



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL BEBAN

With honor and humility

BY PAUL BEBAN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Lawaan, Eastern Samar, Philippines

When the waves came, Elena Gayda swam.

I met Elena in Lawaan, a fishing and farming town of about 10,000 people on the northeastern shore of Leyte Gulf. Sheltered by a crescent of low-slung mountains, nestled on the south-facing shore of a bay shaped like a ragged parabola, Lawaan is picturesque and – it would seem – protected.

But judging from what was left of Lawaan when I was there a few weeks ago, it appears the opposite is true: The town's surroundings are almost perfectly configured to capture and focus the fearsome power of a storm surge directly upon it.

In the early hours of Friday, Nov. 8, when the eye of Typhoon Haiyan passed just south of here, Lawaan Bay rose up and roared down into its namesake town with almost unimaginable force and fury.

The bay was placid as Elena told me about the night the water came. It came quickly.

"It was so fast, so much, so high. We could not run away in time," she explained in energetic, broken English. Friends translated bits of Tagalog for me. "So we swam," she said, windmilling her arms for emphasis, smiling broadly as she re-enacted how she paddled to safety.

"Wait," I said, "you swam?" I hadn't asked, but Elena looked to be about 65

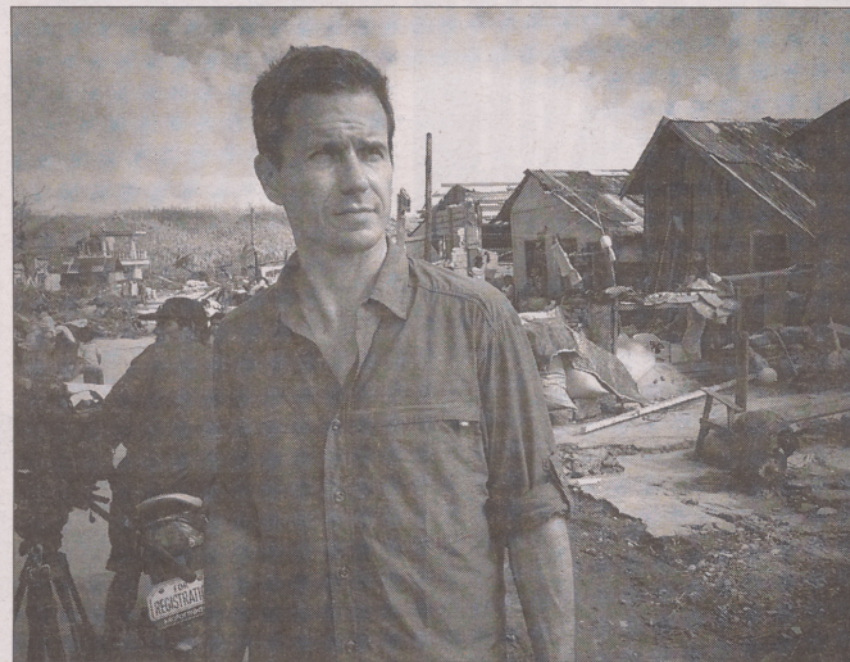


PHOTO BY MATHEW CLEGHORN

Paul Beban stands among the ruins of the devastated town of Taytay, outside town of Guiuan, Eastern Samar. Above, a larger view of the remains of Taytay.

years old, and she was a tiny little thing – no more than five feet tall, maybe 100 pounds. It was impossible to imagine this sliver of a woman swimming through a dark stew of seething water and wreckage. But that's what she did.

"Yes," she replied, beaming. "I swam down the street to the town hall." She pointed to the town hall, at least a quarter-mile down a street people were still working to clear when I visited, almost two weeks

after the storm.

Elena told me her story in the almost unrecognizable remains of Lawaan's port. The 25-foot high fish and vegetable market – a sort of covered, open-sided warehouse – was reduced to a tangled web of splintered wood and twisted metal. The thick concrete pier looked as if it had been bashed apart with a giant sledgehammer.

For about a hundred yards out into the bay, the water was filled with shattered, half-

sunken boats, slabs of corrugated steel, heaps of gnarled fishing nets and piles of undifferentiated debris – what the receding waves had dragged back into the sea after ripping Lawaan to shreds.

Elena was lucky – after the storm, she had a place to go. Her sister's house was more or less intact, though like everyone else in Lawaan, the family had no power, no clean water and little idea what they were going to do now, other than what they had to do to survive, day to day.

"We need everything here – food, water, medicine, shelter. Especially shelter," Andy Heidelberg shouted over his shoulder to me as we sped down the street on his moped.

Everywhere I looked, people were sifting the giant drifts of wreckage, salvaging what they could of their homes and businesses from what looked to me like nothing more than swales of shards and splinters. As Andy took me on a tour of his hometown, a panorama of near total destruction scrolled by, block after block. The breeze was a steamy blend of mold, decay and smoke.

"Lawaan is 80 percent destroyed," Andy said. "80 percent of the people here are homeless."

Lawaan is just one town in an entire region laid low. In the aftermath of the typhoon, the eight thousand or so homeless and hungry people here are just a fraction of the country's total. Estimates of the number of homeless in the wake of the storm run as high as two million. Many survivors have fled the region and are expected never to return.

Lawaan, Tacloban, Guiuan, Taytay, Palo, Tanauan – these are some of the places I reported from on the islands of Leyte and Samar, all of them nearly razed to the

ground, all of them filled with people who are dirty and desperate but – like Elena – determined to carry on, and to do so with dignity.

It's been a few weeks now since I returned from the Philippines. I'm writing from the comfort of my apartment in Denver. Outside my windows, with the temperature hovering in the low teens, a homeless man is bellowing incomprehensibly at a passerby. Here in the Rockies, it's safe to say his home wasn't swept away by a typhoon, but who am I to guess at what forces of nature have left him washed up on the street, shouting in the cold? He's riding out his own storm, and from the looks of it, he's doing it all alone.

Elena, at least, had a family who could offer her shelter. But as tough as Elena and others like her are, they can't survive on grit and determination alone. They're going to need the world's help to put their own world back together.

It's an honor to be sent by a news organization to cover a natural disaster on the scale of Typhoon Haiyan, but it's a tough assignment. Journalists often get what's called "hostile environment training" to learn how to handle themselves physically and emotionally in disaster and war zones. Witnessing trauma is itself traumatic.

The worst part is the feeling of helplessness, of pointlessness. You find yourself asking, I'm here to... tell stories? How is that going to help this child – that woman – this family – this entire city? What they need here is food, water, shelter and medical care – and they need it now!

The terrible irony of covering disaster is that in some ways, you are always looking for the worst, most compelling, gut-wrenching story of all, because that is the one you hope will focus the world's attention on people in such dire straits. Surely, you think, help will come – change will happen – when the world understands what is really going on here.

The desire to make a difference is why you do the work, but you're all too aware that it may well make little or no difference at all, whether the disaster you're covering is natural, such as a typhoon, or man-made, such as war.

The understanding that what you are doing may not change things in the least can break your heart if you allow it. The only bulwark against despair is hope; hope that the witnessing and storytelling you and other journalists are doing will have a cumulative effect, much like the ripples of hope Robert Kennedy described in 1966, in a speech to South African college students.

"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage...that human history is thus shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

With that in mind, I try to do two things: make sure to take the experience with me, make sure it changes me, and while I'm there, push myself as hard as I can. I owe it to the people I'm covering to give everything I have, because, simply put, I have so much. It's a great privilege and even greater responsibility to be a journalist. I try to never forget that.

Which brings me back to that hostile environment training. No matter how physically dangerous or emotionally traumatic assignments in disaster zones are, journalists who come in from the outside always possess something more potent than any training could ever be: the knowledge that what lies at the end of the assignment, is home. We're going to file our stories for a week, two weeks, maybe longer, but eventually, we are going home.

I'm also always aware that I can't do my work alone. As a television correspondent, I



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL BEBAN

The ruined cathedral in Guiuan

need my crew: a cameraman, an editor, a producer, sometimes even more. In the Philippines, we also hired local people to work as producers, drivers and translators, as well as extra hands to simply help us move and manage all our gear, food, supplies and fuel. We also traveled with private security – an unfortunate necessity in a disaster zone.

My hope is that at some point, I'll have a chance to return to the Philippines. It's going to be months before survivors are able to rebuild their homes, their farms, their businesses, their lives. There's so much more to the story.

The final terrible irony of covering tragedy is that the intensity of it makes you a better journalist, so you crave the chance to do it. It's a strange thing to look forward to that kind of experience. The only thing to do with what you learn and how it changes you is to try to make a better world.

"The understanding that what you are doing may not change things in the least can break your heart if you allow it. The only bulwark against despair is hope; hope that the witnessing and storytelling you and other journalists are doing will have a cumulative effect."