

A Letter Home from Indonesia

Cdr. Ted Williams, the XO of VAQ-131 deployed aboard Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72), wrote an email home about Lincoln's response to the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. We are glad that the email found its way through many forwards to arrive in our inbox, so that we could publish it as a snapshot of the first days of the relief operation. While Cdr. Williams wrote about CVW-2 operating from Lincoln, his words depict Naval Aviation's dedication to the humanitarian effort in the stricken region.

Hello family and friends, I just spent three days ashore at Banda Aceh working to assist all of those in dire need in Indonesia. I thought you might like to hear what we have been doing. Stationed aboard *Abraham Lincoln*, we were in port Hong Kong on the morning of 26 December when we heard of the massive earthquake and devastating tsunamis in the Bay of Bengal. As soon as we were aware of the horrible destruction, we departed Hong Kong and headed south at best speed—without any official request from governments. As we proceeded, we were completely unaware of what we could do or even if we would be needed, but we continued through the Strait of Malacca enroute to Indonesia and Thailand. Our mission was quickly defined and we were tasked to assist Indonesia as best as able. To do so we requested volunteers aboard the ship. The

Right, Indonesian residents crowd an HS-2 HH-60H Seahawk to receive deliveries of food and water on 8 January. Below, counterclockwise from front left, Cdr. Ted Williams, LCdr. David Edgerton, Cdr. John Ross, and an aircrewman carry an injured Indonesian from a helicopter to the hospital tent in Banda Aceh during Operation Unified Assistance.



PH2 (AW/SW/PJ) Philip A McDaniel



response, as you can imagine, was overwhelming as all sailors want to help any way possible. We also knew that this would be a job for the SH-60 helicopters we have aboard. We have currently shut down the flying for all carrier fixed wing aircraft (that's me) as there was no mission or request. For the first time in my 17 year naval career, I have seen us stop flying tactical fixed wing aircraft—the primary purpose of an aircraft carrier—completely as all of our focus is on this disaster.

We arrived off the north shore of Indonesia on the morning of January 1st. I was in the first wave of helos sent ashore to establish a logistical hub and move supplies from Banda Aceh airport—only a few miles from the destroyed north coast of the



island. Not knowing what to expect as we lifted off the deck, we were quickly given a glimpse as we saw numerous corpses floating in the water. There were large clusters of debris that looked like they were at one time houses now floating in piles scattered all over the ocean. As we approached the decimated shore, we saw a large cargo ship capsized on the beach.

Proceeding further inland, we were amazed that the coastal town was gone. You could see outlines of where foundations once were, but as the earthquake shook [the buildings] loose, the tsunamis washed everything out to sea. As we continued inland, the devastation was evident more than two miles from the coast. We then approached very green and lush mountains—a sharp contrast to the leveled brown terrain of the decimated

shoreline. We flew over these 2,000 foot peaks and entered an area of surreal, beautiful countryside.

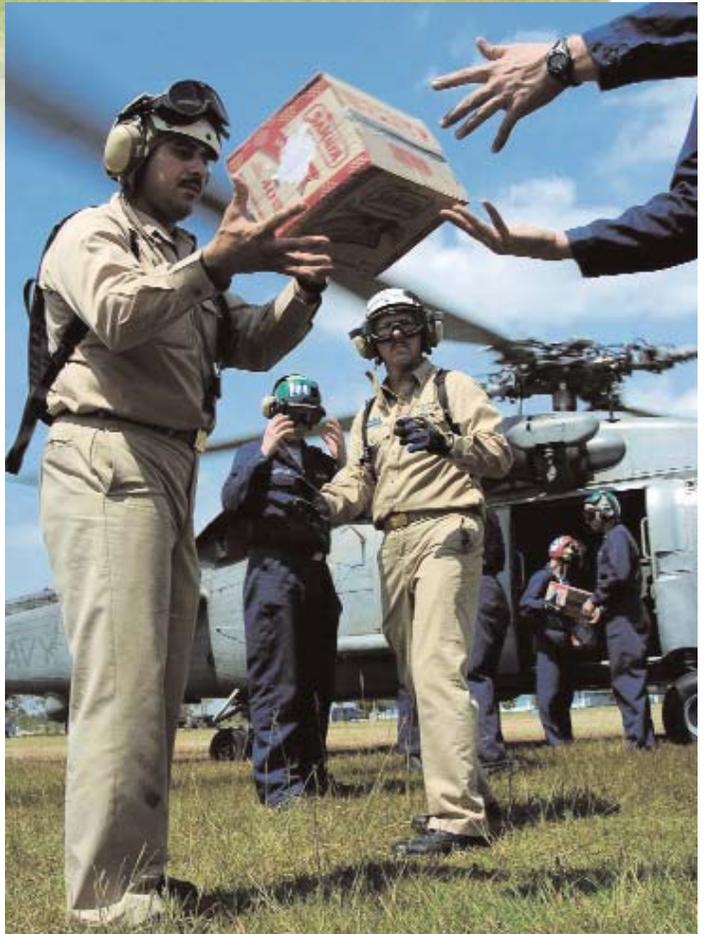
We arrived at the airport to a scene of confusion and near chaos. Six days after the disaster and there was no infrastructure in place to assist these people. About 500 displaced Indonesians who had survived had made their way to the airport in search of a flight out of the area, southeast to the safe havens of Medan or Jakarta where there is little or no damage. [When we arrived], there was only one other American military member at the airport, an Army major who had made his way up from the embassy in Jakarta. A few Australians were already there and had set up a basic logistics hub to accept supplies. The Indonesian military had a base established as well and were accepting supplies but had no way other than



Cdr. Ted Williams



Top, helicopters from HS-2 deliver supplies to an orphanage a few miles inland from the coast of Sumatra. Right, Navy personnel load bags of rice and other relief supplies onto an HSL-47 SH-60B Seahawk at Banda Aceh to be delivered to nearby villages. Above, local residents express their appreciation as an HS-2 HH-60H Seahawk delivers relief supplies at a mosque in Meulaboh, Indonesia.



PH2 Seth C. Peterson

trucks—which could not travel on the destroyed roads—to move the food and water.

Being a Prowler pilot with NO helicopter flying abilities, I was sent in to be the Carrier Air Wing Two liaison to move supplies. Realizing there was no one to “liaise” with, my squadron mate, Lt. Ken Velez, and I became the primary coordinators to make this relief effort happen. Arriving at 0900, we were able to coordinate with the Indonesians and the civilian relief agencies, and within an hour have our first load of supplies moving down the west coast. The two on-scene relief agencies, USAID and the International Organization of Migration have been invaluable in establishing assistance. They have a small medical tent with trained doctors capable of triaging and stabilizing patients. USAID has amazing logistical support to gather supplies from all over the world. The one thing both of these organizations lacked was the ability to distribute supplies to the people in need. That is where we came into play. We have set up a system to have twelve of our helicopters flying from sunrise to sunset to assist. We have been carrying everything: biscuits, rice, noodles, milk, water and medical supplies. We transport doctors and medical staff as well.

The Indonesian people are in need of everything. Their homes along the coast have been washed away and we are finding displaced personnel wondering aimlessly with no ability to acquire food, water, or badly needed medical assistance. They are unable to communicate as all phone lines are destroyed and there is no electricity. As our pilots drop off these supplies there are stories of the Indonesians hugging them with relief and joy. Our pilots then fly north to return back to Banda Aceh for resupply and they are finding small pockets of personnel who do not have any aid. They are able to airlift many of the injured to Banda Aceh. Most are near death. Yesterday we had a helo land with seven badly wounded or dehydrated personnel all in critical condition. One was a seven-year-old little girl. The doctors told me we saved

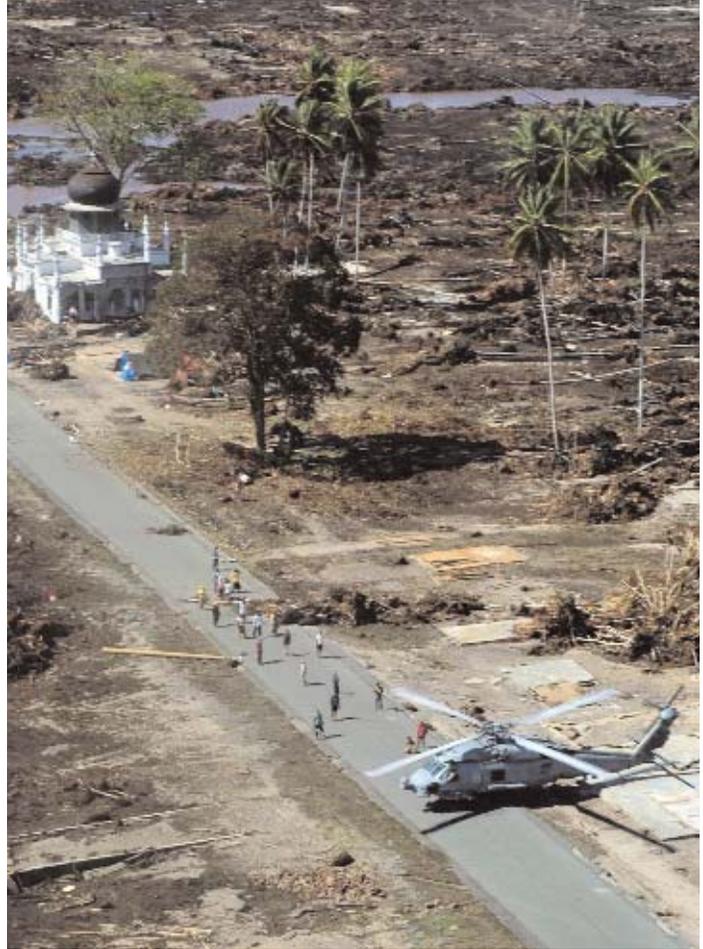


Cdr. Ted Williams

Above, this photo of an inland road depicts some of the damage caused by the tsunami. Right, in the midst of a devastated village, an HSL-47 Seahawk delivers relief supplies. Below, the shore command team from VAQ-131 discusses the daily plan at Banda Aceh air base on 12 January.

her life as she would not have lived through the night. I could not help but think of my beautiful daughters and it was then that I realized the gravity of what we were really doing.

It is difficult to imagine shifting back to fixed wing flight ops and leaving the area any time soon as the work to be done is almost insurmountable. We have been working hard with the hordes of press who badly need to tell this story. I enlisted the support of my squadron mate, LCdr. Dave Edgerton, to work specifically with the media. With every flight of two that we send down the coast, we embark a two-man journalist team, as well as a member of the IOM to coordinate with any injured or displaced persons who need our help. We have flown correspondents from all the major U.S. and international networks and newspapers. If news is coming from Banda Aceh, the U.S. Navy has helped them get their story.



PH3 Jacob J. Kirk

I must say a few words about the volunteer effort here—it is truly an effort of amazement. I see on the news the incredible outpouring of support from the U.S.—it is a wonderful and necessary thing. The effort here at sea is equally as impressive. These young sailors are all extremely eager to get ashore and do whatever is needed despite the threat of disease and the obvious destruction. My squadron alone has already put numerous sailors ashore to assist with the loading and moving of the helos.

I have never been so proud to be a member of the U.S. military. We are often focused on keeping the peace and deterring evil acts. To now have a direct impact in saving lives and attempt to rebuild a society is a testament to the United States' amazing resolve and capabilities. I thank you all for your efforts and your support. Please continue to keep the Indonesians in your thoughts and prayers. As of today this country alone is approaching 100,000 deaths from this disaster—we need to do all that is possible to mitigate any further suffering or loss of life.

My best to all,
Ted



PH3 M. Jeremie Yoder