

THE SEARCH IN THAILAND

By mid-morning each day over the Christmas holidays, Diane Therrien, a Canadian living in Phuket in southern Thailand, was usually on the beach with her mother, visiting from Trois-Rivières, Quebec. But at 10:30 a.m. on December 26, when the tsunami hit, the two had gone to visit a Buddhist temple.

When they returned home, a neighbour told Therrien about a big wave that had hit the other side of Phuket, an island about the size of Montreal. Only the next morning did she learn from a newscast the extent of the tragedy on the beaches facing the open ocean.

She rushed to action. Therrien, the head librarian at a British college and fluent in Thai, had signed up last September with the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok as a volunteer warden to assist Canadian nationals in emergencies. Along with her mother and a Thai friend, she began to look for Canadians in the heavily affected areas. The three were astonished by what they found.

"Many big hotels on the beach had bars and restaurants in the basement; the people in there didn't stand a chance," she says. "The water just came in and filled up the hole. They couldn't escape."

By that time, Diego Tremblay, the Embassy's Second Secretary and Consul, had established Canada's formal presence in Phuket. On Boxing Day evening, Tremblay set up a table in a conference room of a government building that had been transformed

into a temporary base for a number of embassies. "A sea of people poured into the room," he remembers.

Some were still wearing bathing suits, others wore life jackets. They walked around with lost expressions under the glare of bright lights. "I was caught in the wave..." "I was on the beach..." "I was in my room..." They told their stories with few tears, Tremblay remembers, "as though they were apart from it. They were in shock."

For four days, Tremblay, bolstered by more and more staff and volunteers, recorded the names and details of those present and missing, and issued emergency documents for survivors to fly to Bangkok, where embassy personnel could take care of them. The ranks of those taking part in the Canadian assistance effort swelled to 70, including vacationing Canadians who distributed Tremblay's cellular telephone number on posters and cards and an influx of more than 20 consular staff from as far away as Turkey and Trinidad and Tobago.

The team effort to find Canadians was vast. For several days Therrien, her mother and her friend visited hotels and hospitals to survey records of guests and patients who had come and gone. Brian Jackson, a defence attaché at the Canadian embassy who had come to the island the day after the tsunami along with Canadian Ambassador to Thailand Denis Comeau, combed ruined beach resorts for traces of Canadians identified on lists or mentioned in the accounts of other foreigners.

The Canadians affected by the disaster who remained in Phuket, many of them sleeping in makeshift



accommodations on temple floors, were urged to go to the capital. Jackson offered one man, whose wife appeared to have been lost on a Khao Lak beach, his Bangkok apartment, where he could settle in and communicate with his family by phone and e-mail.

The stricken man spent days at the embassy, desperate to keep busy with tasks, says Trade Commissioner Colleen Baker, who assumed the position of tsunami volunteer coordinator. She put the man in charge of buying water and snacks for the reception area set up for survivors. Embassy staff, their spouses and volunteers visited the dozen or so Canadians who were in hospital, collected donated clothes and food or just sat in the reception area listening to those who needed to talk about their experiences.

All who helped in the tsunami effort have now returned to their regular lives and work, but they will forever be marked by the event, says Therrien, who will continue as a warden in Phuket.

"It took two, three weeks to be able to think 'We are lucky, we escaped,'" she says. "We wish we could say the same for everybody." 🍁

Order into chaos: The scene outside of Phuket's provincial government offices, which were turned into a temporary base for a number of embassies.