

PICTURING TRAGEDY

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It was the scores of photographs of the missing with stark, plaintive messages attached that first conveyed to me the particular horror of the disaster. They were everywhere in the compound of Thailand's Phuket provincial government offices: taped to walls, stapled to makeshift notice boards and pinned to trees.

What made these pictures of the missing so compelling and poignant was that they had clearly been taken only hours before the tsunami struck Thailand's west coast resorts.

Many showed men, women and children caught in Christmas Day celebrations. A young Swedish woman raised a glass of champagne to the camera. Dad and two children frolicked on the beach, waving and smiling broadly. A group of roistering guys and gals grinned beerily over a table thickly covered with bottles and glasses.

And already, less than 48 hours after the waves, there were the grim pictures posted by local hospitals of the recovered bodies of the victims.

This was the first major natural disaster to occur in the digital camera age. In the resorts of Thailand and southern Sri Lanka catering to North American and European tourists, almost every moment of the horror was captured and broadcast to the world through e-mail and Web pages as well as television and newspapers. People at home might not have been to Phi Phi Island or Patong Beach,

but the terror of an idyllic sea that turns suddenly vengeful was easily imaginable.

The enormity of the disaster and the vast areas and populations in South and Southeast Asia affected by it were evident when I arrived in Bangkok from Vancouver a day after the tsunami struck. On the long flight, I had had plenty of time to draw up an initial plan of campaign, always a critical first step for a lone reporter confronting such a massive and multifaceted story.

My good fortune was to learn the foreign correspondent's craft in Africa—no stranger to man-made and natural disasters—in the company of skilled and experienced colleagues. A golden rule is to address the story that's in front of you, and not be beguiled into chasing off after others that may sound more compelling. It's a discipline that is both practical and emotionally important; it is easy to be overcome by the highly strung atmosphere and lose judgment.

In Thailand on December 27, I faced no internal debate about where to go and what to do. The immediate story was about the Canadians who had died, were unaccounted for or had survived. Soon I was at the hub of the disaster response in Phuket and beginning to assimilate the human dimension of what had happened from the pictures on the walls of the government compound.

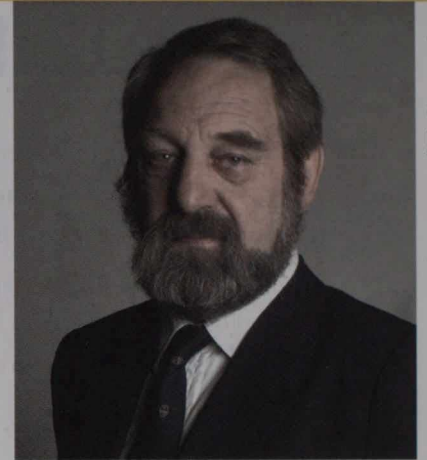


photo: courtesy of The Vancouver Sun

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Posted alongside were lists of thousands of names of the missing, about 200 Canadians among them. It was the daunting task of trying to determine the fate of these people that confronted the Canadian Ambassador to Thailand, Denis Comeau, and his team of diplomats and volunteers. They did an exceptional job under the most trying circumstances.

My task was to seek out Canadian survivors and report their experiences within the context of the overall emergency response. Some found relief in telling their stories. Others, especially those desperately hunting for missing friends or relatives, were consumed by inner turmoil and more reticent.

As days passed, the lack of answers and the emotional roller-coaster rides between hope and anguish sometimes resulted in outbursts of anger. But, in truth, there was for the most part no information to give. One could only dumbly sympathize with people slowly acknowledging the bleak realization that there might never be an answer to what happened to their loved ones—and that the Christmas Day pictures would be their last memory. ❁