

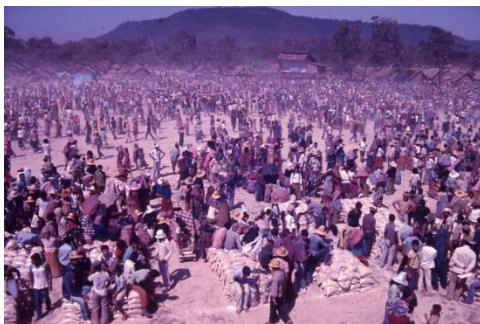


**Larry Cashman, the Unrepentant
Scoundrel**

Chapter 12

Cashman Checks Out

Throughout my short and eminently undistinguished career, I developed a singular talent for landing myself in situations for which I was neither prepared nor qualified. It happened in Crownpoint when I became the hospital's de facto oral surgeon. It happened in Soong Nern when I was deluged with patients seeking basic dental care. Now here I was again, in a fix and way over my head. It was December 1979 and I found myself on the border between Thailand and Cambodia, with the Khmer Rouge army on one side facing the Thai military on the other side, and thousands of Cambodian people in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp trapped in the middle. All of these unfortunate refugees were depending on my clueless API colleagues and me to provide them with sanitation and health services in the camp.



**All of these people needed a place to
defecate every day**

There were 140,000 Cambodian refugees in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, and all of them had to defecate every day. Any way you look at it, that is a shitload of feces. The challenge was to find a place for them to perform their daily constitutional that would not contaminate the surroundings, where the odor would not overpower the camp, and where the flies that tend to accompany massive amounts of feces would not overwhelm the inhabitants. To make matters worse, no one on the API team knew anything about the sanitary disposal of human waste. There were feces everywhere. The reader should note that I cannot tolerate the sight or smell of shit. It makes me gag and vomit. The first time I changed Carmencita's feces-laden diaper, I vomited all over the place and Sabrina had to clean up after both of us. It was also the last time I changed her diaper. What do you expect from a wimp?

Fortunately, the Thai military brought four backhoes into the camp for just such an eventuality. At the sight of the first group of 20,000 refugees traipsing toward the camp, those backhoes went to work. We directed them toward the farthest corner of the camp, and they dug row after row of ditches eight feet deep. Presto – just like manna from heaven, Khao-I-Dang refugee camp had all the pit latrines needed for its prospective residents. That seemed easy enough. I was ready to go home.

What we didn't anticipate was the stench and the flies. When 140,000 people deposited their feces in a hole every day, the odor traveled downwind toward the area where the refugees were domiciled. Not a good idea to place open pit latrines upwind from a housing area. Then there were the flies. It is not readily apparent to me what flies find so attractive about shit. Soon the camp was inundated with thick clouds of them buzzing about and landing on every surface. Within three days, the camp smelled like a cesspool that had not been cleaned and drained in a decade; and there were so many flies they obscured your vision. I was miserable.



The stench from the latrines was overwhelming

What no one told us was that the feces in those pits had to be covered with lime every day to contain the odor and to eliminate the flies. Then the pits had to be covered and sealed, preferably with cement slabs with a hole through which the feces could be deposited, and enclosed for privacy. A small oversight, but what do you expect from people who had no idea what they were doing. Making those latrines functional would be a major civil works project. This was hard work, something Larry Cashman avoids under any circumstances.

Instead, I turned my attention away from the shit show and toward organizing basic health services. After escaping from the Pol Pot genocide, then traveling hundreds of miles in advance of two warring armies, the Cambodian refugees were undernourished, debilitated, and disease-laden by the time they reached Khao-I-Dang camp. The Thai government and UNHCR asked API to coordinate the delivery of health services. Fortunately, we had plenty of help to provide them. As soon as the refugee crisis became imminent, scores of holier-than-thou, humanitarian, voluntary relief organizations descended on Khao-I-Dang like flies on shit, an apropos metaphor in this case. These voluntary agencies, called *Volags* for short, had a messianic fervor to help the poor and downtrodden. Most were religious and faith-based organizations that were there to save souls as well as save lives. They were driven by altruism, compassion, and righteousness. They were eager and willing to provide health services. API had to coordinate the health services provided by this motley crew so that there was no overlap, no infighting, and most of all, no virtuous overreach.



Volag medical clinic in Khao-I-Dang

As the reader knows by now, I couldn't care less about altruism nor do I give a rat's ass about religion. Characteristics like compassion, benevolence, and empathy are not in my genome, and rarely enter my lexicon. For me, religion is a bunch of hocus pocus peddled by charlatans and snake oil salesmen. These self-righteous, bleeding heart, proselytizing do-gooders and their pious morality nauseated me. As long as they set up medical clinics and treated sick people, however, their religious fanaticism was irrelevant. For me, laziness and apathy trump any ethical principles.

They could convert the whole lot, as far as I was concerned, as long as they provided medical care and left me alone.

We divided the camp into 14 sections of 10,000 people each and gave one *Volag* responsibility for one section. Whether they made any converts was a matter of colossal indifference to me. I avoided the Volags and their religious zeal like the plague. I visited their clinics occasionally to monitor their services, so that I could report, as required, to the Thai Military, UNHCR, and the Thai Ministry of Health.

The Thai military was responsible for security in the refugee camps. Task Force 80, an elite Special Forces unit, controlled the Khao-I-Dang camp. The soldiers were rugged commandos who packed side arms and M-16 rifles, and wore spiffy ranger hats. They manned all checkpoints, established the rules of the game within the camps, and brooked no interference. Task Force 80 had a special affinity for API. They viewed API, the largest Thai NGO in the camp, as an ally, in contrast to the sanctimonious and fanatical foreign *Volags* who had overrun the camp to "save" the Cambodian refugees.



Task Force 80 Special Forces

I have a limited skill set, but once again, my ability to speak Thai came in handy. I connected immediately with the Task Force 80 Rangers. They had never met a Farang who could speak Thai, not to mention one who could drink Mekong whiskey and bullshit with the best of them. Many nights I hung out with the Task Force 80 soldiers, drinking, telling dirty jokes, and learning invaluable Thai slang in the process. We became good friends.

After three months, a crisis developed in Khao-I-Dang. The Volags were providing medical care as agreed, but one essential service was absent — family planning. It seemed that contraceptives and birth control contravened their religious beliefs, so they decided to withhold family planning services from the refugees.

After studying public health for two years and working with API, I had learned the intrinsic role that access to safe, reliable contraceptives played for maternal and child health. Their escape from the Khmer Rouge had left the Cambodian refugees malnourished and physically depleted when they reached Khao-I-Dang. Some had small children. Becoming pregnant too soon in their weakened condition would put the mother, child, and newborn baby at higher risk of infant, early childhood, and maternal mortality. A refugee camp, with its poor sanitation, crowded conditions, and limited food supply, was not an ideal place to deliver and nurture a new baby. If the women chose to become pregnant, that was their business and there were health services in the camp to support them. If they chose not to have children, they needed access to contraceptives. Moreover, Thai government policy mandated that every woman must have access to safe, effective contraception. The refugee camps were in Thailand and the Cambodian refugees had the same rights as Thai women.

Normally, I avoid controversy, but I got into a huge battle with the *Volags* over this. Many Cambodian women wanted to delay pregnancy until the time was right, and they wanted contraceptives to help them to do so. Even a slacker like me couldn't ignore their entreaties. They deserved the right to choose. I advocated for the Cambodian women's right to contraceptives with UNHCR and the *Volags*.

The *Volags* went ballistic. Their argument went like this — after the Pol Pot genocide, the Cambodians needed to repopulate. Providing them with contraceptives was continuing the genocide. Of course, this was just a pretense for their right wing, conservative religious beliefs nurtured in the US and Europe, and an excuse to impose them on Cambodian women living in a refugee camp in Thailand. I detested their sanctimonious piety and hypocritical neo-colonialism. It turned out they were more interested in saving souls than saving lives.

I reported all of this to Task Force 80, UNHCR, and the Thai Ministry of Health in my regular briefings. The Task Force 80 commander, leaden-faced as usual, just jotted down the details. UNHCR was ambivalent. They seemed to think that the camps were under some kind of international jurisdiction thus not subject to Thai law. The Thai Ministry of Health was adamant that Cambodian women must have access to modern, safe contraception as an essential health service and human right. This contentious battle continued for another month, with me right in the middle as the target of the *Volag's* ire. Finally, the Thai government intervened and ruled that every *Volag* providing health services in Khao-I-Dang had to include family planning.

If nothing else, the *Volags* were tenacious. As participants in an international refugee crisis, they maintained that they were above the jurisdiction of the Thai government, and resisted its edict. One night, UNHCR convened a meeting to discuss inclusion of family planning into all health service initiatives, as if the Thai government's policy was negotiable. There were 100 people at the meeting and many had come to protest the Thai government's decision. Tensions were high and tempers were hot. Several religious *Volags* decided that they would not allow family planning in their clinical jurisdictions despite the Thai government's directive. Their clinic directors, exuding arrogance and contempt, derided the Thai government's policy, claiming that they were not subject to Thai law. To conclude their peroration, they had unkind things to say about Somchai, API, and especially me. Suddenly, out of

nowhere, three Thai orderlies who worked for the *Volags* jumped out of their seats, rushed the speakers, apprehended them, and took them away. Within 24 hours, the dissident *Volag* clinic directors were on a plane out of Thailand.

Anticipating problems, the commander of Task Force 80 had placed spies in the employ of the *Volags*. After all, Task Force 80 was an elite commando squadron and that's what they are trained to do. I knew Task Force 80 had spies among the refugees. Occasionally, I would see a Task Force 80 drinking buddy dressed as a Cambodian refugee in the camp. I, of course, kept my mouth shut. Unbeknownst to us, Task Force 80 had spies working as orderlies for the *Volags* as well. They were monitoring the situation, confirming my reports to their commander, and waiting for just such a situation to arise. When it did, they were ready.

After this incident, it was astounding how quickly all *Volags* complied with the Thai government's decision about family planning. In one stroke, their truculence had become benign acquiescence. They gave API and me a wide berth. They reminded me of my old clinic nemesis at Columbia, Fritz Pandopo. They were bullies when they were holding all the cards. After they got kicked in the balls, we found out they had no balls.

Things cooled down in Khao-I-Dang after this, and a routine was established. My presence was no longer required full time in the camps. I could monitor API's responsibilities with periodic supervisory visits. Somchai wanted me to spend more time in Bangkok working with other donors like USAID, the World Bank, Peace Corps, and German Agro-Action, agencies with whom he was expanding his non-refugee work. This was fine by me. Sabrina, Carmencita, and I found a nice little apartment on Soi 11 Sukhumvit Road, and we settled into a normal family life in Bangkok.

Working with Somchai exposed us to the eclectic array of people who circulated in his orbit. He had achieved international renown for his unorthodox approach to family planning, and many people wanted to see it in practice. Robert McNamara, President of the World Bank, would stop by for a briefing when he was in Bangkok. Roman Polanski was a friend and frequent visitor. Politicians, celebrities, and international aid donors wanted to meet Somchai and observe his programs in action.

The United States agency responsible for foreign assistance was one of API's most avid supporters. Its visiting dignitaries, usually politicians on shopping junkets to Southeast Asia, visiting the Condom King was a mandatory stop on their Thailand boondoggle. During the visit of two members from the US House of Representatives, the agency's director in Bangkok pulled Somchai aside and said, "The Republican Congressman would like to see the sights of Bangkok. Could you and your staff show him around?" This was code for "This sleazebag wants to visit Patpong and get laid." Somchai didn't expect this from a Congressman, especially a fanatical Republican zealot. Nevertheless, the agency was a

big donor, so he acquiesced. Since I was the only American on his staff, Somchai asked me to accompany him when he met the Congressman for his “sightseeing” tour.

About 9 PM that evening, Somchai received a call. “The Congressman has finished his dinner with the US Ambassador and is ready for his tour. I will drop him off at your office.”



The Congressman wanted to “see the sights of Bangkok”

In due course, a limousine rolled up to API’s office and out bounced this fat ruffian from Cincinnati who also happened to be a Republican Congressman. His pants were buckled beneath his protruding belly, and he had a comb-over that was parted at his left ear to conceal his bald head. He was breathing heavily from the effort required to extract his fat ass from the limousine. Somchai greeted him as he exited the vehicle. “Mr. Congressman. It is a pleasure to see you again. Are you ready for your tour of Bangkok?” He introduced me and we sped off to the Darling Massage Parlor in Patpong.

The Darling Massage was the premier massage parlor in Bangkok. Somchai had so many guests who wanted to “see the sights of Bangkok” that he made special arrangements with the Darling to receive them. Soon after we arrived, we were ushered into a VIP room on the third floor, where drinks were served for our refreshment. Soon, a voluptuous Thai woman appeared to accompany the Congressman. She was No. 125, one of the Darling Massage’s most talented masseuse, whose specialty was the B-Course massage. In this variant, the “massage,” as it were, was preceded by a bubble bath. An air mattress was placed next to the bathtub. When the bath was completed, the suds and foam were transferred to the air mattress, the customer was positioned on the mattress, and the naked masseuse would massage him by slithering and sliding over him with every part of her body. Any services beyond that were negotiable.



The Darling Massage Parlor in Bangkok

The Congressman was ecstatic at the sight of No. 125. He chatted with her as we finished our drinks. Then he turned to Somchai and me and said, “Anyone want to smoke some pot?” We both froze. I figured that this was a sting. The Congressman offers us pot, we smoke it with him to be polite, and then the DEA storms in and busts our ass. “No thank you, Congressman,” Somchai and I responded in unison. “But you help yourself.”

The Congressman was OK with that. He pulled out a bag of pot from his pocket, and said, “I picked up some fine Jamaican buds in LA on my way here. Are you sure you don’t want to partake?”

Again, we politely declined. The Congressman pulled out a pipe, loaded it with his Jamaican buds, and blasted away. It was aromatic and pungent, obviously good weed. When No. 125 smelled it, she jumped right in. The two of them were flying high. It looked like the Congressman would get his B-Course right there. "Please enjoy yourself, Congressman. We'll be back in two hours to pick you up," Somchai exclaimed as we departed the room. We couldn't get out of there fast enough.

When we returned, the Congressman was waiting for us in the VIP room with a big, shit-eating grin on his face. "That was the best two hours I ever spent," he blurted upon seeing us. He proceeded to describe, in excruciating detail, the services that No. 125 had performed. It was clear why she was the Darling's premier masseuse.

As I accompanied the Congressman back to his hotel, he turned to me and said, "I leave tomorrow for Hanoi. I am negotiating the release of the Boat People from Vietnam.¹ I return to Bangkok on Sunday at noon, and I have a press conference at 5 PM to report on my trip to Vietnam. Then I leave Sunday evening. I would like to see No. 125 on Sunday before my press conference. Can Somchai arrange it?" I told the Congressman that I would speak with Somchai. "If Somchai agrees, call me at my hotel at 1 PM on Sunday. Tell my staff that I asked you to call."

Somchai was flabbergasted when I related these events. "For the Congressman to make this effort to see No. 125 again clearly means that either she's a magician or he's a total loser," Somchai remarked. Since the Congressman was a member of the US House of Representatives, the latter was more likely. Somchai called the Darling Massage Parlor and arranged for the Congressman's Sunday rendezvous.

At the appointed time on Sunday, I called the Congressman's hotel. "The Congressman asked me to call about a program for today before the press conference." I explained innocently.

The aide who answered was brusque and arrogant. "The Congressman is busy preparing for his press conference and has no time for any program." I was relieved to hear this. I wanted to be rid of this idiot.

"No problem," I replied nonchalantly. "Just tell him that I called and mention the number 125." I was thankful this episode was over and I could spend the afternoon with Sabrina and Carmencita.

One half hour later the phone in our apartment rang. It was the Congressman, and he was pissed. "I'm sorry my aide did not put your call through. I will personally pluck out all his pubic hair for his arrogance. Can you pick me up at my hotel?" The game was on again.

When I picked up the Congressman, he was a mess. He hadn't shaved, his comb-over was hanging down limply on his left shoulder, he seemed depressed from his trip, and he smelled. He was

¹ This was 1980 and the fate of the Vietnamese Boat People fleeing Vietnam was a diplomatic bone of contention between the US and Vietnam.

carrying a clean shirt. “Sorry for my appearance. The Vietnamese foreign minister was a tough son-of-a-bitch, and the negotiations didn’t end until I was ready to board the plane. I hope No. 125 can fix me up.” I didn’t know if No. 125 could fix his appearance. But she would certainly lift his spirits. She was waiting when we arrived at the Darling Massage. “Time is short, Congressman, so you may want to pass on the Jamaican buds. I’ll meet you here when you’re done.”

Later on, when the Congressman emerged from his lair in the Darling Massage with No. 125 on his arm, he looked refreshed and rejuvenated. His comb-over was carefully affixed atop his bald pate with hair spray. He was cleanly shaven and fragrantly attired. His pressed shirt was neatly draped over his ample abdomen. He had the same shit-eating grin on his face, just like the last time. He reached into his wallet to provide No. 125 with a generous tip. She deserved it for putting up with his fat ass. Then he handed her his Congressman’s business card. When he did this, I jumped forward to intervene.

“Congressman, you shouldn’t give her your business card,” I advised. “This whole matter should be handled discreetly.”

He looked at me with disbelief. “Are you kidding? I know 25 guys on the Hill who would gladly pay \$1,000 per month to keep her in diamonds and lace in DC. It’s cheaper than stabling a horse.”

Nothing this jerk could say would surprise me, but this came close. I knew that members of Congress in the US were supercilious hypocrites, but this guy was a Republican and supposedly had some moral compass. Alas, there goes another of Larry Cashman’s naïve misconceptions. Later that evening, the Congressman’s press conference was broadcast on TV. He spoke of his tireless efforts to gain safe passage for the Vietnamese boat people. He spoke of the illegal drug trade that used Vietnam as a transit point, and his demand that the Vietnamese government dismantle it. He spoke self-righteously about his abhorrence for sex trafficking from Vietnam, and his lifetime crusade to eradicate it. And the whole time, he had that big, shit-eating grin on his face.

Somchai and API had so many visitors who wanted to observe their innovative family planning and community development programs that he established the Training Center for Population Innovation (TCPI) to accommodate them. At first, TCPI arranged study tours for API’s many visitors. When the numbers overwhelmed the staff, TCPI established formal training programs, two weeks in duration, where visitors paid a fee, learned about API in a classroom setting in the first week, and visited programs in the field during the second week. By 1981, demand was so high that TCPI was running a training program every month. The training programs were in English, and Somchai needed qualified Thai/English speakers on staff to lecture in the classroom, and accompany the participants on field trips as interpreters. Larry Cashman was perfect for this job. Once again, Dr. P’s advice paid off.

For an accomplished bullshitter like me, lecturing in the classroom was nirvana. I could pontificate, expound, bluster, and swagger to my heart’s content to a captive audience. A good bullshit

artist can sound convincing even with little knowledge of the subject, a skill that has served me well throughout my career. The audience loved it. Since most participants were from Asian countries and English was not their first language, they listened to my mellifluous bullshit as if it was pearls of wisdom. When I interpreted comments made by Thai villagers during field trips, I could say anything I wanted since none of the participants spoke Thai. If they asked a woman if she was using a contraceptive and she said no, I would answer yes. When they asked how many children she had and she said seven, I would answer two. I was a natural at this.

Every training program had a few participants who wanted “to see the sights of Bangkok.” I was recruited to lead these extra-curricular study tours. My job was to interpret for them, negotiate when necessary, and most importantly, make sure they weren’t ripped off or rolled. I took them to Patpong or Soi Cowboy, another red light district, and introduced them to the bars, the massage parlors, and strip clubs. Lucky thing Pete Lockery oriented me to Patpong and its excesses. Between loser Congressmen and TCPI, I ended up spending a lot of time there.



Bar girls on the Patpong street scene



The variety of Patpong sex shows was limitless

To the extent possible, I tried to steer the participants away from the sex shows. They were too raunchy, and the police would occasionally raid them when they needed money. Several TCPI participants had heard about the sex shows and insisted on seeing one. I don’t arbitrate morals. If they insisted, who was I to deny them? I found one of the more outrageous sex shows through a street tout, and we entered the den of iniquity. There was a brightly lit stage with music, a naked woman dancing on the stage, and tables or booths arranged in close proximity around it for the viewer’s pleasure. There were four of us and we took a booth right in front of the stage. The first performer shot ping-pong balls from her vagina into the audience. There were ping-pong balls all over the place. We had to duck to avoid them.

The second performer lit a cigarette, then puffed on it with her vagina and blew out the smoke. This clearly required perineal dexterity. By this time I was pretty loaded from the Mekong whiskey I was drinking earlier. I started to heckle the performer.

“Can you smoke a pipe? How about a Cuban cigar?” I shouted in Thai. The performer looked at me with daggers in her eyes. The girls didn’t like heckling. It upset their concentration.

The next performer came out wielding two chopsticks. She inserted them into her vagina, and proceeded to pick up food items like sushi and spring rolls with the chopsticks, put them on a plate, and gave it to a customer to eat. This was all getting out of control, and in my inebriated state, I thought I might be imagining the whole scene. Then she jumped off the stage with the chop sticks still held firmly in place, ran to the table next to us, hiked her leg up on the table, picked up a half-eaten Drakes Coffee Cake with the chopsticks, and offered it to a customer at that table. My head was spinning at the sight.

The next performer came on stage with no props – no ping-pong balls, no cigarettes, no chopsticks. She inserted her finger into her vagina and pulled out a string. When I saw this, I was ready to bolt. I didn’t want to see what was attached to that string. My colleagues were mesmerized, and wanted to stay. She pulled on the string and out popped a razor blade. Then she pulled some more and another razor blade emerged, and then another - and another - and another. By the time she was done, she had a string with seven razor blades attached. This was too much for me. I could not believe it. Foolishly, I heckled the performer.

“Those razor blades are not real! I don’t believe it!” I screamed at her in Thai. This pissed her off. She bounded off the stage toward our table, picked up an unopened pack of cigarettes lying on the table, and sliced the pack in half with one of the razor blades. Then she grabbed me by my moustache, brandished the razor blade in front of me like a weapon, and said, “Now do you believe it’s real?” With that razor blade right in front of my face, and considering where it had been moments before, I passed out straight away. When things get dicey, Larry Cashman checks out.

When I regained consciousness, I came to a critical realization. Given my penchant for mischief, the disparate encounters I experienced in Thailand — refugee camps, *Volags*, Thai Special Forces commandos, spies, depraved US Congressmen, and field trips to Patpong — were leading me down a path toward calamity. I needed a change of scenery. An opportunity arose in 1981 that would take Larry Cashman and family to the next stop on our journey through Asia.

TCPI had a contract with the US government’s foreign assistance agency in Indonesia to expose senior officials from the Indonesian Family Planning Association (IFPA) to API’s innovative approach to family planning. Because I played an integral role in these training programs, as both a lecturer and interpreter in the field (and sometimes as a guide to “see the sights of Bangkok”), I got to know our Indonesian colleagues very well. One of the Indonesian participants, Evie Sumarsono, had taken a particular interest in my work. Evie held a senior position in IFPA. One day she asked to speak with me.

“Would you consider working in Indonesia?” she asked. “The US foreign assistance program will place a Training Advisor in the Center for Education and Training in IFPA, and you would be perfect for the job. You have demonstrated your skills as a trainer to me and my colleagues. We need an Indonesian speaker for that position. If you can learn to speak Thai, you will have no trouble learning Indonesian.”² Evie would play a key role in hiring the consultant; hence, her inquiry was nearly tantamount to a job offer.

Upon hearing this news, Sabrina was ecstatic. Indonesia was a huge country with 17,000 islands to explore and many different cultures to experience. That was all she needed to know. She would gladly leave her work at API³ for the opportunity to live in Indonesia. I would be hired by the US government’s foreign assistance agency, which paid competitive salaries with all the perks of an expatriate hire. What’s more, the Indonesian government actually thought I would be perfect for the job. Maybe I was good at this public health business. Maybe my skills were finally being recognized. It was an easy decision. We were going to Indonesia.

That was hubris again. As I would soon learn (see Volume 2), this opportunity had nothing to do with my nascent public health skills, nor my expertise as a trainer. Monumental good luck and a good line of bullshit won the day. Some things do not change.

This concludes Volume 1 of the **Cashman Chronicles, The Formative Years**. In Volume 2, Cashman continues to scam and bungle his way through Indonesia, the Philippines, and Laos. It goes without saying that, through all of this, Cashman remains the same shiftless, lazy, cowardly scoundrel and ne-er do well that you met in Volume 1.

² Once again I was living proof that Abraham Lincoln and Bob Marley were misguided when they said “you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.” I was getting good at it. And Dr. P’s advice to learn the language came in handy again.

³ Because of her work at API, Sabrina had gained expertise on appropriate technologies for health. Through our many international contacts at API, she knew that there were opportunities to continue and expand her work in Indonesia. She couldn’t wait to go.

