

THE HEROES OF KAMALA BEACH 26 December 2004

An unexpected twist in my travel adventures occurred on Sunday morning, 26 December 2004. We were spending a week's holiday on Kamala Beach, on Phuket Island. I felt what seemed like a mild earth tremor, around eight o'clock in the morning; it was notable only that it lasted several minutes, not the usual thirty seconds or so, of the earthquakes I had experienced up to that time. What followed proved to be one of the world's most devastating earthquakes and tsunami and I found myself in the middle of it, and for a short moment, wondering if I was meant to survive.

We were staying at a beach bungalow, just meters from the ocean at Kamala Beach. About 1.5 hours after the earthquake was felt, the Khun Koong (the Thai lady who was the caretaker of our small bungalow complex) rushed up to me and told me to look at the sea. By that time the sea had receded a couple of hundred meters exposing sea bed, where normally small waves lazily washed ashore. The deadly combination of earthquake and receding sea did not fully register with me until I recalled a video of some years back where tsunamis in Japan were shown, rushing in just after the receding sea; just the same as I was now witnessing. I told Khun Koong to quickly run, as a big wave was about to come; took my computers, documents, brief case and ran to our rented car to put these in the boot, thinking this would be the only safe place, if there was to be one. As the first incoming wave hit, the water rose in our rented beach bungalow up to the level of the bed, we put our remaining luggage on the bed.

Just after putting valuables in the car, the second wave hit, much larger than the first. The surging water began to float the car, pushing it against me. The next few minutes were a rush of the incoming water, I felt debris hitting my body as I tried to keep my head above water. Momentarily, I was submerged, before I was came close to the branches of a small tree. I was able to hold myself against the receding water; all sight of the car was gone from this time.

I then saw my wife walking out from the bungalow, where the water was up to the ceiling, she survived only by the water escaping from the lower wall in the bathroom; she was also submerged for some time, before the waters receded.

At this point, staff member from the nearby *Fantasea* ran towards us and urged us to come with them up the nearby mountain (*Fantasea* is a water and animal show amusement park; there are several throughout Thailand). *Fantasea* staff members were suddenly everywhere, leading (mostly) foreigners across the flat areas near the main road at Kamala Beach and up a narrow mountain trail. We, and most others with us, wore only swimming suits, and had no shoes. The group grew to hundreds, as we all climbed slowly up the mountainside. The *Fantasea* staff members were everywhere, handing out shoes, shirts, applying emergency medical treatment where necessary. They were in contact with other staff members by mobile phones and walki-talkies. They continued to provide us with food, water and any other needed supplies as we walked up the mountain.

By mid-afternoon, we were led back down to a location near the *Fantasea* staff housing, where we were provided with ground sheets, which for many, were to serve as bedding for the night.

On a borrowed motor bike of a *Fantasea* staff member, I went back to the bungalow at about 5 pm to see if there was anything left. Only a few items were recognizable, and we prepared to leave. I looked in vain for the car, that I saw floating earlier in the day. Not finding it, I resigned myself to losing everything and returning to the temporary living site on the mountain, when I saw a parked car, neatly in a car port, in a nearby hotel. There was little damage to the vehicle, and I tried the key, and found it was indeed my rented vehicle. Our valuables were intact in the boot, and after a few minutes of clearing debris, I was able to drive the vehicle away, pick up my wife, and drive to the Phuket airport.

My experience during that day ranged from disbelief, terror, relief at finding safety, the depressing feeling of losing everything, to the surprise of finding the car, and driving it away. I was immensely lucky, on a day when so many others lost everything, and some their very lives. We saw families torn apart, and some happily reunited.

To a large extent, all the happy endings of that day were due to the heroic efforts of Khun Koong at our bungalow, and the *Fantasea* staff. When I told her to run, Khun Koong ran to the other bungalows and frantically tried to wake up sleeping guests. They gave unselfishly of themselves, their belongings, and devoted 100% of their efforts to helping those in need. At no time did they even hint that they wanted any compensation for their efforts.

In fact, Khun Koong survived the day, returned to our bungalow, took out our soaked suitcases with heavy, wet clothes, and proceeded to wash each item and dried all of the contents. In fact, she could not open one suitcase, as it was locked. I was surprised on New Year's morning at my home in South Africa, when she called me frantically asking if we were OK, and what was the combination to my suitcase so she could clean my belongings. We subsequently flew back to Phuket, and after a long and tearful reunion with Khun Koong, retrieved our belongings.

I just hope that their efforts of this one individual, as well as the staff of *Fantasea*, can be adequately recognized and appreciated. Their quick and heroic efforts will be remembered by me and my wife, for ever.

Phuket and other areas devastated by this disaster will recover and rebuilding will take place. I own a condominium (under construction) in Kamala Beach, on Phuket, and I intend to complete the project and eventually to move in. Surely there is a need for me to give back something to this society that helped us so me, when we were in need. The belongings we lost, we can replace in a very short time, with no impact on our financial resources. I think this is similar with most foreign tourists that lost their belongings. The losses by the Thai shop and restaurant owners, workers, will take a long time, if ever, to

replace. This selfless attitude was repeated by the Thai caretaker/cleaner of our small group of bungalows. I last saw her knocking frantically on the door of another bungalow, trying to wake sleeping guests.

That region of Thailand eventually recovered, while the economic damage will remain for some time. However, as so often unfortunately happens, it takes a disaster to bring out the best (sometimes worst) in people. On December 26th, this disaster brought out the admirable qualities and heroic efforts of the Thai people of Phuket. They represent the true strength of a society, and indeed the Thai society can be proud of its courageous people. They have certainly earned my admiration, and debt.