

Riding the World's Biggest Wave: 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami

A Personal Essay

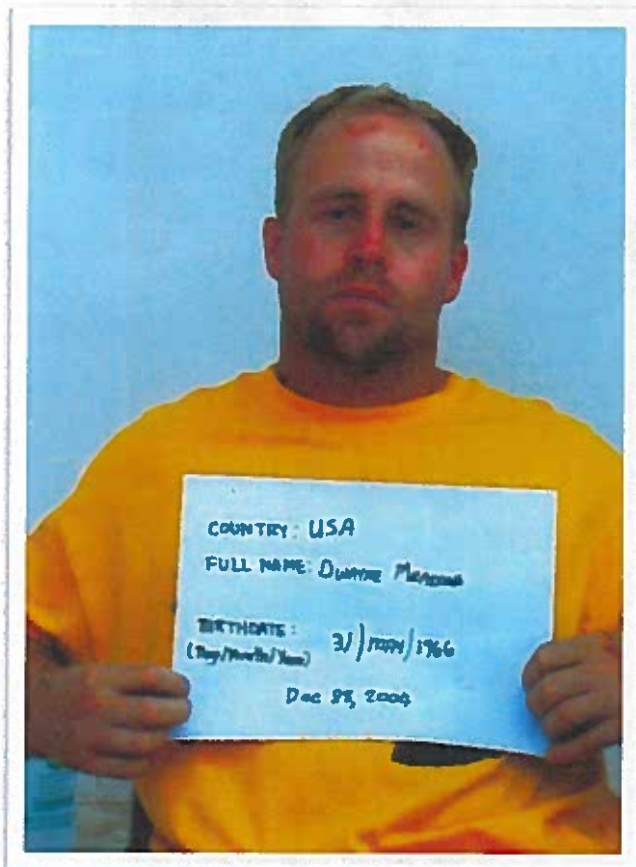
By Dwayne Meadows, Ph.D.

I got the chance to ride the 2004 tsunami in the worst-hit part of Thailand. It still affects me most days. Despite the horrors, I'm glad I was able to bear witness.

After finishing breakfast with a new friend, I headed back to my lovely beachfront bungalow to prepare for a snorkel. I had my back to the ocean.

Lots of people were on the beach. Many saw the sea recede $\frac{1}{4}$ mile out to sea, leaving fish and the sea-floor exposed. Nobody knew what it, or the thin white line on the horizon, meant. So people stayed ocean-side and didn't warn the rest of us during a crucial few minutes that could have saved many lives.

When they saw a military ship get slammed they realized it was dangerous and yelled. When I heard the yells I turned, but I had no time to leave, only brace and hold my breath.



As my bungalow collapsed around me I dove through where a wall had been. I ended up under water, twisting, spinning, flipping in the dark, clawing for the surface. It never got lighter. I said my goodbyes.

I popped to the surface, got a few breaths and thought I'd be ok. I was a good swimmer. But I was flowing through the tops of a palm forest and debris was hitting me everywhere. I slammed into a tree; more debris crushed my back. I thought I would die there, so I pushed into the flow. Something got caught between my sandal and foot, pulling me under. I got the shoe off as my breath was running out.

Still the wave pushed me as fast as a white-water river. I found an air-filled mannequin and held her to my chest. She got damaged by debris, protecting my core.

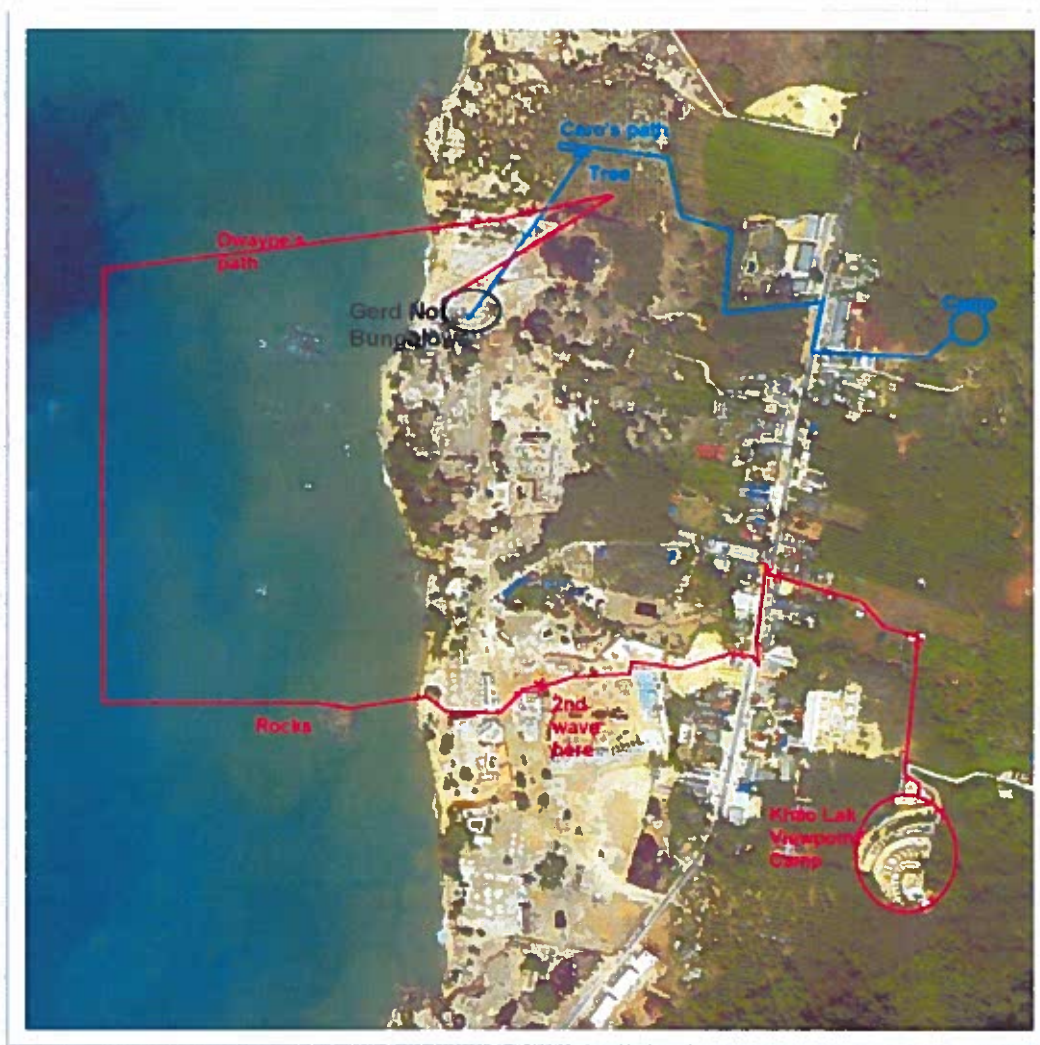
Finally the water calmed. I found myself $\frac{1}{4}$ mile out to sea. All the bungalows were destroyed; three story concrete hotels were gutted. There were screams and victims everywhere.

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Close to shore I realized the sea level was down and another wave was coming. I hadn't thought about that, and neither had other survivors who were on the shoreline looking for family and friends. I knew we wouldn't survive another wave and led a ragtag group inshore, pushing some to leave their dead behind. We just outran the next wave.

I spent the remainder of the day providing first aid. It took my mind off the horror and wondering about my friend.

Had the world been better prepared the damage and loss could have been less. Now we have better and faster warning sensors and models to predict affected areas, coordination, more warning signs and marked evacuation routes, better awareness and education and a similar event will likely cause less damage. Yet we still can't fully predict tsunami waves, too much vital infrastructure is in danger zones, we continue to destroy natural ecosystems that provide protection, many areas do not have signs, evacuation routes or shelters, more people need to know the warning signs and procedures and be better prepared with supplies and skills; memories fade. Preparedness requires constant vigilance.



Dwayne's path as he was swept away by a tsunami wave while vacationing in Thailand on December 26, 2004.