

# A TRULY HUMAN EXPERIENCE

RELIVING A VERY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

IN INDONESIA'S TSUNAMI-DEVASTATED

PROVINCE OF BANDA ACEH



WORDS CORPORAL CAMERON JAMIESON PICS ADF

Inside the crowded dimness of the RAAF Hercules I look again at my watch, hoping another hour has passed. The dim green glow of the watch's light advises me it's only 15 minutes since I last had a look. With a sigh of resignation I settle back into the red nylon seat, which seems designed to deny the occupant any decent sleep, and think about my destination.

Before December 26, 2004, I doubt many people could have pointed to Banda Aceh on a map without help. Now nearly the whole world knows where it is – and for a reason that leaves many numb.

The 2004 Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami was an event that united the world in grief. The death and destruction was on an unimaginable scale, and the images relayed on television could only hint at the reality of the mud, rubble and rotting flesh that assaulted the senses of those who had survived and those who came to help.

Before I left Canberra, people said I was off on an adventure and they wished they

were going. They were very, very wrong. The price of entry into this adventure would be to witness human suffering and the destruction of property on an unprecedented scale. This was a trip into the darkness of human existence, where the horrific had become the norm.

Although I want the flight to be over, I'm in no hurry to see Banda Aceh. By mid-January, the death toll has passed six figures, and is steadily climbing as I fly across the Northern Territory on the first leg of my mission to report on the humanitarian relief work being done by ADF personnel in Indonesia as part of Operation Sumatra Assist.

In Darwin, I meet the NCOs and airmen in the operations bunker and air movements terminal who have been recalled from leave and who are working horrendous hours to ensure the aid flights are made.

It has been a somewhat thankless task for them, as the world's attention is focused thousands of kilometres away in south-east Asia. Yet there is no bitterness in their voices

– they know the importance of their task. They are the small cogs that help make the big wheels go round, and their minds are fully focused on the task. They know that lives depend on their work, and they're determined not to let anyone down.

The same can be said of the personnel working from the RAAF logistic node in Butterworth, Malaysia, except that many of them had experienced the earthquake that triggered the disaster.

The Army personnel of Rifle Company Butterworth had immediately volunteered to help the small RAAF contingent of 324 Combat Support Squadron based there, and from that, a major logistic node has evolved to support the operation. Now there is a force support element located there, assigned as part of the operation's joint task force, and together with the RAAF personnel, they work long hours to ensure the troops in Indonesia have what they want when they need it.

It is here I first meet people who have been into Indonesia and met the survivors

evacuated from Aceh province. Their stories send chills down my spine as they tell of the orphans, widows and silent figures who step from evacuation aircraft.

Soon it is time to board another Herc and fly to Medan in northern Sumatra. Banda Aceh is calling.

The reality of the task force HQ is a bit hard to take at first. Located in the function room of a large Indonesian hotel, I have to remind myself I am on an operation.

The slick glitz of the hotel foyer and the function-room furnishings are only a veneer though – the HQ personnel are oblivious to the comforts of their surroundings as they work long hours in a room with no windows. In effect, it is a 24-hour command bunker that just happens to be located in a hotel because it makes accommodation, catering and communications easier.

The next morning I board a 173 Squadron Army King Air and enjoy the novelty of forward-facing seats that are comfortable. As the plane descends into Banda Aceh, I catch my first glimpse of the devastation.

The coastal region of the city has been largely flattened. Many of the buildings in the central section are still standing, but are inundated with the debris and the mud from coastal houses and paddy fields. The rear third of Banda Aceh is almost untouched, creating a surreal environment in which normal life is returning.

I was to travel through these three zones many times during my stay, and each one would evoke a different reaction.

Even the rear section of the city is charged with emotion, for it's here that the mass grave is located, near the road to the airport. The stench of decaying bodies and the sight of trucks laden with plastic-wrapped corpses entering the gravesite is an everyday part of life that one quickly becomes accustomed to.

Much has been done at the Zainal Abidin Hospital, where the Anzac Field Hospital is located, when I arrive there.

The thick mud from the paddy fields has been cleared from the pathways and some of the buildings, but the only way to

remove the smell of the mud and the dead is to desensitise oneself.

My workspace is alongside the hospital morgue, and some nights I sleep in the room where the coffins had been stored. It's preferable to the amenities room in the hospital headquarters where I slept on other nights – the Indonesian translator who works for the PR officer has refused to sleep in there because of the ghosts.

All the Australians I meet are very polite, but distant, as if the desensitising process has also removed some of their ability to relate to living humans. But I soon find myself behaving the same way – a natural response to unnatural surroundings.

The common expression for the coastal region of Banda Aceh is – Ground Zero. Resembling the after-effects of an atomic







### A job well done

Following both the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami and the March earthquake, the Department of Defence proved to be an important part of the Australian Government's humanitarian relief assistance to Indonesia.

Defence's support for the tsunami relief effort was known as Operation Sumatra Assist, its support for the earthquake relief effort – Operation Sumatra Assist Phase Two.

Fresh drinking water, tentage, medical supplies, blankets and other emergency provisions, logistic support and the 'ANZAC Field Hospital', jointly operated by ADF and NZDF medical personnel.

Sadly, nine ADF members lost their lives in a helicopter accident on 2 April during Phase Two. ADF Achievements included...

#### Operation Sumatra Assist:

- 1200 tonnes of aid supplies distributed by air;
- 70 aero-medical evacuations;
- 2530 people transported by air;
- 3700 medical treatments (AFH);
- 4.7 million litres of clean water produced;
- 9000 cubic metres of debris cleared;
- 1000m of road cleared;
- 1700 large drains cleared; and,
- 6 large fishing boats salvaged.

#### Operation Sumatra Assist - Phase II:

- 133 tonnes of rice delivered;
- 5000 litres water provided;
- 570 patients treated ashore by medical staff;
- 13 Surgical and further treatments conducted on board HMAS Kanimbla;
- 7 Sea King aero-medical evacuations;
- town water pump and generator repaired;
- 138 tonnes of stores moved by Hercules; and,
- Operation Kindergarten Cops entertained hundreds of children in Lahewa, teaching them to play cricket and Aussie Rules.

bomb blast, there is little left standing and some structures lean away from the force of the tsunami.

It is here that I find the Australian engineers, clearing away debris from the streets and the drains. The look on their faces speaks volumes of the waiting horror, of undiscovered bodies and body parts, that lie beneath the surface.

Other engineers man water purification plants dotted across the city. They too look like they have seen too much.

But no one complains – they know the hardship is unavoidable. So they continue. And gradually the city comes back to life, one step at a time.

The worst experiences are the flights along the western coast of Aceh with the Iroquois helicopters of A Squadron, 5 Aviation Regiment. Sitting in the open doorway, camera in hand, the reality and extent of the wider destruction is laid bare. I see the biggest ocean-going barge

I have ever seen, along with its attending tug, lying stranded across the main western road. A large freighter lies on its side, smashed against its concrete wharf.

Time and time again the main road vanishes, or the bridges are washed away. In one place, a multi-span bridge simply empties into the sea.

And then there are the foundations of hundreds of homes that lie like a tile mosaic streaked with mud. Entire villages have disappeared, along with most of their inhabitants. The destruction is so complete it makes human existence seem trivial.

But the Indonesians are not defeated. Many are still in shock, but their resilience is plain for all to see. Despite losing so much, they are determined to rise from the wreckage of disaster. They remain polite and smile and wave.

They appreciate the assistance they are receiving, and understand the sincerity of

the Australians who have come to help. That, perhaps, is the greatest reward of all – the look in their eyes when you say hello. They know we are here to help – and they are grateful.

The flight back to Australia is long, but this time the duration doesn't seem to matter. I know I am returning to a fortunate land, where my home and family are safe.

I have spoken to many people, written numerous stories and filed dozens of pictures. I have also seen things that are beyond belief – that I hope never to see again. Now I can sleep in the Hercules' uncomfortable red nylon seat as it drones towards home. Compared to what the people of Banda Aceh are experiencing, my discomfort is nothing.

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THE AUSTRALIAN MILITARY MAGAZINE

## REQUIEM



Leading Seaman Scott Bennett  
Lieutenant Mathew Davey  
Lieutenant Matthew Goodall  
Sergeant Wendy Jones  
Lieutenant Paul Kimlin  
Lieutenant Jonathan King  
Squadron Leader Paul McCarthy  
Flight Lieutenant Lyn Rowbottom  
Petty Officer Stephen Slattery





# KILLED HELPING A NEIGHBOUR

WORDS BRIAN HARTIGAN PICS ADF

Leading Seaman Scott Bennett, Lieutenant Mathew Davey, Lieutenant Matthew Goodall, Sergeant Wendy Jones, Lieutenant Paul Kimlin, Lieutenant Jonathan King, Squadron Leader Paul McCarthy, Flight Lieutenant Lyn Rowbottom, and Petty Officer Stephen Slattery, lost their lives on the Indonesian island of Nias helping a neighbour recover from a series of devastating natural disasters.

In true Aussie spirit, nine men and women from the Australian Defence Force died in a tragic helicopter crash while helping a neighbour through difficult times.

Reeling from the devastation of the Boxing Day tsunami, western regions of the Indonesian archipelago welcomed the influx of Aussies bent on helping them cope with what was one of the worst natural disasters in history.

With their work done, the Aussies were homeward bound when Mother Nature struck a second cruel blow to a country that had seen too much death already. The earthquake that hit on 28 March, took a heavy toll on an already battered nation and, almost within sight of home port, the Australian service men and women aboard HMAS Kanimbla were turned around and sent back to help once more.

But in a cruel twist, tragedy struck the helpers while freshly engaged on their mercy mission and took the lives of nine of our finest...







... Two weeks later, their countrymen and women bowed heads in silent prayer and remembered their friends.

Addressing a huge crowd in the Great Hall, Parliament House, Prime Minister John Howard recalled meeting some of the young men and women whose lives were being honoured.

"Everything about them was so beautifully Australian," he said. "They were direct, they were friendly, they were tough, they were courageous, but they were also compassionate. They were doing something in our name for the poor people of Indonesia. They were doing good deeds in the name of Australia and that, of course, is what is so heartbreaking about the event that we mark today.

"The example of these young men and women is the most reassuring message and resonance that we can have, that the soul and the character of modern Australia is good and decent.

"They epitomised everything about our way of life that we believe in and we treasure their commitment, their decency, their love, their compassion, their cheekiness, their cheerfulness – all of those things that are so beautifully Australian.

"We thank them for what they have done in our name."

