

26 December 2004 ~ Phuket, Thailand



Try to imagine Ning Nong (the young elephant) walking along this beach with Amber (his dear friend) on his back.!

The water along the beach receded, however, the humans did not see, nor feel, any danger. Ning Nong's trainer was walking beside them, unaware of the pending tsunami.

Ning Nong made numerous attempts to flee the beach before she succeeded ~ running away with Amber on her back.

When Ning Nong arrived at some higher ground, she stopped at a wall so that little Amber could get off of her and return to the hotel where she was staying with her parents. At this same time ~ everything on the beach was crushed!

The enclosed newspaper stories tell more



Brave elephant saved my life from the horror of the Boxing Day tsunami

Mirror – UK ~ Laura Connor 2016

The story of how Ning Nong carried Amber Owen, then eight, to safety when the wall of water hit the Thailand coast has inspired a hit stage show.

As the first wave of the **Boxing Day tsunami** devastated the Phuket shore, baby **elephant** Ning Nong held strong in the surging water to carry his friend Amber Owen to safety.

Four-year-old Ning Nong had become a trusted companion to eight-year-old Amber during her month-long winter holiday with her parents in Thailand in 2004.

Every day she would hurry to the beach to ride on his back along the shore, and he would wrap his trunk protectively around her shoulders as she fed him bananas. After celebrating Christmas in paradise with mum Samantha and stepdad Eddie, she couldn't wait for a Boxing Day adventure on with the four-year-old elephant on the beach in Choeng Thale resort. In the Sheraton hotel just above the beach that morning the family had felt a small tremor, but thought nothing of it. Then, as Amber took her daily ride on Ning Nong, the tide suddenly receded.

No one was prepared for what happened next. Amber saw several local men walking on to the sea bed exposed by the retreating water, picking up the fish left in its wake. But Ning Nong instinctively knew something was wrong – and his actions during the horror that followed would save her life. Amber, now 20, recalls: "Ning Nong seemed really agitated. He kept turning away from the sea and was anxious." As the baby elephant became increasingly stressed, his trainer kept trying to pull him back as he attempted to run away. "I didn't really understand what was going on," says Amber. "All these men were walking where the tide had receded, picking up fish and putting them in their bags."

"But Ning Nong was swaying and trying to walk up the beach. He didn't get very far as the trainer kept pulling him back. Seconds later the water crashed, reaching Ning Nong's shoulders. I clung on to his back, terrified." The power of the colossal wave overwhelmed the previously peaceful beach. Holidaymakers lying on the sand were washed away by the wall of water. All Amber could do was cling to 4ft Ning Nong. Instead of throwing her off he climbed through the swirling current, up the beach and inland with her on his back.

He only stopped when he reached a high wall, about 400ft from the shore, where he wedged himself beside a stone shelf so that Amber could clamber up to safety. "Ning Nong knew what was going on," says Amber, from Milton Keynes, who is now fashion company intern.

"I don't know what would have happened if I wasn't on Ning Nong's back. I was so scared. I could have just been swept away if it wasn't for him. Despite being so young, it's a day I will always remember." Amber's mum Samantha, 47, tells of her panic when the first wave hit while Amber was out of sight on the beach. The company director and her husband Eddie, now 57, were finishing off their breakfast when they heard screams coming from the beach just below their hotel. She recalls: "We ran down to the sand and I was screaming. 'Where's the elephant?'"

"Someone told me he was dead, and I just panicked. Amber was always with him so I knew she'd be on his back. Finally I saw Ning Nong at the other end of the beach, protected against a wall, with Amber. I was hysterical. "For the elephant to sense something, run away like that and pop Amber up on a wall is incredible. "The elephant saved her life."

Samantha grabbed Amber, who is her only child, and ran back to the hotel, where Eddie waited for them nervously. Just minutes later the next wave smashed into the coast.

"Amber didn't understand what was going on. "When I found her, she just said to me: 'Mum, mum, don't worry I can swim.'" While young Amber might not have realised the full extent of the tragedy unfolding around her, Samantha did.

..... Amber has kept up with reports on her animal saviour, and recently read he has been renamed Bai Tong and is at the Somnuk Camp in Kanchanaburi, west Thailand. If it is him, he will now be 16.

"I'd like to see if he remembers me," Amber says. "And I want to go back to the beach. "Elephants have something special and a strong sense. They know what's going on before humans do. I thank him for my life!"

How British girl saved from tsunami by elephant inspired Michael Morpurgo play

Hannah Furness, arts correspondent - 20 MAY 2016

Mr Morpurgo, the former children's laureate, recalled reading a small article about Miss Owen back in 2004, but had misremembered enough of the details that he had never traced her in real life.

The adaptation of the novel, **Running Wild**, will now run at the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre until June 12, told by a cast of children and puppet animals.

The real story saw Miss Owen on holiday in Phuket with her mother Samantha and stepfather Eddie in 2004, when she visited her favourite local tame elephant for a ride and to feed him bananas.

But while riding Ning Nong along the beach, the eight-year-old noticed the elephant was attempting to pull away from the receding sea water.

"People were going into the sea to pick up fish, but the elephant kept trying to get away," she told the Telegraph. "I didn't know what a tsunami was, but he could clearly sense there was danger."

"He ran away, and as the water came in I was safely on his back. He saved my life." At the time, her mother described hysterically screaming before she found her daughter on the elephant's back, pledging to donate to his upkeep every year as a mark of gratitude.

How Ning Nong the elephant saved me from the tsunami: The incredible bond between a little girl and baby jumbo that inspired Michael Morpurgo's 'sequel' to War Horse
¥Amber Owen was in Phuket, Thailand at the time of the tsunami in 2004
¥She was riding Ning Nong the elephant when the devastating wave struck
¥But Ning Nong used his animal instincts to take the little girl to safety
¥Now her incredible story has been adapted into a play, *Running Wild*

By OLGA CRAIG FOR MAILONLINE 29 May 2016

As Michael Morpurgo read the tragic stories of devastation and appalling human suffering that followed the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, he became ever more dispirited. 'It was truly one of the most terrible natural disasters of our times,' he recalls. 'Then, in the midst of the overwhelming sadness, I read just one small story of hope.'

That tale was of a young British girl's incredible escape from the storm-lashed beach of Phuket – all thanks to her rescue by an elephant.

'Inspired by this miraculous story I decided to do what I had always wanted to do,' says Morpurgo, author of the award-winning drama *War Horse*. 'That was to write an elephant story.'

The result was his book and now hit show, *Running Wild*, a fantasy woven around the girl's tale of survival. But although the play is thrilling, its drama is overshadowed by the true story of what happened to Amber Owen that day.

She was in Thailand on holiday when an elephant ride on the beach turned into an extraordinary tale of both heroic courage and the wonder of animal instinct. It was a once-in-a-lifetime, month-long trip for eight-year-old Amber, her mother Samantha and stepfather Eddie. Each morning, Amber would rush down to the beach to see the elephants that ferried children up and down outside the Sheraton hotel, where her family was staying.

'The elephants carried us along the beach and into the sea,' recalls Amber, now 20 and living in Milton Keynes. 'I grew especially fond of Ning Nong, a four-year-old, and would feed him bananas every morning, always insisting that only I rode him. He would wrap his trunk around my shoulders and nuzzle me.'

She continues: 'On the morning of the tsunami there was a small earthquake about eight in the morning, but we didn't think much about it. I was riding along the beach on Ning Nong after breakfast and I could tell he was anxious and kept turning away from the sea. **As he edged inland, a huge wave rushed up to his shoulders.**' **Clinging to the back of the elephant as the waves threatened to engulf them, Amber watched in terror as flailing fellow holidaymakers disappeared beneath the breakers....**

Elephant that saved young Brit from 2004 tsunami found in Kanchanaburi

By Coconuts Bangkok June 3, 2016

Twelve years after "*Ning Nong*" the baby elephant saved an 8-year-old tourist's life during the 2004 tsunami in Phuket, she has been located in an elephant camp in Kanchanaburi on Wednesday. Amber Owen, from the UK, was staying at a Phuket hotel with her family at the time of the tsunami and, that morning, she was visiting Ning Nong and riding the elephant when the tsunami began. Ning Nong sensed the danger and headed inland with the little girl on his back before the huge waves struck. The survivors have not seen each other since.

Ning Nong's heroic move was brought to attention recently after children's author Michael Morpurgo has used it as inspiration for a London stage production called "*Running Wild*," according to The Telegraph. He first produced the play in 2009, but it recently opened again in London.

After the tsunami, *Ning Nong* was sent to Somnuk Elephant Camp in Kanchanaburi where she has been renamed "*Bai Tong*."

Somnuk, the camp's owner, said *Bai Tong* was sent to his camp because the hotel's owner could no longer take care of her. *Bai Tong* is very smart and friendly. She always wins the hearts of tourists who visit the camp, according to MCOT.

Amber is now 20 and works in fashion and lives Milton Keynes, England.

**Ning Nong then moved to a better environment ~ an elephant-paradise in the mountains west of Kanchanaburi.
She was also given a new name
BaiTong (Golden Leaf)!**

This farm prides itself on genuine healthy care of the elephants and BaiTong happily integrated into the small family of elephants that already lived there.



In her new home, BaiTong lives a peaceful life with friends in the mountains.

BaiTong loves the river-water ~ especially when someone gives her a good rubdown. She is often the first (as in this pic).

BaiTong always prefers bareback riders & likes to show them her favourite foods!



Here is a pic of BaiTong (January 2017) after one of her playful adventures with friends!

Truly a beloved Gentle-Giant!

Soon there will be another celebration ~ everyone is looking forward to the birth of BaiTong's first baby in 2018.

**This poster tells BaiTong's story. It is in her new home.
Sheba Suphannahong, February 2017**

