


Disaster strikes

Paradise: Hikkaduwa beach before the Tsunami hit

Police officers Lisa Kent and her husband Mark were on holiday in Sri Lanka when the Tsunami struck. They speak to *Police* magazine about the horrific experience which has prompted them to raise funds for the villagers who saved their lives.

 On Christmas day the sun shone and the waves lapped the stretch of beach on the paradise island of Sri Lanka. Lisa, 25, a detective constable who works on the crime squad at West Mercia Police, and Mark, a police officer from West Midlands, were enjoying the perfect break away.

They had joined a party of 20 others to go scuba diving in the village of Hikkaduwa on the southern coast of the island. On Boxing Day they prepared their kits to go out to sea, planning a dive around 9.30am.

The dive never took place. Lisa was sitting ten metres away from the sea, the tide seemed high, but no one could have guessed the horror that would follow.

'I looked at the sea and it just looked a bit unnatural, it was really choppy with big peaks and troughs, swirling around; it almost looked like it was boiling. We still didn't realise what was happening,' says Lisa.

The next thing, Chummi, the owner of the dive club, shouted for the group to head back and get into the dive shop.

First wave hit

'We started to walk quicker and a young girl, Danny, who was just 13, became scared and started screaming. I grabbed her and held her in front of me. Then I felt another wave hit me in the back, I was struggling to stand on my feet, I couldn't run because the water was up to our thighs,' Lisa said.

The group reached the dive school building at the edge of the beach and went inside, but the building was also taking the strain of the pressure from the water and began to collapse.

At this point the Lisa and Mark were separated, they took different exits out of the building, Lisa still clinging hold of the little girl.

Mark was trying to help a woman, petrified of the waves, to get out of the building when a

concrete pillar fell on them.

Eventually the swell of the wave subsided and the pillar trapping Mark gave way and they managed to free themselves. Others were physically washed through the building by the pressure of the wave.

Missing

Mark spent some time searching in the wreckage thinking that both Danny and Lisa had been trapped or, worse still, swept out to sea. As another wave appeared, people began to run.

'I was hit and my legs just gave way, I seemed to go into spasm and thought I may have broken my thighbone,' he recalls.

Mark was taken to a local hospital, which lacked facilities and was being deluged with the injured. A bus then came and took people to hospital in the nearby town of Galle. Some of those on the bus were alive and severely injured; others were dead.

Mark comforted a girl in her 20s, who lay on the floor of the

bus in agony with a suspected broken back, trying to withstand the pain as the bus rode over dirt tracks.

While Mark was being taken into hospital he still had no idea if Lisa was alive.

'During the initial incident I looked down and my wedding ring had been ripped off my finger. I almost saw it as a sign that she had died, I knew there was no way she would have let go of Danny.'

Lisa had managed to escape the building and had struggled through the deepening waters into the streets.

'People were running and screaming, we did not know what was happening or what to do, a table hit my legs and just took them from under me,' She adds.

It was then she spotted local Sri Lankans calling her into an alleyway and she managed to pick Danny up and wade over.

Lisa recalls how she saw a bus screeching to a stop in the street, then a wave just swept the



Destruction: Hikkaduwa beach after the disaster in which thousands died



Together: Lisa and Mark miraculously find each other among the chaos

welcomed them in and made tea and prepared food. Many of those who had made it had cuts all over their legs and feet; the villagers sold their own goods to try to get food and medicine.

Reunited

At 11o'clock that night, Lisa heard the news she had been hoping for; she found out that Mark has been taken to a house just next door to the one she was staying in.

'I was so relieved, I just didn't know if he had made it until that moment.'

An official broadcast from the Sir Lankan authorities had predicated another wave was set to hit Hikkaduwa and Mark wanted to be with Lisa.

When the panic passed, Lisa and Mark were struck by the reality of the aftermath from the Tsunami; debris strewn the streets and fishing boats had been swept onto rooftops alongside cars from the street.

Around fifty people were staying in the house and the villagers fed them for the next few days; not eating until their guests had eaten; sleeping on the drive while the group slept in their house; boiling water for the survivors; keeping them alive.

Chummi, the dive school owner, had lost everything yet managed to ferry people to hotels to try to find their passports, wallets and supplies.

Although many roads had been washed away and no diesel fuel was available, Chummi managed to salvage some fuel and drive a coach-load of survivors to Colombo, the capital, where food and water supplies were plenty.

The drive took six hours and the group were escorted by locals, who left their wives and children behind. On the journey they saw the hundreds of homeless huddled in temples or sitting in the shells of their former homes.

Devastation

In the most devastated areas, people waited for the tide to bring in the bodies of their loved-ones.

Many of those who had been so kind to Lisa and Mark and the others are still left without proper shelter and the monsoons are due.

The couple and the dive group, rescued by the villagers, are now raising money after setting up the Hikkaduwa Village Fund, specifically to make sure the money goes to those people most in need.

They aim to raise £10,000 to help re-build the village and provide fishing boats to help feed the people there.

Anyone wishing to donate should make cheques out to the 'Hikkaduwa Village Fund' and send it to 14 Chesworth Road, Harwood Park, Bromsgrove, B60 2HF. For more information click on: www.hikkaduwafund.org



whole back end and lifted it as easily as rag doll, tossing it from side to side.

They were led through the alley to a railway line, around 20km from Galle.

Lisa saw others from the dive centre, but her husband was nowhere to be seen. She describes how a German girl lay on the floor, both ankles broken from the pressure of the wave. Three Sri Lankan men helped the girl up to the temple on a hill with the rest of the group.

Villagers did not know what had happened, they stared as westerners came through the door in swimwear, sodden from the ensuing wave.

At this point Lisa began to wonder if Mark was still alive.

'I was still in shock but still trying to be optimistic for Danny, telling her that her parents were still alive and Mark would be okay, but I kept thinking, "how could Mark have got out alive when the building collapsed behind me".'

Helping hands

The group were then taken to a house in the hills where villagers