



# FATAL SHORE

Boxing Day 2014 marks the 10th anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami. Caused by a massive earthquake said to have released energy equivalent to 1000 atomic bombs, it killed 250,000 people, including six Queenslanders. For relatives and survivors, the past decade has been a long journey of healing.

Story Jennifer Johnston

**R**od Emerson was watching the Boxing Day cricket Test on television with a few mates at his home in Leeton, 550km west of Sydney, when a 3pm newflash revealed a tsunami had hit the area where his older sister was on holiday. Kim Walsh, 39, a teacher at Trinity Bay High School in Cairns in Far North Queensland, was staying with her husband, Ian, a CSIRO tropical medicine expert, at the Sofitel Magic Lagoon Resort at Khao Lak, 60km north of Phuket.

Emerson tried to call his sister, without success. At 1am on December 27 Kim's mother-in-law, Margaret, rang to tell Emerson that Ian was injured but that they couldn't find Kim. "I just knew it was over because they were separated, and I know that would ►

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LOOKING AT THE 20-FOOT [6M]  
MARKERS ON THE PALM TREES  
— IT MADE ME FEEL SICK.**

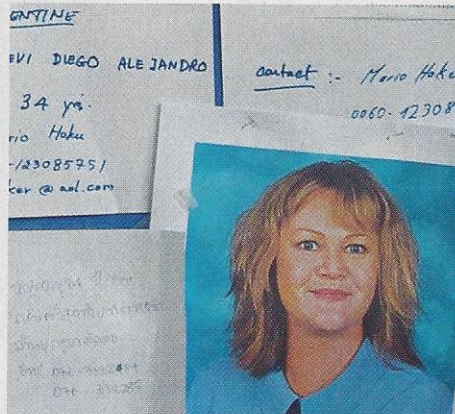


never normally happen,” says Emerson, now 47, an irrigation operations coordinator. “And when you’re dealing with the volume of water behind those tsunami waves, you wouldn’t have a lot of time to find safety.”

But deep down, Emerson hoped for a miracle. “I’d been hearing stories of people who’d survived. I turned to my wife, Nicole, and said, ‘I have to go and find Kim.’”

That day, despite his fear of flying, Rod, accompanied by cousin Terry Emerson, drove to Sydney where officials fast-tracked a passport. They flew to Bangkok to meet Ian’s brother, Brian Walsh, who’d arrived the day before. “I remember the plane to Bangkok being empty; everyone was leaving, not arriving.”

They were helped in their search by a group of volunteers led by Paul Endres, a colleague of Ian’s in Cairns. “Paul would coordinate communications and search efforts from Australia and give us instructions as we searched Phuket,” recalls Emerson. “We’d search each hospital daily. When we arrived at the Khao Lak beach, I was shocked. The only remaining sections of the resort were concrete slabs and a couple of statues. We stood on the beach, looking at the 20-foot [6m] markers on the palm trees — it made me feel sick.”



High water mark ... Rod Emerson on the Thai beach where the wave that claimed his sister, Kim Walsh (inset), hit; in the palm tree next to him is a peg showing its height.

The cousins continued their search for seven days. “The number of bodies meant the morgues were full and many of the bodies had been sent to temples,” Emerson says. “You can’t imagine how horrible this task was; these bodies had been lying in the humidity for four to five days, bloated with water. We were getting to the stage where we knew we were not going to find Kim. We knew it was time to return to Australia.”

Kim Walsh’s body was located on February 16, 2005, and identified by DNA. Her body was returned to Australia on February 20 and she was buried in Cairns six days later.

Emerson will never forget his sister. “We have

a special place for her in our house, a recess in the wall with downlights and photos of Kim. It’s not a shrine as such, it just evolved naturally as our place to remember her. My sons, Brandon [21] and Hayden [19], and Nicole and I feel a sense of comfort having it there.

“I don’t think you ever get over losing someone like this,” he says. “I don’t believe in closure. My cousin Terry was affected by it and he sought counselling. I didn’t want counselling, as in my mind you can’t fix it, you can’t bring Kim back.”

A portrait of the three siblings (including younger sister Karen) hangs near the television in Emerson’s home. It was a favourite of his mother Ruth’s and before she died last year, she flew to Cairns to visit Kim’s grave. “I know when Kim died, part of Mum died with her. Kids aren’t supposed to die before their parents,” says Emerson.

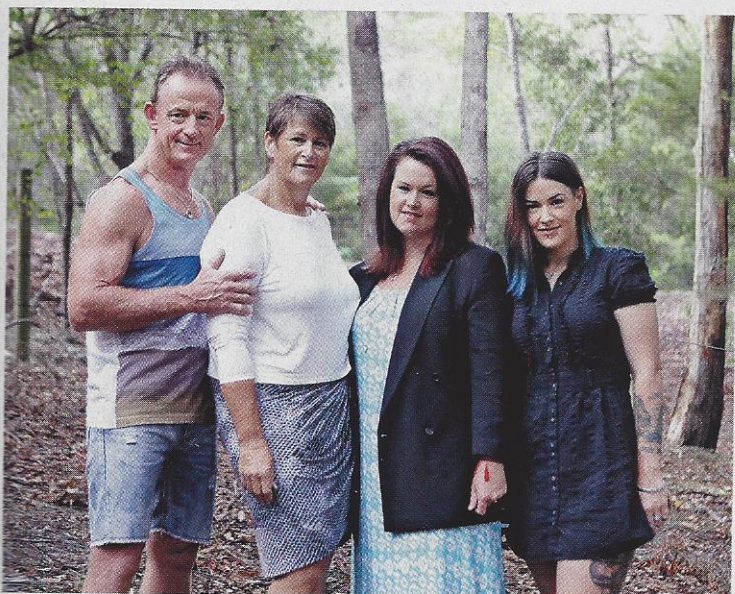
Six months after Kim’s funeral, Emerson returned to Phuket to visit the temple where his sister’s body had been taken for identification. In the grounds, he planted three trees. “I said I would return to see the trees, but I’ve not been back. A few mates of mine are saving money to make the trip to Thailand to visit the temple and create a garden around the trees.”

For years after losing Kim, Emerson watched the Boxing Day Test on his own. Eventually Nicole rang his friends and said, “Oh, for god’s sake, come around and be with Rod, he is moping.” Since then, Emerson’s mates renew the ritual every year, turning up to his house on Boxing Day to watch the cricket. “They come to support me,” he says, “but it’s a day when we all remember Kim.”

**THE TSUNAMI’S FIRST WAVE, REPORTEDLY UP** to 10 metres high, hit the coastline of Phuket at about 10am on December 26, 2004. Helen and Peter Hallett and daughters, Jessica, then 12, and Samantha, 15, from Tallebudgera Valley in the Gold Coast hinterland, were staying at the Holiday Inn at Patong beach on the Thai island’s west coast. After a relaxing Christmas Day, Peter Hallett, now 54, was keen for action. “I’m a GI Joe kind of guy, so I booked a day’s snorkelling adventure on Phi Phi Islands,” he recalls. His daughters were unimpressed as they were desperate to ride elephants so, after some nagging, their father changed the snorkelling adventure to a mountain elephant tour.

While waiting for the bus, the family felt the rumbling underground. Tour desk staff told them it was probably just machinery at work beneath the building but as the bus drove out of town, the first wave struck Patong. The driver stopped the bus and they watched the devastation unfold.

“Large boats had been picked up like Matchbox toys and were lying on the beaches near the hotels,” says Hallett. “It hit me then what changing that snorkelling tour meant to us.” ▶



“**SEEING ENTIRE FAMILIES LOST [TAUGHT ME] THAT YOUR FAMILY, YOUR HEALTH AND YOUR LIFE ARE ALL YOU NEED.**”

Bullet dodgers ... (left) Peter and Helen Hallett with their daughters Sam and Jess; (above) disaster specialist Kirsty Wright, who spent five months in Thailand post-tsunami.

Returning to the hotel, they found the ground floor flooded but their second-floor room undamaged. Peter wanted to stay on in Phuket to help, but Helen didn't want her daughters exposed to more trauma. It took 15 hours to get off the island to Bangkok, where they stayed for five days before returning to Australia.

Back on the Gold Coast, Helen Hallett, now 52, decided to make some changes in her life. She was determined to lose weight and shed 80kg in two years – she is now half the size she was a decade ago. “I felt unhealthy and wanted to be on this Earth for as long as possible for my kids,” she says. She also resigned from her 25-year position as food services manager at the Tweed Heads District Hospital to work in her husband's business, Midcoast Marine and Rescue Products. The couple are volunteer lifesavers and she now works as a development officer with Surf Lifesaving Queensland, an active role she could not have foreseen a decade ago.

The Holiday Inn invited survivors back to the hotel in 2005 and the Hallett family took part in a lantern ceremony in memory of those who died. They have returned to Phuket three more times and are planning a holiday in 2015. “How many parents have their kids in their twenties [daughters Sam and Jess] happy to go on holidays with Mum and Dad?” asks Peter Hallett. “This disaster has made us so much closer as a family.”

#### DISASTER SPECIALIST KIRSTY WRIGHT

expected to be in Thailand for three weeks, but such was the scope of devastation that she stayed five months. Wright, now 38, was a Brisbane-based forensic biologist working with Queensland Health at the John Tonge Centre in Brisbane's south, conducting DNA profiles in murder and sexual assault cases. She'd also worked on aviation disasters and assisted with

victim identification after the 2002 Bali terrorist bombings. Awarded a Churchill fellowship in 2004, Wright had recently returned from several weeks in the United States, where she studied the authorities' responses to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. But this time, seconded by the Australian Federal Police to become DNA team leader in Thailand, Wright was in “the unusual situation where I got to see the victim response unfold”.

She says no-one was prepared for the complexities of the operation: “So many experts who'd experienced a number of disasters from all around the world responded, but no-one foresaw anything like the tsunami and we were simply not prepared.”

Working six days a week, mostly 12-hour shifts, in 40-degree heat and humidity was tough, to say the least. Wright and her team had to identify about 3500 people, 500 of them children. “This is very difficult, heartbreaking work and we do have to switch off and be scientific to do our work properly,” she says. “But at the end of the day we are people too, and it was especially challenging.”

“The thought of someone being lost forever and for surviving family members to never have that person again, to never be able to bury them or go to their gravesite, is such a horrible thing. You do what you can to help give people back to their loved ones.”

Victim identification was complex because of the sheer number of missing people who were related. “Normally when we identify someone we can go to their hotel rooms, as in the Bali bombings, and use their toothbrush to retrieve their DNA, then match it to the bones,” Wright says. “If that direct source of DNA is not available, we approach family members to obtain an identification, but with the tsunami the wave washed away so many personal effects. It washed

away towns, villages, communities, but it also washed away so many family members [at the same time].”

Wright and her colleagues were breaking new ground in what has become the largest victim identification response in history. Post-tsunami, victim identification is now seen as a humanitarian response, not just a scientific exercise. It was a life-changing experience for Wright, who lives on the Gold Coast. While there are courses to help people suffering first responder stress, a psychological disorder that afflicts those at the front line of disaster relief, Wright found the best way to deal with the emotional aftermath was to talk to others who responded to the tsunami.

“The police and forensic scientists all came together like a family to talk about our experiences,” she says. “That sense of camaraderie really helps. Many of my friends don't know what I have done in the past, or what I do now.”

Wright lectures in forensic science at Griffith University, and continues to work in the field with police and the Royal Australian Air Force, where she undertakes victim identification in current conflicts as well as recovering the remains of Australian soldiers killed overseas in both world wars. “Managing the DNA teams in Phuket has led me to do more things in my career, including the work I now do with the military,” she says. “I also feel I have no right to complain about anything. Seeing entire families lost gave me the perspective that as long as you have your family, your health and your life, that is all you need.”

“Returning [to Thailand] has been something I have been thinking about for the ten-year anniversary, but I don't think I can. I know ten years is a really long time but as soon as you start remembering things, it's like yesterday – as far as I am concerned, I am not there yet.” ●