Tsunami of Tears
2005 Relief Effort in Southern Thailand

The personal story of a physician assistant helping with the dead.

by
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This is a tale of profound sadness, but also a tale of the blossoming of the human spirit through observations of incredible self-sacrifice by a multitude of volunteers dealing with the dead and dealing with the survivors searching for their lost loved ones.
Preface

by Steve Wilson, MD

My small team of four walked slowly in the back of the temple, picking our way across the yards filled shoulder to shoulder with the dead. Not just out of respect for the human remains, we also moved carefully in order not to trip over a limb or step on any of the slippery remnants of skin, because that had sent many of us sprawling face down atop a decomposing body. That would be nauseating, although our stomachs were always on that verge anyway because of the rank odor that penetrated into your skull, even while you were holding your breath.

The rubber Wellington boots were slippery, the fog from the dry ice made visibility of where you stepped impossible, and inside the boots were puddles of sweat since we wore impermeable outer jumpsuits in the 98 degree weather with almost as high humidity. Thailand has only two seasons, they say, hot and hotter. Nevertheless, we maintained strict clean conditions with hoods, splash proof eye protection, masks, and double gloves. This, we learned much, much later, increased the risk of heat stroke, and we were overly protected from the low risk of contagious disease. But even if we had known this, my team, this DNA procurement team that I was detailed to, would still be dressed that way in order to maintain the integrity of the DNA specimen. The only thing one could do was to move carefully while being so heavily encumbered because our sharp instruments could cause us much more to worry about than our discomfort.

This was the tsunami disaster in the worse hit part of Thailand, in the province of Phang Nga, at the relief
effort's headquarters in the temple (wat) called Yan Yao. Any volunteer with any sense would go to Phuket, where five star hotels and quickly recovering businesses and entertainment, made the hell of the devastated area at least livable. They would also realize that in Phuket there were hundreds of bodies, while we had thousands. Anyone with any sense at all. But then again there was Don, or Professor Don, as we later called him. How we got to call him "professor" is an interesting little story of this humble man. Let me tell you a little something about his story.

I could hardly see anything—squinting through the perspiration that was always stinging my eyes, so I didn't look up when people spoke to me so that I could keep the rivulets away—there was no way to wipe them away what with the outer gear we wore and the corpse juice on it all. So, of course, the goggles steamed up. So why look up? Just don't cut yourself while you can't see, I kept reminding myself.

"Hi, my name's Don and I'll do whatever you need; I've had some medical training," he said. He was already dressed for the weather, just like I was. Who helped him? Maybe he already knew how to gear up. Maybe he really did have some medical training. I also hoped against hope, with his American accent, that there were more to give us relief and that they brought many things so that we could eat, drink, and sleep away from the corpses, because that's where most of us lived. How do you provide enough toilet and sleeping facilities for up to a thousand people a day in this rural, remote area?

There were so few Americans here in the second week of the disaster that I got tired of being asked where they all were. We barely had enough electric lines to the site for the computers, so none of us had any access to the news in the world. We didn't know if anyone out there cared.

So I took to wearing a stars and stripes bandana, and everyone thought that the yanks must've arrived since they always send a lot of people with a lot of equipment and supplies. This gave them hope that at least the world had not forgotten.

"Hi, my name's Steve, and I've had some medical training too, but not like this."

"I've been in things like this, so I don't mind it so much. I'm willing to do anything to help."

I was relieved that this newbie wasn't expecting me to stop all work just so that I can give "his royal highness" a crash course in everything medical. Most volunteers had an attitude and wanted a high profile job, but we sorely needed body carriers, and rarely does anyone last
more than three days doing that. I cried once, a few days ago, to find four expats, each from a different European country, working their second day moving Thai bodies. Not European bodies. Not using the carts that the foreign Disaster Victim Identification teams got. No stretchers and tables and roofs and air-conditioning. Just bend over and grabbing a corner of the sheet. They came down from the northern city of Chiang Mai to give something back to their adopted homeland.

“Well, I’m getting DNA, but you’ll want to take it easy in this heat. I keep my team small so we work alongside the other types of teams doing dentistry (on the ground) and forensic external examination and documentation (on the ground).” I reached for another instrument in my bucket of total-kill-all solution we had invented and continued cutting away (on the ground). “And my team carries bodies when we’re caught up with work to help out the army; they’re worn out also. So you really should work with the main DNA team, with lots of help, and time to teach you.”

Don said, “I just came from there. It’s a big group. I watched them work and I kinda don’t think they need more help. And I want to do more.”

“Oh,” I said, “you can carry this.” I gave him the bucket. He really did not look offended. He really just shrugged. I let him carry it around for over an hour. No complaints. He stayed close, but not too close, and watched my timing, rhythm, the order of the instruments. He was soon a step ahead of me by cleaning instruments for the next body while we finished up on this one. I’m a surgeon, and I knew when an assistant was watching me, pacing along, and, most importantly, thinking. “Who is this guy?” I thought.

So I asked. “Where you from?”

“Utah, the university.”

“Are you aware how good you guys are with DNA in SLC? Not just the school, but the local companies in SLC? I even heard a rumor that Sorensen might help out. I’m from the states and I’ve been telling the Thais to grab, just grab, anyone from Utah to deal with this DNA.” I said, commenting on something well-known only someone in medicine would know. He did know. And I knew he knew, and wasn’t just agreeing with me. Somehow I got the feeling that he wasn’t the type of guy who would agree just to agree with me.

Don Pedersen worked like that, professionally, speaking appropriately, gently offering his advice, for many, many days. I knew nothing of his professional background. But I know a professional when I see one. At least, I can spot a good one. And the best surgeons make the best surgical assistants. That’s how a resident gains confi-
dence—because the resident is being assisted by the attending surgeon. So, without protesting, over the next few days, Don was preparing instruments before we started work without being told to (not simple in that chaos), and then moved on to actually handling the specimens. And that’s saying a lot: chain of custody, proper labeling, not losing any, expedite the delivery. Despite these most adverse of conditions, with lack of food, hydration and sleep, the teams of Dr. Porntip Rojanasunan, the most prominent forensic pathologist in the Kingdom, comprised of ever-changing members, turned in specimens on those thousands of bodies over five weeks with zero cross-contamination, a rate lower than that of a modern western hospital working in perfect conditions.

“How come you can do all this?” I finally had to ask him.

“I’m a PA,” he said.

“I love you guys,” I said. “I love NPs too. I worked with you guys in my office for many years when I was in practice.”

And Don came back every day. You never knew who would not show up the next day, hindering the continuity of care. People had to leave. It was too traumatic psychologically. Many, many collapsed emotionally and physically. Getting in early and watching who would walk through the main gate was one of the most moving things I have ever experienced. It gave me the strength to go on.

So what was I going to do with someone like him? There was nothing else I could do but give him a team of his own. He had the right temperament. He could teach, carefully, and stick to high standards, and somehow communicate with all these people from all over the world with significantly challenged capacity for English.

Getting a third team harvesting DNA was a big, big deal. Bodies came in by the hundreds all the time. And later Don allowed me to respond to consult for the dental teams and also go on to form another forensic exam team, this time specializing in separating the races on these badly decomposed bodies.

“How come you’re so good at running the show?” I asked him many, many days later. I don’t know how we got the time to sit out front and watch the zoo of reporters, but we were enjoying the show.

“Well, I’m kind of a prof,” he said. “And I have to leave soon.”

“What!” I said. A prof, no wonder he knows what he’s doing. And no fair he’s leaving, I thought.
He tried to tell me about his friends Stu and Sally and their missing son (a friend of Don's son), injured badly but alive, and their still missing daughter Kali. And he had to help them. Had to. Don was near to tears. But I was busted up at losing a key person. Was that selfish of me? Yes. But over the entire five weeks, there were only a few of these key men and women, and I owe my survival, despite my disability, to their work and to the example of Dr. Poon, who got by with even less rest, food, water, and emotional support than I got. And we, so few and all barely surviving, did, indeed, get the job done, completely, and on-time before we got yanked out at the end of the fifth week.

"Can you help us?" Don asked. "I can't get any info from the foreign teams, and what little I get is nothing. It's contradictory. And they won't let me in the back [restricted area] and never get back to me."

People don't realize that, unlike the foreign teams, we were all volunteers, even the members of the Royal Thai Army who came for tsunami relief, their medical officers and their enlisted men who never, ever complained; so we each had earned each other's respect. After Don left, we were still busy. But I felt that I still owed him. That's why, although we took special care with every request for assistance we received, I and all the Thai volunteers, lay and medical professionals together, performed one of the biggest humanitarian operations to find Kali, solely because we all remembered Don and did it for him.
Wednesday, January 5

This morning I leave for Thailand—to help, where I can, with the relief effort for the 9.0 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Sumatra and the resultant tsunami that has taken so many lives. Estimates now stand (10 days after the disaster) at 150,000 dead—an incomprehensible number made real by the death in the tsunami of Kali Breisch, a friend of the family from Salt Lake City, and significant injuries to her brother Jai, who shares a love of music with my son Joey (through their “Under the Garage Band”). Our hearts ached for Kali’s father Stu, her older sister Shonti, and Stu’s fiance, Sally Nelson, as they struggled to find Kali in the days after the disaster. In an essay several months ago, Kali had written about crying a “tsunami of tears” thinking about the loss of her mother over a decade ago.

I approach this trip with some trepidation, never having been to a disaster area. I have hope, however, that I can offer some assistance. I am buoyed by the love and support of my wife, Kathy, who also will be traveling with some of my physician assistant (PA) students to Thailand in a week to participate in the Thailand International Elective (TIE) offered by the University of Utah Physician Assistant Program. My arrival will be met by Noi, a friend of the family who is married to a PA classmate of mine Douglas Barker. She and Doug coordinate the 4-week TIE program.

In Bangkok I will link up with Dave Rockwood of Park City, Utah and help the Thai Ministry of Public Health with DNA sampling of Thai citizens who lost their lives in the Khao Lak area of Phang Nga Province north of Phuket in southern Thailand. Dave travels to Thailand regularly on business and has partnered with Sorenson Genomics in Salt Lake City to provide assistance with DNA sampling kits. Reading the DNA sampling protocols prior to my flight it strikes me that all the issues and problems I perceive in my life are really quite insignificant compared to the tragic loss of life and the enormity of the task ahead.
Minor delay in Salt Lake City due to light snow and the need to de-ice the plane. Called Kathy, who was seeing patients at clinic. Missing her and my sons Nick and Joe. The dogs will take longer to miss.

Talked with Noi last night and she shared a dream she had—she was in a large room with two Western men and hundreds of people who were looking for a way out and she was trying to help but could not find the door. The call from Dave and me last night was chilling for her, as the DNA samples will allow the bodies to be matched to the relatives and eventually released. To be involved in this activity will be an honor.

Flight delayed out of San Francisco, but will make up the difference in flight. Found a book at the airport called *Safe Harbor*, by Danielle Steele. It started with a poem:

*The Hand of God*

“Always with a feeling of trepidation, excitement, fear
the day comes
when we go out
to God’s lost souls,
Forgotten, cold broken, filthy, and occasionally
Though rarely clean,
Brand new on the streets,
With still clean hair,
French braided,
Or faces cleanly shaven,
When only a month later,
We see the ravages of days,
The same faces no longer
Quite the same” ……..
I only met Kali a few times—at Joey and Jai’s concerts at Stu’s house, the prom, graduation—and I continue to wonder why I’ve been so affected by her passing. I feel I’m not alone in my grief. Perhaps it’s being a father myself, the closeness of Joey and Jai, or just that her death was so very wrong: a bright star gone too soon.

I grew up in the southern California surf and love the waves (we surfed with Jai at Manhattan Beach, California just this past summer) but it angers me that the ocean I love has taken this lovely young soul.

How can you comprehend the unbearable pain the family must feel. I saw the newscast when Stu and Shonti found Kali’s photo—my heart broke.

Made it to Seoul, Korea, on time. Beautiful airport, ultra high tech.

Wondering why my poor bookkeeping resulted in a windfall for me (in my checking account) … To finance this trip? Why at this particular point in time?

Friday, January 7

Slept about 4 hours. Up at 6:00 am–circadian rhythm way off. Noi and I travel into Bangkok with her son Juriaan and his girlfriend. He will return to the U.S. on Monday to continue his studies at the University of Utah.

This morning we find Jai asleep at the private Bangkok hospital and decide to have a bite to eat in the cafeteria. From a phone call earlier this morning I understand that Stu and Sally got married this morning at a Buddhist temple. I’m sorry to have missed this event—joy in the presence of such sadness.

Jai was awake when we returned after our meal, but very groggy due to the pain medication (he’s had five surgeries in three days on his knee, which was badly injured and infected). For three days after the tsunami Jai thought he was the
only survivor of his family of five. We stayed briefly—no Stu or Sally yet. Jai attended the first part of the ceremony at the temple at Monk's hospital in Bangkok but had to return to the hospital as he was feeling poorly. Stu’s family is scheduled to return to Salt Lake City tonight on the midnight flight.

As Noi and I were leaving the hospital I was sad, thinking that I would miss seeing Stu, Sally, and Shonti—when Stu and Sally suddenly appeared. They were dressed in beautiful Thai silk and adorned with beautiful flower necklaces. They were radiant, seeming to generate an aura.

Stu said that Kali’s body was to be cremated and the ashes sent to the U.S later. Although while in the Khao Lak area north of Phuket he and Sally saw the photo with the identification number they were unable to locate Kali’s body. Understandably, there was much confusion in the early days following the tsunami.

Somehow I had known that I would see them—and as luck would have it, I caught a glimpse of Stu through the front window of the hospital. We would have missed them by a minute or two had I not returned to the hospital to visit the restroom after calling for a taxi.

Stu, Sally, and Shonti have been working with the U.S. Embassy regarding Kali. We also met a Thai couple that befriended them in the search—feeding, housing, and accompanying them in their search. This Thai family exemplifies the goodness in all of us during times of crisis.

We leave tomorrow for Phuket and Khao Lak to the north (where many resort hotels are located)—Noi will stay one night, I will stay about two weeks. We are going to perform DNA testing on approximately 2,000 bodies housed in a makeshift morgue at the Yan Yao temple (Wat Yan Yao) which is approximately 120 kilometers north of Phuket on the southern Thailand coast.
Slept for three hours this afternoon–hard, solid sleep. Tonight I will call Lars at Sorenson Genomics to make sure I understand the process of sample procurement.

I talked with Noi about how to approach the bodies–what is the culture surrounding death? Apparently, Thai people encourage the spirit, which leaves the body, to move on and not stay around to cause problems. This is the purpose of the ubiquitous “spirit houses” in the yards of most houses and businesses in Thailand. The body is eventually cremated at one of the many temples after a three day ceremony.

**Saturday, January 8**

Up early–met Dave Rockwood and Peter Willden at the airport. Both have business interests in Thailand and speak fluent Thai from their early years as Mormon missionaries. Free flight to Phuket on Thai Airways for those involved with disaster relief.

Took a taxi from Phuket through the impact area. The destruction is incomprehensible. We are traveling to Wat Yan Yao, one of the three processing areas at temples in southern Thailand, including Karbi and Phuket. At the staging area outside the morgue we meet with Dr. Luba Matic, who is running the DNA sampling operation and elects to have me join his team. Dave will work in the staging area coordinating DNA samples to be sent to Sorenson Genomics. Dr. Luba is a Serbian physician working in dive medicine and is involved with the hyperbaric decompression chamber in Phuket. Dr. Luba volunteered to help the Thai’s process the many bodies. His experience in Kosavo with post-mortem DNA sampling is of great help here.

We were to receive 300 more bodies in the afternoon. They arrived at 11:00 am. The bodies were transferred to new body bags–they had been buried for
about 10 days at another temple, Wat Boan Mong. We were to take DNA samples but these were already done for the most part so we proceeded with the complete body assessment—trying to determine race (Asian vs. Western) through any distinguishing features (prominent brow, high cheek bones, etc.)—scars, tattoos, jewelry, clothes (mostly non-existent), hair color and length.

Photos were taken with numbers, which had already been attached at Wat Bang Mong. Two to four photos per body. Bodies are now so badly decomposed that regular DNA testing (soft tissue and hair) cannot be done. Now we are taking a 4–8 cm section of rib. This was secured through an 8–12 cm incision over a rib on the right anterior thorax. Measurements were taken—total length and femur length. The process was very professional, efficient, and respectful.

We processed approximately 12 bodies in this fashion. Most seemed to be Asian, but this was a best guess. The faces had only the hint of normalcy. The eyes needed to be molded into a semblance of shape, the ears were gone. The noses were basically flat, as the cartilage had disintegrated. One female had a large nasal implant—an interesting finding of great utility in the identification process.

We had one boy about 12 years of age with longer blond hair and Adidas shorts (which were in tatters). This Western body was turned over to the international Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) team. Some bodies had pieces of shirts with resort logos. Earrings on another one, gold teeth on another—teeth gave some clue as to age. All of these pieces of evidence could prove useful in linking the bodies with their relatives.

The injuries were horrific—skulls fractured, limbs twisted backwards. Faces in grotesque shapes—seemingly screaming. Drs. Luba and Wilson are saints, I believe. They have been here for about seven days, arriving shortly after the
disaster. Luba came from Phuket, where he helped with the immediate aftermath, and Wilson from Bangkok.

There were about four teams working on assessments and four teams working in the dental area. Bodies were everywhere.

I believe Stu was correct; there is a feeling of spirits here. My imagination of hell in the past could not come close to this.

There were very good precautions that one had to take before entering the morgue—rubber boots, plastic suits, double gloves, goggles, masks, hats, and then disinfectant spray when leaving. The support area was always awash in volunteers. There were food, drink, water, and command-and-control stations and always right in the middle of the turmoil was Dr. Porntip, a female pathologist and high-ranking government official–celebrity status in Thailand. The Thai army has a big presence. Volunteers everywhere—all wanting to contribute, speaking many different languages.

The media are everywhere, too—trying to capture it all.

Rooms are scarce—Dave and I are in a hotel 30 miles from the temple.

We arrived this morning with our bags—we will try to relocate to a new hotel closer to the Wat. The military watch people's valuables. But my sense is that no one would lower him or herself to steal in this place—a Buddhist temple with people performing such noble work.

I suited up and went to work. Hot and humid in the plastic suit. I will dress better tomorrow. On the ride back to the hotel we stopped at Khao Lak, a district where many beautiful resort hotels had been just two weeks ago. The devastation was enormous. I have no idea how Jai survived. It seemed to be total destruction. The burning piles of debris gave the sunset an eerie feeling.
I keep writing as I am afraid to close my eyes to sleep for fear of the visions I know I will have—as I have found myself staring off—distracted by this fright, this horror.

In a way, I’m glad the Breisch’s did not see Kali like those unfortunate soles in the morgue. To think of your child in this state would be unbearable.

2:00 am—could not sleep, so called Kathy. So good to hear her voice. Shared some thoughts about today. Told her not to send others (students and faculty). The logistics are just too hard—scarce accommodation as well as travel and language difficulties.

I know she is worried about me—so am I. Never in my experience have I seen, felt or imagined this.

**Sunday, January 9**

Little sleep after talking to Kathy last night. Breakfast with Dave, Peter, and Noi at a restaurant attached to the place where we stayed. This place was spared and is beautiful—much like what Khao Lak must have been like. Noi will leave today for Bangkok. She was instrumental in working out the logistics of this trip.

As we approach Yan Yao temple I am feeling some apprehension. I want to help but feeling disturbed about yesterday. The drill seems now very familiar—trade shoes for boots, secure my pack and shoes, then put on the plastic suit, hat, mask, and double gloves. Help with suiting up comes from other volunteers—from Germany this time, taping on my gloves.

Dr. Luba seems happy to see me. He said that some volunteers come once and never come back. DNA samples this morning. Today is so much worse. The
bodies are much more decomposed—bones showing, skinless skulls, and some heads detached. Luba is taking DNA samples this morning. His team is efficient and I help for a few bodies. For infants the humerus (upper arm bone) is dissected out. Often the bone needs to be cut in half to fit in the plastic bags. For this a cleaver and wooden block are used. There is enough help here so I move on. Dental has set up a portable X-ray unit with computers and people are cataloging X-rays by body bag number. Lower jaws are also being removed—I’m not sure of the purpose of this horrid activity.

Moved on to another area, where I met Dr. Steve Wilson, who I saw earlier while gowning and gloving. He commented on my Utah nametag and spoke highly of the University and its reputation. He was a practicing ob/gyn physician until he developed post-polio syndrome. He was born in the Philippines (like me). He moved to Bangkok from Hawaii about a year ago and is fairly fluent in Thai now. We talked about my PA program’s Thailand International Elective (TIE) and I suggested he might like to teach for us in the future. He is a gentle, self-effacing, very sharp individual. I will bring a card to give him tomorrow.

Dave is happy, as the Thai government has now allowed him and his team (a group of college kids on semester break) to do the DNA sampling and send some vials to the United States. Sorenson Genomics in Salt Lake City will perform the analysis. Most likely a one- to two-week turn around for results vs. the two- to three-month turnaround anticipated when sending samples to China. The fact that the Thai government plans to give US$1,000 to the family of each victim makes the DNA process very important. The government will require a DNA match on all Thai bodies (otherwise any corpse would do).

I move on with Dr. Steve to implant microchips in the bodies. The number implanted will be matched with the body bag number as a secondary means of identification. Both numbers will be entered into the growing database of post-mortem information. This technology is from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. A syringe with a large-bore needle is used. A sensor will read a unique number
from the chip once it is placed. The needle is inserted into the maxillary sinus via the inferior orbit of the right eye. The problem is the landmarks are difficult to determine—one must “mush” the eye socket and feel the inferior ridge. Some are easy to push the needle through—others take more time and effort and somehow make you feel bad for having to exert such force. Sometimes you bend the tip of the needle and need to discard it. We complete about 50 bodies in the morning.

After break my team is not yet assembled. So, sitting in the shade, I meet up with two expats from Canada both working in Phuket in real estate. They are a real pair (F this and F that). They volunteered to move bodies—very hard work.

The afternoon is spent placing more microchips. The Thai pathologists moved us from the small body bags to the larger ones. I was very thankful; the kids are hard to take.

It was decided that when the head is severed from the body, the chip would be inserted into the sternum. I had the first one, a young boy with a skull completely skinless and devoid of most muscle. I try to remember what Noi said and say a prayer to send the spirit away. Dr. Steve and I talk some more—I’m finding that you really need to connect with others: “where’re you from,” “how’s it going,” etc.

Sat for a while with a young man from Switzerland—he was impressed at how the French can be so opinionated. Enjoyed talking with him. He is volunteering as a translator in the intake process with the relatives searching for their loved ones. He related that one of the Thai soldiers lost his parents and six siblings. Alone now, the Thai soldier works carrying bodies all day long.

More volunteers coming constantly—most recently police from New Zealand.

The temple has two sets of gates—outer gates at the street and inner gates that lead to the processing area (morgue). It seems that the outer gates lead one to “purgatory” while the inner gates lead one to “hell.”
3:00 am. Up again unable to sleep. Thinking about the ever-present clanging of metal on metal as new tags are prepared to add to the bodies as we continue implanting microchips. Wishful that not sleeping would postpone my return to the horror.

I await the sun rise before returning to the Wat. Once there I manage a banana and a few drinks (iced coffee and water). A return to the media show in purgatory. News cameras from all over the world are everywhere. Dr. Porntip in the center. Secretary of the Interior and other provincial officials milling about. Later in the day Dr. Porntip was signing autographs for the Thai military. Her public popularity brings her more political power.

Bodies continue to arrive on trucks, double-wrapped in cloth and plastic. Not in body bags as was the case yesterday. The Thai’s are very appreciative of the Westerners here to help. They ask, “Where you are from?”

Noi returned to the airport today. Our driver called and said he would be delayed by two hours. Dave tried to get us a ride locally instead of waiting, as it was already dark. This took two hours. As I waited I talked with a security guard from Germany who is living in Thailand taking photos for money and doing odd jobs. He speaks some Thai and seems to be well liked by the Thai guards he works with.

While waiting I crossed the street from the temple, not realizing this was where the walls of photos of the bodies where displayed—the photos we took during the identification process. The multiple panels are grotesque. Juxtaposed with these are some of the photos of the missing—placed by loved ones—photos of happy, healthy people as they were just two weeks ago.

I’m engaged in something so different from what I had expected. On the plane I prepared for and studied up on malaria, cholera, dengue fever, etc. Now PA stands for “pathology assistant.”
Some of the physicians I'm working with know what a PA is, but it's difficult to explain it to the Thai's—although I met one of the Thai pathologists who had done some training in the States alongside some U.S. military PAs. Another Thai was interested in coming to the U.S. for advanced education—I gave him my card.

In talking with Snag (Dr. Wilson), who has been involved with some of the IT operation, I came to understand the sophistication of the IT effort. Using an Access relational database, all records are entered–body bag numbers, assessment information, microchip numbers, dental records, DNA, etc. The Thai's are a “cut above” the world standard according to Dr. Wilson.

The international DVI teams are performing autopsies. The cause of death seems clear to me–no murders here, only the unfortunate timing of an event. Some would call it a natural disaster. “Disaster” for sure; “natural” I question—this was evil.

People continue to come to find their loved ones. Dave will start a team screening the relatives with buccal swabs tomorrow.

This operation is vaguely familiar to my past experience with mock military operations while in the Army Guard and Air Force Reserves. Large logistical activities with lots of activity. Same here, only the victims were real human beings—it is hard to believe this is real.

I find myself washing and showering longer. Trying to wash the reality of this situation away.

Monday, January 10

Moved to a new hotel, closer to the temple (10 minutes away). It’s a flophouse really, but OK for me. Dave procured a van for the next week to take us to and from the hotel.
Traveling to the temple this morning after we checked in produced much anxiety, given yesterday's horror.

The drill gets easier and now I'm the old guy helping new volunteers to feel more comfortable given the initial shock of hundreds of bodies. I am gaining an understanding of the process. The Thai's really have things wired–processing hundreds of bodies per day. The international DVI teams from other countries (Germany, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, and many others) are processing the “Western” bodies—doing full autopsies according to international protocol. I walked through their operation. I saw lots of equipment, but little activity.

Lunch break—checking my Yahoo account thanks to the Thai IT group.

Today I worked with Snag (Dr. Wilson). He says he got the nickname because he tends to screw things up. Somehow I really doubt this—he is the most appropriate, respectful person. He has worked with many PAs in Hawaii and really respects the education of PAs and the role they play.

Together we took rib samples from approximately 50 bodies for DNA, leapfrogging from body to body lying on the ground in the heat of the day. Incision below the right breast–10 cm. Isolate the rib, try to strip the tissue away using pick-ups and a box cutter dipped in alcohol. Shears to cut, then bag and tag. Dr. Snag and I have a contest as to who has the cleanest sample—mostly he wins (he's the doctor).

Fox 13 News interviewed me today—BFD. They want to know what is happening in “the back,” but when I tell them, the producer cuts the tape and asks that I tone it down. Today started out twice as bad as the days before, but somehow I'm okay with it. This worries me some. I commented to Steve that my wife Kathy (a former surgery nurse, now a PA) would be appalled at our attempt at sterile technique. I'm using a box cutter dipped in alcohol, tin snips, and occasionally a meat cleaver to cut the humerus (of infants) in half. The skin is leathery, muscle intact but
grey—it’s difficult to strip the tissue from the bone. Best technique: cut on top of
the bone, strip the tissue as best you can, cut the posterior part of the rib first, free
up the rib, break it at the sternum, and occasionally you can strip off all the tissue
as you pull it out. Replace any tissue into the wound and offer a prayer.

(Kathy: I’m being really careful, but with one sample I thought a bone spicule
poked me—not the case, as it turned out, but cause for concern.)

A missionary from the Anglican Church is helping us—Father Rand. The work is
difficult for him. Through his church he volunteered to help at Ground Zero for
nine months after 9/11 terrorist attack.

We are all trying to care for each other. A bit of “gallows” humor really does
help. Dr. Luba is particularly good at this. Dr. Steve is too and very cerebral
about it. I see volunteers touching—and this is good—a tap, a punch, a hug, a
“good on you mate!”

There is some talk of post-traumatic stress among the volunteers. The first day or
two this worried me, but now I think I’m OK. I thought I might beat feet home
soon, but now I’m resolved to stay and help. Luba seemed glad when I told him.
Hope I can link up with Snag in Bangkok before we leave for the U.S. on the 25th.

The morning was tough—hard, sweaty, hot work. The afternoon was worse.
Another truckload of bodies from Wat Boan Mong (where the bodies have been
buried). The Western DVI teams stand around watching the Thai group work.
More bodies—we send one Western body to them. Then in another group we
found three more Westerners and hand them over to the other side.

Dr. Steve tested my pathology/forensic skills—I failed. Choice: Asian or Western?
Decision points: torso to lower extremity ratio (Asians 1:1; Westerners have
longer femurs). Asians also have high cheekbones: unfair—the mandible was
dissected out by dentistry. But I did pick up poor dentition, common in Asians.
Dr. Snag is a tricky guy. He tried to throw me off—pointing out wide shoulders—but dark hair (a point for me!). Toes were Asian—second toe longer than the great toe.

As I write this, I’m on my second Singha beer in a local restaurant and somehow I know everything will be OK now.

Kathy is on her way to Bangkok; I talked to Noi earlier. I lost my cell phone yesterday, but the driver returned it today—to the Wat. My link to the world, my lifeline.

Dave will leave in a few days with his DNA samples. I will be on my own.

I will arrange to go to the hotel where Kali was lost. I need some closure on this as well. I will take an afternoon for myself.

This is the most profound thing I have ever done. I sit here in the open-air restaurant watching a newscast about our operation. The media circus is surreal—the real story is behind the inner gates (to the morgue).

Tonight, Noi will pick up Kathy and the students for the Thailand International Elective. I love Kathy more than she will ever know—my family is everything.

Have I talked about maggots (botfly) yet? They are prolific on the newly arriving bodies. Few on the leathery skinned unfortunates.

Snag and I visit the dental section to learn what they have been doing. All very professional. Thailand is not a third world country, not backward. The Thai dentists have excellent technique and use redundant systems for recording data. Dissecting out the mandibles according to missing persons protocol, X-rays in the field uploaded into a relational database, and the first disaster in which microchips have been used.
We found numerous Westerners among the bodies in the last group. Very large—the size of them impressed me. Gold chains, designer clothes, gold dental fillings. We sent four bodies to international DVI while we dealt with 40 or 50.

Today, Dave talked of Soy Dogs—Thai dogs—tough, scrappy, indestructible—our driver hit one accidentally at 40 mph—the dog got up, shook off, and ran away. There is a blues group in Bangkok called the “Soy Dogs”—I will try to see them before I leave for home.

All my stuff is completely soaked through with sweat from today’s work—trying to air it all out in the restaurant (money, cards, photos). Perhaps one more beer will do it.

Noi says Doug will arrive after the PA students and Kathy. He is coming from Kazakhstan where he works caring for Chevron employees. He’s on his own according to Noi. My friend, I wish he was here. I know he would enjoy my feeling that somehow I belong in this environment—the constant activity, the feel of it. I feel somewhat content, happy, but miss my kids and Kathy. My son Nick (a photography student) would love this country—photo ops abound.

I believe I will sleep tonight. Noi said Al Forde and Mike Langley (Utah PA program faculty) made it to Bangkok for the TIE program. They are enjoying the city now—no need for them to be here.

The faculty and students enrolled in the TIE 4-week rotation planned for January want to be involved, to help—but our expertise is with the living not the dead. I am dead to feeling now—I’ll stay as a surrogate for the rest.

Newcomers in the back today (from Oregon, England, and Iowa). Standing together in a clump; no medical training but want to help. In shock—like me the first day. I orient them (I think this helps with the initial shock) and tell them to be here early and join a team.
I'm not sure exactly where I am, but I know the Thai's will take care of me. They are profoundly troubled that so many guests in their country were affected by this tragedy.

Tuesday, January 11

Up early, breakfast with Dave near our hotel then off to the temple. I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach when I see the front gates of Wat Yan Yao. Much more organization in the staging area. More people arriving everyday. DVI teams from everywhere—Austria, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, France.

Gowned, gloved, masked–heading in for another day. Forty-five bodies this morning, all needing DNA samples taken. I helped open up the body bags (still with dirt on them from being buried at Wat Bang Moung). Most were buried for one or two weeks—a few feet under ground to help preserve the condition of the bodies—but from the look of them it's hard to believe that it helped much.

Every day I learn more about the logistics of this operation. The Thai military pathologists are in charge and are very impressive in their command of the situation. They set the tone of respectfulness in approaching the bodies. They seem thankful for our help. Though some "help" it is—it now seems some of the non-medical volunteers are getting in the way. The Thai's are so polite they don't say this, but from the upper level you get a sense that this is the case. The TIE students want to come and help but logistics are such a problem—transportation, housing, language are all major issues. Self-contained teams, it seems, would be best. One group of volunteers showed up and wanted to do "orienteering" (whatever that is). When they were told they could wheel bodies to the containers, they left.

Information technology in the staging area.

Buccal swabs taken from relatives for DNA matching.

Analysis conducted at Sorenson Genomics in Salt Lake City.
This morning the work was brutal—45 bodies on the ground in the sun. The state of them is no longer an issue; there is nothing worse than what I have already seen: mothers with their babies in the same body bag, severed heads, exposed bones, facial contusions, eviscerations, botfly maggots by the thousands on most bodies, the back of a skull disintegrating in my hands, dental detaching lower jaws. Hundreds and hundreds of bodies. There is a certain similarity to them, but knowing each was a unique human being is difficult. I send them on their way as Noi instructed—to a better place.

This afternoon is my opportunity to go to Khao Lak and find the Emerald, where Kali was lost. Dave and I head south about 25 km, stopping where Stu’s directions led me to believe the hotel was. I spent an hour in sheer chaos, but amid the chaos new life was blooming—a flower, new green shoots of a banana tree coming out of the debris.

We talked with a woman on the beach who had seven or eight framed photos of her family members and employees of her beachfront restaurant. We sat on the cement slab that was all that was left of it. She told us exactly where the Emerald is (was), but we still had to stop twice more to make sure of the location. Dave has been magnificent—his command of the language (reading and speaking) is superb. Thank God for missionaries.

Father Rand (who had been helping with the DNA teams) gave me a blessing before my trip to the hotel. We find the hotel with its marquee sign nearly gone—a good quarter mile from the beach. This holiday season was the opening of this resort and it must have been beautiful. The destruction is extensive. We search for an hour. I desperately want to find Jai Ram’s guitar—but know it is futile. I will bring back a small piece of teak wood and a shell from the beach as consolation. I am not particularly spiritual, but I honestly felt a sense of peace and calm being here. The ocean, bay, and beach are still stunning; looking inland is another look at hell.
Returning to the temple in the late afternoon I see a new face with cameras—a photojournalist. I snap a shot for Nick, my budding photojournalist son. This guy, David Gross, recently returned from Iraq, was also in Serbia. I sent him to Luba. He has been specializing in mass graves (some specialty—he is in the right place).

I treat my first living patient—one of the DVI guys. “Feels like something is in my ear,” he says. Wax plug—what a case! A few other patients present—a Thai volunteer with a conjunctivitis, a DVI guy with a rash, some relatives with vasovagal reactions. I’m surprised that there haven’t been more heat-related injuries.

Dinner with Father Rand, a gentle soul—patient and kind and worried about my well-being. Today he worked with the relatives. I feel this is much harder than working with the bodies.

The dynamics here are very interesting. Some have a need to be seen as “spot on”—“I’ve got the skills,” “I’m cool,” “I know the drill,” “you’re new”, “I’m the man,” etc. Whatever. It seems it needs to be a game to some—those with the most points wins. But there are no winners here.

I got my very own autographed copy of Dr. Porntip’s book, but I’m still not sure how I feel about all of this hype. Dave says it all helps. Porntip being here increases morale, buys her power, helps her get what she needs. Maybe so, but the “show” still is odd to me—a surreal feeling to it all. Like the guys surfing in Vietnam in “Apocalypse Now.”

Dave mailed off some of my photos to Doug in Bangkok. Not the horrific ones, just the sanitized ones. Dave went to Phuket tonight to deliver buccal swabs to a family from Germany. The family will FedEx the kit to Germany to get swabs from the direct relatives and send to Utah for the DNA analysis.

In the staging area we have now the “Happy Coffin Café”—gallows humor is appearing and lightens the somber mood of this place.
I'm losing the toenail on my left great toe–my boots were too tight a few days ago. Also noticing a mass under the ball of my right foot–most likely a Morton's neuroma. Can't help thinking it might be a botfly larvae–how long does it take for filariasis to develop?

I prefer a box cutter to a scalpel–just for the record. The double heavy gloves are too bulky for the delicate scalpels.

Since Dave is gone I will score a ride from a Thai couple here from the States that also maintain a house in Bangkok. I'm on my own–interesting prospect. I do know the Thai word for airport (sinambin) since this is part of Doug and Noi's address–Sinambinam Road (Airport road).

I saw the three guys I oriented yesterday–now seasoned vets after one day of moving bodies.

I need to see if I can find anything out about Kali tomorrow. I will go through the intake process like the relatives. I don't want to see her–only remember her as she was on the Web site 4kali.org.

**Wednesday, January 12**

6:00 am. Hard to remember what day it is–up every hour last night. Catch a ride with Trang and his wife. They are from Torrence Beach, California–where I surfed while growing up in San Pedro. Trang retired from Northrup, where he was an engineer for 30 years. He now runs an Asian newspaper for a readership in the Southern California area. They are assisting with the IT effort, inputting information taken from relatives. Trang is also looking for stories for his paper. It is interesting to watch an “Americanized” Thai drive–much more conservative. Also–a Ford Explorer with leather seats–a far cry from earlier rides in the back of pickup trucks.
Today there was a pleasant surprise—a physician from Papua New Guinea joined us to help. I oriented him on a break—showed him the ropes, introduced him around. He is helping to harvest ribs—hot, hard work today. Fifty bodies this morning. Lunch break was the best. In the plastic suits you soak through all your clothes, your double gloves are filled with sweat, which flows out like a faucet when they cut them off. Back through the gates to the staging area—many changes, more organization of the venues in purgatory. Also, newer, fancier equipment—better goggles, masks, and gloves.

At Yan Yao the Thai team has processed 2,000 bodies thus far, the international DVI teams about 500. Many more DVI groups arriving. Met a guy today from Norway who says the trip Kathy and I have been planning there (a six-day boat ride from Bergen up the coast) will be great.

Belgium teams wear the most interesting garb in the OR—blue robes without sleeves. There are many more—French, Austrian's, Swiss, etc. All seem to be vying for the coolest outfits. Shorts and vest, jump suits, lots of pockets. The best thing to have under your suit is a fanny pack turned to the front—keeping valuables and cell phone with you and dry.

We all store our backpacks behind the info station. No worries. I don't believe anyone would take something amid this humanitarian effort.

Making fast friends. Exchanging cards: “I’ll visit you someday,” “I’d like to go to school in the States.”

At lunch I sat with Col. Thanya—the head Thai military pathologist. He runs this whole show. Very soft spoken—all business. He seems to enjoy practicing his English with me. He is at the military hospital, which is next to the Victory Monument in central Bangkok. I have the utmost respect for the Thai operation. There are three other military officers at varying rank—all very hard-working pathologists. They are here before we arrive and stay long after we are gone.
Another 45 bodies in the early afternoon. Again, hot, hard work. The photojournalist I met yesterday showed up with Dr. Luba as we were processing. Luba was attempting to make a face appear more normal. After a while I assisted: putting cotton where there were eyes, scraping the face to rid it of the muck that is ever-present on the bodies. You develop an attachment to them—a need, of sorts, to be with them. “An unsettling intimacy with the dead,” was how one person described it.

Father Rand, who has been assisting me with the harvest, asks when he can “cut”—I thought he did not want to do this.

I show him the technique: scalpel with one definitive 10 cm. incision, not the chopping he attempted at first. No father, on top of the rib, otherwise you unleash the most horrible smell—the diaphragm in now distended up under the ribs as the bellies are all swollen. Then free up the rib underneath. Try to strip the tissues with the pick-ups. Better to do this when the rib is attached. Snip and snip with a pair of shears—posterior aspect first.

Interesting interaction today—one of the international DVI guys offers to get me a bucket of bleach to rinse my hands between bodies. First offer of anything from their side. Mostly they stand around and watch. “Thanks mate.”

Then there is the young French men (who reminds me of my oldest son Ryan). He works as a dive master and has been helping Luba with DNA from the start. He appears to love doing this (thought he was an MD at first). Today I assist him (a dive master’s assistant). No problem—cut all you want. I enjoy watching him—he’s a hard worker. This is his space—he’s been two years in Thailand, speaks some Thai. I let him find out on his own that I’ve been in medicine for 26 years—Snag and I talk about the U of U, my PA program, and past surgery experience. Dr. Lam (the PNG physician) and I discuss our medical backgrounds. At break the French man and I seem to have come to
another level of understanding. I do like him—he is helping the Thai’s not his countrymen. “Let’s go diving sometime,” he says.

Oh yeah, Father Rand is doing great, slicing and dicing. But I worry about him poking himself. That would not be good.

John the North Carolina paramedic is back too. “Couldn't stay away,” he says.

Eating at my local café—I love this place. Mom, daughter, and her son of 12 months–cute, not like the little lost souls in the morgue. Grandma dotes on the child. No snooker tonight—too tired. Great noodle and pork dinner—you get by.

Back to the photojournalist, Dave–amazing work he's doing. The faces we cleaned and reshaped are on his computer. Photoshop has almost breathed life into them. More reshaping technically–color, highlights–present a more lifelike photo for loved ones. You must do this before the skin becomes like leather. I would have enjoyed being on a team to do this cleanup prior to taking photos for the relatives to view. Dr. Luba truly seemed heartbroken about taking photos of faces so unrecognizable.

We find a few Western bodies today.

Dave returns from Phuket–networking with Dr. Porntip—“GO Dave.” The DNA samples bound for China may end up in Utah after all. 1,000 samples in Bangkok–my students may have a role after all. The samples will need to be repackaged to the smaller vials. Tedium work, but probably the most important part of the effort: making a positive ID.

I spoke with Snag and Luba about the need for more help–timing is everything. The time I came was perfect. They had processed for about seven days–I’ve now been involved for over a week, two more days’ tops for body processing. But things might change—they always do.
I believe Luba could publish the results of the face reshaping–truly remarkable (they have been Lubasized!). Photoshop, in expert hands, is truly remarkable–a marketable skill Nick.

Left message for Joey this morning and talked with Nick. They just returned from Kali’s ceremony at Kingsbury Hall at the University of Utah. Stu is trying to raise money to help the Thai’s. Our hearts go out to Stu, Sally, Jai, and Shonti. How was this possible?

I’m gaining some element of peace. I will connect with Kathy and the students in a few days. Welcome party going on at Doug and Noi’s house. Sounds great–Thai traditional music and dancers.

**Thursday, January 13**

Kathy is a delight. She was born to service–the slums, Subin (aid worker from the Bangkok–Klog Toey slums), the cause.

The PA Foundation should support this effort. The Daung Prateep Foundation (which our students work with in Bangkok in the TIE program) will help the orphaned children of Thailand as a result of the tsunami.

This morning I will try to find out about Kali’s remains. When I was talking with Dr. Lam yesterday I met Kris from Sydney. She is working as a volunteer. Found her this morning and she, fortunately, is working on victim identification. She recalls seeing Kali’s file yesterday and asked if her father was Stu. She has Kali’s number and will help me find where she is. She thinks they are waiting for dental records to be sent from the U.S.

I’m not sure what I can do, but for now I’m collecting information.
Her photos. I believe were taken the day of the trauma (no more than 1 day old). Fill out forms—her body is here at Yan Dr. Luba is helping—working through the Thai military physicians. I'm going through the process with the many Thai families—looking for loved ones. I'm relieved at the photo—compared to what I've seen. Kali had horrible head contusions and most likely was killed instantly.

They have mental health workers here helping the families. One in particular talked with me—good English skills and very comforting. I may be able to see Kali’s remains—say goodbye for family and friends.

Called Stu—he requested I call the U.S. embassy guy, David. I called and gave him my information—he said he’s happy I’m here. Interesting—he is pumping me for information about a report that the military is planning on exhuming 4,000 bodies. I thought he would be the one with all the answers.

Kris, the volunteer from Australia, would like me to help a German guy bring back a family friend. The parents are not healthy enough to travel to Yan Yao. I link up with Snag and head to DVI information. Luba has also been helping to find Kali. DVI has been searching its databases for her number and they have come up empty.

I move through the intake process aided by a contact of Steve’s. A young Thai woman is searching all the records (DNA, container lists, etc.). Her regular job is a crime scene investigator. Hard to believe this demure feather of a girl could be involved with CSI activities.

I’m told by DVI that the photo ID # is matched to the body bag # then matched to the large container #. The process may take up to 24 hours to complete as they work with my request about Kali.

200 bodies coming in this afternoon. Not sure I can do this anymore. I just want to ID Kali and go home—feeling guilty.
The problem is that she was, more than likely, tagged with a Thai tag, which may have deteriorated—necessitating a new number. We need to find the list that shows the re-identification. The British guys have been very helpful. Also Kris, who is sending a note to Stu. She was working on Kali's file the day before. I filled her in on the family.

Saw some American military today (first time). Filled in the captain on our situation.

Snag to the rescue again—now working with the DNA team to see if we have a sample with Kali’s original number. This then might be able to be cross-referenced.

No DNA sample with what I thought to be Kali’s original number.

Two possibilities.

1. Her paper tag deteriorated with burial and she is in an unidentified group (no number or re-number).

2. She has not yet come through for processing. She would go to the DVI teams. Occasionally, we get a Western body. They are taken to DVI—no processing is done on Westerners here. On occasion, in the identification process we determine a body has been misidentified as Asian. This would not have happened with Kali given her photo—unless she came through as unidentified after two weeks.

My sense is that if she is part of an unidentified cohort, there will be a DNA sample with a number on it. This will be in a database. Stu will give a sample (buccal swab). Eventually the two will be matched. Kali’s remains will be dealt with as Stu wishes: She will come home.
Dave's activity may be the key. Sorenson Genomics will be doing the unidentified. A sample of a sample will go to the U.S. I've heard that the rib samples we have been taking will eventually go to China for analysis.

I will check in with DVI administration tomorrow morning—perhaps go back to the Khao Lak Emerald in the afternoon. Dave is in Bangkok dealing with customs issues regarding the DNA vials.

I hope I can come up with something for Stu and his family. I searched today's bodies—no match to Kali's number.

Maybe I will head to Bangkok on Sunday—stay in Phuket on Saturday night. I can't go from the field to the plane, all sweaty and smelly.

I walked through the Thai morgue and entered the DVI area from the back. Suited up—Dr. Don, USA PA—to get some information.

Two teams working—Australian, Swiss, Austrian, and some others on one team, French, German, and some others on the second team. Spoke with a congenial Australian women who indicated that their team had processed approximately 430 bodies. Not sure about the other team.

Kris asked for help with the German fellow again. I think he finally got access to see the body. From the photo of his body there were very large and distinctive tattoos on his chest and arms—this was a guy I remember from the back. Seeing these tattoos made me think that having one might not be a bad idea. There was a guy this morning in dental with a dragon on his chest and stomach and other tattoos on his arms and legs—some were Asian tattoos, some New Zealand. Luba and Snag debated whether it was an Asian or Western body. Luba wins—short femurs, high cheek bones, flat occipital area, longer second toe, poor teeth, sparse pubic hair—Snag is just testing Luba (great teacher). This was a guy I saw yesterday—took his rib for DNA (no need with these tattoos—very unique.)
Waiting for my ride back to the hotel … Trang and his wife are still working–inputting data. Taking information from the relatives and entering it in English and in Thai–changing alphabets. These are great people. I will take them to dinner tomorrow night to show my appreciation.

Thoughts while I wait … I feel a bit scattered.

- I don't want to see Kali if they bring her here after being buried for two weeks.

- This experience has confirmed for me that I will be cremated—Kathy and I made the right decision years ago. I can't wait to see Kathy and the group–maybe Sunday?

- I will get a tattoo as well–I’m going to Phuket on Saturday. Perhaps dinner with Dr. Lam?

- I feel comfortable here, even though I don't know the city I’m in. But I know the way from Wat Yan Yao.

- Father Rand leaves tomorrow and asks if I will be here in the morning. I will see him off.

- Long talk with Kathy. All is well–students are happy. Great first day–lunch and lecture.

- It seems that the relationship between the Thai’s and other countries is better than the relationship between the countries themselves (Western DVI teams).

- Dr. Porntip is here every day–showing a group of monks around now, photo ops with visitors. You can't help but get caught up in it all. She
carries it all off because she is competent, confident, bright, and powerful. The German photo guy calls her “Punk” because of her hair.

- How to say good-bye?

These people, these volunteers are so dedicated—gifts, that’s not why they are here. What makes people give so much? Many don’t now have a salary, but they are here helping and will be at the next disaster (which will come).

I need to investigate the dynamics of disaster relief—is it humanitarianism that motivates volunteers? or possibly meeting some inner need? I’m not sure of my own motivation. Do I want to be a hero? Kathy calls me her “crusader.” I’m not a hero or a crusader—just in the right place at the right time with the skills that were needed.

I will do this again someday—not sure why. This had a personal connection—what if there was not a similar connection—I’ve never done this before.

**Friday, January 14**

Trang’s paper, “Siam Media Weekly,” sounds like a going concern.

Waiting from my ride from Trang. At breakfast at my local restaurant I hear “Mr. Don, Mr. Don.” I look up and see a Thai fellow from last night at the snooker hall. He knows a few English words. He points to my camera and wants to know the English word. Next is a trash can. My turn next—a papaya tree across the street is mok lak go.

Yesterday a young French man, Gabriel, who was helping with the computer photos, thanked me for helping with the German guy, trying to ID the body of
his friend. Knowing who is in charge or who has the information (answers) makes all the difference. Trying to piece it all together–Sherlock Holmes style.

Now I need to know the “stretch” of the database. Does it include all the processing centers (Yan Yao, Krabi, Phuket)? Finding the case number yesterday I was assuming Kali was here at Yan Yao. So, if she is not, that explains why her number does not exist here. But, if the database does include numbers from all the processing centers–then the numbering must be a major problem.

New DNA team organized today–the young French man and I are grandfathered into the mostly Thai cadre, as we are “experienced cutters.” But this may be a moot point, as Dr. Peter (one of the Thai military pathologists) explains that only 21 more bodies will be processed at Yan Yao–then “no more.”

Waiting for Dave to return. I will try to go to the Khao Lak Emerald again this afternoon. Stu gave me directions to the bungalow the kids were in when the waves hit.

Waiting for a news conference with Dr. Porntip. From what I can gather, it will mark the end of processing of bodies here at Yan Yao. From the British DVI guard Kate, I find there is a processing center being created in Phuket, which will replace all other centers and will begin matching the post-mortem data with the ante-mortem data on the Westerners. If we are truly done processing I will catch a ride into Phuket with Dr. Lam.

Call from Dave, still in Bangkok. He wants to enlist the help of my students in Bangkok–processing samples from the rib samples for DNA analysis. This may alter their trip to Pattaya.

Still waiting for the news conference, which was to have begun at 11:00 am. It’s now noon. Now 1:00 pm, 2:00 pm. Wait, wait, wait.
New development—DNA harvest this morning ended up with two bodies undone and one unmarked sample bag. Bad business! Glad I was not involved this morning (searching for Kali instead). Breaking the chain of custody is a disaster. Of the 40–50 bodies, to which does the sample belong? Good intentions by the volunteers—now only Thai’s will harvest along with the young French man and I (experienced cutters, you know). However, all seems to be winding down.

Talked at length with the CDC guys who just arrived at Wat Yan Yao—they are very interested in what we are doing in the back and the potential for “sharps” injuries. They are primarily concerned with enteric infections. I told Chris (CDC) that very few bodies were eviscerated, but there is a risk of puncturing the diaphragm while harvesting a rib. Dental–more sharps with dissecting out the mandible. CDC Chris usually goes out on Ebola outbreaks in bubble suits.

The Italian team arrives today.

Also—the singer Ricky Martin (maybe this is the news conference we have all been waiting for) and a mass of press. He tours the outer grounds, not the inner sanctum, missing the real story. People need to see the horror not the hype; the sorrow, not the show.

I wonder if there are disaster groupies? I need to leave the madness. The show will go on without me!

I will call the U.S. Embassy guy later today to see if I can visit the new center in Phuket and inquire about Kali. Also, would like to link with Dr. Lam as he has been traveling back and forth from Phuket to Yan Yao every day.

Said goodbye to Snag today even though I will be back tomorrow—I don't want to miss a chance to say farewell to this most genuine individual. I also find Dr. Luba (a true hero) for a goodbye. We talked about tattoos and how I thought it might be a good idea to get one for future identification if needed. He shared
his tattoo with me—a young tiger on his right shoulder. He said he felt compelled when viewing tigers caged in a zoo. His was a symbolic gesture—to free the tiger cub.

Along with Ricky Martin, many Thai celebrities have visited Yan Yao. This is a good thing as it makes the volunteers feel that what they are doing is important and it boosts morale.

People are starting to talk of their plans—some will move on to Sumatra or other parts of the disaster area. Some will go home. People will move back to the life they had, but will be permanently changed from what they have seen, what they have been a part of.

Tonight we went out to a wonderful dinner at a Khao Lak restaurant (many businesses are coming back). Trang, his wife, Dave, and a young lady on Dave’s DNA team join me for dinner. The best Thai food I have ever had. The owner of the restaurant lost a few of her employees to the tsunami—a common story.

Dave will continue to work with the processing of the samples. I will head back to Phuket—stopping by the hotel to look for Jai’s guitar and say a final goodbye to Kali.

Piecing it all together, it appears that Kali was found early. Identification, DNA, and dental processing were done—then she was buried in a body bag, as there was no refrigeration in the first few days. As more bodies came in they were taken for processing at Yan Yao—leaving the earlier bodies underground.

The first-found bodies—where are they now? They may bring them to Yan Yao but not reprocess them—only store them in the containers, catalog them, and wait for the DNA results.
Saturday, January 15

Breakfast with Dave this morning—new restaurant, new dishes. All the dishes at last night’s dinner were new to me and all excellent–so many tastes and textures.

Lots of politics going on. Porntip vs. the Thai police. Apparently the police don’t like her because she exposed shoddy police work in the past. She is now with the Central Institute of Forensic Science and the Justice Department. She has been at Yan Yao from the first day. Now the police, siding with international DVI and Interpol, say they should be the ones to be in charge of everything. There are some questions about our procedures in the morgue–not following international protocol, not using DVI forms, not treating the Thai’s the same as Westerners. Possible cross-contamination between bodies regarding the DNA samples. Should be using bleach instead of alcohol for washing instruments and hands.

I have been assured that the protocols we have been using are up to standard and that the ribs we are collecting will be subsequently cleaned and the tissue for analysis will come from within the bone not from the surface. There are too many bodies to do complete autopsies on every one–also a point of contention. (Reports from Sorenson Genomics indicate that there has been no cross-contamination of the samples sent to them for processing).

Spent two hours looking for Jai’s guitar at the hotel. Long walk around the perimeter of the flood plain–easily a mile from the beach–looking, hoping. Jai and Kali’s bungalow is gone. I spend some time sitting by the ocean in the sand–sleeping and waiting for my ride to Phuket. Dave is off to Bangkok. The driver takes me to the hotel where Dr. Lam has been staying–Andaman Beach Suites–beautiful accommodations. I feel guilty sitting by the pool–will swim and relax.
Kathy’s voice sounded great on the phone—she, the students, Doug, and Noi are all in Pattaya on the beach. I will see her and the others tomorrow—anxious to meet up with everyone.

Met with Dr. Lam for dinner and a walk—great food on the street. Shopping and vendors everywhere. Dr. Lam (Misi) is a great guy—half Samoan and half Chinese. Living and working in PNG in ob/gyn. Educated in New Zealand. On our walk he bought a series of three oil paintings and a portable DVD player for his older boy (10 years old.)

He agrees to accompany me to the tattoo parlor (am I serious?). I checked it out earlier in the evening. While walking around Khao Lak Emerald I found a ream of stationery from the hotel about a mile from the beach. The hotel logo is a turtle with a leaf in its mouth. I felt this would be a fitting body adornment. The artist, a young Thai man, recreated it exactly and placed the words Khao Lak above the turtle. Kathy will hate it—but I feel this is right.

Early to sleep—great bed, good sleep.

Sunday, January 16

Breakfast with Dr. Lam and Kris—they will go with me to the TOT building (where the new Interpol DVI center will be) to collect any information I can regarding Kali. They will return to the hotel and I will head to the airport.

A call from Scott Jensen of the US Embassy. No use going to the new center. He goes every day at 3:00 pm for briefings. He has Kali’s dental records and will proceed to Wat Yan Yao. He has no contacts there. I linked him up with Snag, Luba, and Dave. Scott indicated that Kali’s remains are in “positive control” of International DVI. This maybe why there are no records on the Thai side of the Yan Yao operation.
From today’s paper all forensics will go to Interpol. Dr. Porntip is tired of fighting the police and others, though she is a valiant woman and has my utmost respect.

Upon my return to the US I will visit Sorenson Genomics regarding processing of samples to see if our harvesting procedures would have some how compromised the DNA sampling.

It will be good to get back to normal–some semblance of order.

Sitting in the Phuket airport, feeling the weight lifting.

Uneventful flight but confusion at the Bangkok airport with the taxi—Noi to the rescue. She talks to the driver via cell phone. Off to the Golden Dragon. The hotel is much better than I expected. Carpeted rooms, separate shower, flush toilets.

Waiting for the group. A knock at my door–Kathy in her red hat looking beautiful. I love her so much, ravenous for the touch of her, the smell of her—all is right now.

A call from Snag. Progress on the lost German guy—they are close to releasing the body to his friend—identified with his many tattoos.

Snag indicated that when I was not in the morgue and dealing with the search for Kali’s remains some untrained, non-clinical personnel were helping with the DNA harvest and not following protocol (cleaning instruments well and possibly cross contaminating samples). DVI filmed them and showed the breaches in protocol to Drs. Luba and Steve. No more new volunteers.

But it doesn't matter now anyway. Now all the bodies will go over to Interpol and the police in Phuket at the new center set up to merge all the data.
All of the TIE students seem to be happy and enjoying themselves shopping, eating, and learning.

Kathy and I will take the day for ourselves tomorrow. She can read my journal if she would like—perhaps it will help. I want to talk about it all, but I don't want to grandstand or make this experience out to be more than it was. I will try to put together a talk that will be representative and academic. The emotions I will share with Kathy. It's helpful just being around her.

I don't want people to feel sorry for me or think I'm fragile—even though I guess I am. The worst of it all seems to be fading.

**Thursday, January 20**

Dhamanannda, the only female monk in Thailand (ordained in Sri Lanka), meets with us as part of the TIE program. She was a professor with a family before she became a monk. She truly is enlightened—there seems to be a glow (aura) about her.

She spoke about Buddhism with the students. Talked of her experience with the tsunami victims—in the camps with displaced persons. Many stories—she speaks of the love and kindness blossoming out of this tragedy.

I posed a question to her, which was asked of me by a news person while I was sitting in the staging area after a particularly hard morning in the morgue: “Why did this happen?”

I could not answer the question (only God knows, I said). Dhamanannda could not answer as well, but she explained her view—we are all part of the whole (earth, water, fire, and wind).
I asked to speak privately with her and asked for a blessing. We retreated to a quiet place in the garden where she performed a “water ceremony” for me. Two cups, one full of water the other empty. While she prays, I pour the water from the full cup into the empty one and then pour the water on a tree in the garden (renewal).

After the ceremony she explains she is praying that the merits (karma) I have garnered by working with the Thai bodies protect me and sustain me. We talked more about what I was doing at Yan Yao and she seems to be happy to talk with me and to have a more complete understanding of the activities in the morgue.

It was good to be with her in the garden, to be in her presence. Peace, joy, enlightenment in this sanctuary.

I gave my talk to the student and faculty tonight. Some slides, giving them some insight to my experience. This also was helpful for me—to share this and to move on.

We will talk with Stu and Sally upon our return home.

Dhamanannda spoke of souls (spirits). Some are very good, having done much good in their lives; they will “go up.” Some are very bad and will “go down.” There are many souls in the middle that can benefit from the merit work (good karma generated) of others. The merit will help them leave this world and go up. She feels this is what I was able to do for these souls.

_It was an honor to be involved with the Thai people as they struggled with the aftermath of a tragedy that has so shaken the world._

Map of Thailand.
Addendum

In February 2005, Stu and Sally returned to Southern Thailand to retrieve Kali’s remains. A positive match was made through dental records, clothing and jewelry. Noi was able to meet them in Bangkok and travel with them to Phuket to act as an interpreter. Dr. Steve Wilson was also able to accompany them to offer assistance working with Interpol and the Western DVI pathologists. Her coffin was draped in flowers for the traditional three-day Buddhist ceremony. Kali was cremated after the ceremony and her ashes were brought home.

Stu and Sally also met with many groups looking for ways to directly benefit the Thai people affected by the tsunami. The Kali Foundation funds will be utilized to fund projects aimed at repairing fishing boats and building houses. (Visit www.4Kali.org for more information.)

I am overwhelmed by the courage, energy and compassion of Stu, Sally, Shonti and Jai as they purse their relief effort to honor Kali and to help Thailand recover and heal.

Additionally, Sorenson Genomics is attempting to convene a meeting in Salt Lake City later this year with Drs. Porntip, Luba, Wilson, Dave Rockwood and myself to devise a DNA sampling kit which could be deployed in disaster situations. (Visit www.thaitsunamihelp.org for more information.)

In the aftermath of the tsunami the Physician Assistant Foundation as the philanthropic arm of the American Academy of Physician Assistants was able to match nearly $10,000 donated by individual physician assistants from across the country to aid in the relief effort. Your tax-deductible contribution of $20.00 or more for this publication will help rebuild the Foundation's Emergency Fund.

Your donation to the PA Foundation’s Emergency Fund Program will be greatly appreciated.

Please specify “Emergency Fund” and “Tsunami Journal” for tracking purposes.

Please send your tax-deductible donation to:

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For further information or to utilize a credit card contact:

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Don Pedersen, left and Dave Rockwood, right. Preparing for the day's work.

Devastation in the Khao Lak area of Phang Nga Province in Southern Thailand.

Thai soldiers off-loading bodies in the morgue.

Teams conducting dental evaluations.

Thai people – spiritual and resilient.
Teams conducting dental evaluations.

Dry ice delivery.

Dave Rockwood's team for the Sorrenson Genomics project.

Andaman Hotel

Forest Monks.

Outside Wat Yan Yaо.

Chain of custody for DNA samples.

Refrigerated containers for body storage.

The story of life is quicker than the blink of an eye.

The story of love is hello and goodbye—until we meet again.

—Jimi Hendrix

Misi Lam, MD—volunteer from Papua New Guinea.

Staging area inside the gates at Wat Yan Yaо.

Information technology in the staging area.

Traditional Thai snooker hall provided some distraction from the days work.
Tsunami of Tears
2005 Relief Effort in Southern Thailand

Proceeds from the sale of this book will support the Physician Assistant Foundation's Emergency Fund.