



'It's not a pleasant thing to do. The smell – if I take you to a corpse you wouldn't like it either. But it doesn't affect me mentally at all.' Rob Brown surveys an old tin pit he is sure contains bodies.

The Body Bloke

When Briton Rob Brown saw the 2004 Asian Tsunami on TV, he dropped his job, packed his bags and headed for Thailand to find bodies.

Rob Brown indicates a small oblong drawn in the sand near a large klong, and marked at one corner with a stick. "I'm pretty sure there's a body under there," he says. "We found three human bones." There were a lot of corpses in this area of Baan Nam Khem just after the tsunami.

As people ran from one wave, another came from the side and swiped hundreds into the klong. Roughly one third of the population of 4,000 or so died in the December 26 tsunami.

But Rob's checked the area with his signature sniffing pipe, a length of blue plastic pipe through which he sniffs the air close to the ground, allowing him to pinpoint where the smell is strongest. There's a body there, he reckons.

Different species smell different, he says – cows and dogs don't smell the same as people, though pigs are a problem; dead ones smell the same as human corpses and in the weeks he has been in Baan Nam Khem he's been fooled a couple of times and spent

hours carefully removing debris only to find a pig underneath.

He keeps his nose in tune by sniffing cotton wool that he keeps in a Ziplock bag. The monks at the temple, he explains, allowed him to take a swab from a corpse there.

Since January 18, the 62-year-old from Weybridge, Surrey, in England, has been on a personal crusade to find as many corpses as possible before the Thai government decides to draw the curtain on this phase of the tsunami recovery, and bulldoze rubble over any remains that may not have been recovered.

Already, Rob has had to use his secret weapon – a letter from the authorities acknowledging the value his work – to stop the Thai Army from bulldozing rubble into one of the many pools that he believes still contain human remains.

Nam Khem is dotted with lagoons, the legacy of the old tin-mining days, and many of the village's tsunami victims ended up in the pools. Bodies that floated were easy to recover, and were picked up in the days after the waves hit, but others still lie trapped

below the water, tangled in the smashed debris of houses.

So far, Rob has found and recovered 15 bodies. At first he would persuade one of the local people to take him and the corpse in a pick-up truck to the nearby Baan Bang Muang temple. But these days the authorities require him to report his finds to the police, who take the bodies over from him.

Some of the bodies were easy to find – “I tripped over one of them. I don’t know how anyone could have missed it.” – but most have been recovered after days of pumping to empty the pools. “I must have drained 20 lakes,” he says.

It’s gruesome work. The flesh on the bodies now has the consistency of jelly. Rob tells of one corpse, that of an infant. “I was scouring around the lakes and I saw a foot, floating, just a foot, with a shoe on it. One of the blokes helping me went in there and was trying to tug on it to get the body out. I tried to tell him to stop, but I don’t really speak any Thai.

“I knew what was going to happen. It just fell apart. We managed to recover most of it, but it was getting dark and we couldn’t find the head. The army found it the next day.”

Rob arrived in Thailand “as soon as I could get here. I’ve been to Thailand eight times, and I love it, though I’d never been this far south before.” He immediately pitched in, helping to recover bodies in Phuket.

His expertise in locating corpses was recognised by a doctor from Thammasat University, who persuaded him to go to Nam Khem where, she said, his abilities would be in much greater demand.

For the first four nights he slept on the beach, the reek of death all around him. The doctor (who did manage to find accommodation for herself) helped to organize some large pumps to drain the pools in the devastated village, and on the third day they set to work.

“The engineers wanted to put the pipe [from one of the pumps] all the way down to the coast. I didn’t want to do that. I got the digger to dig a channel one meter wide all the way down to the sea. The idea was that the water rushing out would erode the sides of the channel. It went really wide.

“Sure enough, the next day I went down to the beach and there was an arm sticking out of the sand. So it worked.”

The partnership with the doctor didn’t last long and when the doctor stopped taking Rob’s phone calls, the pumps were taken away, so now he works on with smaller ones he’s managed to scrounge up.

He feels let down, but the doctor’s distance is not something that is likely to deter the bluff Brit. The locals have provided him with a room to sleep in, and one of them insists on laundering his clothes free – he wears military gear “because it lasts longer”. He pays for food from his own dwindling pocket.

He has also been lent a small boat and rides around on a two-stroke road-racer motorbike, also on loan.

The one thing that worries him is the money he now owes for fuel to run the pumps. The bill is now up to about 10,000 baht.

But still he carries on with the work. In any case, he’s been in rougher places, including a spell as a mercenary in Angola in the late 1960s, under the infamous psychopath, “Colonel Callan”.

Angola’s not a topic Rob likes to talk about – “I really don’t want to go into that.” But he does reveal that he and some others managed to escape the Cuban-backed forces who pursued them right across the country. “We ran all the way to what was then Northern Rhodesia. I’m still a wanted man in Angola.”

Is what he is doing now some kind of atonement? “Maybe [Angola] changed me. I don’t know. I’m no expert – I’m not a psychologist. But I do feel deeply about people who have been hurt. I feel a lot for these people [in Baan Nam Khem]. They are poor people – very poor people.

“I have a lot of compassion. I have a lot of heart. And all of that was a long time ago, and it was a bit of a mix-up. I suppose it all [seemed like] a bit of an adventure. It’s like a friend of mine who joined the French Foreign Legion then wished he hadn’t. He ran away, and there’s a price on his head too.”

Rob has been recovering bodies on and off for the past ten years, mostly in Africa, after a friend asked him to help out. He’s plainly proud of his skill in what he does, but how does he feel when he finds a body?

“It’s not a pleasant thing to do. The smell – if I take you to a corpse you wouldn’t like it either. But it doesn’t affect me mentally at all, really; it’s a body that has to be retrieved. It used to bother me in the old days, but now I don’t feel anything when I’m working. It’s a job to be done, though with total respect.

“But after I get the body out, and it’s gone to the temple, I think about it then ... I weep when it’s a child, even with people watching me.”

While he has been in Baan Nam Khem, Rob’s life in England has been languishing. Over the past couple of decades he built a solid career as an investigator for law firms and a deliverer of writs. But he says his heart’s not in it any more. He plans to rent out his house in England and retire to Thailand. He’s met a special person and they will be married in June.

Meanwhile, he will carry on with the search. Is he obsessed? “Nah. I’m just doing my thing. It’s not an obsession. I just want to do this.”

But, he concedes, “It’s the most bizarre type of occupation, digging dead bodies up. I know they’re dead. I know they’re going to smell and they’re going to look blooming awful. But I have a lot of compassion. I love helping people, especially if they’re down. I’ll carry on until I find the last body.”

How will he know it’s the last body? “I won’t. But I’ll carry on until they tell me I have to stop.”

When this story was published in the Phuket Gazette, Rob Brown received cash donations and the loan of a pickup truck. Finally, though, the Thai authorities decided he’d done enough. He went home.