

Nanaimo women flee through Japan's post-tsunami wasteland

BY CHRIS KOEHN, NANAIMO DAILY NEWS MARCH 15, 2011



Carisa Webster, unidentified male, Tarah Millen, unidentified male and Marley Daviduk trekked for a day through a devastated landscape before securing rides to the safety of Tono, Japan.

Photograph by: Nanaimo Daily News, Submitted

When Marley Daviduk went to Japan on a mission of mercy, she could never have known it would soon become a struggle for her own survival.

A Nanaimo animal-rights activist, Daviduk and friend Carisa Webster were in Japan to document that country's dolphin slaughter when they were literally caught up in the earthquake and tsunami that has devastated the country.

While anxious friends and family in Canada waited to hear from them, Daviduk and her companions fled from the deadly waves and then travelled on foot through the devastated landscape to reach a city where they could begin looking for a way out of the country.

They found that way out on Sunday and arrived home to the relief of loved ones on Monday, but they won't soon forget the scenes of destruction and tragedy they left behind.

"We walked through rubble, over what used to be houses in a scene from an apocalyptic movie. There was steam rising around us, fires and propane tanks exploding" Daviduk said.

"At one point, we met a 16-year-old boy in a school uniform and his eyes were puffy from crying. He followed us out of town."

They arrived on Thursday to join four other Sea Shepherd Cove Guardians on a tour of Otsuchi, Japan, when disaster struck.

While they filmed dolphin hunters returning to the marina, violent tremors shook the ground, nearly knocking them off their feet.

"We had to hold onto the cars to remain upright," Webster said. "The quakes just got stronger and stronger."

Otsuchi's police immediately began to usher them through the massive gates of a cyclopean wall meant to protect the town proper from tsunami waves.

It was six metres tall, but was ripped apart before noon by waves twice its height.

Someone in the group recorded choppy video of black waves destroying the shore and posted it online. Tsunami alarms shrieked as the waves soon overcame the protective ring and surged through town.

The video changes to Barnes driving a car and talking on the radio to Daviduk, who is heard asking if the falling rocks ahead threatened their safety and then the video abruptly ends.

Daviduk's friend, Heather Mackay of Nanaimo, was stunned when she saw the video.

"It shows them on the beach and after the earthquake it cuts out. I didn't know if they made it to high ground or not. The city they were in was absolutely gone," Mackay said.

They reached the safety of a small mountain and watched as thundering waves destroyed the town of 17,000 below them. Cars, overturned boats and even small buildings were dashed upon the hillsides and the road leading to their secure hilltop was blocked by the remains of a city that stood before them only moments earlier.

Then they began to see bodies float by face down in the surging waters.

As night approached, they heard a woman screaming in the harbour. She was on top of some floating

debris and was being pulled out to sea.

Using the searchlight and loudspeaker from an abandoned fire truck, they tried to signal boats to rescue her. Darkness came and the woman's screams faded while temperatures plummeted below freezing.

"It was pure torture. For hours and hours we tried to get to her. We tried to get a boat started but there was no motor left," Daviduk said, unsure of the woman's fate.

They stayed warm by using the rental car's heater and slept.

Morning greeted them with aftershocks, smoky skies and firefighters who had found more survivors on the hill.

Abandoning their gear, they joined the firefighters who were going to set up a camp in one of the nearby valleys. They noticed one of the bodies that they had seen floating earlier now resting in a tree.

They left the makeshift camp and set out for Tono, the town to the west that had served as their base of operations.

The devastation was complete and they picked their way through the bleak landscape of bodies and wreckage until they secured rides to Tono later in the day and contacted families to let them know they were alive and well. From there, they took taxis to Akita and arranged for the flight home on Monday.

"Our families had bonded together and everybody was wondering if we were dead. No one knew what happened to us other than what was in that video. Nobody had any idea," Daviduk said.

The harrowing experience hasn't deterred the women, who plan to return to Japan one day and Daviduk said that she intends to contact Ayuka, a Japanese survivor they spent the night with on the hilltop, and help her out in anyway she can.

"Some day this is going to happen to us, very likely in our lifetime," Daviduk warned. "From the devastation I saw, I'd seriously reconsider living in a tsunami zone. There's no surviving something like that."

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