



# SURVIVORS

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# Survivors

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# Survivors

## Introduction

What would you do to survive? There are many different types of survivors. Some people just need to hang on until help comes. Others are forced to do shocking things to save their lives.

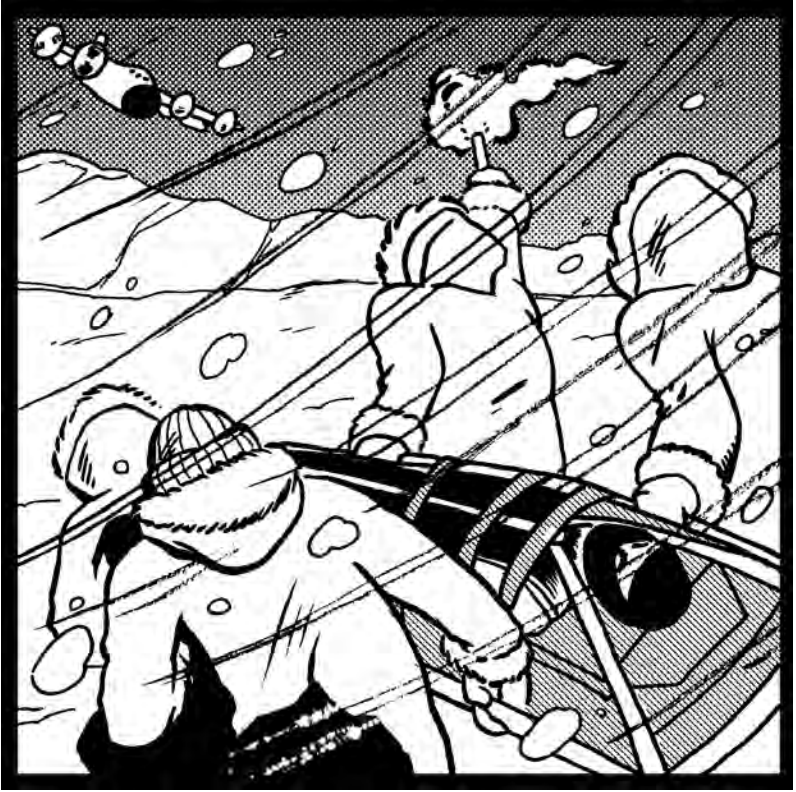
Many times, people battle Mother Nature or disease. Those who fight the elements—such as floods, storms, or fires—need to act quickly to survive.

Sometimes, surviving means keeping still and quiet. That way an enemy cannot find you. And sometimes you fight not just for your own life. Others may be depending on you for their survival. In these cases, survivors may also become heroes.

# Survivors

In these six stories, you will meet all sorts of true survivors. Imagine what you would do in their shoes. How would you react? Could *you* survive?

## Cancer at the Bottom of the World



**D**r. Jerri Nielsen was recently divorced and no longer saw her children. She needed something different in her life. An

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expert emergency room doctor, she wanted to use her skills in a new way. In a medical journal, she found that opportunity. It was an ad seeking doctors to live at a science base for a year—in Antarctica. She signed on as the sole doctor for the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station. Before leaving, she had a full physical. The organization she would work for, the National Science Foundation (NSF), wanted to make sure that she was in top shape. Jerri passed with flying colors. By November 1998, Dr. Nielsen was settling into her new home at the bottom of the world.

Then life threw her a curveball. In

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early March 1999, Jerri found a hard, lumpy mass in one of her breasts. At first, she was not concerned. It might be harmless. But when the mass began to grow, Jerri knew something was wrong. Very wrong. This lump could be cancer.

To add to Jerri's worries, the Antarctic winter was beginning. The continent shut down. Most people left. Night lasted for six months. The temperatures dipped below  $-100^{\circ}$  F. Planes were not allowed to fly in the area. The freezing temperature turned jet fuel to jelly. The South Pole is the windiest, coldest, driest continent. Over 97 percent of it is covered in ice. Jerri was stuck at the base until her year

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was up. But in that time, the cancer could spread.

For three months, Jerri kept the lump a secret. Since no plane could come until the end of October, death was likely. Then, she decided that she owed the truth to her coworkers. After all, they had become like family. She told her boss first. He urged her to contact her doctor in the States. Her doctor said that Jerri would need to get a biopsy. A biopsy is a removal of tissue for study. As she was the only doctor, Jerri would have to do it herself.

She knew that she needed help. With a



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heavy heart, she broke the news to her fellow “South Polies.” Jerri asked the team’s welder, a former Army medic, to help her with the biopsy. They trained on yams, fruit, and a chicken breast. For the procedure, Jerri was awake. She used only ice and a local painkiller to help her through. Once the biopsy was done, another Polie rigged up an old microscope to the computer. This let Jerri e-mail her biopsy slides to her doctor. The answer came back. Jerri did have breast cancer. And there was a 50 percent chance that it would kill her.

Jerri now had to tell her friends and family back home. The only way to do

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this was by e-mail. Jerri hated to break bad news in such a distant way. She sent off an e-mail with the subject “Serious Medical Problem at Pole.” Her brother later said that he thought the e-mail would be about Jerri saving someone’s life. He never dreamed it would be about the possible end of her own.

Jerri’s doctor wanted her to start chemotherapy. Despite the harsh weather, the NSF sent a plane to fly over the research station. Cancer-fighting drugs were dropped in large crates. Finding all the boxes in the 24-hour night was a challenge. Once they were found, Jerri trained her team to help with the process.

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Together they learned how to mix the drugs. Everything had to be exact. They all hoped that the chemo would stall the cancer.

The lump started shrinking. Jerri and the Polies began to hope. But then the medicine seemed to stop working. The lump grew bigger. The chemo made Jerri's hair fall out. She grew very ill. Even after the drugs were changed, Jerri's health worsened. She got ready to die. She found peace in the fact that this last year had been so new and exciting.

Her doctor was in favor of Jerri being rescued. Jerri wondered if it would be

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worth

it. She

knew that

the prognosis—

her chances for

survival—was poor. She did not want to

risk the lives of her would-be rescuers.

But the station needed a healthy doctor.

The NSF wanted to get Jerri out and get a

new doctor in. An Air National Guard LC-

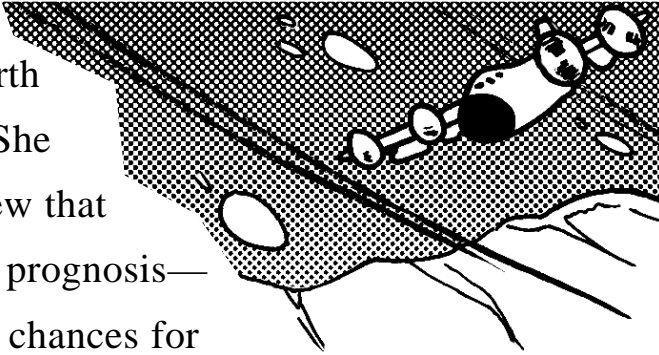
130 plane would try to reach her. The ski-

equipped LC-130 was the only type of

plane able to land on the frozen continent.

The rescue would take place at the

beginning of October. This was more than



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two weeks before flying was thought to be safe.

Most of the Polies did not think the rescue was possible. Not only is the Antarctic climate brutal, all that white can confuse a pilot. There have been many cases of a pilot thinking he was headed in one direction, when he was aiming straight for a land mass. This mission would be dangerous.

Once the plane arrived on the north coast of Antarctica, it needed to wait until temperatures at the station rose to at least  $-58^{\circ}$  F. At last, on October 16, 1999, the LC-130 made it to the South Pole. Jerri

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and her fellow Polies were ready. They had only minutes to get Jerri into the plane. To wait any longer would be to risk the LC-130 freezing. The plane kept its engines running as the switch was made. With her friends' help, Jerri scrambled into the plane as the new doctor got off. The entire rescue took just 22 minutes.

Jerri was rushed to Christchurch, New Zealand, and then to the United States. Her cancer was treated. She has since had many surgeries. She reports being cancer-free. In one interview, Dr. Nielsen was asked if she would ever go back to the South Pole. She said, "I would go back tomorrow if I could!" The cancer may

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have scarred her body, but her spirit remains strong and intact.

