been chartered to take a rugby team known as the Old Christians, all pupils or old boys of the Stella Maris College in Montevideo run by Irish Catholic priests, to play a series of friendly games against teams in Chile in

early October of that year. The flight was filled with friends and family of the players to keep down the cost.

They set off, after a stop-over in Mendoza, Argentina, on Friday, October 13, 1972, bound for Santiago, Chile. At more than 13,000 ft, in the middle of the mountain range, the pilot thought he had already crossed the Andes and brought the plane down for landing.

Canessa and Arbilla fall silent. I remain passive. Then I humbly ask for details. Hesitatingly they provide me with some.

It turns out that thirteen of the 45 on board died instantly as the plane crashed. An avalanche^o that struck the wreckage two weeks later, as the survivors slept inside, killed another eight. Eight more died of injuries and exposure^o as temperatures dropped to 30 degrees below zero. The Andes that year had the heaviest snowfall for more than 50 years. An extensive air search for survivors had been called off after just nine days.

3. What caused the plane crash?

4. What extreme conditions killed more passengers after the plane had come down?

All those who survived the crash lived for the first 10 days on a square of chocolate, a teaspoon of jam, a dab of

toothpaste and a deodorant capful of wine. When this ran out they began to eat the frozen corpses of their companions. They ate the 5 muscles, organs, fat and fingers of their friends, carefully calculating the minimum of human flesh they had to eat each day to stay alive. As a young medical student at the time 10 of the accident it was Canessa who was forced to supervise^o the careful dissection^o of the bodies.

After surviving for 60 days in the mountainside in a makeshift 15 shelter of mangled^o fuselage^o, Canessa and Parrado were selected, as the strongest, to try to find help. Carrying small parcels of human 20 flesh wrapped in a sock they set out in jeans and jumpers with only plastic bags on their feet. After walking and climbing for twelve days they eventually raised the alarm that led to their rescue.

25 Here, Canessa's voice breaks down into abrupt sobs. I hand him my handkerchief. I can smell grief in his tears. He tilts the tea kettle and continues:

30 "Grisly photographs in a Chilean newspaper, showing half-eaten limbs lying around the wreckage of the plane, revealed the secret of our survival. On our return to Uruguay 35 we called a press conference and confirmed that when the moment came we thought of Jesus at the last supper: 'This is my body take it and eat.'"



5. What did the survivors have to eat initially?
6. Why was Canessa the one who was forced to supervise the dissection of bodies?
7. How were the survivors rescued?

Twenty-two years after the tragedy all but one of the survivors, their families and the families of those who died still live 5 within a few miles of each other in the suburb of Carrasco, the home of Uruguay's affluent^o elite in the outskirts of Montevideo. They have gone on to have families and careers 10 as doctors, lawyers, businessmen and gentlemen farmers. Almost all of them appear to outsiders to have adjusted with ease back into normal life after their extraordinary experience in the Andes.

supervise be in charge and make sure everyone does what they are supposed to
dissection act of cutting up a body
mangled damaged and twisted
fuselage the main body of an airplane
affluent rich

attend take part in
communion a special relationship
revulsion very strong dislike

Initial attempts to encourage them to attend^o group therapy sessions, after it was felt they had broken one of human society's strongest taboos, met with boredom and finally laughter. As they remember, they used to fix the therapist with an intense gaze and say: "I feel hungry ..."

Instead they developed their own therapy by meeting often to discuss their experience within the privacy of their own homes. They still meet, sometimes once a month and always on the anniversary of their rescue, December 21.

They talk philosophically, sometimes jokingly about their experiences and still vigorously defend what they were forced to do in order to survive. After their rescue they were assured by the Roman Catholic Church that their cannibalism was not considered in any way a sin. Before deciding to consume the corpses of their friends, those still alive after the first ten days in the Andes say they made a pact that they were all willing for their own bodies to be eaten if they died on the mountainside, in order to give the others a chance to survive.

"I would have been happy to feed my body to my friends rather than to the worms, which is what happens when most people die," says Danilo Arbilla. I suggest that people today might think of scenes from *The Silence of the Lambs* when they think of cannibalism.

But where the character in that film was driven by hatred or some deep lust, we were driven by the will to live, says Arbilla: "What we did was share a communion.^o It was an act of great friendship. The cannibalism was not the worst of what we experienced. It was much worse to watch your friends die and know that you could be next."

Then Canessa tells me he married his fiancée, who actually thought he had died in the crash, and they now have three children. He says he never suffered nightmares because of what happened in the Andes. "The only dreams about that time I have had since have been dreaming that my friends were still alive, and I did not want those dreams to end." Danilo Arbilla adds: "Some of us could not sleep for more than 15 or 20 minutes at a time in the first months after we were rescued. We had never been able to sleep for longer periods than that on the mountainside without moving in order to stop frostbite from setting in."

At this point Danilo Arbilla finally relaxes and smiles at me – and it is a strange smile, one I will long remember.

“It is amazing how quickly human beings adapt to the most terrible of circumstances,” Arbilla says. “Once we overcame the initial revulsion^o at what we were doing, it became something natural, like

brushing our teeth ... in the mountains we learned to create mental archives where we did not allow ourselves to think about certain

5 things that were going on. The team spirit is what kept the 16 survivors alive," he says. "It's a game that's misunderstood by people who don't play rugby. They don't understand
10 the team spirit, the sacrifice you make of yourself for another player so he can score. We survived from that spirit. If we had been soccer players, we would have died."

15 I am about to leave this interview, my time is up and a taxi is waiting outside to take me to the airport of Montevideo. But Danilo Arbilla grabs me by the arm, and
20 it actually hurts a little. He says, "Everybody thinks eating human flesh is the most gruesome and terrible thing you can do, but it was only one more thing that we did
25 for us to get out. We had to! Eating the flesh did not mean we would survive – there were others who ate the flesh and died anyway, from the avalanche and the cold."

30 I loose myself from the firm grip of Arbilla, and I catch a glimpse of Dr Roberto Canessa who has been looking at his empty cup of tea during the last part of the conversation
35 with his old friend. I catch the glare in his eyes, as he says, "Knowing there was only one way to get out inspired us all the more to escape certain death on the mountaintop."

Leaving the secretive Canessa estate I get the hunch there is a secret among those men and women who survived those frosty nights in the Andes. Something troubles me as I climb into my taxi for the airport. I don't know what. But as I leave, I think I hear the vultures again, and it fills me with eerie^o
10 feelings.

eerie strange and frightening

- 8. What became of the survivors after the accident?**
- 9. How did they feel about eating their dead friends?**
- 10. What difficulties did they experience the first few months after they were rescued?**

REFLECT & SHARE 

1. Why, according to one of the survivors, would they not have survived if they had been a soccer team?
2. According to Dr Canessa, their survival has become a “soap opera”. What does he mean by this, do you think?
3. Would you take the role of Dr Canessa – if no one else volunteered?
4. Writing the reportage, the reporter is alert to all her senses – can you find evidence of all five?

FURTHER STUDIES 

Read the book *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* (2002) by Piers Paul Read, or see the film *Alive* (1993) directed by Frank Marshall.

WORD WORK **A. Synonyms**

What synonyms for the italicized words are used in the reportage?

1. Just before Christmas, Canessa and Parrado *stumbled* down from the Andes.
2. They told *an amazed* Chilean *farmer* that they came from a crashed plane.
3. Many of their friends had already died of *wounds* and *frostbite*.
4. A *large-scale* air search had been called off after just nine days.
5. When food ran out they began to eat the frozen *bodies*.
6. They carefully *figured out* how much they had to eat each day to survive.
7. Canessa was forced to *oversee* the dissection of the bodies.
8. Then Canessa and Parrado were *picked* as the strongest to try to find help.
9. Later, *dreadful* photographs in newspapers showed half-eaten limbs.

FOLLOW UP

Take a clean sheet of paper. Your teacher will say one of the words above. You have 30 seconds to write as many words associated in any way with the given word as you can. At the end of 30 seconds your teacher calls out the next word and so on. Share your associations with the class.

B. Informal and formal English

The audience of an official report on the accident would expect a formal level of English, avoiding everyday phrasal verbs. Rewrite the sentences changing the italicized words and expressions into formal ones from the box. In most cases, you must change the form to make them fit the context.

approach	deplete	reveal
depart	resort to	crash
proceed	cancel	drop
attend	descend	tend

1. The plane *set off* from Mendoza, Argentina, on October 13, 1972.
2. Due to pilot error, the plane *came down* in the Andes, instantly killing thirteen passengers.
3. Eight more died when temperatures *went down* to -30 degrees.
4. Only nine days later, the extensive air search was *called off*.
5. When the survivors had *run out* of their food supplies, they had to *fall back on* eating the frozen corpses.
6. As a last resort, Roberto Canessa and Nando Parrado *walked down* from the mountains.
7. They *walked up to* a peasant who was *looking after* his cattle.
8. After the rescue, grisly photographs *gave away* the secret of their survival.
9. Today, all survivors have *gone on* to have families and professional careers.
10. Initially, however, they were encouraged to *go to* therapy sessions.



GO ON
FOR YOU
FOR YOU

c. Definitions

Match the list of words with the corresponding definition.

- | | |
|-------------|----------------|
| a) solemn | g) gaze |
| b) blister | h) anniversary |
| c) delicate | i) assure |
| d) wreckage | j) grief |
| e) lavish | k) sacrifice |
| f) mutual | l) spirit |

1. giving something up for the benefit of another person
2. large, impressive, or expensive
3. a long and steady way of looking at someone
4. involving serious behaviour or attitudes on an important occasion
5. easily damaged or broken
6. the parts of something that remain after it has been destroyed in an accident
7. enthusiasm, energy and self-confidence
8. tell someone that something is definitely true, in order to make him less worried
9. strong feeling of sadness
10. a swelling on your skin containing clear liquid
11. done by each of two or more people to one another
12. a date which is remembered because a special event happened on that date a previous year

FOLLOW UP

Complete the sentences using words from above. Change the form where necessary.

1. She has very ... skin and should stay out of the sun.
2. He has ... his career to stay home and look after the children.
3. She has always shown great ... and passion.
4. They treated each other with ... respect.
5. We attended a ... ceremony in the temple.
6. After the death of his mother, he was overcome with