

Braveheart

Hundreds of relatives, colleagues and friends gathered together at the National Police Memorial Day in Cardiff last month to honour police officers who have been killed or died while on duty. Tina Orr-Munro speaks to one of the relatives who suffered a personal tragedy when his son died while trying to help those devastated by the tsunami in Thailand.

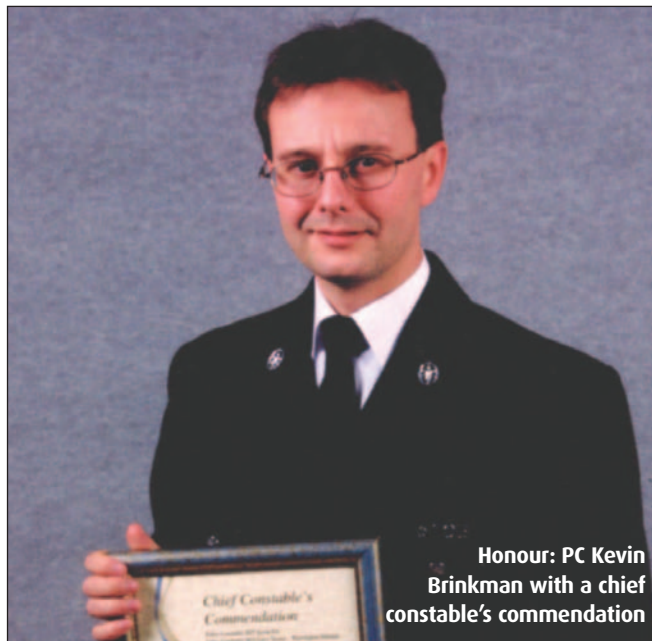
 The Asian Tsunami claimed the lives of thousands of people when it struck the coasts of South East Asia on Boxing day 2004. But when PC Kevin Brinkman, from Cheshire Police, volunteered to travel to Thailand earlier this year to help with the recovery operation, no-one could have predicted that it would claim his life too.

When PC Brinkman, who had planned to marry his fiancée Diana this year, made the decision to go to Thailand to help in the aftermath of the Tsunami, it came as no surprise to his family, despite their reservations.

Kevin's father, Brian Nicolson, says he was concerned about the psychological impact on his son of dealing with a disaster that wiped out thousands of lives as well the possibility of contracting a serious illness.

'I was not surprised when he said that he wanted to go out to the tsunami disaster area to help with the recovery of bodies. It was the kind of person he was. He was a member of the force's search team, so when they asked for people to go, Kevin volunteered. He was set on doing it.

'But I was worried and I didn't want him to go and neither did his mother. We were fearful. But I thought the worst that could happen was that he would pick up a serious disease or infection. I was



Honour: PC Kevin Brinkman with a chief constable's commendation



Devastation caused by the tsunami

also concerned about the mental effects of working out there in terms of what he would be exposed to.'

PC Brinkman, who was also known as Kevin Nicolson, flew out to the resort of Phuket in Thailand as part of a team whose role it was to prepare bodies for post mortem. It was a gruesome task and when Kevin phoned his father on Easter Sunday, it was clear that the officers were working under intolerable conditions.

'He called several times before he got through to us. He gave us a pretty vivid description of what he was doing out there. The conditions were appalling. It was hot and one of the refrigerated lorries containing bodies had broken down so it was pretty unpleasant all round. They were masked up for the few days and after that they just got on with it.

'He didn't really say how he was coping. He would have told us more on his return as he was due back in the following fortnight. Really he just told us how awful it was. It was combat conditions.'

Obviously unaware of what was to come, Kevin who was 33 when he died, had discussed plans for his forthcoming wedding to Diana, his long term fiancée and mother of his two-year-old daughter, Chloe. Their wedding was due to take place in September this year.

'Looking back, we are very grateful that we were able to talk to him, although our conversation was about the wedding because we didn't know what was going to happen, says his father.

During Kevin's time there, he and several other members of the team were given time off and decided to take a trip to see a ship that had been washed inland by the force of the Tsunami. Those on board had all survived.

But the van they were travelling in missed its turning. As the driver attempted a u-turn in the road, a bus travelling in the opposite direction hit them sideways on, propelling their vehicle 30 metres down the road. When it came to a stop, the driver and the other passengers were slightly injured, but Kevin was nowhere to be seen. After a search, he was found unconscious away from the site of the accident. An officer tried to revive him on the roadside. Then Kevin and another injured passenger were bundled into two cars and taken to hospital where Kevin was resuscitated for about 40 minutes until he was pronounced dead. The doctors said that it is likely that Kevin died at the scene of the accident.

Back home, Diana, Kevin's fiancée, was the first to be told of the tragedy. She was out shopping in Chester with her mother when the police telephoned her. They offered to come and get her, but Diana said she would make her own way home. When she got back there were two police cars outside her house and she knew then something was wrong.

When she was told the news, she called Mr Nicolson at work immediately and then she telephoned Kevin's mum.

'Shock takes over and that whole day became totally surreal,' says Mr Nicolson.

He explained his main concern was that Kevin's body would be returning unaccompanied and he asked Cheshire Police to ensure this didn't happen.

'We had total support from the police. I am very impressed with the whole way the police have handled this from the moment that we were told of Kevin's death.



Officers are honoured at National Police Memorial Day

'My first worry was that Kevin would be coming home alone and the officers went out of their way to make sure that didn't happen. We could have waited up to three months for his body to be flown home and I was preparing to go out to speed things up when a superintendent flew out on the Tuesday and returned on the Friday with Kevin. In fact the whole team flew back together.'

A short service was held at Heathrow by the chaplain before Kevin's body was returned to Cheshire. Kevin's colleagues also showed the family photos from the memorial service held in Thailand that was attended by officers from all over the world.

'We received a card from everyone there and the comments were wonderful. It is not often police officers let their feelings show like this,' says Mr Nicolson.

He also pays tribute to Sgt Simon Roberts, the family liaison officer, who has supported them through their loss.

'He has been incredible. I was getting worried that we were beginning to look forward to his

visits and seemed to be so reliant on him. He would give us more information about the accident as it came through. Then one day he broke down as he was telling us what happened and I was able to console him. It was a wonderful moment for me as it meant he was no longer on this pedestal. I have great admiration for him. He helped us through and he is still there for Diana.'

Kevin loved his job, says his father. He struggled to get into the police service initially as he failed to meet the height restrictions, until they were lowered, and he was also short-sighted, but he persevered and served for Cheshire Police for 11 years. During that time he was commended for his bravery in 2002 when he arrested two armed thieves as they held up a jeweller's shop in Stockton Heath.

'He was very proud to receive that commendation. He loved the job and that's why we decided that we would have a full blown police funeral,' says Mr Nicolson.

Kevin's family also attended this year's National Police Memorial Day, at St David's Hall in

Cardiff, which honours the 4,000 police officers to have given their lives in the line of duty.

It was a difficult day for them and Mr Nicolson says he is not sure if it has helped with the healing process, although it was important to have the opportunity to commemorate Kevin's life.

'We met other people in a similar situation to us and to an extent it reopened the wounds. But I would say that it is part of the grieving process. The fact that it is an opportunity to honour Kevin and his life makes me very proud and it is important for us to recognise and remember Kevin and his colleagues.'

The grief continues for Mr Nicolson and Kevin's family and difficult times remain ahead.

'I can't think for a moment how things are going to pan out. I must admit being Scottish we are not renowned for showing our grief, but I have grieved for Kevin. Sometimes when I am driving along the road that is the worst time, I think about him and the tears are streaming down my face.

'Everything is an anniversary that we have to get through. The worst was September when Kevin and Diana were due to get married. That was terrible. The lowest I have felt, cancelling the hotel and the honeymoon. Kevin's colleagues cancelled the planned stag night in Newcastle.

'I can't describe it. I have lost my mother and my father, but this is different. And when you lose a partner there is always a chance you may remarry, but a child is irreplaceable. The only consolation is Chloe who looks so like Kevin when he was young. God willing we will always have that.

'He was a loving father to a two-year-old daughter. He was very conscientious and took his work seriously, but he had a great sense of humour and was a great storyteller.

'Words can't describe the last few months. I would never have thought that I would be at No. 10 talking to Tony Blair or attending award ceremonies. I am really proud to be there, but I would rather have my son with me.'

