Agent for change

Royal Australian Navy, Sub-Lieutenant Melanie O’Kane, 29, studied nursing at ACU National and joined the Navy because she enjoys excitement and “making small differences”.

Posted to East Timor in 1999, and to Sumatra in the wake of the recent Boxing Day tsunami, Melanie has already changed lives for the better.

Within days of New Year celebrations in 2005, Melanie was on her way to Sumatra where Australian and New Zealand troops were working five kilometres inland, shovelling head high mud from the corridors of Banda Aceh hospital.

In the short term, injured people were treated in nearby tents, with medical teams from Singapore taking the day shift, and Melanie and her Australian colleagues on duty for the better.

“There was an obvious language barrier,” she said. “A lot of the local people had never had much communication with westerners before and there were only one or two interpreters.

“Nursing ended up being the universal language. We were communicating with just a smile or a touch. We couldn’t judge their pain. Usually we ask patients how much they hurt on a scale of one to 10, but in the end we figured that the louder they prayed, the more in pain they were, and adjusted their medical treatment accordingly.”

In return, families who had struggled to find precious food in the chaos around them tried to give it to Melanie and her colleagues to show their thanks, a gesture she will never forget.

Melanie was dealing with patients with tuberculosis, leprosy and tetanus, diseases she had previously only seen in text books and lectures.

She has since heard that some of her patients perilously close to death have survived and become prominent members of their communities.

“They are still trying to rebuild their lives and it’s still quite devastating, but we have been able to assist a few of them getting their lives back together.”

Melanie attended St Mary’s Campus of All Saints Catholic College in the NSW country town of Maitland. She joined the Navy in 1995, beginning a nursing degree at ACU National’s North Sydney Campus in 2002.

“It wasn’t like the big universities where there can be 300 people in a lecture,” she said. “It was small, cosy, with small numbers, so you could ask questions and help each other. The lecturers were great, very current, and there was a real community feel.” She also liked the way the course was focused primarily on the patients, rather than on their disease or injury.

When Melanie’s partner, also in the Navy, was transferred to Melbourne, Melanie was able to follow, transferring to ACU National’s Melbourne Campus for the final two years of her undergraduate degree.

“The University was more than willing to help me transfer, and I discovered the Melbourne Campus to also be very small and friendly. I found friends straight away, and it’s been just great.”

When at sea with the Navy, Melanie’s role is to provide emergency and outpatient care, preventative health, vaccinations, medical examinations and occupational health and safety advice to the 300 staff on board, as well as to help brief them about particular health risks in the areas they visit.

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At the height of East Timor’s struggle for independence in 1999, Melanie found herself sailing for Dili for three months, with only 24 hours’ notice.

“You just get over there and do your job,” she said. “The satisfaction you get from making a small difference outweighs any small inconveniences.”

Melanie particularly enjoys the diversity and adrenalin rush of nursing in operating theatres. “The patient is unconscious, and completely dependent on you. It really tests and challenges you and is always different.”

She is now sharing her skills with new navy recruits as a lecturer of medical assistants. Meanwhile, her own skills continue to grow as she completes an honours degree at the University’s Melbourne Campus, where she is specialising in operating theatre nursing and trauma surgery.

Far Left: Operation being performed in the operating theatre on board HMAS Kanimbla

Left: Building nursing skills in the Royal Australian Navy

Photos courtesy Royal Australian Navy Imagery Unit