

## SAVING TUGBA BY DOUG COPP

Millions of people watched us on television as we saved the life of Tugba Altun, a little Turkish girl. She was trapped under nine floors of concrete for four days after the devastating 1999 earthquake in Turkey.

For the last eight hours before discovery, she listened to and felt a backhoe bucket. It was tearing her mound

next to hers, looked into her eyes and told her everything would be OK. She smiled and said, in her little voice, "OK."

At the same time, I decided that if I could not save her, I would die with her. I did not want to see another squashed little child. I would rather die. It would hurt less. I remembered the first collapsed building I had ever crawled inside of — a school in Mexi-

myself: "This is impossible!" The TV pictures showed the slab that came down over her face. This was not the slab immediately above her. This was the second slab above her. The first slab was 1/8th of an inch above her chest and a corner of a piece of plywood, on its edge, was holding up nine floors of concrete from crashing down and killing us both. I felt like I had my head stuck in a guil-



**LEFT:** Tugba could not move. The concrete over her face was part of the second floor, above her, in the apartment building where she lived. There was only 1/8-inch of clearance between the concrete slab and her chest. **CENTER:** After Tugba was rescued she waves her hand in triumph, having escaped death. At the time she did not know that her brother was crushed to death under the table in the apartment where they lived. **RIGHT:** The author visiting Tugba at the hospital. She made a complete recovery.

of rubble to shreds. She later told me that she was in terror that the bucket was going to rip her head off.

A miracle happened. The backhoe operator saw her little head sticking out from between the slabs. She survived because she was in a rubble void, what I have come to call the "triangle of life" (see our website listed below for more info), that existed next to her bed. We were 75 feet away on the other side of the building, trying to find the person our search and rescue equipment told us was inside. We rushed to her.

She was pinned. She could not move. She could not even twitch. Her arms and shoulder were buried and packed in rubble. Her arm was broken. Her neck and back were injured. Tons of concrete were positioned above her head, ready to slide down and kill her.

It took 3 1/2 hours to free her. It was the most complicated rescue of my life. It took all the intelligence, all the knowledge and all the skills I could muster to save her.

At one point, I put my head down

co City — with every child crushed to death under their desks. Five hundred thousand people have died at the disasters I have worked at. Seeing dead people is my normal life. I am used to it. Except for kids. That still hurts.

My name is Doug Copp. I am the Rescue Chief and Disaster Manager of American Rescue Team International (ARTI).

Maybe you saw us featured on the ABC prime time special, "The World's Deadliest Earthquakes," Good Morning America, Entertainment Tonight or the Real TV program. All of these programs broadcast footage of our saving Tugba.

What she didn't know was that everything was not "OK." Although my outward appearance was calm, professional and re-assuring, inside I felt different.

There were several different things that could instantly kill us. When I first stuck my head down next to her and looked under the slab, which had slid down to within 1/2-inch of her head, I was stunned. My heart skipped a beat and my eyes must have bulged. I said to

lotine with the trigger pulled and the blade stuck on some dried blood. two pieces of broken concrete above our heads. The rebar had separated.

These two-ton pieces of concrete could not be supported or stabilized. Nothing could be done. I knew another miracle was needed. These almost vertical slabs were hanging above our heads the entire 3 1/2 hours of the rescue with no reasonable explanation as to why they didn't just obey the laws of science and slide down over us. It was impossible.

At one point I slid my hand under a beam and, having swept away and removed all the broken chunks of glass (from a China cabinet smashed and broken around her), I felt over her shoulder and arm and she put her little hand in mine. I told her everything would be OK and she replied again in her little voice, "OK." I was so glad. Up till that point I was afraid that her shoulder was crushed under the beam and she was in shock and it would require amputation. Miraculously, she

was unhurt. Her shoulder and other arm were untouched. We were eventually able to bring her out of the rubble and get her to a hospital.

Tugba survived because she was in the "triangle of life," or the void that existed next to her bed. Almost everyone who does the traditional "duck and cover" in collapsing buildings during earthquakes is squashed when the ceiling crushes the desk or table they hide under.

After saving Tugba, I went to the collapsed apartment building next door. We worked with French, German, British and Canadian volunteer rescuers on this site. There was a young teenage girl we thought to be alive inside. We all worked hard. It was dangerous. The building was fragile. Everyone was brave.

A backhoe moved over to our building and started to approach. I rushed down and said: "Stay away! The vibration and movement of your heavy equipment will cause the building to further collapse. This will kill the teenager trapped inside."

To my surprise and shock, the operator didn't care. He said that he had a contract to recover the dead body of a man, inside. The family, wanted to recover his body before too much decomposition took place (It is a fundamental Islamic belief to bury the dead ASAP). He was starting up the machine. I stood in front of it. It was a showdown.

Our exchange was so intense that I had failed to notice my surroundings.



This father fell weeping into the author's arms when he was told that his wife and three children were dead.



**LEFT:** The apartments, seen from a distance, where Tugba was buried amid the rubble after the 1999 earthquake in Turkey. Tugba was buried under nine floors of concrete for four days. **RIGHT:** Hundreds of buildings collapsed during the earthquake, killing many of the occupants.



The crowd that had watched us save Tugba earlier in the day had now drawn around this man, his backhoe and me. We both looked around and saw the crowd. It was dark. They were angry. They had turned into a lynch mob. The backhoe operator, a look of terror on his face, fled for his life, leaving his equipment behind. This crowd had joined my team. I went back to work.

Days of more rescue work later, I was returning to my tent at our base camp for some much needed sleep when I was met by my good friend, fellow ARTI member and Turkish Akut (rescue organization) Chief Memo Tansrever. He discussed Tugba's rescue with me.

"I Hear you had a good one," he said.

"Yep," I replied.

He continued: "A little bit complicated."

I said: "Yep."

"Saving the life of a brave little girl under such extreme conditions...is a rescuer's dream come true," he said.

"It came from Heaven...it didn't make up for all the dead, crushed kids who got under their desks...but it was a beautiful thing," I said. I went into my tent and feel asleep.

Still later, I went to the hospital to see Tugba and to take her a teddy bear. She kissed me

on the cheek and thanked me for saving her life. I thanked her, twice, telling her out loud that her bravery and courage was inspiring to me, and I thanked her inside of my mind. I needed to save her; I had seen too many dead children.

In the aftermath of that terrible



A Turkish man kisses photos of his family who were killed inside his home during the 1999 earthquake.

earthquake in Turkey in 1999, ARTI/Akut saved 276 lives. And we saved all those lives with a cash budget of \$2,500. That is the biggest miracle of all.

If you would be interesting in joining our team, or to obtain free, practical, realistic and effective information that could save your life in a disaster, go to our website: <http://www.amerrescue.org>; or email me at [amerrescue@aol.com](mailto:amerrescue@aol.com) or [chief@amerrescue.org](mailto:chief@amerrescue.org). See it all on our website: the videos and survival info. **SRJ**