

# Of International Service

by Marissa Cruz Lemar

5Ks in Indonesia are not like 5Ks in the United States. In the United States, runners of all shapes and sizes don spandex and athletic shoes, Garmin smart watches at the ready to track their pace. Not so in Indonesia. Instead, the majority of the participants wear cotton t-shirts and long pants. The pants are more athleisure than athletic, and some women sport designer sunglasses and purses, all of which should have been our first clue.

Used to three-inch-inseam running shorts, Becca (my running mate and fellow sailor) and I have instead opted for short-sleeve shirts and capris, our best attempt at modesty. In this conservative, majority-Muslim country, the last thing we want is for insensitive clothing choices to make us stand out as Westerners any more than we already do.

We arrive an hour before the race's start time, plenty of time to register and safety pin bibs to our sporty tops. Plenty of time for races in the states, not so much in Padang. We encounter an empty stadium parking lot in the pre-dawn darkness. That should have been our second clue.

I should clarify. We arrive in pre-dawn darkness to an eerily quiet neighborhood, unsure of if we are, in fact, in the right location for the 5K. Becca had Googled the race after seeing the billboards (in Indonesian) announcing the run. We are about 60 percent sure we are in the right place.

Becca and I are in Indonesia ahead of the U.S. Navy hospital ship's, USNS Mercy's, visit to the archipelago as part of the 2016 Pacific Partnership mission. As the officer-in-charge, she ensures all logistics run smoothly for the visit, and as the public affairs officer, I work with my Indonesian counterparts to make sure locals know we are coming.

We arrived in country early, as part of the advance party of about ten other Navy and Marine Corps officers. Our jobs range from medicine to engineering and security, and the overall logistics of planning for the arrival of a floating hospital and crew. During the days before the Mercy's arrival, we visit the farms, construction sites, and clinics that crew members will see when they arrive. Most of my work involves sending emails and participating in phone conferences with embassy officials in Jakarta, so I have the flexibility to hop in our contracted van and participate in many visits across Padang with the rest of the advance team.

Nearly an hour after we arrive at the 5K, people emerge and start to set up a stage and wire sound equipment. Locals put together stalls for selling handicrafts. Every few moments, men and women with trays of fresh treats pass through the growing crowd. The smell of the freshly cooked meat patties and banana-leaf wrapped pastries makes the event feel more like a street fair than athletic event. The whole town has come out to participate. Whether as a racer, vendor, or spectator, this is a community affair.

Before long we spot a couple sailors from the Indonesian Navy that we have been working with over the course of the week. The whole event has Becca and me, veterans of road races back home, rather confused. Our Indonesian friends get us signed up and help us to navigate through the crowd to the starting line. A loudspeaker makes an announcement that we can only guess, based on our experience at races in the States, means the 5K is set to begin.

With speakers blaring an uptempo pop song, we're off. Used to crowded races requiring a few hundred feet of slow walking for the throngs of participants to even out and have enough space to run, after a few minutes, we realize this isn't going to happen here. The race, in fact, isn't a race but a walk. The whole neighborhood has decided to meet in the morning for a jaunt across town. We're even joined by a few marching bands along the way in bright, glittery uniforms. Their upbeat performances along the course only add to the surreality.

Participants break all running conventions and walk in rows four and five people abreast. They stop in the middle of the course to take selfies. Before long, Becca and I embrace it and do the same. We have enough time as we walk the course to veer from the crowd and pose for photos along the bridges and food stalls, a luxury unheard of in American competitions.

We walk many of the streets we had only seen from a passenger van, passing too quickly to notice the many details of Indonesian daily life. We make our way through a quiet suburban area of single-story homes. Occasional schools and small mosques punctuate the neighborhood as well. The whole area looks revitalized and largely untouched. The buildings, with mixed construction materials of aluminum, wood, and concrete, allow for rapid repair. Much of the infrastructure, as we're seeing, has been rebuilt from recent earthquakes.

Pacific Partnership began in response to the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Southeast Asia in December 2004. The tsunami wreaked havoc across the entire region. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, 227,898 people were killed or listed as missing and presumed dead, and 1.7 million people were displaced in fourteen countries in Southeast Asia.

As time passed, the mission evolved from direct care to enhancing partnerships. Pacific Partnership visits Southeast Asian nations to build capabilities, from medical and veterinary training to engineering projects. It's also meant to improve multinational cooperation for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief so that the region can best respond to natural disasters, like tsunamis, to which the area is prone.

On every van ride with the advance team, we pass bright blue shorelines and verdant valleys. And on every ride I imagine waves rushing up, toward the interior of the island. Rushing waters overpowering slim palm trees, crowding the small huts that line rivers and small footbridges. I pay close attention to the homes. Too many sit at sea level. The views are spectacular, with sparkling water lines mere feet from the back doors of the homes. I try to calculate how fast the water from a tsunami would move. How fast feet would carry people away from the danger. How quickly wheels could move families to safety.

Sometimes during the rides I notice the triangular white and orange signs marking evacuation routes to higher ground, away from the shorelines. Looking more closely, I see the tall loudspeakers that are used to broadcast emergency alerts for the next tsunami. “Next” because the country is on borrowed time before the next big wave strikes. The earthquake that triggered the 2004 tsunami struck off the coast of Sumatra, the island where Padang is located. Padang sits on the same earthquake fault line that leaves it vulnerable to future devastation from future earthquakes and their resulting tsunamis.

Indonesia sits on the Ring of Fire, the string of volcanoes and sites of seismic activity around the edges of the Pacific Ocean. I learn from National Geographic that the ring traces the meeting points of tectonic plates that constantly move past, above, below, and into each other. This movement results in deep ocean trenches, volcanic eruptions, and earthquake epicenters along the boundaries where the plates meet, creating volatile fault lines.

The Ring of Fire is home to seventy-five percent of the world’s volcanoes and ninety percent of its earthquakes. The earthquakes fascinate me the most, because they trigger the tsunamis that ravage the area. While I love the water, I understand its destructive potential as well. On beach trips to Puerto Rico when I was little, my father would warn me to never turn my back on the waves. He grew up on the island, and always had a healthy appreciation for nature’s power. His advice wasn’t meant to scare me, but to instill a respect for the power of the ocean, a respect I maintain to this day.

One morning, a week after the 5K, I hitch a ride with the Seabees, the naval construction battalion (“C.B.”), to a site. The Seabees, along with Indonesian military engineers, work to build a community shelter that’ll be used during natural disasters. This site offers the most concrete image of what our visit will leave behind: something tangible to provide refuge during crisis. Beyond a building, I remind myself that construction skills are being shared, so these can be left behind as a knowledge base for the next project. I take solace in the fact that this structure will serve as a safe haven.

The crew, led by a petite, American female junior officer, moves fast. They’ve already added sturdy concrete block walls, an arched roof with exposed, bright red beams, and large windows that offer generous views of the surrounding neighborhood.

The ribbon cutting will take place in just about a week, so there are no frills to the structure. But it’s still an impressive feat of engineering that this building is going up so quickly, and there’s a palpable pride in all who are helping to build it.

I remember seeing the tsunami footage from 2004. My family and I had traveled to Hawaii for the holidays, and I was at the hotel gym when I saw the first images. Still jet lagged, I had woken up extra early and claimed a treadmill closest to one of the televisions. I saw the destroyed homes and boats moored on streets. I saw distraught survivors try to take stock of the devastation. And I saw all this from the relative safety of an island chain with the robust

infrastructure only the United States can provide. At only seventeen, I would have never guessed that one day I would be halfway across the world, seeing Indonesia firsthand. I finished my three miles, wiped down the treadmill, and returned to my hotel room.

I try to reconcile the bustling shops I see during the 5K with the footage I remember seeing I saw during my treadmill run—the debris-strewn beaches and demolished homes.

I learn from a *Time* article that Padang is one of the world's most vulnerable cities to seismic activity. The city is due for a more catastrophic quake and tsunami in the next thirty years.

A tsunami detection system spreads across the Indian Ocean to help mitigate the threat. When an earthquake strikes, the shift triggers the system's sensors and surface buoys relay signals via satellite to government warning centers, alerting them that a tsunami might be on the way. The system in Indonesia includes sirens that alert citizens that a tsunami is possible.

While intricate, I later learn that this system doesn't even function properly. A 2014 National Geographic article describes a test run as follow.

*On April 11, 2012, when a magnitude 8.6 earthquake struck Banda Aceh, Indonesia's National Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami alert within five minutes of the first tremors. The nation's early warning system worked perfectly, but the local response to the alert does not bode well for future disasters. Officials in Banda Aceh had failed to establish clear emergency guidelines for the city. Although the earthquake didn't generate a tsunami—the plates along the fault in this case slipped horizontally, not violently upward—people with horrific firsthand experience expected one, and panicked.*

*"The conditions were totally chaotic," says Syarifah Marlina Al Mazhir, a lifelong resident of Banda Aceh who worked for the Red Cross during the 2004 tsunami. "Instead of evacuating to safe areas, people were going home or picking up the kids at school, which created traffic jams."*

The article goes on to describe that the region's next major earthquake and tsunami threaten Padang. Based on geological evidence of past tsunamis, the area is overdue. Those small schools with open play yards and colorful mosques with tall minarets from the 5K route are all at risk.

Pacific Partnership stops at less developed cities, ones that will most benefit from these relationships and port visits. Which is why we visited the more remote coastal town of Padang, and not Jakarta. Pacific Partnership has worked with Indonesians in the past. The mission came in 2004 and 2005, and as recently as 2009 following an earthquake near Banda Aceh.

The hospital ship brings operating rooms that will welcome Indonesians seeking routine care and physicians seeking practice with their American counterparts. The Mercy brings capabilities more extensive than most permanent hospitals in the country offer: eleven operating suites, eighty intensive care beds, a radiology suite, and a blood bank capacity of 5,000 units. The differences serve as a sobering reminder of the realities many in this region will face once we Americans leave.

In the week before the ship's arrival, we take regular trips to the port, a small Indonesian naval base too small for the huge ship. Eventually the Mercy will have to anchor in the ocean, a twenty-minute tender ride to the pier. The ship slowly reveals her massive size as the tender approaches. According to the fact sheet we keep on hand, "massive" translates to a height equivalent to a ten-story building and a length of three football fields.

The Mercy, one of two hospital ships the Navy operates, traveled from her homeport in San Diego, California. The USNS Comfort, based in Norfolk, Virginia, supports the other half of the world. This dual placement leaves the Navy ready to deploy the ships anywhere around the world when called to respond to humanitarian disasters. In as little as five days they can be activated and on the scene to help.

I crouch in a far corner and snap a photo of the progress at the construction site. I'm interested in the optics of the Indonesians and Americans working side by side, but it feels natural to capture the teamwork. The young people, after only about a week of working together, have already settled into a steady rhythm of building. All have taken off their long-sleeved blouses in the heat, their undershirts soaked through to a darker shade. The Seabees wear the hardhats mandated by construction law back home and the steel-toed boots that are a normal part of their uniform. Their Indonesian counterparts, on the other hand, wear no head protection, and some have even arrived in civilian clothes, down to open-toed sandals. Regardless of attire, all equally split the duties of mixing concrete and placing blocks.

I wipe sweat from my upper lip with my hand and step back outside where it's a few degrees cooler, away from the trapped heat of the building. Besides the building crew and the advance team I rode over with, neighborhood residents have also come to the site. They stand off to the sides, watching the builders' steady progress.

I'm not the only one impressed by the builders' progress. A handful of young schoolgirls have come to watch the construction as well. The girls, no more than nine-or-ten-years-old, wear matching white and purple school uniforms that, save the white headscarves, are reminiscent of Catholic school uniforms back home.

The girls smile and shield their mouths to whisper to each other when I wave to them. All but the officer in charge, and one or two of the crew working on the building are men, so I make a special effort to interact with the girls. I know women are the minority in my own military, so I imagine these young girls also aren't used to seeing women in uniform. Let alone women with skin brown like theirs.

"*Selamat pagi*," I offer.

They giggle.

"*Selamat pagi!*" One girl, their de facto spokesperson, responds.

Her dark eyes droop downward at the outer corners like mine. My Puerto Rican features are just ambiguous enough that I'm asked daily during my visit if I'm Indonesian. Even though I respond that I'm not, each person reacts warmly, zeroing in on some other form of kinship (like

what I've enjoyed seeing or eating during my stay) to extend our conversation. And it's this kinship that makes my concern of the destruction of tsunamis feel more personal and urgent.

The girls and I have a conversation of broken English and Indonesian phrases. I want to ask them why they aren't in school and what they think of the building. I want to know if they grow up learning about earthquakes and tsunamis in school or at home. But the language barrier limits us to exchanging pleasantries and compliments.

I point to their uniforms and say that I think they are very nice. I point to their headscarves and smile, saying they are lovely too. They grin and trade glances, trying to understand. I say that they must be smart to be so curious about what is going on in their neighborhood. This one is a long shot, but it feels good to say it out loud. We take a selfie and part ways.

On the rides to the port, before the ship's arrival, we notice the large billboard announcing the upcoming visit. The Indonesian colonel in charge of public affairs, the only female officer we encountered in our counterparts' ranks, had told us to look out for the sign. Her team had worked to pick the ideal location and perfect message, and she was very proud, rightfully so, of the final product. We spot it alongside cellular network and soda advertisements. But rather than 4G connections or sugary goodness, it announces medical care. How many of the locals who see these signs, who come to the ship, remember the 2004 tsunami? How many fled to higher ground or had their homes destroyed?

Beyond sharing tangible medical skills and building infrastructure, I want a change in understanding and publicly available information. I want citizens to know of the risk of tsunami and the action they can take to prepare. I want them to know what emergency signs to look for and what to do when they feel the first ground shaking. This is what saving lives requires. I hope our visit is a part of this.

In the areas most vulnerable to them, tsunamis strike with no warning. No breaking news alert or text message warning announces the impending danger. Instead, the wall of water crashes over slatted roofs, throws small boats against waterside homes, and destroys all in its path. Sometimes the violent shaking of the earthquake that precedes serves as a warning. Too often, it doesn't.

In the years since, scientists have presented increasingly dire warnings of the dangers of climate change. They warn of more destructive natural disasters, like tsunamis, in the future. While climate change doesn't mean more disasters, it does mean worse ones. And it doesn't take an overly active imagination to picture the impact for densely populated Indonesia.

The 5K course takes us on the beach road around the corner from our hotel. Having budgeted only enough time for a running race, not a stroll, Becca and I decide to cut the course short and head back. I've run races of all distances, from 5Ks to full marathons, for the past twelve years, but the hour in Indonesia remains my favorite.