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S. Dorney
Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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Covering Catastrophe
In Papua New Guinea

Sean Dorney
Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Five days after getting out the first news to the world of Papua New Guinea’s catastrophic tidal wave – the tsunami that killed more than 2000 people in and around the Sissino Lagoon west of Aitape in July 1998 – I broke down uncontrollably and wept. Sitting with my hands on my knees and my head bowed in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC’s) Port Moresby radio studio, I cried solidly for, I suspect, at least five minutes. I was alone. It was shortly after half past six on a Thursday morning, and I had just completed a regular weekly, 10-minute chat with Radio Australia’s early morning Pacific Beat program. I was exhausted by then, having covered the tsunami tragedy for ABC Radio, ABC Television and Radio Australia virtually non-stop since the previous Saturday morning. What triggered the sudden and, to me, surprising outpouring of emotion was a final question about how the survivors were coping, having lost so many and so much. I stumbled through the answer and burst into tears after switching the microphone off.

A week or so later I broke down again. This time I was addressing a mining conference in Madang. I was the invited after-dinner speaker, and normally I would have gone to a great deal of effort to make my speech as amusing as possible. Making people laugh after dinner is something I have earned a bit of a reputation for in PNG, and it is what I had been asked to do. But I botched my brief. I was so emotionally drained by the work I had been doing covering the Aitape disaster that I gave the dinner guests a tearful, first-hand account of what I had seen and what I had felt going into villages that were no longer there or villages that had become little more than scrap-heap debris; how a husband we filmed in Nemas village was burying his wife, her body already starting to bloat, in a shallow grave – not in the dignity of a coffin but of necessity wrapped up in lino, the floor covering from their smashed up house; of how one of the senior government disaster officials had told me there might not be much point reopening some of the schools because so many children had died; of the Arop Primary School headmaster, Job Tomur, and his wife, Alexia,
talking me through Arop which had been scraped clean off the sandspit where it had previously been so apparently ideally located and swept into the lagoon killing more than half of Job’s students – 157 of Job’s total enrolment of 311 school children. Many of the children had run down to the beach, because they heard the tsunami coming and mistook it for a jet aircraft landing on the beach. It made so much noise. The other noise survivors told me about was machine-gun like fire. That, we can only surmise, was coconut palm trunks being snapped by the power of the wave. There were not too many laughs at the mining industry dinner, but they raised thousands that night from industry officials and their partners for the Aitape Disaster Relief Appeal.

In the 20 odd years I was in Papua New Guinea I covered many natural disasters and tragedies. But none of them affected me so deeply as did this freak wave which crashed down without warning on those once beautiful West Sepik (Sandaun Province) villages on the PNG north west coast just after dusk that Friday night. The scale of death was truly frightening. There is still no accurate final death toll. But well over 2000 were killed instantly or died from injuries inflicted when the wave flung them into coconut trees, crushed them under their own houses or speared them with shafts of wood and branches.

Just about a month ago, back in Papua New Guinea, again filming for a forthcoming two-hour ABC TV documentary on PNG’s first quarter century of independence, I choked up again when talking about the Aitape tsunami. I had been asked by the headmaster of the Catholic High School at Aitape, Frank Edwards, to talk to his final-year students. In the open sided hall, I regaled them with stories about being a journalist in PNG and about how I had met and fallen for my wife, a Papua New Guinean radio broadcaster. But when one of them asked me to compare the Aitape tsunami story with the volcanic eruptions at Rabaul in 1994, I, again to my own surprise, came close to weeping. The Rabaul story was the most visually spectacular event I had ever covered, I told them. Flying in a helicopter between two erupting volcanic vents each spewing out enormous, broccoli-shaped clouds of ash with the town of Rabaul blacked out below us by a violent electrical storm – that was a vivid, unforgettable sight. But only five people died in Rabaul. The human tragedy of the Aitape disaster had, I said to them with tears welling in my eyes, no equal in my experience. I knew that sitting amongst those before me in that school hall were some from the Sissino Lagoon area who had lost most of their families. There was more than one student who had lost not only their mother and father but all their brothers and sisters as well.

I must admit that when the ABC’s International Editor for
Radio, Tony Hill, suggested to me several days into my coverage of the tsunami story that the ABC had professional counsellors available and that, if I wanted, I could contact them, I scoffed. “I’m not the one who needs counselling,” I mused to myself. I was pretty cross with the ABC at the time. Since then I have tried to analyse my feelings, and I recognise that I was traumatised by it all, not only because it was such a tragic story but also because of the almost impossible demands that were daily, hourly, being put upon me, but also – and here I come to the nub of my selfish, inward trauma – because I had been told just a week or two before that the ABC was pulling me out of PNG.

My recall to Australia was well overdue. I had been the ABC Correspondent in Port Moresby for 17 years, the last 12 of them consecutive. This had been a major irregularity, often commented upon internally, in an organisation with supposedly strict rules about foreign postings. Two to three years as a correspondent was normal; five the absolute maximum. So I knew I was on soft ground expecting to remain in PNG forever. I had successfully fended off a number of previous attempts to bring me home but, finally, the ultimatum had been issued. I would be recalled to Australia at the end of 1998. I could understand all the logic of why this should be so. My wife, Pauline, was keen for us to leave Port Moresby and return to Brisbane where our two children were now young adults – one still studying and the other working. I was being stubborn, and I was wallowing in a mire of imagined ingratitude.

Therefore you can imagine that about the last thing I wanted at half-past-nine on a Saturday morning was a telephone call from an excellent contact of mine in Vanimo, the capital of PNG’s Sandaun Province, telling me that a tidal wave had struck the Aitape area and there could be five people dead. My enthusiasm for news was as low as I remember it ever being. Tempted as I was to ignore it, I could not. I hauled myself over to the ABC Office and began tracking the story down. The first four radio news stories I filed late that Saturday morning and on into the early afternoon won me a Walkley Award [Australia’s most prestigious journalism award]. Evidently professionalism had kicked in somewhere, and my self-centred resentment at how the ABC was “treating” me was washed to the back of my mind.

The logistics of covering any stories in PNG outside the capital are always daunting. Aitape was a nightmare. That part of the north-west coast is almost as far away from Port Moresby as it is possible to get on mainland PNG. So while I was filing endlessly – well, hourly anyway – for ABC Radio News, I was also trying to work out the best and quickest way to get to the scene of the disaster. Air Niugini does not have a telephone booking service
on weekends, so I had to drive out to the airport to see what flights I could get on. I carried my mobile phone and, standing in the queue at the booking desk, surprised those both in front and behind me with a running commentary on the aftermath of a tidal wave. The tickets I bought would get me only as far as Wewak – that was still six hours drive on a rotten road from Aitape – and I would not get to Wewak until mid-morning Sunday. Back to the ABC to file more radio news stories and a television story for Saturday night that the station would have to illustrate with graphics in the absence of any pictures.

TV News agreed with my recommendation that the only way we could get vision for Sunday night was for me to charter an aircraft. As a correspondent you do not have a lot of backup so, on top of everything else, I had to track down a charter aircraft on a Saturday night in Port Moresby, make arrangements for a pre-dawn departure and make sure that there was not only a freelance camera team available but that they would be willing to come. We flew out of Port Moresby first thing the next morning in the unpressurised cabin of a Twin Otter for a three-hour flight. The pilot had to climb to 12,000 feet to clear the mountains in the PNG Highlands and I froze. By the end of the day – after a similar flight back – I was suffering from altitude sickness. We had to land in Wewak to refuel and while there loaded on stretchers and food supplies that disaster authorities wanted taken to Aitape. Once we arrived in Aitape, we raced around interviewing whoever we could and filming at the Raihu Hospital where victims were strewn everywhere in the wards and on the floors.

Then it was on to the Sissino airstrip much closer to where the tsunami had done most damage. A doctor came out of the jungle and pleaded with us to take injured people back to Wewak. He had some, he said, who would die unless they received proper care quickly. I had a decision to make. We had taken on enough fuel in Wewak to enable us to fly directly from Sissino back to Port Moresby. That was our plan, and it meant we would make the satellite feed for the ABC TV News that night without worry. “It’s up to you,” the pilot said. I did some rough calculations. I was spending a lot of the ABC’s money for these pictures, and I knew what the answer would have been if I had been able to contact anybody in Sydney. But there, on the spot, I made the only choice I could. “Put them on,” I told the doctor. Then I told the cameraman, “We’re going to have to get into these villages, get what we can and get out fast if we are going to make it.” The devastation was remarkable even in the nearest villages. But we had to hike in for 45 minutes before we found that television news imperative for disaster stories – bodies. And, better, relatives in the process of burying them, others standing by wailing. I find
this the toughest part of my job.

Piece to camera done, it was back to our chartered aircraft. But we found the doctor had put so many injured on the plane that there was no room for us. Sydney would have been horrified. However, our pilot decided that this was a situation where Civil Aviation Regulations could be ignored, and he squeezed us on. There were bodies in the aisles and so much pain it was heart rending. But we took the injured back to Wewak, and while they were being transferred to ambulances, I dashed across the road to the Airport Lodge hotel to file two items for ABC Radio News. Once again, up over the mountains for our three-hour flight back to Port Moresby. I worked out the TV News script on the way, shivering as I did so. We just scraped back in time to make the satellite news feed and the story, of course, led the ABC Television News around the country that night. I still had more radio stories to do and a current affairs item to put together for the morning’s AM program.

My elation with having achieved so much in such difficult circumstances did not last long. At 7.30pm, I was part of a telephone hook-up during which news executives in Sydney were deciding what I should do on Monday. They wanted a repeat performance – up and back to Sissino Lagoon with stories for every bulletin. I was fed up and as close as I ever have been to quitting, but I went again. And again I managed to deliver. Thankfully, Tim Palmer arrived from Sydney to share the load from the Tuesday.

I could go on and on. My story about getting into and out of Arop village with Job and Alexia Tomur on the Wednesday to put together a five-minute item for The 7.30 Report that night is a tale of trauma in itself. However, what I would like to say is that I found the support I received from my wife, Pauline, that week of incalculable value. She kept me going. When I could not sleep, she stayed up with me and calmly talked it through. Pauline became my counsellor.

I have concentrated on the trauma I went through as a result of having to cover the Aitape tsunami. Let me close by briefly mentioning two other aspects – possible impacts of news reports on people involved in crises and possible impacts of media presence. In the Aitape case, there was a massive beneficial impact of the media’s coverage of the tragedy, especially from the audience here in Australia. The response of ordinary Australians to the various appeals that were launched for the victims was quite staggering. It was hugely appreciated up there. Pauline also told me she was very touched by how many people contributed. For instance, ABC Radio ran an appeal for garden implements, and I understand that a total of 22 pallets of gardening materials were shipped...
freight-free to Wewak for distribution to the survivors in their re-located villages.

I do not want to downplay the negative. There were undoubtedly tensions between those engaged in the rescue effort and those trying to report on it. A week after the disaster I bumped into the helicopter pilot who been first on the scene and who worked tirelessly with the medical staff of the Raihu hospital to save many lives. He told me that on the Monday afternoon – the third day of pulling survivors out of the mangrove swamps backing onto Sissino Lagoon – he looked up and saw a cameraman leaning out of another chopper, filming what he was doing. “That fucking Sean Dorney,” he told me he yelled out to those around him, “all he’s interested in is the bloody pictures. Why doesn’t the bastard get down here and help save someone? The fucking leech!” It wasn’t me in that particular chopper. But I can fully understand the sentiment.

*SEAN DORNEY is the Pacific correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, including Radio Australia. This is a revised version of a paper he gave to “Toil and Trouble: A Colloquium on Trauma and News” at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, on 27 October 1999.*