

TSN News

Newsletter of the Tsunami Support Network

Co-ordinated by



Volume 1, Issue 7

February 2006

Welcome to TSN News

Welcome to the seventh newsletter of the Tsunami Support Network. This has been set up to help provide opportunities for support for people in the UK affected by the South East Asian Earthquake and Tsunami.

As well as our website (<http://www.tsunamisupportnetwork.org.uk>) and ongoing telephone support (0845 054 7474), we hope this newsletter will enable readers to obtain and contribute information, share common experiences and benefit from mutual support. Do contact us if you wish to know more.

About the TSN

The Tsunami Support Network is being coordinated by the British Red Cross which is working closely with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) & the Dept for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS). The DCMS is coordinating aftercare for those affected by the Tsunami.

How to Contact the Network

If you wish to receive further newsletters or other general information from us you can call us on the support line number (0845 054 7474). Please pass on our contact details to anyone who you feel might benefit from our activities.

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Preliminary Meeting of the National Tsunami Support Group – Saturday 4th March

As many of you will know, a small group has been meeting up to take over the work of the British Red Cross. This group met on the 21st January and have laid some proposed plans for 2006. The group would like to invite all members of the TSN to meet in London on Saturday 4th March where discussions of the group will be presented.

Additional volunteers are still required for the group (particularly in the finance category) and group members would be very pleased for such volunteers to come forward. If you are interested please contact orzepczynska@redcross.org.uk or call 0845 054 74 74.

A fuller letter of invitation and questionnaire will be sent to all on the Network in the next few weeks.

- TSN -

WWW.TSUNAMISUPPORTNETWORK.ORG.UK
EMAIL: TSUNAMISUPPORTNETWORK@REDCROSS.ORG.UK
SUPPORT NETWORK ANSWER SERVICE 0845 054 7474

Keeping in Touch: Important Notice

Here at the Red Cross we are compiling a **new contacts list** which will be handed over to the newly formed support group committee and will replace our current list of contacts. ***If you wish to continue to receive communications, i.e. newsletter, details of events and meetings, you will wish to be included in this new contacts list. If so, please complete the form attached with this newsletter and return it to us as soon as possible.***

The Millie & Tia Sunflower Nursery

Alana McGowan, who lost her sister Mel, and her two children Millie and Tia writes:

The scale of the tsunami was phenomenal, though my personal connection with the event was with Thailand, and more specifically Phi Phi Island. My sister Mel lived on the Island with her Thai husband and two children Millie, aged 3, and Tia aged 3 months. Sadly Millie, Mel and Tia all died that day on Phi Phi Island. I took on the project of building a nursery, as a tribute to Millie & Tia, my two little angels.

Many people responded with overwhelming generosity at the beginning of the year when I told them about my plans, and with their help I was able to build the nursery and finance it to date.

Hundreds of houses were destroyed on Phi Phi, and many families displaced, moved to nearby Krabi Town where they still remain in temporary accommodation. I built the nursery there for children from Phi Phi whose families cannot return to their Island, either having no home or job there anymore.

The children at the nursery have survived a disaster that took so many lives, in many cases, their parents, siblings and friends. The world as they knew it was turned upside down by the tsunami. They do understand that their lives have been disrupted, but these children are extremely

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resilient, and it is essential that their daily lives consist of routine so they can feel safe and secure. The toddlers play and learn as any toddlers would at nursery. Returning to this kind of normal routine is an important step in helping them recover. Normality is a very relative term, but these are without doubt positive steps for the future wellbeing of these kids.

I built the nursery with donations from last year and now provide financially for every aspect of it including water, electric bills, food, water, milk, stationary, books, toys, wages etc.

The nursery now has 34 children, 3 full time teachers and 1 cook/cleaner who are all fully paid. As I'm sure you can imagine financing the nursery is quite costly, so any donations received no matter how big or small go a long way, so that hopefully the nursery can continue as successfully in 2006.

The nursery was opened in March 2004 and will hopefully continue long term. I hope to build another nursery on Phi Phi Island itself, though I do not have the funds yet to support this. The priority for the nursery is to provide a safe and secure place for these beautiful children who have been through so much to learn and have fun, and with the great support I have I hope to continue.

If you would like anymore information about anything at all please feel free to email:

alanamcgowan@hotmail.com or
alanamcgowan@hotmail.co.uk

If you would like to make a donation to The Millie & Tia Sunflower Nursery, you can do so through an account I have set up on www.paypal.com which is very easy to use, alternatively if you email me I will give you my bank details.

I would love to find a sponsor for the nursery, for the assurance that it would be financially secure long-term. If anyone knows a company/ person who may be interested please let me know.

Alana McGowan

Personal Reflections on the Tsunami Anniversary

Over the next few pages some TSN members have kindly shared with us the ways they commemorated the first Tsunami Anniversary.

Ethiopia

Jane and Robert Brewster who lost their son Nic and his fiancée Christina in Khao Lak went to Ethiopia over the anniversary. They write:

Having been twice to Thailand, the first time to Khao Lak immediately after the tsunami and the second in May, a visit marked by the identification by the I.M.C of both our son Nic and his fiancée Christina, we decided, along with our daughter Elodie, that a return trip for the anniversary was not what we needed. Little did we realise, when in August we started to organise a trip to Ethiopia over the Christmas period, that it would become a turning point in our lives after the difficult year of 2005. Jane has a cousin who has been living in Addis Ababa for 14 years but is likely to be leaving shortly and this encouraged us to make the decision.

On doing a little homework we came to realise that Ethiopia does not celebrate Christmas on 25th December. 60 per cent of the population is Ethiopian Orthodox and their Christmas takes place on 7th January; and by then we would be already back home. Their New Year is on 11th September and they have 13 months in the year. They are now in the year 1998.

We were lent a house, as my cousin's was on the small side, within walking distance of the international airport (we were advised not to do the walk in the dark because of hyenas). Each morning we were woken by chanting – the Ethiopian orthodox religion takes a very big part

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in Ethiopian life. Their services last at least 3 hours, and they appear to fast about 180 days a year and have special fasting food of vegetables. On fasting days, no meat or dairy products are allowed.

The day after our arrival, we were off north (the next morning). The same morning Lord Triesman arrived in Addis to try to calm the Ethiopian/Eritrean border dispute which risks breaking out into war again, before going on to the anniversary events in Thailand. When we reached the airport, we discovered our plane had been reprogrammed and wasn't going to Bahir Dar any more. We had to wait two hours for another plane. We had intended to visit the Blue Nile Falls, but were told that 'the taps had been turned off' (a hydroelectric scheme has diverted the water) and that a boat trip on Lake Tana would be more interesting. We visited several 14th & 15th century monasteries on islands which all had interesting paintings, illuminated bibles, crosses, crowns etc. One of them did not allow women to visit, but Robert returned to find Jane in deep conversation with a monk on the beach. He was hoping to borrow a mobile phone to phone his friend! The monk proudly showed his sandals, which he had made from tyres and bus tickets. Priests and their chosen wives are only allowed one marriage, and when the first spouse dies the survivor must become a monk or nun.

Accommodation left much to be desired, except for the two nights near Awassa, and food mostly not to our taste. Their staple diet, the local injera, is a flat spongy pancake made from tef, a cereal similar to millet and tastes very sour. It is eaten with spicy meat, or vegetables on fasting days (Wednesdays, Fridays and numerous religious days).

We then flew to Gondar, and visited the Debre Birhan Selassie church with its famous painted

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ceiling and Emperor Fasilida's Palace and baths where they have a big baptism ceremony on Timkat, their Epiphany on 19th January. The local markets were the poorest we have seen anywhere.

The Simien Mountains we visited in a day trip from Gondar, 3 hours each way on dirt roads. At the entrance we had to add a local guide and scout with a Kalashnikov to our driver and general guide. We had time for a walk and to meet the local Gelada or bleeding heart baboons. They are herbivores and very approachable. We didn't see any other tourists the whole day. Lalibela, with its eleven 13th century churches all carved out of the rock below ground level and interconnected by tunnels, was amazing. Each church has its own cross magnificently worked in silver.

Our daughter, Elodie joined us for the last week when we went down to the Rift Valley with my cousin and husband. Our first stop was at Lake Langano, with its beach of fine pumice stone and acidic water. The resort didn't have hot water and the food was best avoided. This was compensated by the scenery and abundant bird life. We continued to Awassa, and then to Yirgallen where we spent Christmas at the Aragash resort. The accommodation in tukuls (rondavels) was luxurious compared to the rest of our stay, and the owners, second generation mixed Italian, Greek and Ethiopian, not only produced excellent food and wine but seemed to have organized all the local population. We were able to see hyenas, visit villages, watch coffee being prepared (Robert's attempt at separating the beans from the husks by dancing on a stone was not very successful) and see them preparing bread from ensete trees (false banana). Elo and Jane returned to distribute some of the 30kg of children's clothes we had brought out. The Arabica coffee is excellent and, as we learnt, coffee originated in Ethiopia. This area seems

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self sufficient – nothing to indicate the drought and developing famine just 200km further south.

Back in Addis we visited the Leonard Cheshire home, which Jane's cousin has been helping to run for many years. They have outreach branches throughout the country and locate crippled children, mainly polio victims, operate on them (at the Russian Red Cross hospital) and then re-educate them physically, accompanied by schooling, to insert them into their families and local life. At the centre we saw children dancing to music despite wearing callipers, with big smiles on their faces. We were also able to distribute clothes at an orphanage with 180 children; many of the healthy babies were awaiting adoption, all beautifully cared for and loved by Maltese nuns.

There were still signs of political unrest, with a large police presence the opening day of the trial of opposition members which was adjourned. A guide told us that he had been arrested on 3rd November and taken to a prison camp in the desert for 23 days where he contracted malaria.

Companies in Ethiopia are only allowed one expat; the rest of the staff must be Ethiopian. This means that there are very few Europeans except diplomats and aid workers. Apart from taxis, every second vehicle seemed to belong to an N.G.O. or branch of the U.N. Obviously food distribution is unfortunately now urgently required again in the South, but we felt the most successful programmes are those that educate the locals to be self-supporting, to solve their problems themselves and to train them to develop education nationwide. One of the unfortunate results of years of handouts is that the appearance of foreigners immediately brings out hosts of young children whose English vocabulary is limited to 'Hello, Money'.

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There is now a big drive to teach English in schools, which all have two shifts.

The country has enormous tourist potential, but such a long way to go to meet the requirements of the modern tourist (if they want to?). As Jane's cousin says it is a country for travellers and not for tourists. We feel that the trip helped us move on, and seeing how happy and friendly most Ethiopians are despite their poor living conditions gave us food for thought.

Arriving in Amsterdam on our way back and finding running water to brush ones teeth was a true luxury! It made us realize that we are privileged to live in Europe where we take so many things for granted.

Ethiopia turned out to be a fascinating country with very few tourists, many having cancelled due to the political situations. Discovering new places, and Ethiopia is very different to the other African countries we have visited, was a challenge. We think Nic and Christina would have approved of our choice of destination and would expect us to move forward, never forgetting them but continuing to explore life, as they would have done. We believe it is important to try to do something different at each anniversary and we all feel that we achieved this in December.

Jane & Robert Brewster

Char

Alan Jones, who lost his daughter Char on Ko Racha Yai, writes about the tsunami anniversary on the island:

Over the Christmas 2005 break, whilst most folk in the UK got stuck into their traditional family festivities, the Jones family was often to be found walking quite slowly along a very beautiful beach on a tiny idyllic island off the southwest coast of Thailand. The sun shone, it was rather warm, the sea was a glorious blue and small waves lapped gently on the golden sand. But that wasn't what they saw. Instead, they often closed our eyes and tried to imagine what it must have looked like a year before and what their wonderful 23 year old daughter Charlotte would have seen and felt as a huge wall of water thundered towards her.

The Boxing Day tsunami was the last thing our gorgeous Char would ever see. And now, one year on, Liz and I, together with Charlotte's younger sister, Vicki, had come to the island of Ko Racha Yai where Char so tragically left us. Why were we there? The easy answer would be something about marking the anniversary of Char's death and to say a final goodbye to the girl we all loved so very very much. But that wouldn't wholly be true. I don't like the rather arbitrary idea of an anniversary and this certainly wasn't a final goodbye. Charlotte will stay in our hearts for the rest of our lives. No, the honest answer is that it is not easy to explain why we went, nor what we expected to find. All I can tell you is that it felt right to be there and that it was important to be there. It was almost as if we were on a pilgrimage and that somehow, simply by making it, we came closer to our beloved Char.

One year on there is still a deep and truly terrible sense of loss as well as incomprehension. Char may have been 23, she may have been building a wonderful new life for

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herself but she was still our baby, still our little girl. Char was also a magnificent free spirit and on a journey of a lifetime. She was out-going, adventurous and positively fizzed with energy. She had gone bungee jumping, climbed Kilimanjaro at 16 and, had she lived, skydiving, I know, would have been absolutely top of her dangerous-things-to-do-next list. She was a force of nature, a girl who took life by the scruff of the neck and shook it. She lived life to the full as if there were not enough hours in the day. And then, suddenly and in the most extraordinary circumstances, she was gone. Char, a magnificent swimmer and a qualified scuba diver, was the only person to die on Racha Yai.

The last time I spoke to her was on Christmas Day 2004, the day before she died. She had been away since early November and, along with her best friend, was almost two months into the round-the-world trip that had already taken them to India. So when she called it was wonderful to talk to her. She had rung to wish us Happy Christmas, of course, and to tell us her latest news. Char was my diving buddy and we had spent several wonderful weeks together in the Red Sea learning to become more proficient divers. She knew that I had recently made my first wreck-dive and that very day she had made hers. She wanted to tell me every last detail. Now I am so deeply grateful for the time we spent diving together in the last few years. If it wasn't for those wonderful memories of her life, the pain of her death might almost be impossible to endure. Whilst on Racha Yai I did that wreck dive twice. It was a difficult deep dive with strong currents. I tried to see it through her eyes. I went on lots of other dives for Char, dives that she would have made had she survived so that she could see them through my eyes.

On Boxing Day 2005 we held our own personal

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tributes to our daughter with a candlelit procession to the beach and the loading of offerings onto a raft and candles lit and then sent out to sea, followed by the letting off of 23 hot air lanterns. On the headland of Siam Bay, where she died, her friends have erected a simple memorial wooden post with the all-seeing eye of Horus carved into it. Char had the same eye tattooed on her lower back. The Ancient Egyptians believed the symbol offered the wearer powerful protection but clearly it wasn't powerful enough to protect Char from that great and terrible wave. But I like to think that, through that eye, there is still part of her, looking out to sea, looking out to a world that she would not now get a chance to conquer! We visited it several times and brought a simple box out from England with a few of her personal effects in and left personal notes for her. We lit incense and we let her spirit flood into our hearts.

Leaving the island was poignant with lots of looks back wondering when we would ever return. But we know that we will return to visit her again many times. Another reason for returning is that whilst there we also began the process of establishing some long-term scholarships for children at Muang Phuket School in Chalong Bay. These will be funded via *Char's Fund* and they will hopefully provide an enduring memorial to our remarkable daughter. We hope too that a little of Char's indomitable spirit will live on in the country where she passed away. So maybe that is why we were in Thailand last Christmas. Not to find out any more about how our beloved daughter died but to remember her and to celebrate how she lived. And why am I telling you all this? Well because our Char was very special and would have gone on to do great things. You didn't know her but you would have liked her very much. We want the world never to forget her.

Alan Jones

Khao Lak, One Year On.

Michael Perry, who lost his daughter Hannah in Khao Lak writes:

Until Boxing Day 2004, I'd never heard of Khao Lak. Hannah may have mentioned the name, but it didn't register. All I knew was that she and Matthew were going to a place in Thailand where there were some good dive sites. I remember 'Simian Islands' being mentioned but, to be honest, I hadn't a clue whereabouts it was.

Over the next few days I was to find out at first hand a lot more about Thai geography. Matthew finally managed to contact his mother on the 28th December and finally we knew that Hannah, our much-loved 36-year old daughter, was missing. I left for Thailand that evening and made my first visit to Khao Lak on Thursday 30th December in a vain attempt to locate her. I had to return empty handed, but brought my son-in-law Matthew back to the U.K. on January 1st. How he survived the 'washing machine' we will never know. They had been staying at the Ghan Garden and Bin Resort, in a bungalow very close to the beach. It was obliterated along with most of Khao Lak.

Hannah's body was identified at the end of February and we made our second visit to Thailand early in March. We had a simple cremation at the Wat Pra Thong temple and the next day made a pilgrimage to Khao Lak. Matthew very bravely found the exact spot where their bungalow had stood – apart from the floor slab, there was nothing left.

I had not anticipated ever returning to Thailand but then we heard about the Royal Thai Government's plans for Commemorative Ceremonies to be held on the first anniversary. We took only a passing interest in this but, having visited their website and also found out about their very generous offer of one free flight and two nights accommodation per family, we decided that one of us should attend.

As my wife Wendy hates flying, can't stand heat or

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humidity, and cannot sleep if there is an air conditioning fan running, the choice of which one of us went out was quite simple! I applied for the sponsorship package online and was delighted to find a couple of weeks later that my application had been accepted. Some hasty phone calls secured an airplane ticket - but where to stay? I had read in TSN News that the FCO were offering to include in their local transport arrangements those British citizens travelling under the Thai Government package. It seemed sensible to stay somewhere near the British contingent to save extra mileage. I therefore gave Ian Hester at the FCO in London a ring, told him of my plans and he very sensibly suggested staying at Khao Lak to avoid too much travelling. I hadn't realised that any hotels there had re-opened. A quick trawl on Google gave me a good choice and I opted for the Khao Lak Merlin resort.

I travelled out from Heathrow on Christmas Eve, arriving at Bangkok on the afternoon of Christmas Day. I was quite surprised to find a young man from the British Embassy holding up a card with my name on it. Ian Hester had passed on my travel arrangements and although I was a guest of the Royal Thai Government, the British Embassy came up trumps. Most unexpected and very much appreciated. Passport Control was much simplified – no queuing! – and the wait for my flight down to Phuket was very much more comfortable in a private lounge.

I arrived at Phuket International at about 8 p.m. and was greeted by Tony Thompson of the British Red Cross and had a long interview with Kylie Morris for BBC News – arranged a few days before. I remembered to thank the FCO, Red Cross, the Thai government etc., all to no avail as it was all cut apart from a few seconds' footage of Tony and I walking through the terminal, apparently deep in conversation, and a close-up of my wrinkles.

It was about 9.30 at night on Christmas Day when I finally arrived at the Khao Lak Merlin, and

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discovered that the Red Cross and the British Embassy had teams staying in the Hotel as well. A quiet stroll around the grounds to get my bearings to the accompaniment of some spectacular thunder and lightning for good measure, and then turned in. No chance of ringing home to wish Wendy a Happy Christmas – the hotel was in a dip with no mobile signal and land lines to the U.K. were ‘all busy – please try later’.

Up betimes and an early breakfast. Discovered that I had a sore throat and no voice – a Christmas present from my grandson Freddie, I think. Some photos from my poolside hotel room (I had had this idea of cooling off in the pool between Ceremonies – fat chance!) and a daylight stroll through the grounds, making note of the damaged areas still under repair and the marks on the trees showing the height of the wave as it had struck.

I made my way to the reception room reserved by the British Embassy team and met up with the Red Cross and British Embassy team members. It is very nice to meet people face to face instead of just by e-mail. I was then able to meet a few other British survivors and their families and exchange Tsunami stories. Then it was out into the coaches and off to the first Ceremony. This was held simultaneously at seven sites around Thailand, including Phi Phi Island, Patong Beach and at the Memorial Wall. For obvious reasons I had elected the site closest to Hannah and Matthew’s bungalow, on Bang Niang Beach. It turned out that the ceremony was to be held in front of the Naval Patrol Boat, the one in all the photographs, which was washed about a mile inland by the Tsunami.

I couldn’t help remembering the first time that I saw it on December 30th, 2004. Then the area in front of it was a lagoon and it was in the bushes on the far side of the swamp. Already trucks were dumping debris into the lagoon. The emergency centre had been set up under tents nearby and was manned by Thai volunteers. The only ‘English’ voice I heard was that of an American doctor who lived near Khao Lak and had come down to help

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out. He was very kind and gave me every assistance in my search. I won’t write about what I saw, trying to find my daughter, but all I will say is that on balance I’m glad that I didn’t find her there. I can remember her as she was – attractive, vivacious and wickedly funny.

I was also pleased to note the amazing changes since our second visit to Khao Lak. In March all the debris had been cleared away and all ruins had been bulldozed flat and level, but re-building had barely commenced. Now, however, shops, pavements, houses and even floral plantings have been established. It was uplifting to see the progress made by the industrious Thais.

Thousands of plastic chairs had been arranged in front of the boat, with a small stage and sound system for the officials. As we entered the site (through an airline-style security check) we were handed water, souvenir booklets and a white rose each (white is the colour of mourning in Thailand.) I can’t say I remember much of the speech by the Deputy Prime Minister – I do remember the terrific heat and was very glad of the beanie hat given out by the Red Cross and Embassy team, together with a seemingly endless supply of ice-cold flannels for cooling us down! Top tip for staying cool was to place the flannel on the head, underneath the beanie hat.

At precisely 10.10a.m. exactly one year on from the moment the first wave struck, there was a minute’s silence. I found the silence eloquent – the atmosphere was very heavy with emotion as we all remembered why we were there. You could have heard a pin drop. Afterwards, we were invited to lay flowers on a shrine near the boat but it was so crowded and mobbed by camera crews I didn’t want to get involved, so headed back to the coaches.

We headed back to the Merlin and arrived at about 11.15. Some of the group went off to the beach to lay flowers and some went to relax before lunch. I had to resolve a problem of my

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own making. I had accepted the Thai Government package and had to collect my re-imbusement from a special government unit set up at Phuket International Airport. However, this unit was open only from 9a.m. to 6p.m. on December 25th, 26th & 27th. I had arrived the evening before much too late and my flight out was booked for 9.10 the following morning, too early to claim then. I had no option but to make a special trip down to the Airport, make my claim and return, hopefully still in time for the second ceremony. The Embassy team were incredibly helpful – they wouldn't hear of me hiring a taxi and arranged for a mini-bus and driver to take me down to the Airport. Despite worries about heavy official traffic and possible road closures for security, the trip was easy and uneventful. One hour each way and just ten minutes to make my claim. There must have been about thirty Thai Government and Bank officials – and no other claimants at the time. Torrential rain on the way back – a real tropical downpour.

Got back to the Merlin at 1.40 p.m. in plenty of time wash and brush up and change my shirt. As I got back to the Embassy office the Heavens opened and for about fifteen minutes it really chucked it down. I got soaked running back to my room for an umbrella! Fortunately it soon stopped and the weather cleared up and it stayed dry for the rest of the day.

The second Commemorative Ceremony was held on Haad Lek Beach, an idyllic cove at the end of a quarter-mile footpath down through the jungle. It's a twenty acre site in the middle of the Lamroo National Park, on the headland just south of Khao Lak. A permanent Tsunami Memorial is to be built there and a competition has been held to short-list various architects' plans. These all seem very elaborate to me – a simple memorial on the beach would seem more appropriate rather than some monstrous concrete intrusion into this bit of paradise.

The Ceremony was to lay the foundation stone of this Memorial and this was to be performed by the

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Thai Prime Minister, Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra. Naturally, security was tight – half way down the path to the beach, soldiers in jungle camouflage were training their weapons on some unseen target. Were they real or dummies? No, they were real, although they had scarcely moved when they ceremony ended several hours later.

A large stage had been set up on the beach, with open –fronted tents for the big-wigs and tiered seating out in the sun for us mere mortals. There was a Master of Ceremonies (assisted by Miss Thailand), Buddhist Monks, a poet, a flautist and saxophonist. Quite an elaborate event but to be honest I could see little of the proceedings as we were so hemmed in and cameramen seemed to stand in all the wrong places, blocking the view. The Prime Minister's speech was very good and diplomatic and again for me the best bit was a minute's silence (no reflection on the quality of the various performances.) The crowd seemed to thin out and people drifted away. I went to look at the Architects' Plans for the Memorial design competition and then took some photos of the stage and the cove. Thought I'd get some shots of the beach from the waterline so went right down to the edge of the sea and then spotted some clean virgin sand, unmarked by the thousands of footprints just a little higher up the beach. I couldn't resist writing 'Hannah' in the sand to show her that she wasn't forgotten. A small wave came and washed it away – no matter. I looked up through my tears straight into the lens of a cameraman, who gesticulated for me to do it again. He was disappointed. I was able to leave a more permanent mark on a huge board erected just for us to write on. I didn't read all the messages – some thanked the Thai Government but most were personal messages to loved ones. I simply wrote 'Hannah, we miss you' and left it at that.

By now I couldn't see any of the British contingent and time was marching on. Although events were still running on the stage many people had left and I didn't want to miss the start of the final

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event, due to commence at 6.30 p.m. I rushed back up the path through the jungle only to find no British contingent at the agreed meeting place out on the main road. I hung around for half-an-hour but still no-one came, so assumed I had missed them by dawdling on the beach. (It transpired that they had all stayed on to listen to a very good saxophonist playing.) For my part I soon found a lift to the site for the third ceremony, back down in Khao Lak, at Chong Fah Beach, Bang Niang. A shuttle service took us from the main road to a drop-off point near the beach but it was still over half a mile to the site of the Ceremony.

As I approached I suddenly saw lights rising in the sky and realized that the 'floating lanterns' on the programme were not little night-lights floating on the sea, but large hot air balloons floating in the sky. I was very struck by the beauty of these lights and determined to get as close to them as possible.

The entrance to the site was quite crowded and everyone was handed a white plastic candleholder, shaped like a flower, with a small candle inside. There was an art display and a huge sound stage – rather like a pop concert. Thousands of plastic chairs were lined up and already the event was in full swing. I was delighted to note that there were many Thais present and we 'farang' were in the minority. I confess that I ignored the chairs, the video screen and the stage and kept on walking past them, heading north towards the last few rising lanterns which I now realised had been coming from a beach about a mile further up the coast. Suddenly I came to the bank which led down onto the beach and saw three lines of people sitting on the beach. Each line consisted of about twenty teams of four or five people, waiting patiently. Beside each group was a pile of white plastic 'bin bags' to which they were attaching something. Intrigued, I decided to settle down and wait too.

I didn't pay much attention to the proceeding back on the stage, but then I heard Tilly Smith read out her very moving poem. This was followed by a minute's silence and then everyone lit their candle,

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a very moving sight. This was the signal for action on the beach. The teams leapt into action and within seconds they were releasing hot air balloons at an astonishing rate. They were much bigger than I had imagined – about six feet tall and about thirty inches in diameter, with something burning at the base. As soon as one went up the team would prepare another and within seconds that too would be released to drift in the gentle off-shore breeze just a few yards out across the sea and then start its long climb, just one shining yellow light amongst so many. Up and up they rose, more and more, until you couldn't tell balloons from stars. Five thousand were released in less than thirty minutes, one for each soul lost in Thailand. It was very beautiful, so simple and yet so effective. My trip was worth it just for my time on the beach that night. It was a beautifully warm evening and I felt a tremendous sense of peace and inner calm.

There was such a crowd that I abandoned all thoughts of trying to meet up with the British contingent – the words 'needle' and 'haystack' came to mind – so I decided to make my own way back to the hotel. The site of the ceremony was a good mile from the main road, so off I set prepared for a brisk walk, but I had forgotten the kindness of the Thai people. A lorry soon pulled up beside me so a group of us pedestrians could pile on board for a lift. Once out onto the main road the other pedestrians got off so that they could collect their cars, but luckily the lorry was heading south. I noticed that most of the lorry was filled with youngsters all wearing the same brown uniform. I asked the lady at the back of the lorry beside whom I was sitting if they were a school party. No, it was the Patong Girl Guides. Within fifteen minutes they had very kindly dropped me off by the lane leading to the Merlin. I arrived back at the hotel twenty minutes before the British party returned.

With a few minutes to spare I went and settled my hotel bill and at reception finally got to meet Allison and Paul Arlotte, members of the Khao

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Lak group, with whom I had exchanged e-mails. Nice to meet them at last. Then the rest of the group arrived and we all went to have a buffet supper. Sharon Howard, her mum Rita and all the rest of her family were there and it was lovely to catch up with them again. They live just twenty miles from us down here in Cornwall.

I still had one more job to do that night. I hadn't as yet laid my flowers in the water as I had planned. The flowers, kindly arranged by the British Embassy, had been following me around all day and at last caught me up. I had two bouquets, one for Hannah and the other for Leonard Barratt and Catherine Mullan, the mum and dad of two boys who live just a few miles away from us. I was very proud to be asked to perform this little service for them. I attached messages to both bouquets and went down onto the beach. Shoes off, trousers rolled up and out into the sea and sent off the flowers and their messages. Not a soul in sight, just a beautiful starry night, just me and my thoughts. Then a bigger wave came and soaked my trousers – I swear I heard Hannah giggle.

Off to bed after a long, demanding and very tiring day – but I am so glad I went. I shall always be grateful to the Royal Thai government for their thoughtfulness in planning and executing this Commemoration and of course for their kindness in making it possible for me to attend.

Breakfast at 6 a.m. and then off to the airport with one of Embassy team and one of the Red Cross members. I was very impressed by the way the two teams merged seamlessly and worked so well together to ensure that everyone was so well looked after. Many thanks to all concerned.

An uneventful flight home – escorted through Bangkok airport by the British Embassy representative, Matt Harris, which made life very much easier. Finally arrived back at Heathrow, late, to find huge queues at Passport Control. After being escorted straight past all queues in Bangkok, it was quite a reality check! Wendy, my son William

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his wife Michelle and young Freddie were there to meet me – I was very glad to see them again. Back to Cornwall the next day.

Was it worth it? Yes, it was. Will I ever return to Thailand? Maybe. Perhaps one day I'll go and see what they have decided to build as a permanent memorial at Haad Lek. My lasting impression is that although Thailand is blessed with many beautiful natural features, its best asset is the wonderful, gentle, friendly Thai people.

If you have any queries about this letter, please feel free to contact me, my e-mail is: - bosvigo.plants@virgin.net

Michael Perry

Tsunami Anniversary Commemoration Song

If you would like a copy of the Thai song that was played at some of the commemorative events in Thailand, please email orzepczynska@redcross.org.uk or telephone 0845 054 74 74 and we can send you out a copy.



Update on the progress of the National Audit Office's review of the experiences of UK citizens affected by the Asian Tsunami

On 10 December I attended the Tsunami Support Network meeting in London to give an update on progress of the National Audit Office's (NAO) review of your experiences. I was very glad to have the chance to speak to some of you and very pleased that so many of you are planning to complete the survey when it is ready.

We are currently going through an ethics approval process in order to ensure that the well being of those who may take in the review part has been given sufficient consideration. This process takes time and we hope to have cleared the final hurdle sometime in February – sorry not to be able to give a firm date. Once we have approval, from the Oxfordshire Regional Ethics Committee, will pilot the survey and then it will be available to complete on line. It will also be available in hard copy form. A small group of survivors has been helping us with the questions and in thinking through the many sensitive issues and we are grateful for their invaluable input. (Contact details below)

For those of you who have not heard of the NAO before or wonder why we are doing this work here's why: The National Audit Office is an independent public sector watchdog responsible for reviewing the work of all Government departments and agencies. We are totally independent of Government. We make sure that, not only do the departments provide value for money, but also their strategies and work practices are refined and developed by learning from experience.

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On Boxing Day 2004 and in the days and months after, many of you will have had contact with numerous Government departments and agencies – the Foreign Office, the Red Cross, the Department of Culture Media and Sport, Health Service and others. The review will examine what that contact was like, what could have been done better, what could be done in the future if another tragedy should strike and how the different departments and agencies could work better together.

Your experiences will help the departments and agencies learn valuable lessons for the future.

We are working on the review with The Zito Trust and have commissioned them to undertake a major survey and a limited number of interviews. The Zito Trust is a highly respected organisation with many years experience in dealing with families who have been bereaved suddenly and has been involved in supporting victims in the aftermath of tragedies such as the Paddington rail crash and Marchioness disasters. The Zito Trust is independent of both the NAO and Government. We hope to publish the final report in October 2006.

When we are ready to begin the review, you will receive a letter either from the Foreign Office or the Department of Culture Media and Sport telling you about the survey and letting you know how to take part - if you want to. We will also advertise the survey on the Tsunami

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Support Network website and many other websites and will post regular progress updates on these websites, including information regarding publication.

Your participation is of course entirely voluntary and your responses to the survey will be treated in confidence and your privacy respected at all stages.

Thank you again to those I met in December. If you want to know more about the work of the NAO my details are below. Contact details for The Zito Trust are also given.

Claire Fisher
National Audit Office,
020 7798 7681
claire.fisher@nao.gsi.gov.uk

Michael Howlett,
The Zito Trust,
01497 820011
zitotrust@btinternet.com

Edith MacGill is one of the members of the Survivors Group helping us develop the survey. She is happy for anyone to contact her about this at edithmacgill@yahoo.co.uk

Khao Lak

A group of people who were bereaved and/or survivors from the disaster in Khao Lak have been making contact with each other through the Network to talk about their experiences.

If anyone would like to be in touch with others connected with Khao Lak, please let us know and we will share your contact details with this group.

Email us at:
tsunamisupportnetwork@redcross.org.uk

Guidance on Dealing with the Media

We have available a leaflet offering guidance on dealing with the media. This has been prepared by representatives from the DCMS - the Department of Media, Culture and Sport - and Tom Clarke, who acted as media representative for the September 11th Family Support Group in the UK.

Please contact the Tsunami Support Network if you would like a copy of this leaflet on:

0845 054 7474 or email us at:
tsunamisupportnetwork@redcross.org.uk

Talking to the Media

The media occasionally contacts us with requests for interviews with people affected by the tsunami. If you might be interested in this please contact us.