



“Carma Cave,”
Costa Rica, summer of 1997.

THE DARK SIDE OF CAVING

By: Carlos Goicoechea C.
(NSS #29373)

*“Whenever you go caving in a tropical cave,
don’t you EVER underestimate the weather,
even if it is a lovely, midsummer afternoon.
This story will give a little light on why.”*

SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 1997, 09:00 HRS

Caving group N°1, composed of Gustavo Quesada (age 21), Randall Bermudez (22) and José Alfaro (24), enter “CARMA CAVE” (length: 2865'+ /depth: -321'+), with shovels and a load of empty sacks: their purpose is to reopen, at approximately -210', the “LOST CONNECTION” that leads to the breathtaking “UMBRELLA ROOM” and “ALMOST IN HEAVEN,” which have been plugged-up by sand and mud since May of 1992.

At practically the same time, group N°2, formed by Bryan Kakuk (36?) and his girlfriend Lorry (24), two North American citizens, Carlos Goicoechea (51), Ricardo Llobet (21) and José “Primo” Bermudez (30), enter nearby “ESCONDIDA CAVE” (length: 630' /depth: -45'), having the objective of a nice, fairly long photographic session, combined with showing the cave’s treasures to the two visiting cavers.

(Note: All of the Costa Ricans, except for J. Alfaro, are members of the “GRUPO ESPELEOLOGICO ANTHROS,” and at the same time active members of the National Speleological Society. The NSS will be integrating a Costa Rican chapter soon.)

SAME DAY, APPROXIMATELY 14:30 HRS.

Caving group N°2 exit Escondida Cave without any problems, after having shot about 45 nicely worked-out photos, and immediately proceed to enter Carma Cave, having in mind to join forced with the “diggers,” in order to accelerate the job. Lorry, Brian’s girlfriend, decides to stay outside of the cave, in the company of a sharp machete, just watching and hearing the jungle sounds, mostly because her experience in vertical rope work basically reached her limits with the thirty-foot descent at Escondida, and Carma is a much more serious opponent.

SAME DAY, APPROXIMATELY 15:45 HRS.

All of the cavers meet at a depth of -190', where the three members of group number one are caught taking a long and very deserved siesta, after having completed about four and half feet of depth in the digging project, lamentably, in a somewhat incorrect direction. Carlos, a long time acquaintance of this particular cave, quickly convinces everyone that the "hidden pass" to the lost sections must lie at least some eighteen feet of gravel, sand and mud, and about six feet to the left of the present digging effort. It was hard enough just to talk about digging in the sump-like pass, so the project was abandoned.

About this moment, Bryan decides to solo-climb the two hundred and ten-foot vertical distance to the surface, to rejoin his waiting girlfriend outside. The other five cavers vote for pushing it to the FINAL SUMP, and Carlos simply remains alone at the digging place, to peacefully enjoy a long-awaited-for solo-cigarette, something he desperately needed at this point. The time now is around 16:10 to 16:15.

SAME DAY, AT EXACTLY 16:25 HRS.

With his cigarette just about finished in his mouth, Carlos suddenly receives a LOUD, quite incomprehensible shout from Bryan up-above, after which after some thought, he can only make out two distinctive words, something like... waterfallor WATER-FLOOD!...For still a few extra seconds he remains undecided, without getting any extra answers, but when a constantly growing foreign sound joins the message he catches on..."I've got to run down and warn my buddies!"

SAME DAY, TWO MINUTES LATER (and onward)

Carlos runs and jumps down the ninety feet linear distance from -210' to a short but problematic belly-crawl close to the -240' depth, from which he begins to shout to the closest man, Ricardo, that there's some water definitely coming down, and you guys, being so close to the lowest point of the cave, logically . . .

At that instant, the sound of the incoming has at least doubled or even tripled, so he cuts it short to something like... "Man, you people have to leave RIGHT NOW, or I think you're gonna be dead meat, and man, I MEAN IT!!!" ...On the other side, a joking voice starts to transmit something like... "Boys, the old-man says that there is some kind of trouble out there and that we should..." But right then the roar and rumble and actual shaking has increased so much, in less than thirty seconds, that there needs not to be an in-between man, and Gustavo's voice raises to wipe out the misunderstandings... "Better do as Carlos says. Cause, sometimes he's right!... Rig off the pit NOW!" he commands to his buddies. By this very instant, the noise and the extra "special Effects" are something like that of about three Jumbo Jets taking off simultaneously, and the floor of the cave is actually reverberating in a hard way, so Carlos nervously shouts out... "I am pulling out NOW!!!...Adios, amigos!..." He then grabbed his extra-

light caving pack, with spare batteries, water and carbide, placed it on his back, picked up another light one left there by his friends, and still a third much heavier one, stood up and frantically climbed up the eight-foot wall, entering large room number seven.

Right that instant, the noise was ear-shattering and absolutely overwhelming, and nerves were just about to break down. Catastrophe for sure, was only a very few brief seconds away, so quick decisions were mandatory. A fast check around revealed, to the extreme right, a fairly wide and strong protecting column, so thoughtlessly he ran for it. But upon second thought, it was clear that the incoming havoc would then surround him from two sides, at least, so... No, wait!.. A calculated jump placed him still another five feet higher and further to the left, behind a five-foot wide and nine foot tall sturdy rock. Whether the rushing nightmare would show itself from the left or right side, or both (a very uncomfortable thought!), it seemed this shelter should hold, at least for a while. Besides, there was now no time left. The flash-flood smashing waters were imminent, time-crashing, and surely life taking.

And then, just behind him, he heard voices..One,..two...three... Three of the final sump caving team members had made it out of the belly-crawl trap!... But... what about the others?... Disgracefully, right that instant, we just had time to think about our own lives. It was every man for himself!

Then it began to happen. The floors the walls, the far away ceiling, the whole cave, everything was shaking, shaking hard... The sounds were unbearable, and unbelievable, just like out of a Sci-fi movie!... Carlos had let go of the two extra packs he was carrying, but keeping his, and by the moment he got behind cover, Ricardo and then Gustavo joined him. José Alfaro was a little bit behind, and he got hit by the low, first wave, the “get-out-of-the-way” bottom column, no too large. He managed to somehow fish the light-blue pack-sack that Carlos had just dropped, held on, and skipped being carried away by jumping up a mud ledge, and barely made it to cover, behind the big protective rock. Just then, with no mercy, all hell broke loose!!!

Right now as I write this article, only a couple weeks away from that unforgettable experience, it is impossible to think back and talk about things in a fairly calm way. But at the very instant of that killing nightmare, we were nothing but four minute, tiny spots of human flesh, clinging to life, uncontrollably shivering and shaking, absolutely overwhelmed by the mega-giant size of the circumstances surrounding us. And so, unable to stand by ourselves against them, our only resource, besides taking relative refuge, was only this simple: improvise, honest to God, desperate man’s prayer!... Yes, we prayed, we ALL prayed intensively, with all our hands clinched in a big powerful circle of faith. We prayed, first of all, that He would stop the rain, at surface level; and then to emphasize, that He would drive the clouds away and bring on the sunshine, even though it was a bit late for that!...But above all, we kept a constant, strong flow of prayer for “Primo” and Randall, trapped or lost somewhere down below, and for Bryan, lost or missing way on top of us, whose desperate last minute yell had given us that precious minute of early start, which was the edge that provided us four with some hope of survival! Where on earth could he be, at this instant? Certainly, inside the cave and closer to the entrance

than us, but...was he battling the situation in a somehow safe and comfortable position as we were? After all, Bryan was our guest, and we were responsible for his well-being and whereabouts.

But come on! Let's get back to reality, to the flow of the story, however shattering it may be. It was a damn reality that we had naively made a large number of serious mistakes, and just to mention a couple, here you have them; first of all, and being it no excuse that we were at the height of our summer season, we absolutely ignored all the elementary signs that weather gives. We, the members of group number two, who entered the cave around 2:30 P.M., had never bothered glimpsing up to the sky to catch some indication of what must of been, by then, very obvious signs of an approaching heavy rain. (Rain started about 3:30 P.M. and was very heavy and steady for at least two hours). And as a second BIG mistake, without hesitation, I must point out, ignoring all established rules, we divided ourselves into four non-linked groups, as follows: Bryan, climbing up to the surface, just by himself; Carlos enjoying his solo cigarette, down at the -210' line; Lorry, up on the surface, with no one to talk or rely on and, worst of all, those not-so-experienced young cavers trying to reach at all costs, the bottom of the cave. The bottom, just to say a few words, is a deep narrow sump at the end of a forty-five foot high, seventy-five-degree incline pit that lies one hundred and fifty feet past a tight crawl and an eight-foot vertical wall. So it wasn't just that simple.

After carefully reading all of the preceding quotations, I believe you will agree with me, without any second thought, that it was only through God's immense mercy that this story had the end that it had, instead of a much more tragic one. Having made a few points less confusing, let me now proceed with the telling as it was.

The sounds, the shaking and rattling and trembling of the whole cave, and the height and dark chocolate color of the wild, raging waters, all of it led to only one very great concern: was this just the beginning of something really immense, or was this the actual peak of the nightmare? This, I guess, was the main thought running through our minds, as we all four kept tightly close to maintain our body heat, and to somehow feel a little bit less vulnerable. Our basic concern, right at that instant was..Oh God, where were Randall and Primo, those two trapped so close below us? Would or had they become the first two victims of this unexpected blow of nature? Down below, the exit doors had been shut, and we knew nothing, except that somebody had left the faucet wildly open.

We kept together even tighter, all four of us, in just about six square feet of a very slippery patch of hard mud, having to shout to barely communicate, all hands joined in an everlasting prayer, with the wild, raging flood waters rushing by us, at a distance of no more than a foot away, at a speed that must have been thirty miles an hour! Were we all doomed? Weren't Bryan and Primo and Randall already a part of history? Weren't we also just about to be brushed away and sucked into that awesome final sump? Honestly, with the dim light of only one carbide lamp permanently on guard, at it's lowest rate, we could almost swear that we hadn't seen any human corpse go by us, so Bryan was either still holding alive somewhere or his dead body lay

hooked to some rock, or trapped in a tight fracture, or maybe just hanging lifeless on the rope.

Things after awhile began to be “routine,” since only one fact stood up without discussion: it seemed as though we were surviving!!! Checking the water’s height above and to the left of us, inspecting the solid sixty-five degree inclined mud wall to our right, and aiming a powerful flashlight every five minutes or so toward the entrance of the belly crawl, twenty-five feet below us, those things were all we could do. Myself, very deep inside, knew that the final sump at -321 feet just couldn’t hold all of the entering waters, so it was only a matter of time for our room number seven to start flooding, and then... But before that happened, our two missing buddies fate down below would’ve then been certainly sealed.

SAME DAY, AROUND 18:10 OR 18:15 HRS.

This was about the twelfth time I had checked the water’s level at the crawl’s entrance; there had been about forty-five minutes of a steady holding flow of rushing waters going past us, but it was now obvious that both the volume and the speed of them had gone down some twenty to 25 percent at least. For instance, we could now speak in fairly loud voices, instead of shouting, and the color of the flood, still wild, was only dark brown instead of heavy chocolate.

I was about, as I said, to light up my flashlight when all of a sudden, I saw a streak of light way down below; only a brief tiny light, and certainly coming from under the still rushing waters. I shouted and everyone jumped up and started screaming like madmen, and would have shot down to help unless stopped. “Wait, wait! We CAN NOT assist them without possibly losing someone! But we can shout instructions and give them light and direct them to the best route, and grab them when they are close, but only that!” And so we did: “Keep next to the left wall! Now, around the right and up that boulder! Watch out! Now climb up that mud incline.” and etc. etc. And a couple minutes later, both Randall and Primo were finally with us! Dirty, with no gear at all, soaking wet with no t-shirts, with tons of cuts and bruises, but miraculously with us, after too long of a nerve shattering wait. Oh God, how merciful Thou art!!! We were now six persons standing on the same six square feet of hard mud that had been our “salvation raft” for the past forty-five minutes or so, but we were now six joyful spirits! Tragedy makes giants out of each of us, with all the adrenalin and brotherhood that fills our bodies and our minds.

But not everything was smooth running: we were still trapped or marooned in a flooded pit-cave at -240 feet, we didn’t know if our rigged rope had held without damage and, above all we still knew nothing about Bryan’s whereabouts. Had he managed to take cover, to get out of the way of that incoming, awful mess? We still couldn’t stop our praying, but certainly, just to kill time and lift up our morale, we were soon telling jokes and making fun of our problems. Such is life in the tropics, as they say! The codeword was not to give up.

SAME DAY, 10 MINUTES LATER 18:25 HRS.

At this moment, and as said, no more than ten minutes after that incredible rescue, one of

the routine checks revealed that the final sump could no longer take in any more water, had filled up and now the waters were starting to flood at a fast pace our own room number seven. Oh,oh! Another check-up a couple minutes later showed an extra raise in level of about two feet in about two minutes. Very alarming! At that rate, we would be swimming in about ten to fifteen minutes. We definitely had to move, and we better do it now, in a safe manner, without the pressures of panic.

Upon checking the incoming flood, we observed that it had gone down to about two by four feet of quite clear waters, which we thought we could handle or safely skeep. Even the noise was now down to that of a normal mountain stream, only that it was nighttime, and we would be going down a narrow canyon.

One volunteer, Gustavo, dared to jump across, landing on a ledge of the cave's wall, and after climbing up a bit and a thorough search with a beam-light the message was...yes, we could make it, at least some forty feet to another safe position, fifteen feet higher than our precarious present position.

All six of us ran as quickly as possible to our new home, but since we now were on a "moving spirit," someone suggested that we ought to send another scout still higher up the cave, to the next crawl to check how conditions were for a crossing into the next room (number five), where we had been digging. Soon Gustavo made his way back and reported that there was about five inches of air and about two feet of slow moving water. He made it far enough to see that our digging effort had totally vanished, with about a foot or so of water on the top, and that a waterfall was dropping into it, but this side, the climb-up side, was totally clear! After getting there at -180 feet, we would see what routes were safe and possible. We made it without problems, and along the way found my lost rope climbing gear, full and intact, someone else found his pack-sack, but empty, and still another found a glove and one kneepad. They were all salvaged.

We found out it wasn't at all convenient to remain at that depth, since if there was a new flood, we would be totally in the way, so Randall climbed straight up another fifteen feet, and from there saw that the best way out was, ironically the worst: the way the water was coming in! Only that right now, the level was fairly low and manageable, except for two or three cascades that were either avoidable or easy to handle. So again we moved, as fast as safety would allow, and at a depth of -160 feet we found the low end of the rope, our "road" up to freedom. We tested it, and it seemed in good and safe condition; again I started up a seventy degree flowstone climb, with all the others following, regrouping at a very quite safe ledge at -130 feet, know as "Las Respresitas" (The Rimstone Dams), twelve feet below the bottom of "Pozo Esperanza," the exit pit. From there we could see the rest of the rope, freely hanging, but laid right in the middle of a **strong**, sixty-five foot high waterfall. Going up right now was out of the question!... And yet another detail; no sight of Bryan! We shouted and shouted but silence was always the answer. Had he made it out somehow? Was he out of hearing range, or maybe unconscious? We all made a thourough search for him, coming up and noone had seen anything abnormal along the way,

so... Oh God, we were still depending on Your mercy, weren't we?!

We all once more sat down as close to each other as possible, in a space no bigger than six square feet, with a long straight down pit at the right side, and a two by two foot, forty foot deep window on the other.

Randall had in his left-over gear some honey, which gave us extra energy, and I still had a few cigarettes, so we weren't that bad after all. It was then around seven P.M., and one thing was for sure; we were very close to the surface, only about -130 feet, sixty-five of them straight up! And from then on, it was only about three hundred and fifty feet of "walkining distance"; three short climbs, a couple of crawls, and the rest was just "easy going" passages and rooms.

STILL SUNDAY THE 23RD, AROUND 22:00 HRS.

We had been holding that same position for at least three hours, staying as much as possible away from the spray and the wind produced by the waterfall, with someone checking it's condition every half hour or so. Luckily, we had managed to deal with hypothermia very well, with noone at any moment going past grade one without the rest of us noticing it and taking prompt action. Everything, was actually routine; NOT falling asleep, NOT falling down the pit or the window, NOT dropping the space blanket, NOT pushing the others, and yelling and shining a strong light around and up the pit from time to time. Some of us talked, some dozed a little bit, someone told a joke every so often, and all of us kept a stream of prayer flowing up, because we all felt very, very small, considering the size of the circumstances surrounding us.

Somewhere around 9:30 to to 9:45 P.M., it became a definite fact that there was no longer any spray falling on us, and that the waterfall's wind had gone down to almost nothing, and the fall itself shrank to just a constant dripping. The only noise was that of another incoming side-spring that cascaded down into the nothingness below.

And just about then it happened!!! It was almost exactly 10:00 P.M. when, all of a sudden, a very powerful beam of light shone down from above, followed instantly by our yells. "Hey!... Who's up there?... We are down here, all six of us! It was three of the members of the Alfaro family: the father and two older brothers of José Alfaro, the one with us. They had brought an extra ninety feet of brand new PMI rope (Bryan's) and at least three very powerful flashlights, the type professional divers use. And after some back and forth question-answering, someone asked, "and Bryan, what do you know about Bryan? Did he ever make it out?" It seemed that many hours had gone by when the answer came, just about three seconds later. "By God! Whom do you think came down to tell us, and gave us his flashlights, and told us to bring extra rope? Yes! They are well, both he and Lorry, but very, very tired!!! They are staying at the house, trying to get in touch with the Red Cross, the fire brigade and other cavers, both at Ciudad Neilly and San José."

We all jumped up in joy, and cheered, and shouted, and whistled, after exactly five hours and thirty five minutes of not knowing in any form what on earth could have happened to him

(and Lorry), our North American friends and guests...Again...Oh Lord, how infinite is Your mercy! Seven cavers went in, and seven cavers came out, with just a few scratches, but with a bag load of new experiences. And probably, most of them, if not the whole group, with at least a few extra gray hairs on their heads.

MONDAY, MARCH 24TH, 1997, AROUND 00:00 HRS.

The last man makes it out of Carma Cave's entrance.

Along the way out, on level number one (zero to -57'), we are lucky enough to recuperate, intact but absolutely wet and muddy, Randall's pack-sack and a machete and Gustavo's pack, absolutely dry and unharmed, which he had left hanging from a tiny rock hook, only about five feet above the normal dry-level waters, right at the entrance to the waterfall. As we start our way through the jungle, down to the Alfaro family's home, we noticed that everyone has handled his Petzl carbide lamp so well that we don't need to refill.

MONDAY THE 24TH, AROUND 01:00 HRS.

The last of the stranded Carma cavers makes it to the house, just to find that there is a fiesta everywhere: long loud shouts, embraces, hand shakes, hugging and a lot more handshaking and fooling around, and above all, a very joyful atmosphere, and lots of hot food and drinks.

And then, finally, after all those many hours of uncertainty, the reunion with Bryan and Lorry. There are no words to describe this particular scene, so please just imagine it... There were tears in the eyes of practically everyone present, and that is a lot to say, with so many hard-core people involved. The "test", by now, had been nine and half hours long, and all of us had been caving since nine A.M. The previous day; that adds up to a sixteen hour ordeal, something, to my understanding, that you don't go through everyday.

MARCH 24TH, 02:00 HRS: We all leave the Alfaro family home (eight of us).

MARCH 24TH, 02:20 HRS: We all safely made it to our sleeping quarters.

MARCH 24TH, 04:30 HRS: Carlos G. boards the bus, on a nine hour trip back to San José, in for a full day of his regular work.

MARCH 25TH, VERY EARLY!:

Leaving four men along the way, to keep an open eye on the weather, and to be able to transmit news of any threatening change, the "point man" makes it all the way down to the final sump, and manages to recover one very expensive camera, floating in a (wet!) Water-tight container, and a ninety foot rescue rope with it's bag, and one glove and one kneepad. Economic losses are estimated to be around U.S. \$3000.00 figure: damage to the rescued camera, lenses,

another fancy camera lost, and a seventy-five foot PMI rope, plus several rescue pulleys, at least eight to ten carabineers, and a couple sacks full of personal caving gear (ascenders, descenders, harnesses, etc.) But as we just said a short while ago, seven cavers got in, and through Gods infinite mercy, all seven of them walked out. That is something you don't see every day!.... And period.

San José, Costa Rica, May 26th, 1997

Main story by Carlos Goicoechea C.

See *Extra Thrills* from Bryan Kakuk's and José Bermudez' point of view!

Right at the Edge

Side story by: Bryan Kakuk

At about 4:23 P.M. that day, Bryan was only twelve feet short of completing the seventy foot rope climb up the "Pozo Esperanza." He was exactly at the lowest of three edges that mark the end of the free climb (one foot wide by about twelve feet long) when he noticed that apart from the usual cave sounds, there was a strange, foreign and growing sound, absolutely unusual. He stopped prusiking to analyze what on earth (better say under) it could be; right at that instant, he had a sort of flash back and he remembered Carlos pointing out just casually, that, "some of the Costa Rican caves are subject to sudden flooding." Since the noise, by then, had grown to a very loud and very close roar and rumble, he quickly balanced his situation: definitely there wasn't enough time to switch to a descent mode and try to reach the rimstone dams section, and if he tried to ascend the remaining twelve feet of the climb and then get off rope, he would be totally helpless right at the "Tube," a seventy-five foot long and narrow phreatic tube (twelve feet high and four feet wide), with no chance at all to reach the next room(Number three), the closest place to find suitable refuge.

So, without hesitation, he opened up his Petzl croll ascender and removed the rope, and then, with his right hand, he "thumbed" the other ascender, so that the rope would slip, and as quickly as was possible he moved to the extreme left, along the narrow and slippery ledge. This placed him about six or seven feet from where the eventual flood (or whatever) would show up, falling into the Pit. It was then when, thinking himself in a safe position, he shut to the ones down below something like, "Hey you guys!... there is a water-flood coming down!...Better run for cover!"

Just about then a solid wall of dark, brown, thick water at an unbelievable speed and at least ten feet tall and some six feet wide, shot out from the tube, with such force that it jumped

clearly across the forty foot wide pit, crashing against the opposite wall, to then bounce-off at least halfway, finally dropping into the immense darkness below. Saying it, in only a few words, it was simply unbelievable and indescribable!

Bryan had just enough to tighten the rope against the wall, and to tightly press himself into a small crack in the rock, and even so, the furious waters missed him by only about ten inches. Obviously from time to time, a little wave would get him wet, apart from the heavy spray flying all over the place, because with the flood came in also a heavy wind. Such was the magnitude of this disaster.

It was indeed a very difficult and edgy situation, and as Bryan later confessed, never in his whole adventurous life been so close to facing death. He even had to cut the little rope that held his pack-sack, because if it somehow got caught by the flowing inferno, drag him down into the pit, or pendulum him right into and under the massive flood. A sure death in either case. Nevertheless, he managed to keep the pack between his legs, since it contained a lot of life support equipment.

At least thirty minutes went by in such a state of conditions, with hardly any trace of the flood lowering its strength, worsened by the fact of being constantly soaking wet. With a cave temperature of about sixty-five degrees, and a heavy wind-chill factor, plus the fact that he couldn't move at all, he started to go hypothermic, shivering violently, soon without any control.

He realized that was a dangerous enemy, so around five-fifteen P.M. (Fifteen minutes later), noticing that the floods magnitude had by then gone down noticeably, he decided to free-climb the remaining fifteen feet of the pit, still attached to the rope by the Petzl ascender, because that gave him a better chance than to free-fall seventy feet or more to a sure death. As we said, he would just pendulum into the midst of the waterfall, At the most he would only drown!

Luckily, he made it without any major problems to a point just a bit above and right in front of the ropes anchor point, where he got "off rope". After some minutes of looking around, checking-up things, and studying all the present conditions, he found a ledge here, a foot-hold there, a crack later, and a few hand holds, and managed to move twenty feet into the tube, above the waters, right to an eight foot climb, actually, an eight foot high waterfall, which he also managed to avoid. From then on, he was able to hold and just traverse right on top of the four foot deep waters and finally quite exhausted, he managed to reach room number three, where he knew he could at least stay in safety, totally away from the water, the spray and the wind.

Right outside the cave, he expected to find Lorry, but earlier she had decided to return to the Alfaro family's house, but she had lost her way in the jungle and was just wandering around hopelessly. The same thing happened to Bryan, but luckily, at some moment, one of the two shouted and was heard by the other one, and together they were able to relocate the trail, which they flagged in the event of a possible rescue.

With Lorry's broken-up Spanish, they managed to communicate the events of the day to the Alfaro family, and after that the father plus two of the toughest sons got on their way to the cave, using three of Bryan's extra-bright diving lights. Then Lorry had a sudden break-down of both mental and physical exhaustion, and she collapsed with borrowed dry clothes into a super warm and soft bed, something at that instant of absolutely first priority.

Meanwhile, with a super-generous very hot meal in his stomach ,and also dry, borrowed clothes, Bryan dedicated himself to "try and get initial response"(T.A.G.I.R.) From the local Red Cross and the Fire Brigade. He only received some very terrifying answers: the Red Cross guys didn't even have flashlights, and someone with Fire Brigade said,"he thought that, somewhere, they had short natural fiber, seven-sixteenth inch rope." Bryan knew there were at least three or four local Ciudad Neilly cavers, but he knew neither their names not their addresses, and later on, when trying to contact a couple of known cavers at San José, the capital city, all he got a catch of were answering machines, with the usual message: "when you hear the tone please...!"

Definitely, to this author, that day (March 23, 1997), it was God's will, that nothing bad was to happen, at least in reference to the eight cavers visiting Carma Cave, Punteranus province, republic of Costa Rica.

I believe so, very firmly!

Do you want to know something else? José Alfaro (age twenty-four) was on his life's first visit to a vertical cave! And even then, after some hot soup got into his stomach, and having his "hot mamma" right on him with a really hot embrace, he was the one to say, "Hey you, amigos, what about going down tomorrow, very early, into Carma Cave, To see what can be saved?"

That's what I call true caving spirit!

The Two Trapped Below

Side story by: Jose “Primo” Bermudez

Before getting into the final sump, we had to go through a difficult crawl, approximately eighteen feet long; the ceiling was very low, around sixteen inches at the most, so we had to go down on our bellies, without pack-sacks, and crawl over loose sand and pebbles. The solid limestone walls were about two feet apart.

Once past this crawl, the ceiling raises to about fifteen feet and the passage widens a little until you hit the eighty degree inclined forty to forty-five foot long pit that ends at the sump. Once we got to it, my cousin Randall and I dedicated ourselves to rigging the pit, while Ricardo and Gustavo checked things out.

At a certain moment, about ten minutes after entering, Ricardo had to go back to the crawl to bring some caving stuff left inside the sacks. He was almost there when, all of a sudden, he heard Carlos’ voice. (Carlos had remained alone at room number five). He started shouting to us that something wrong (?) was happening... and that we should recover the rope and all of the equipment, and leave the pit. Then Gustavo took José Alfaro, and started to pass the crawl, when he figured something was really wrong, and he shouted to us, “guys, hurry, leave the rope, and get the hell out of here!” We heard him, but we took a short time to back the end of the rope. We didn’t believe there was such an emergency. But as precious seconds went by, we started to hear and feel the rumble and noises Carlos was trying to tell us about.

When we got finished, the noises and rumbles and the trembling were frightening, we were terrified, almost like if it were a magnitude eight earthquake. The two of us threw the rope up as high as possible, over a ledge and then we ran for our lives. I was leading , but the moment I put my hands to the ground to start crawling they got covered by muddy water. “We still have enough time to go across,” I said to myself, but when I was about halfway thru, I suddenly felt on my helmet a violent , strong blow, that swept us both away, almost to the edge of the pit; it was something like being hit by a powerful explosion, that’s all I can recall. Somehow, we managed to get a hold on something, and we quickly stood up and climbed on top of some large rocks, and then moved up along the side-walls, so that the awesome flash flood wouldn’t drag us into the sump, a sure death, whether it were from getting crushed against the solid walls or just simply drowning. “Oh my God, we’re trapped! What on earth are we going to do, Randall? What? What?!”

The first thing we did was search for the highest accessible place where we could have some chance to survive, since we soon realized that the final sump would at some moment be unable to take in all that water, and the level would start rising (as it really happened). We soon found one, too narrow for both of us to fit in, and fully covered with very wet mud. That detail pointed out to me right away, that the flood waters had recently been there, and thus I envisioned the moment we would be face to face with the invading waters. Just then, I thought that if we were later on to be

sucked into the sump. Our bodies would hardly ever be found, so I brought out the idea of tying ourselves one to another. This way, I said to myself, there will be a better chance of finding them. At that instant, I was only thinking of my mother: I thought that it would be less painful to have...something...to take to the grave, instead of a never found notice.

Since Randall was on the sump-side, I asked him to carefully do a traverse above the rushing waters, because there might be a chance to find some type of chimney or Dome above the sump, he soon came back with a negative answer, and that became still a lesser chance to survive. This only made us feel more trapped, and made me go wondering, for the next thirty to thirty-five minutes into a sort of "review" of what my life had been up to this dreadful moment. Things such as the futility of dying in such a manner, in that God forsaken hidden depth, and that Randall and I would be a part of the list of people that died during Holy Easter week, and those many things I had programmed to do and wouldn't do, related to my business life, about my girlfriend, with whom I would never marry and build a pretty home, with many kids, and that I was going to fail everyone I was committed to, and so on and so on, till I would return to the fact that I had to fight to the very end to see that none of that happened, because I had a fighting spirit, and I was still alive.

At certain moments we had our lights out, but then, we would turn them on again, hoping that some sort of float would have a rescue rope tied to it's end, that would conduct us to freedom, because if we were given something to hold on to, I knew we could beat the raging and vicious waters: but then again, desperation would catch a hold of us, and then, the only thing we could go to was praying, over and over again.

I took it for granted that our fellow cavers out there somewhere had avoided being sucked and pulverized into the sump, but it made me angry to see they were doing nothing to help us, since only with help from outside could we get out. Their risk was minimum compared to what we were experiencing. And so, I never lost my faith in them, and I constantly shone my flashlight towards their direction. But I only saw the waters flowing..flowing...

It was right at one of those signaling moments that I excitedly noticed that the water level had gone down a bit, and that we had about two inches of air space in the crawl from time to time. I ventured that if we took off our helmets off (but keeping them) we would be able to stick our noses into the triangular shaped top of the ceiling, and thus make it out; so, I immediately shouted to Randall: "OK, cousin, this is it!...we can't wait any longer, since there might not be a second chance!...Take your helmet off, otherwise we won't fit, and follow me as close as possible!"

I jumped into the still menacing waters, and I remember sucking in quite some water through my nose, but I knew there wasn't any turning back, and then, all of a sudden, I felt that I was out, on the other side. Instinctively, I leaned back into the waters, stretching my arm and feeling everything, and then I had a hold of a pack-sack, and I pulled. I knew I was out alive, but Randall was still inside, so I reached in again, and I felt his hand, and experienced something unique, out of this world:to have my cousin's life in my hands, and that if I were to let him go, I would lose him forever!...It was then when I braced myself against the walls and ceiling that I pulled with all my strength, and it was

absolutely incredible to see that seconds later, he was standing by me, alive and breathing, and even though we still had to get out of the flood pounding on us, I looked up and seeing the ceiling at least sixty feet above us, I just whispered, “Oh my God, thanks, now I know I am not going to die! Thank you Lord!”

And then, behind a big shelter rock some sixty feet away and high up, we saw our companions signaling to us with their lights, and they shouted out the best route out of the flood towards them, and when we managed to get to their refuge, I felt that I just had to cry, out of sheer happiness, something I have never experienced in my life.

Truly, being only thirty years old at the moment, those were the toughest moments I had ever suffered in my life; but right now, a couple months later, I look at them as “A great, everlasting experience.” Logically, one that I don’t wish to ever go through again in my life, and that I do not recommend to any one, being it friend or foe.

THE END

OR

THE BEGINNING, FOR ALL THE SURVIVORS!!!