

Obituary -**The Times**, 10/01/05

Robin Needham

Aid worker and director of Care Nepal who was last seen guiding people to safety after the tsunami

ROBIN NEEDHAM was a longstanding senior administrator with Care International, the aid and development agency. He spent his working life helping others in some of the most challenging areas of Africa and Asia.

He died in the tsunami which hit the Thai island where he was on holiday with his family. His wife and four children survived, and Needham was last seen alive shepherding people to higher ground. His death is the more tragic as one with his experience could have made an immense contribution in the aftermath of the disaster.

He was no stranger to earthquakes. He was in Beijing in 1976 when the huge earthquake devastated nearby Tangshan, killing at least 250,000 — and maybe as many as a million people. The stone table at which he was sitting was reduced to rubble by the tremors. He was so sure an earthquake would soon hit Nepal (where one was many years overdue) that he always kept an earthquake-survival kit in his house there.

Nor was he unused to floods, having dealt with the almost annual flooding which afflicted Bangladesh during his time at Care's mission there.

He had recently been helping to develop a scheme to enable the rich nations to pool their resources when dealing with major disasters. He had become a familiar figure in the corridors of power in the US and UK promoting this notion.

Robin Needham was born in 1953. He was brought up in Yorkshire. He left Eton early to cram for university, and during a gap year travelled in India, where he worked for the Irish aid agency Concern. He then studied Chinese at Leeds University for five years — this included one year, 1976, on an exchange in Beijing with 16 other international students.

China, still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, was then closed to the West. Apart from embassy staff, these few students made up the entire foreign population of the capital. All were supposed to seek permits, seldom given, to travel outside Beijing, but Needham and his fellow students simply ignored this and during vacations travelled without problems throughout the country. He became a fluent Mandarin speaker.

After Leeds he spent a year with his brother converting a remote bothy on his cousin's Strathconnan estate in the Scottish Highlands into a home. Before mains supplies came, they depended on a generator for water and power. Between them they did all the work, honing their practical skills through a harsh Scottish winter. Needham tried to visit each year in time for the Highland Games, at which he was a well-known figure, and for the hill walking. He once arranged a surprise party for his dying cousin, ferrying guests, pipers, food and champagne to the top of a nearby mountain by helicopter.

From Scotland he answered an advertisement for a couple to help restore Kentwell Hall, a stately home in Suffolk, replying that he was not a couple but spoke Chinese and had converted a Highland bothy. He joined Judith and Patrick Phillips at Kentwell and turned his hand to everything, including the organisation of the first of Kentwell's annual re-creations of Tudor life. He also participated as the "bailiff" and was happy to allow himself to be put in the stocks so

that children could plaster him with kitchen waste.

In 1979, moved by the harrowing reports of the “killing fields” famine and boat people of Cambodia, Needham volunteered his services to Concern and was soon in the thick of the refugee camps. His Mandarin was invaluable when buying provisions, and he became responsible for the supplementary feeding of thousands of refugees.

Soon after this he joined Care, where he met Lucy, an American engaged on similar work, and they were married in Rhode Island in 1981. Between 1981 and 1983 he was posted to Care Sudan and then returned to the UK for a year in Swansea, where both took a masters degree in development studies.

In 1988, after a stint with Care Kenya, he became the first director of the newly formed Care UK (a fundraising arm) and spent more than a year putting the fledgeling organisation on its feet. But administration was not his forte, and in 1991 he was happy to be appointed deputy country director of Care Bangladesh, the agency’s biggest mission employing more than 1,000 people. After six years he was transferred to a similar role in Ethiopia, where he quickly became head of mission. And in 1998 he was transferred to run Care Nepal, the position he held when he died. He was also chairman of the Nepal Association of International NGOs.

Each posting required him to deliver a combination of disaster and development aid. In Bangladesh he had to learn to deal with abject poverty, great suffering, regular flooding and the corruption which is a feature of many countries receiving aid. He became skilled at negotiating in this environment and came to recognise that delivering to the needy only 70 per cent of supplies that came into the country was in fact a considerable achievement. In Africa one of his workers was kidnapped and held for a time, and he was responsible for securing his release. In Nepal he had to deal with the consequences of the murders within the Nepalese royal family and the rise of the Maoists who took to killing aid workers and destroying mission posts.

Everywhere he went he threw himself into his work with tireless commitment. He and Lucy often supported destitute children from their own pockets. They adopted into their family twin Bengali girls from a refuge in Bangladesh.

Always heavily bearded, Needham was quietly spoken and deliberate in manner. He was good company and a delightful host, often entertaining friends of several different nationalities at the same time. He was one of those few people who genuinely put others before themselves, and he died at a time when he and his talents are most needed in the region he served for so long.

Needham is survived by his wife and four children.

Robin Needham, aid worker, was born on August 28, 1953. He died in the Indian Ocean tsunami on December 26, 2004, aged 51.