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## **Random Musings of an Army Surgeon**

***Author's Note:** Random musings in no particular order as the first week is a blur. I still cannot dissect out the order of events and have stated my feelings in the different situations I faced. Sorry if it all appears disjointed.*

9/10. Neelum stadium Muzaffarabad. I step out of the MI-17 and see a mass of humanity lying sitting or standing to one side and the stands reduced to rubble on the other. S—t I think and my heart sinks. What can I do here?

People on all sides are tugging me as I step over and among the mass of casualties. “My child is very ill, why have you given him number 3?” I cannot explain that his child has a severe head injury. I cannot explain others may have a better chance. I remember my own son and I cannot even shed a tear.

The old man died alone. Nobody is with him. I remember seeing him a while ago as he lay gasping. We got an IV going not much else; he was priority 3. There is 6000 rupees in his pocket and some papers. Who was he saving this for? Do they know what happened to him? I hand it all to a police sergeant.

I was sent here. The civilian doctors are volunteers. Would I have volunteered? I will never know. These are good people.

The child is in sepsis. The leg distal to the fracture is black and smelly with gangrene. I amputate with a scalpel blade held in my hand, no other instrument is available yet. The bone sticks out to the point where it had fractured. Don't have a saw. Dressing; priority 1; next patient.. Did I hand over the limb to the parents for burial? Was it a boy or a girl? I can't remember. This is the first amputation in our little “trauma center”.

Somebody points out Rehane Kibria. He is the surgeon posted to the pile of rubble that was CMH Muzaffarabad. He is in a daze, his wife and son are in an ambulance but appear unhurt. They all appear fine but need a heli-ride out. Can I help? I see the mass of casualties to my left and with a pang of conscience put 1 on their foreheads. Am I being dishonest? Many others lay there with broken bodies but on 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> priority.

Later I find Rehan's son was found dead crouched on the back steps of his house as it collapsed. His mother in law had also died.

My heels ache. The big toes and little toes of both feet are numb. This has never happened to me before.

I let the photographers and camera teams in. I try to give them a minute or two as long as they don't get in the way. Their images of our suffering are our voices reaching out to the world. We hope the world heeds our call and sends the aid we so desperately need.

Many people ask us for stuff. We don't have tents, we don't have blankets. We're doctors. "Talk to the Brigadier".

This old man won't leave. It's late and he says he'll stay the night in our "theater". I can't remember the number of times he's been escorted out but he sneaks in every time, not injured but crazy. Got to be firm, he can stay in the ward tent outside.

Shah Sahib from the UK brings four truckloads of aid. He hands it to us and promptly one of his drivers disappears with a truck. As he waits he tells us he has a wife in the UK and one in Pakistan. Lucky guy?.. Too sleepy to hear more, excuse myself.

Great teamwork with the Rawalpindi Medical College guys. Got calling cards from two of them. They're pretty organized carrying their calling cards and digital cameras. I had to borrow a sleeping bag and jacket. Got to stay in touch with them.

She's got two minutes and nothing goes on the record. "What will Pakistan need most..", asks the lady from UNESCO. Spinal rehab and aid over the long term as the communities rebuild, I tell her. Her two minutes are up.

Maggots are crawling all over the mattress and the smell of gangrene is overpowering. The lady has to lose her shattered right arm. A tourniquet applied by somebody at midarm level has sealed its fate. Dr. Khalid of Baqai University and I get to the job. This time somebody has dug out some gigli saws. The first one is crap, the second one works. We try to get rid of the maggots on her dress and mattress. Ultimately we have to change her into one of our theater dresses and use one of the shrouds as a sheet. Much better now.

Carolyn Low is a paramedic from Singapore. This girl does not tire. I have to order her to sit, take a break and a glass of juice. Soon as I turn my back she's back on the tables with the patients. I speak to the WHO guy and General Malik for official recognition for her efforts. We are all impressed and grateful.

This lady doctor and her husband are Pakistanis from Qatar. The lady is with us all day for 3 days (or is it 4?). She has worked in Afghanistan before this. Imran Asghar (surgeon from AFIC) says she's the kind who blow themselves up in Chechnya and jokes with her. She's a good sport but is doing no blowing up just yet. She's a great help. Then she leaves for someplace further that I cannot remember.

Our store is overflowing so we dump further stores into a parked 5 ton artillery truck. That too is full so we just take antibiotics and ketamine and turn other aid away.

I have a hunch about these dressings so we take one down. They've not even bothered to clean the wound of dirt. It's the Belgians somewhere forward of Muzaffarabad. So we treat all of their patients as new casualties. I complain to a WHO guy and tell the General.

Kashif has that greedy look in his eye whenever he sees a large degloved scalp, face or ear wound (not really but I tease him). He's maxillofacial surgeon from Baqai University. Real nice guy and he takes all of the nasty face wounds from us. The Baqai team and we work together for a good 9 days. I have found many new friends.

Citizens Foundation have set up camp across the road. They've got 2 tables running. Impressive organization. Great people. Gynaecologist there delivers first baby after the earthquake. Big media coverage.

Burhan Ozbilici the Turkish photographer calls us his brothers. He genuinely feels for these people. Marie Dorigny from France has already got photos of our little theater published in "Elle". Then there's this Polish photographer who dresses like a Kurd. Dr. Conix of France is our liason with the French medical team. Mr. Harold is a surgeon with the ICRC originally from the Shetland Isles. I am grateful to them and all the others helping us in our time of need.

As I said, I have found many new friends.

***Note from KLWT Project Coordinator:** The author, Maj. Dr. Sohail Muzammil, my class fellow and friend for 24 years was sent to Muzaffarabad overnight by helicopter (MI-17) from CMH Lahore. I met him late at night in Rawalpindi en route to Muzaffarabad. He asked me for a sleeping bag, as he was told to expect "nothing". None of us had any idea of what he was going to encounter. I met him less than 48hrs later in Muzaffarabad at night. He tried as best as he could to tell me what he had seen and gone through. In the morning, I went back to see him and the whole theatre of helicopters landing and taking off with patients and relief goods. 12 days later Sohail was relieved from his duties in Muzaffarabad and was sent back to Rawalpindi. He spent the night with me in Islamabad. We discussed many issues and I referred to our meeting in Muzaffarabad. He recollected our meeting which took place at night, but did not remember meeting me the next morning. I showed him the picture of a child whose arm he had amputated but he could not remember that child. Eventually, I showed him some of his photographs, which I had taken during the morning when I visited him. Only then did he believe me that I was there with him but he still does not remember us meeting. Such is the trauma that has been inflicted on some of us, that a friend for 24 years was just not visible or worth registering amongst all the apocalyptic scenes we witnessed. It will take us years to come to terms with what we saw, heard, smelt and felt during those tragic days.*