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Pryor aids tsunami-ravaged region

The children touched Thomas Pryor '96 the most. After all, he had left his own baby daughter in Arizona when he boarded the U.S. Navy's Mercy hospital ship off the shores of tsunami-ravaged Indonesia.

Pryor, a registered nurse, is a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Public Health Service. He works for one of its agencies, the Indian Health Service, most recently in the intensive-care unit at the Phoenix Indian Medical Center.

He spent the month of February with a medical team working to relieve the suffering inflicted by the monster wave that slammed into southern Asia in December, killing an estimated 221,100 people.

It was an unprecedented international relief effort, Pryor said: one month, compared with the normal two-week deployment for such emergency aid, and the first joint operation of the U.S. Navy and Project HOPE volunteers. Amid the chaos and destruction there were political sensitivities: Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation, and the Americans did not want to force themselves on the government. Civil strife compounded their safety concerns.

Banda Aceh's ruined University Hospital served as a kind of staging area. The first crisis for the Mercy staff arrived as a small boy with a burst appendix was flown out to the ship because the hospital could not treat him.

The next morning, a 12-year-old boy went into respiratory failure. He had a severe lung infection, aspirate pneumonia, caused by swallowing contaminated water. The boy had nearly drowned, then floated on a log in the ocean for two days before he was found. The rest of his immediate family was killed. Pryor nicknamed him "Harapan," Indonesian for "hope."

Since he had some pediatric experience, Pryor became Harapan's primary attendant, working 12- to 14-hour days. Finally, after a week, the boy was able to breathe without assistance.

Soon after, Pryor went ashore and visited the hospital's rebuilt pediatric unit.



A view of the beach front in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, during Thomas Pryor's work there in February.

There, he found a 7-year-old girl in similar respiratory distress. While arranging for her transfer to the ship, he noticed several very ill babies about the age of his daughter, Audrey. "That's when I really felt the heart tugs, because I recognized that in my efforts in helping one, there were two or three others who didn't get my help that day," he said.

Despite the devastation and limited medical resources, there were signs of hope. "Those that got antibiotics, of whatever kind – it was amazing to see how rapidly they got better," Pryor said, adding that their response was partly because the Indonesians, unlike most Americans, rarely get such drugs. "Some of our basic antibiotics that we hardly ever use anymore were very effective and powerful over there."

On Feb. 23, Pryor flew by helicopter with Harapan from the Mercy back to shore to join the boy's uncle, aunt and their 2-year-old son – his only surviving relatives. Pryor wrote of the reunion in his online journal that day: "I guess what I was most struck with as I left Harapan and his family is the impermanence of life, and how the mystery of life provided me an opportunity like this: To serve as an officer in the USPHS and be a part of the Mercy mission, where I would find myself halfway around the world in a different culture and different language, and despite all of the differences I have rekindled a heartfelt reminder in Harapan and his uncle that we share so much in common – the strength of family."

Pryor returned March 2 to his own family, wife Erin and daughter Audrey, who is now a year old. In September he entered the two-year Kaiser program in nursing anesthesia in Pasadena, Calif., and after completion will continue to work for Indian Health Services.

To read more about his experiences, visit www.surgeongeneral.gov/journal.

— Beth Rogers Thompson

Thomas Pryor '96 with "Harapan," who nearly drowned in the tsunami and lost his entire family.

