

# British Red Cross wins HR Excellence Award

**Emergency response handling during major Tsunami wins The British Red Cross and Top Interim Manager Mel Petrie the HR Excellence award for 'Most effective use of resources for an Interim project'.**



Mel Petrie

When news of a major tsunami in the Indian Ocean hit on Boxing Day 2004, the western world was relaxing on their Christmas break.

Staff at the UK headquarters of the British Red Cross were no different. But with such a disaster the need to fill the post of head of emergency response was critical. Roger Smith, the HR director at the Red Cross, approached interim provider Russam GMS to help find a suitable candidate, and Mel Petrie was chosen to manage the emergency response for the next three to six months while a full-time replacement was found. Stephen Brooker who



heads up the specialist Charity practice responded immediately with a fast strategic solution. It was imperative that the right Interim Manager was found for this critical assignment. After a careful selection process Mel Petrie was appointed.

The main focus for Petrie and his team was Sri Lanka and Thailand, and in the UK he found himself facing a complicated situation when the Thai government decided to repatriate foreign nationals quickly. Neither Heathrow or Gatwick were designed to cope with the major influx of needy people.

Clothes had to be provided for returning holidaymakers, flying into a wintry London wearing only beachwear. Food and further assistance for travel home from airports also had to be organised. Local branches of the Red Cross offered support at the airports, with Petrie keeping in close contact with them all and visiting often.

How was effective help achieved? The first step was to consult with both the Cabinet Office and The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to ensure the Red Cross provided relief where it was needed most. This happened the morning Petrie started, before he had even arrived in the UK office. A later development from this early work saw Petrie broker an historic agreement with the FCO for the British Red Cross to be the preferred and funded agency it turned to first in crisis.

All this – combined with an office move – meant challenging times for the organisation. The results exceeded expectations, with Petrie playing a major role. Full and part-time staff as well as volunteers and contractors had been mobilised in huge numbers and dealt with a total of 6,962 survivors at UK airports, 1,302 of the distressed via support lines, while back in Thailand 594 survivors had been given on-site care.

*Mike Whitlam, specialist Advisor to the Russam GMS Charity Practice commented, "Having been the Director General of the Red Cross I know exactly what the pressure is like on an organisation facing a major disaster. The Tsunami was like no other. The right Interim solution was exactly what was needed and I am delighted that we at Russam GMS were able to help."*



*Russam GMS's Specialist Charity Practice Chairman Stephen Brooker commented "This assignment was always very special and significant and we were delighted to be able to help The British Red Cross at such a critical time when the disaster struck. The Tsunami was a personal tragedy for millions of people, and The British Red Cross richly deserves this award which underlines their professional and businesslike approach to all that they do".*



Mel Petrie, Margaret Lally, (The British Red Cross), Stephen Brooker (Russam GMS), Anna Bishell (Russam GMS), and Jeremy Vine (BBC Radio 2) at the ceremony.

### The Criteria for winning -

*Judges were looking for evidence of an organisations ability to mobilise its people resources to achieve stated aims for a one off project. In particular, creative and clear thinking in the projects conception and management was needed, along with evidence of its successful delivery.*

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