

Tsunami hero's tale of horror

Ignoring his own injuries, John Grant battled to save scores of others in danger

“I could see the wave swallowing people up as it came towards me,” says Scottish businessman John Grant, recalling how the worst natural disaster in modern history unfolded in front of his eyes. “It was a wall of water, easily the height of a man and full of debris. In that split second, you could see the material in the wave itself was really dangerous – tiles, broken glass and metal.

“Then I saw some women and children being sucked into it. They didn’t stand a chance, no one could outrun it. They just disappeared.” Just after dawn on 26 December, a force-nine earthquake, the largest recorded for decades, tore through the sea bed off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. The resulting shockwave pulsed outwards, creating a tsunami that raced out across the ocean towards the mainland. Within hours, more than 160,000 people would be dead and millions made homeless. Grant, 46, had been holidaying on the tiny picturesque Thai island of Koh Phi Phi. “At about 8am, I felt the earthquake,” he says. “I quickly realised that the concrete building

Onlookers barely had time to register the approaching debris-filled danger

KILLER WAVE



Front line: resorts turned from places of relaxation to destruction in seconds

DEVASTATION

was shaking. We had no idea what was to come.”

Grant was picking up emails in an internet café next door to the hotel when the wave struck. Looking out, he saw the wall of water with a boat perched on top of its crest racing towards the café. “I shouted to everybody to get out and run,” he remembers. “I grabbed the woman next to me but by the time I had pulled her into the doorway, the water had already hit. Everything happened so quickly. It was terrifying.”

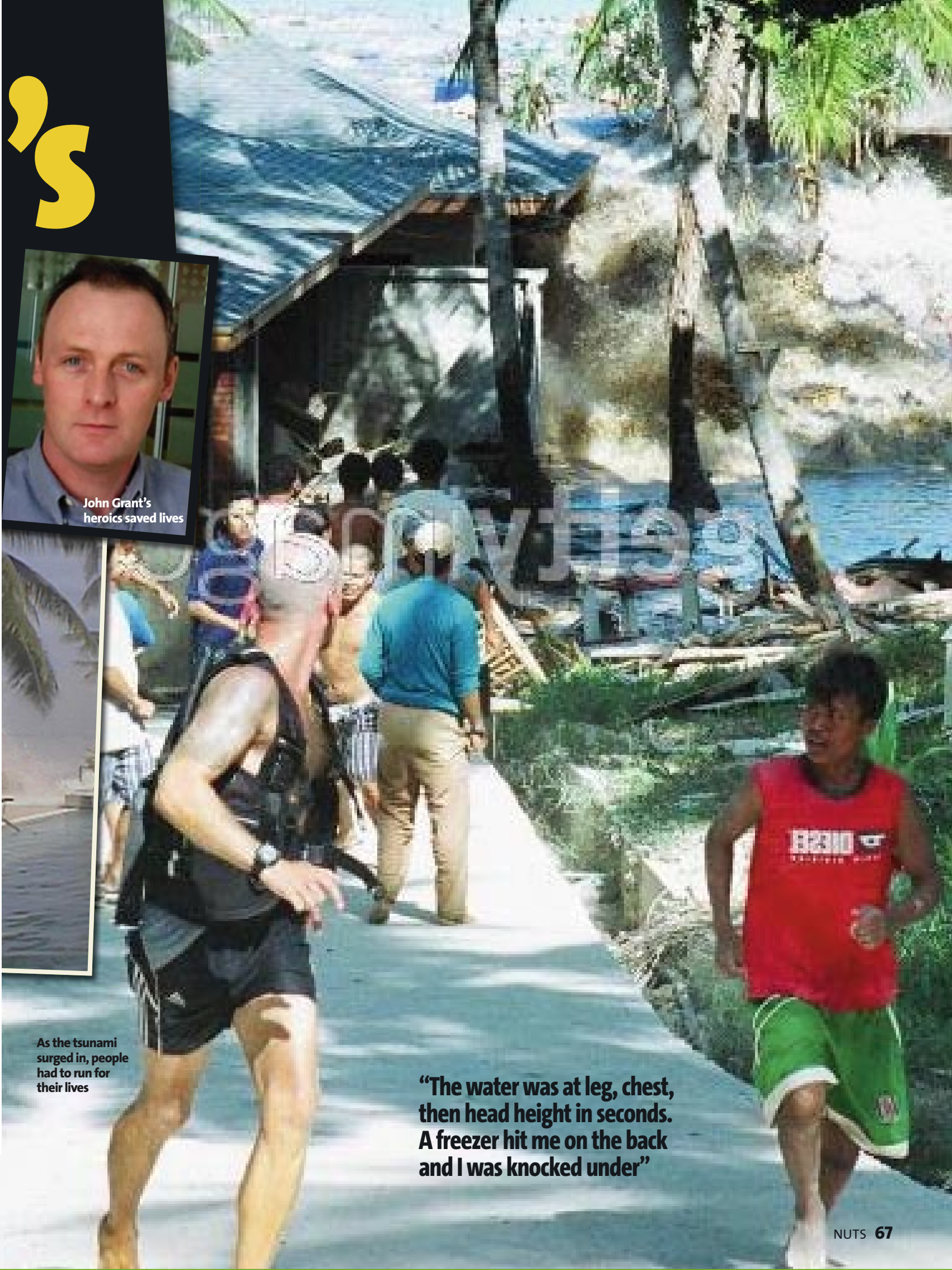
Then the café began to collapse. “The walls began to fall in, the roof started sloping downwards and the whole building buckled

under the pressure of the water smashing into it. Six-inch concrete roof supports snapped like twigs.”

For Grant, there was no time to panic. “It was so overwhelming, so frightening, that I just went onto automatic pilot.” He tried desperately to drag the woman away from the collapsing building. “But it was happening so fast,” he says. “The water was at leg, then chest, then head height in seconds. Then a freezer hit me across the back and I was knocked under. I had to let go of her. The air was knocked out of me and I swallowed water.” ➔



John Grant's heroics saved lives



As the tsunami surged in, people had to run for their lives

“The water was at leg, chest, then head height in seconds. A freezer hit me on the back and I was knocked under”



Many survivors' homes, businesses and lives were left in pieces



VIEW FROM ABOVE

Before and after the horror

"I decided I was going to save as many as I could... I told myself this was not the day I would die"

As dawn broke, the party made their way along the shore to a makeshift hospital ship. "We could smell death," he remembers. "We went along the beach and it was littered with bodies. It was the worst thing I've ever seen."

The survivors of the destroyed island were ferried to Phuket for treatment. Grant had crush injuries to his throat, arms and legs and skin, blood and chest infections. Back home in Scotland, he refuses to call himself a hero. "I only did what others would have done. I just wanted to help," he says. "After all, we were stuck in the middle of an apocalypse." ■

Nuts has made a donation to the tsunami appeal. If you would like to donate, you can do so by logging on to www.dec.org.uk or calling 0870 60 60 900

← When he surfaced, Grant was swimming in a torrent of water. "I grabbed hold of the roof that was being swept away. By this time, everything was moving – a mass of debris and people were being washed past."

Despite this, he managed to rescue an injured girl, Nikki, from the swollen water and, together with the café woman, who had also surfaced, he pulled them onto the roof. The café woman was in shock, knowing that her partner was trapped under the water. Despite the danger, Grant descended into the raging waters. But the man had major injuries and it was too late.

"I told the lady it was dangerous to come down," Grant remembers. "I said her partner was dead."

By the time the backlash of the first wave hit the area, Grant had managed to drag the two women into the branches off a huge palm tree, but in doing so, ended up adding to his injuries. "My right leg got trapped between two roofs that were being pushed together," he says. "I wrenched my foot free but the shredded aluminium roof sliced my leg open."

Worse was to come. Minutes later, a second

wave struck. What little was left standing after the first wave was now swept away, including many survivors who had been clinging to wreckage.

"I decided I was going to save as many people as I could," Grant says. He climbed down from the tree and swam out to one of the few remaining boats through raw sewage, bodies and buildings.

"I got to a boat, grabbed the two ladies from the tree and three Thai people from another roof and belted out as fast as I could to a ship anchored just off what was left of the shore."

Grant spent the next couple of hours ferrying people to the ship. Then the boat seized up. Swimming back to shore, injured, Grant felt himself fading. He had seen an area of higher ground in the middle of the island and led a party of 60 tourists and locals to it, where he spent an agonising night. "I just told myself that this was not the day I was going to die," he states calmly.



DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

Nothing in the tsunami's path was safe

WORDS: PIERS TOWNLEY PHOTOS: AP, REUTERS, GETTY