

[The 'Old Man Who Survived'
Tells of His Ordeal](#)

At one minute, former Silicon Valley executive Jerry Bodden was preparing papers in a meeting room at the Golden Buddha Beach Resort in southern Thailand, the next he was struggling for his life in the Andaman Sea where mind focused on one thing: a grim determination to survive.

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BANGKOK -- Early last Sunday morning the homeowners' committee of Golden Buddha Beach Resort, a pristine vacation spot on Phra Tong Island off the coast of southern Thailand, met to discuss such routine items as fees and improvements. "I had just opened the meeting," said Jerry Bodden, chairman of the committee, "when we looked into the horizon and saw what I thought were cumulus clouds. It was the big wave coming. Everyone ran up the embankment to look at it. I didn't take it seriously. I thought nothing like this could happen here. I went back to the meeting room to prepare papers."

A few minutes later, the 72-year old Mr. Bodden, a former Silicon Valley executive who retired to Bangkok 14 years ago, was struggling for his life in the Andaman Sea. His mind focused on one thing only: a grim determination to survive. "I almost died of a stroke seven years ago," he says. "I'd rather go from a stroke than this, with the feeling of salt water filling my lungs."

Mr. Bodden's three hour swim back to shore has made him one of the lucky ones, and something of a local celebrity. "By the time it was over, everyone knew my name," he said from his hospital bed in Bangkok. "I was the **old man** who survived."

No setting could be more idyllic than the Golden Buddha Beach Resort, with its private beaches, mangrove swamps and native vegetation teeming with birds. Offshore were coral reefs with a dazzling array of tropical fish in the crystal-clear waters, and a nearby island covered with primary-growth rainforest. The resort itself, founded in 1990 by American investor and environmentalist Dick Sandler, remained so dedicated to preservationist principals that it offered bird watching and lectures on sea turtles rather than a swimming pool and tennis courts.

On Sunday morning, as Mr. Bodden went back to his meeting, a few of his neighbors started to run for shelter.

Suddenly, "a huge wall of water came at me," he recounts. "It was like something in a movie. I said, 'Oh my God.' After I was swept out of the building, I tried to hold on to a tree, but I was too weak, and it took me out to sea. The current was so strong that it ripped off my trousers and underpants. But strangely enough my contact lenses stayed in my eyes."

What frightened Mr. Bodden most was the loss of control. "At the beginning, I was going down under the water and then coming up, and each time I came up I tried to take a deep breath," he says. "It seemed like it was forever, but in reality, perhaps only five minutes. Then I grabbed onto a floating tree, and the tree pulled me out even further, probably two kilometers from shore."

The fact that he was moving away from shore, and that two longtail fishing boats not far away didn't see him as he waved and shouted for help, didn't dent Mr. Bodden's determination. "I never panicked, for some reason," he says. "I stopped thinking about who of my friends at the resort might not have survived. I focused on only one thing: I want to get to that piece of beach."

Finally, he felt a glimmer of hope. Mr. Bodden, who was intimately familiar with the currents and the topography of the island, says he felt the current reversed directions and start moving toward shore. He methodically calculated where the tree he clung to would take him, and what the ideal point would be to let go and resume swimming. When he began to swim, he paused every few minutes to float on his back. "I'm 72 and don't have the strength and energy of a young man," he explains.

After a half hour of swimming, Mr. Bodden reached the beach. Badly sunburned, dehydrated, coughing up water, one leg slashed and an arm bruised, he collapsed on the sand. When he recovered enough to walk, he limped toward the resort, which turned out to be a half hour away.

What he saw shocked him. "It looked like a war zone," he says, "buildings flattened, roofs caved in. Where my house used to be, there was just a cement pad. Nothing was left of the clubhouse. And strangest of all, it was a complete ghost town. I asked myself, 'Has everyone been wiped out?' Then I met a Thai worker who led me up the hill, where everyone was huddled, fearing another tsunami."

Resort workers and vacationers spent a largely sleepless Sunday night huddled together on the hill, with children wailing. Mr. Sandler, trying to get help from his Bangkok home, had only second-hand reports, since a few of the vacationers were able to use their mobile phones to call relatives. Some of the reports were

grim: one guest had estimated that 70 of the 170 vacationers and workers at the resort had died.

Mr. Sandler tried to hire helicopters from private evacuation companies to rescue the wounded, but the companies told him that the Thai government had closed the airspace over southern Thailand. And he says the Thai government, faced with hundreds of missing tourists and residents at bigger resorts, was unwilling to respond to a request from an isolated island.

By Monday morning, with the seas calm and the threat of another tsunami lessened by the passing hours, a mainland resort sent boats to help with the evacuation. Mr. Bodden and other injured guests were rushed to a local hospital. The next day in Bangkok, a doctor determined Mr. Bodden was suffering from pneumonia due to inhaling salt water; he was advised to stay in the hospital for at least two nights. At the first hospital, "I finally broke down and started sobbing," Mr. Bodden says. "As I look back on it, it was so horrible. But I wasn't traumatized before that because I wanted to live."

On Tuesday, Mr. Sandler was able to get to Golden Buddha. Although the vacationers had all been evacuated, his immediate problems weren't over. The resort's computer had floated out to sea, and with it the list of guests staying there. So he could only guess at the number of missing, and he felt that some might have been washed inland into the island's forests.

In a telephone interview from the island Tuesday afternoon, Mr. Sandler started to cry as he relayed the grim statistics: of 60 staff members, four were known to have died and nine were missing. Four vacationers had perished, and by his best estimate, nine were also missing. "Now our biggest need is to get some professionals who know how to do search and rescue," he said. "We know there are people in the woods and they might be alive."