

An Earthquake Miracle



Told by
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Elder Randy Ellsworth and his companion were so sick the night before the 1976 Guatemala earthquake that they decided to sleep in the chapel next to the 10-foot by 10-foot adobe house they were staying in. Had they not slept in the chapel, they would surely have been killed by the adobe walls of that little house that I saw, which came crashing down where they would have been sleeping.

However, the Elders were not completely safe in the beautiful Patzicia chapel. Not only did its walls come down but so did a massive concrete beam which landed on Elder Ellsworth causing him great pain and pinning him to the stage of the cultural hall. Hearing agonizing cries for help, missionaries and townspeople — each of whom had lost loved ones themselves — came running to the church to try to help the young missionary. But even with all this help, it was impossible to lift the heavy beam off the missionary whose injuries were becoming more serious by the moment. As the hours passed, not only was the injury to the Elder's back becoming more serious, but the pressure impeded circulation so his legs became discolored and swollen leading to the more serious problem of hemolytic uremia with progressive kidney damage. Finally, Julio Salazar, a Guatemalan missionary, came up with a brilliant and inspired solution — to cut the stage out around the trapped missionary. No one thought this would work. To make it worse the rescuers had to crawl through rubble to reach Elder Ellsworth. A 7.3 aftershock compounded the danger. As debris came crashing down around them there was real concern that the weakened adobe walls would come down in full force crushing the rescuers. At that point Julio stopped and offered prayer, blessing the walls to stand until they could get him out. And they did. Another Elder, Gary Larsen,



found a chain saw. But it was out of gas. Unsuccessful in siphoning gas from a truck into the chain saw, someone disregarded safety sucked the gas into his mouth and spit it into the chain saw until there was enough gas to make it go. Soon a section of the stage was cut away. Supports under the stage were cut away. Bricks were propped under the concrete beam and Elder Ellsworth was freed from his entrapment. He was carefully put in a vehicle and transported to a hospital in Guatemala City.

Two days later Dr. George Snell and I arrived in Guatemala and the mission president took us immediately to see his critically injured missionary. It didn't take long to assess the situation. Besides severe back injuries, Elder Ellsworth's legs were discolored and massively swollen. There was no urine output. The BUN was elevated — how high no one remembers — but a lab slip in Randy's possession records a potassium level of 9.3 which had caused an episode of cardiac arrest. Now, he was comatose and dying of renal failure. Without the availability of dialysis, the doctors had given him up for dead.

Because of aftershocks, the airport had been closed. There would be no more flights in or out of Guatemala — excepting one U.S. Air force cargo plane that we learned would be leaving soon for Panama. Brother Goodman, a counselor in the mission presidency, and an

(Left) Before the 1976 earthquake, this was a beautiful chapel in the town of Patzicia in the Guatemala Highlands. A huge concrete beam fell on a sleeping missionary, Elder Randy Ellsworth, who was trapped under it for hours

(Above) Dr. Ellsworth and Julio Salazar were recently reunited. Elder Salazar was the missionary who blessed the walls of the chapel to stay up and eventually freed Elder Ellsworth from the concrete beam.

official in the United States Embassy, communicated by radio with the commander of the Air force plane. When President Goodman asked permission for our dying young missionary to go on this plane to Panama so he could receive life-saving dialysis, permission was denied. He was a civilian. I then told President Goodman to get the Air force commander back on the radio and to tell him that we were bringing this young U.S. citizen to the airport and that we were not asking permission — he was going on that plane to Panama. And that's exactly what we did. But getting this semi-conscious missionary with severe back injuries and dying of renal failure to the airport was no easy task. There were no stretchers so tied him to it with some ripped up sheets to a door that we took down. After moving Elder Ellsworth onto our makeshift stretcher, we ran into another obstacle. We couldn't maneuver the door-stretcher through the narrow outside door. So we untied our seldom-conscious patient from the door and retied him to a ten-inch plank, and loaded him into the ambulance.

When I use the word "ambulance," don't think this was a modern EMT vehicle. It wasn't. This rickety old vehicle looked more like an old-fashioned milk truck. There were no medical supplies, no gurney, nothing —

except two rough wood benches, one on each side of the truck. Once Dr. Snell, President Arnold, his counselor, Randy Ellsworth, and I were all in this vehicle that may have been built before shock absorbers were invented, it started moving — hitting every hole that had been in the road before the earthquake as well as the new ones caused by the quake. President Arnold gave his missionary a powerful blessing — en route. I don't remember exactly what was said in the blessing, but the promises seemed much greater than the medical realities or probabilities. Looking back at that experience, I should say of myself, "Oh me of little faith."

Arriving at the Guatemala airport in the darkness of the night, the ambulance driver proceeded onto the tarmac to the Air force plane. I still don't know how it all happened. After all the permission denials on the radio when we were at the hospital, I don't think anyone asked a single question. But there was no jetway — or even one of those stairways on wheels that are sometimes pushed up to an airplane at small airports. Seeing that the access to the plane was a fold-down ladder, I wondered how we would ever get the unconscious missionary tied to a plank with torn pieces of sheet up that ladder and into the plane. No problem. Several Air force enlisted men posi-



Besides the chapel, the earthquake left thousands of people without homes or anywhere to go for shelter.

Had Elder Ellsworth and his companion not been so sick that they slept in the chapel, they would have been crushed to death by the walls of the tiny adobe house they were to have been in that night.





With the Patzicia chapel totally destroyed, an inspirational fast and testimony was held outside the Sunday following the 1976 earthquake

Everyone at that meeting had lost loved ones in the earthquake.



tioned themselves on the ladder and passed the board with our heavy patient up into the plane.

Climbing into the plane, the stretcher board was anchored onto its floor and we decided George would go with Randy to Panama to cut through any remaining red tape and to be sure he received the needed lifesaving dialysis.

Elder Ellsworth received the peritoneal dialysis and was transferred to George Washington University Hospital in Washington for further treatment. During Elder Ellsworth's recovery, President Gerald Ford heard his story and invited him to a White House dinner — after which Randy was interviewed on network television. Although still in a great deal of pain and just barely able to get around on crutches, when asked what he planned to do, Elder Ellsworth explained that he had been called by a prophet to teach the gospel and he intended to return to Guatemala to do just that.

Watching this news report at his home in Salt Lake, the story goes that President Thomas S. Monson, turned to his wife and said something like, "This young man doesn't understand the gravity of his situation. We don't send missionaries back into the field when they can't even walk." It wasn't long before Elder Randy Ellsworth was sitting in President Monson's office receiving permission to continue his mission in Guatemala. His new mission

president, Robert O'Donnell, asked him about his faith and challenged him to put away his crutches and walk. He did — with great difficulty and discomfort and was sent back up to the Guatemalan Highlands where he preached the gospel to the Indian people he loves so much. For rehabilitation he worked his way up to walking ten to twenty kilometers a day.

I next heard about Randy Ellsworth when President Monson told his story in a general priesthood meeting. Later I heard that after Randy Ellsworth had completed his mission he finished college and went to medical school followed by a residency in ophthalmology. But our paths didn't cross again until December of 1994 when someone called the guy sitting in front of us in the Marriott Center, "Dr. Ellsworth." I tapped him on the shoulder and introduced myself as the guy who had helped him get on the Air force plane when he was semi-comatose after his earthquake accident. Besides our friendship growing, we went back to Guatemala together a couple of times to work on setting up schools for Guatemalan Indian children in Chimaltenango and Patzicia — where our paths had crossed those many years before when the earth shook and a huge concrete beam had tumbled on top of him.