

**The quiet stillness
is broken only by the
distant moaning of a bulldozer,
intent on its wretched task of
digging. The dust hangs
heavy and through the fog a little
boy clutches the hand of a rescuer
as he stumbles over the broken soil.
Nearby a woman sobs softly, her big eyes dazed
as she hits herself with clenched fists.**

The smell of death clogs the air. Hugh Price-Hughes pauses in his work. Slowly he removes the dust mask from his mouth and folds it in his hands. He nods to his team and, exhausted, they down their tools. He's been to three earthquakes and this is always the most difficult part. "I walked over to the father," explains the 32-year-old Johannesburg Emergency Management Services rescuer. "For two days he'd watched us search for his daughter. I think he understood she was dead but us being there gave him hope. I tried to explain that we couldn't reach her body – and even if we could there was nothing recognisable left in it. The dogs had sniffed out her smell on both sides of the room. But he was so desperate, for something that he begged us for a hair, a tooth, a bone, anything of his daughter he could bury."

MASTERS OF DISASTER

BY PAULA SLADE PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUTHER & MARCHESI

Mountains, rivers, oceans and deserts. Earth abounds with expeditionary opportunity. But when the earth's crust gets a little shaky, another kind of adventurer steps up to the plate

The Djoudj family had been eating dinner when, six days earlier, the Algerian city of Bousaada had been hit by an earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale.

The family of five had just made it out of their third floor apartment when their 10-year-old daughter, Yasmine, had turned back to fetch a scarf to cover her hair. The last thing her father remembers are those heart-wrenching screams.

"We were working underground with

three stories above and three below that had collapsed into the basement. The entire building had shifted three metres to the right. It was dangerous work and while we were there two massive aftershocks and 100 smaller ones hit the city.

"They came without warning and don't just start falling everywhere. I was a rescue squad leader and while I was never scared, knowing you're responsible for your guys and that there's a great chance of them being trapped in a secondary collapse, is frightening."

Price-Hughes is also responsible for deciding which of the country's rescuers are qualified to participate in these overseas missions. He runs an intensive eight-week urban search and rescue course in Johannesburg, training recruits in high-angle, advanced rope, confined space and trench and structural collapses. The volunteers come from emergency services around the country where they work as fire fighters, paramedics, doctors and dog handlers. As soon as an international call for assistance goes out, they're mobilised through "Rescue South Africa", a Section 10 company established five years ago to co-ordinate the South African government's official urban search and rescue response. Affiliated to the United Nations International Search and Rescue

Advisory Group (INSARAG), Rescuer "South Africa relies mostly on sponsorship and has so far sent teams to Turkey, India, Algeria and Iraq following their earthquakes, as well as providing assistance during the Marmatshon floods and the volcanic eruption in Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo."

It's tragedy mixed with the ultimate adventure, an adrenaline rush to the nth degree. Within hours the team is mobilised from around the country, given scant information and sent to a distant country that's in the middle of a natural disaster.

"People pay lots of money to do adventure sports, but we do it every day as part

of our job," smiles Price-Hughes. "These missions are the ultimate challenge."

"People often forget that we're not there for an earthquake site-seeing experience. The fact that we get called means something really bad has happened. For us it's another day at the office, for someone else it's likely to be the worst day of their life."

"We start digging with spades and picks," continues Malebafane. "We don't recommend the guys use their hands although sometimes you don't have a choice as you run the risk of getting through the body if you use a spade."

There was this one family sitting around a site we were working on, watching us and crying. Their grandfather had died there. "We asked them if the body was still trapped underground and they said no, it had already been removed. But they still sat there crying. It was very sad, almost as if they thought that by staying there their grandfather would come back."

For most of us the sight of a dead body can be a reality check, but for rescuers it's the norm.

"My reality check is an earthquake," admits Glass. "It forces me to look at the world around me and count my blessings. Walking through the two-and-a-half thousand-year-old city of Bam [Iran] was the

first time I'd been exposed to humanity during back-to-back. It's difficult to come to terms with the fact that it took just 30 seconds to completely destroy it. Being in a earthquake zone is the most horrifying, while at the same time terrifying, experience. It gives you a greater appreciation for the vulnerability and fragility of human life and makes you realise just how insignificant we are in the bigger picture," says Glass.

"He's haunted by the memory of three teenagers, crouched down in a little trench they'd dug for themselves, completely surrounded by sand. They'd been digging into a hole and started crying. Their grandfather had died there. "We asked them if the body was still trapped underground and they said no, it had already been removed. But they still sat there crying. It was very sad, almost as if they thought that by staying there their grandfather would come back."

Although it wasn't yet confirmed that

they'd be going, I was back in Johannesburg the following morning. At the back of your mind you're already working on the logistics, who'll be in the team, what to take. Because we usually deploy hours before the international television crews get to the disaster site, there's very little information available when we leave. You have to research on the Internet and anywhere else you can to find out what the weather conditions and health risks are."



When the call comes through, Hugh Price-Hughes is ready to stop everything.

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"There's one moment in every rescue you never forget," reflects Price-Hughes. "For me, it was when the Algerian government troops wanted to start spraying pesticide on the site where this poor man's daughter lay dead. I'd just

told him we wouldn't be able to get to her, but when he saw those soldiers, he went ballistic and started screaming at them that his daughter was under the rubble. I will never forget his heartbeat, his desperation, his pain."

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and raised about \$771,000 in charity boxes, although 3,000

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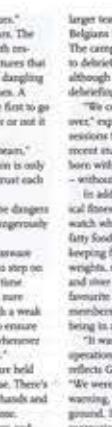
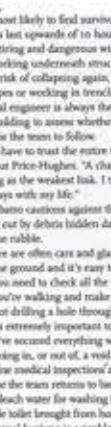
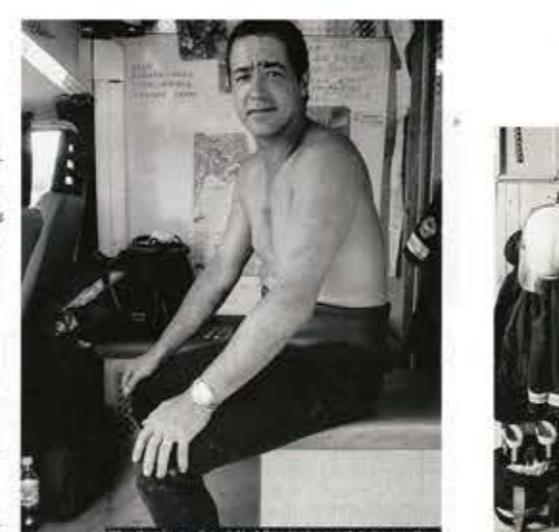
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ESCAPE FROM AN EARTHQUAKE

»Rescue South Africa board member Tom Watson says it's imperative to get away from buildings as quickly as possible. "Try to find an open space," he suggests. "Avoid using lifts, escalators, anything mechanical."

»If that's impossible and you get trapped in a building, Trevor Glass advises trying to attract attention to yourself. "Screeching and shouting requires a tremendous amount of energy, so it's better to try and get a brick or a piece of metal and knock at something irregular instead. The noise must somehow get to you."

»According to Glass, people succumb

because of exposure to extremes of temperature.

"You need to stay warm and hydrated.

You're most likely to find survivors."

Shots last upwards of 10 hours. The work is tiring and dangerous with rescuers working under collapsed structures that risk collapsing again during rescue operations or working in trenches. A structural engineer is always the first to go into a building to assess whether or not it is safe for the team to follow.

"We cope by switching off when a call is over," explains Price-Hughes. "Debriefing sessions force us to switch on again. A recent study suggested that people are born with the ability to switch on and off without it you're going to suffer."

In addition to mental endurance, physical fitness is imperative. Most rescuers eat what they eat, avoiding meat and fatty foods. The most popular options for keeping fit include circuit training, lifting weights, mountain climbing, spear fishing and river rafting. Touch rugby is another favourite and during one such game team members got their closest idea of what being in an earthquake is really like.

"There are often care and glassware under the ground and it's easy to step on them. You need to check all the time where you're walking and make sure you're not drifting a hole through a weak base. It's extremely important to ensure that you've secured everything whenever you're going in, out of, or avoid."

Routine medical inspections are held each time the team returns to base. There's always a walk around the campsite and a portable toilet brought from home.

"Personal hygiene is a problem and there's always a lot of suffering from diarrhoea and vomiting. The most common complaints are sinusitis, irritable eyes and upper respiratory tract infections caused by the contamination in the air," says Glass.

"It's good to bring isotonic drinks because the work is physically intensive and dehydration can become a problem in the heavy protective clothing."

The team usually brings two tons of bottled water and six tons of food.

Trout nests, mashed potatoes, tins of bully beef and tins are the staple diet. A lot of the food is also dehydrated so that it can be easily prepared. For Price-Hughes, the effect has been a self-imposed ban on bully beef and tins. But for Malebafane, the camping life was fun.

"It reminded me of my Scout days when you'd sleep in tents somewhere in the wild. But the food takes getting used to," he chuckles. "When you had to go in there, sit and talk out with your staff in a log, that's difficult."

And for that reason the South African volunteers will continue to fly to wherever they're needed to do their bit to help find survivors.

SIGN UP FOR SERVICE

You need to be a certified technical rescue technician or paramedic although, according to RSA board member Andre Tomlinson, they do make use of civil engineers and other specialists. "Any people can join as domestic support members," he says.

To join, visit www.rescue-sa.co.za.