

RISING WATER

ALSO BY MARC ARONSON

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RISING WATER

THE STORY OF THE THAI CAVE RESCUE

MARC ARONSON



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This book is dedicated to Sergeant Sam, who gave his life, and to all the heroes of the rescue, from the Thai middle school volunteers to the international crew of cave divers. You accomplished the impossible. It is also written to honor the world's undocumented and stateless refugees and migrants—may you all find safe and welcoming homes.



The hands of rescue workers from around the world symbolize the spirit of cooperation that characterized the effort to save Coach Ek and the twelve young soccer players.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THAI

Members of the Wild Boars Club (asterisk means trapped in the cave)

Coaches

Ekapon “Ek” Jantawong*: assistant coach

Nopparat Kanthawong: founder and head coach

Players

Chanin “Titan” Vibulrungruang*, eleven years old

Mongkol “Mark” Boonpiam*, twelve years old

Panumas “Mick” Sangdee*, thirteen years old

Duganpet “Dom” Promtep*, thirteen years old

Sompong “Pong” Jaiwong*, thirteen years old

Adul “Dul” Sam-on*, fourteen years old

Nattawut “Tern” Takamsong*, fourteen years old

Ekarat “Bew” Wongsukchan*, fourteen years old

Prajak “Note” Sutham*, fourteen years old

Pipat “Nick” Pho*, fifteen years old

Pornchai “Tee” Kamluang*, sixteen years old

Peerapat “Night” Sompiangjai*, seventeen years old

Thaweechai Nameng, thirteen years old

Songpul Kanthawong, thirteen years old

Thai Navy SEALs

Baitei: SEAL member who stayed with the team in the cave

Lieutenant Commander Saman Gunan: retired SEAL

Captain Anan Surawan

Thai Army

Dr. Pak Loharnshoon: medic who stayed with the team in the cave

Government Officials

General Prayut Chan-o-cha: prime minister of Thailand

Narongsak Osottanakorn: governor of Chiang Rai Province

Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun: king of Thailand

Assisting in the Rescue

Ruengrit Changkwanyuen: diver

Sri Tammachoke: farmer

OTHER COUNTRIES

Australian

Craig Challen: cave diver

Dr. Richard “Harry” Harris: anesthesiologist and cave diver

British

Dr. Martin Ellis: geographer

Rob Harper: cave explorer

Chris Jewell: cave diver

Jason Mallinson: cave diver

Richard “Rick” Stanton, MBE: cave diver

Vernon Unsworth: cave explorer

John Volanthen: cave diver

Chinese

Wang Ke: volunteer member of the Beijing Peaceland Foundation

Zhou Yahui: volunteer member of the Beijing Peaceland Foundation

International Divers

Ivan Karadzic: Dane living in Thailand

Fernando Raigal: Spaniard

Ben Reymenants: Belgian living in Thailand

International Businessman

Elon Musk

United States Military

Master Sergeant Derek Anderson

Staff Sergeant James Brisbin

Staff Sergeant Michael Galindo

Major Charles Hodges: leader of US team at the cave

Captain Jessica Tait: chief public affairs officer for US effort

Prologue: Snatch and Grab

Thursday, June 28, 2018

CAVE DIVERS KNOW NOT TO PANIC; NOT TO LET THOUGHTS OF drowning linger and distract them. Make the best decision in this moment, this second, save your breath, stay alive. Face the next crisis when it comes.

Richard “Rick” Stanton and John Volanthen are two of the best cave divers in the world. They had flown overnight from England to Thailand to look for twelve Thai youth soccer players and their assistant coach, who, if alive, were somewhere deep in the pitch-dark, flooded caverns of the Tham Luang cave system. But now that the divers were in the cave, they realized that the best move was to give up the search.

The cave system was filled with so much rushing, muddy water that divers could not see even a foot in front of themselves. Even Stanton and Volanthen could not make any headway against the

current. The boys were sealed in a watery trap. The divers finally managed to navigate far enough into the cavern to reach a large chamber where they found four terrified men.

Desperate to reduce the water level in the caves, authorities had managed to bring in water pumps operated by skilled workers and linked to long hoses that led out of the cavern. But the water had risen so quickly that four of the pump workers were trapped. The frightened men couldn't stay, couldn't make it through the tight tunnels that were flooded floor to ceiling, didn't know how to dive through the cold, muddy waters.

Stanton understood how to save a man who was in extreme danger but could not move: grasp him and pull him to safety. Back in England, he'd trained as a firefighter. Now, as the water in the chamber rose, he and Volanthen had to act, fast.

They'd have to grab the workmen, dive them back through to the cave entrance, and tell the Thai authorities to suspend the search for the boys: the rushing waters beyond the chamber were too dangerous to cross.

Cave diving is a new form of exploration that requires care, training, and specialized equipment, and Stanton and Volanthen are decorated, world-record-holding divers. That means they know when to quit, when the risk is just too high. For the moment, the hunt for the boys must end. Once they got the workmen out, going back into the cave would be suicide for the divers. Later on someone could go back to look for the boys—or their bodies.

1

Wild Boars

DR. ANDREW ALAN JOHNSON, AN AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST who lived in northern Thailand for many years, has described the area near the Tham Luang cave system as a beautiful mountain valley with sharp-sided cliffs, the hills covered with green, dense jungle. And then comes the cave system, which is “enthraling. Its entrance is broad, like a cathedral door, and during the rainy season the humidity pours out of it like steam. It looks like the gateway to another world. In some senses, it is.” Filled with inviting chambers, challenging tight corners, and branching paths, the caves are a popular destination for adventurous explorers, like the members of the Moo Pa youth soccer team.

The Moo Pa, or Wild Boars, were members of a soccer club whose players ranged in age from eleven to nineteen. Twelve players and their fit, outgoing, and good-humored assistant teacher-coach,



The entrance of the Tham Luang cave as seen from the inside, in the dry season.

twenty-five-year-old Ek (Ekapon Jantawong), had decided to cap off a day of practice by scrambling through the linked giant caverns and twisting, tight, and craggy passageways of the 6.4-mile- (10.3-kilometer)-long cave system.

Nopparat Kanthawong, the team's creator and head coach, started the group in 2015 as a free activity to give young people, especially those facing difficult lives, a chance to enjoy themselves and to improve their skills. When about seventy players across a wide range of ages joined up, Coach Kanthawong divided the players into four age groups, though the best players could “play up” into the next squad. The players in the cave cut across the age groups.

The Wild Boars practiced hard, sent some graduates on to

major Thai soccer teams, and fared surprisingly well in regional tournaments—earning second place in one recent contest and taking home the championship in another. But their bonds went beyond sports. Ek created a system where an athlete’s playtime was linked to how he was doing in school. Excitement about sports led to better study habits, and better grades guaranteed more chances to excel at sports. The sports-school link was only part of what the team offered.

Out of the seventy Wild Boars, at least twenty—including three lost in the cave and Ek himself—were not Thai; their place in the country was fragile. As Coach Kanthawong explained, “All of the kids who join the team, they all wish that they would be professional soccer players. But they would not be able to do so if they don’t have nationalities.” Ek and the other “stateless” players were among the 400,000 to possibly as many as three million people in Thailand who are similar to what are called “undocumented” immigrants in the United States, with an added level of peril. They are not Thai, but if they are missing any birth information from their home country, they are also no longer citizens of the lands in which they were born.

Stateless people can live in Thailand but do not have the legal papers that would allow them to study, travel, and work throughout the country, eventually get married, or leave Thailand and return. As the coach said, they have no nationality at all. The team is a kind of home—a place to be together, bond, share, and learn away from the impossible pressure of being a person without a country.

As Ek tells it, they had been thinking about exploring the caves for a while, ever since they’d gone on a team-building bike trip together. “Hey,” he remembered someone saying, “let’s go to Tham