



Against the Tide

Cathy Stiles had a 6 week deployment with Samaritan's Purse nursing in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of their field hospital in Cremona Italy in April 2020 nursing during the peak of COVID-19 in Italy.

The year 2020 has been one that most people in the world could never have imagined. I remember vaguely hearing about a virus that had been detected in the wet markets of Wuhan China, in late December 2019. This was not particularly alarming or newsworthy as it had happened many times before. There has been MERS, SARS, Swine flu over the past few years. They had come and gone with the initial concerns and then we moved on with life. Corona virus, or COVID-19 as we now know it, was different. The global fear that was whipped up by constant media reporting was unprecedented, and by early February 2020 the world as we knew it was about to change completely. That's where the biggest journey I could ever imagine began.

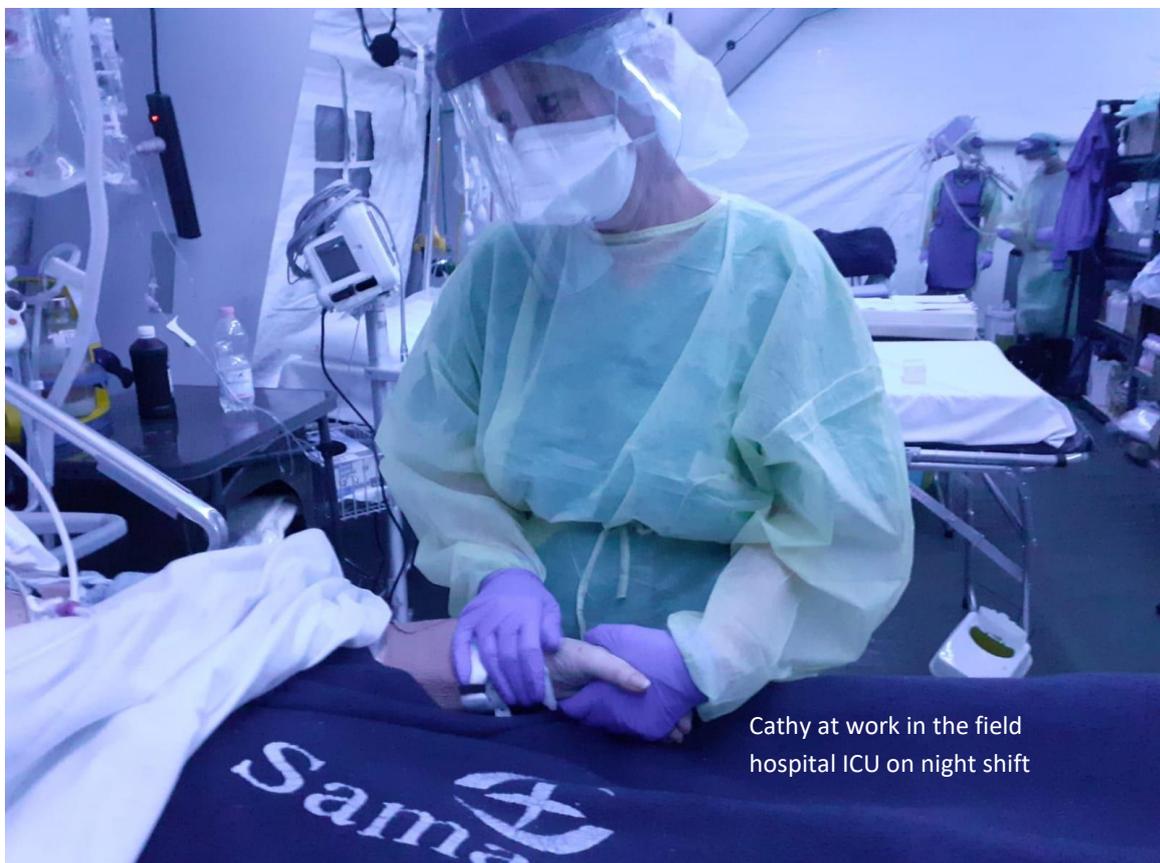
I have had a very strong sense of social justice and a yearning to do humanitarian aid work since I was 16 years old. I am a relatively new Christian and as such began to grow my knowledge of the many Christian aid organisations such as Samaritan's Purse (SP) which is an evangelical Christian humanitarian aid organisation based in Boone, North Carolina, United States. It is led by Franklin Graham, son of the Christian evangelist Billy Graham. One of the many programs SP run is the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) which is committed to meeting the critical needs of victims of war, poverty, famine, disease, and natural disaster. DART specialises in providing water, shelter, food, and medical care while sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. As a Registered Intensive Care Nurse with an overwhelming heart to help using these skills, I applied to become a DART team member in October 2018. I was accepted and I did my training in November 2018. To say I was excited was an understatement.



In early 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning. Northern Italy, became the first country outside of China to be hit hard with an almost overnight increase in the number of people infected with COVID-19, many with serious symptoms which overwhelmed the health care services. Samaritan's Purse put out a call for people to communicate their availability to deploy to Cremona, Italy. This deployment would be longer than usual because it required 2 weeks quarantine after the 4 weeks away. I spoke with my husband and sent in my notification to say that I could deploy.

On Monday the 6th April I got the call from Sydney SP office to say I was needed in Cremona by Saturday. I remember feeling physically sick, excited, nervous and overwhelmed about the logistics of it all. Health professionals knew little about the virus and how to effectively treat people with COVID-19 so going to Cremona, Italy - the COVID-19 'hotspot' of the world at that time - made absolutely no sense! Yet I inexplicably felt I had to go. I have never experienced such an overwhelming sense of peace and lack of fear as I did at that time. I actually would have had more trouble saying no than I would to go. My husband understood and supported me completely. However, our children did not! Their fear and anger towards me and my husband was an added stress, but it did not deter me.

Less than three days later I caught the last flight out of the Gold Coast Airport before they shut it down. I flew to Sydney where I met up with another Aussie – Trish, a lab technician from Adelaide. We became travel buddies on our 'amazing race' - pandemic style. We completed endless paper work to get out of the country and into the next country. There were challenges such as language barriers and many looks of disbelief when we stated where we were headed and why! We were



Cathy at work in the field
hospital ICU on night shift



effectively heading 'against the tide' to a country completely overwhelmed by COVID-19 and that struck fear into the hearts of even the most stoic people. The mood on all flights was sombre. The flight between Sydney and Doha was packed with people trying to get home to Europe, and there was no happy 'chit chats' that usually occurs on international flights. When we landed there was not the usual crush of people to get their bags before the seat belt sign was turned off. Everyone was subdued, doing exactly as they were told. It was very disconcerting.

As we got closer to Italy every flight became emptier and the usually busy international airports were deserted. We landed in Rome without a facemask but from that point we donned our first mask and wore them constantly for the next four weeks because they were mandatory. The reality of what we were about to walk into became evident.

We arrived in Cremona late morning on Easter Saturday - April 11th. After a brief orientation to the Emergency Filled Hospital in the car park of the Cremona Hospital, we learnt that we were to be on the night shift team for the whole month. We were given a crash course in 'donning and doffing' our Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). This was our new reality. It was uncomfortable and difficult to work in, but it was to protect us from the virus that was ravishing the bodies of many people in this region. I had pressure sores from the PPE for many weeks after the deployment was over!

There was a definite spiritual darkness that came over the world during this time and it was very evident in Cremona. I'm not sure whether it was doing constant 12 hour night shifts, or the fact that all but one of my patients passed away, but I have never felt the kind of overwhelming grief that I felt during that time. The physical drain of constantly wearing PPE for long hours took its toll early in my deployment. I struggled with the harsh reality of the place, which was nothing like the mind picture I had conjured up in my early dreams about doing humanitarian aid work!

I felt inadequate, frustrated, exhausted and deeply sad. It threatened to overwhelm me in those first few days. I wondered what was the purpose of me being there because I did not see the sick being healed; nor was I able to bring much comfort to these people in the ICU environment. Additionally, I had a back injury that first week and wondered what my purpose was amongst all of this sadness. I questioned so much of what I was seeing and doing, rather than having faith and belief that God had a handle on it all and me being there was a part of His plan. Even though I had so many mixed emotions and feelings I had no regrets that I had deployed. I was being obedient... I was trusting... and my faith was growing... When I look back at my life, I would never have done these things. Fear would have taken over and I would have stayed in Australia and kept wondering what would have been. That was the gift for me, the realisation that I was there by faith... I was buoyed because many people kept me in their thoughts and prayers... my husband's love, support and listening ears to my emotions during our daily 'talks' kept me going. My back healed well enough over those next few days to continue as I kept trusting and letting go of my fears and sadness. God had been right alongside me the whole time... I was just too busy trying to do it on my own and I didn't realise it. It was at this point that I found a new energy. I'm not saying that every time my feet went into those gumboots every night that the reality of that harsh environment didn't return, but it was different somehow. I found a new drive from within... an awareness of why I was there, and



an affirmation that my 'calling' was from God. It was a spiritual thing and something I simply could not resist. It was innate... woven within my very being, I could do nothing else but be there. I felt blessed to have such God-given passion for my mission. I did not choose to just keep walking through life and miss the great gift that God had given me.

The time in Cremona was not only tough for the above reasons, but working in a field hospital ICU tent, was like ICU 'camping style'. Nothing was easy! We had limited resources and often reused things that you would never think of doing in a 'normal' ICU environment. Our selection of drugs was limited and the equipment we were using was designed for short term 'trauma' patients, not long term rehabilitation ICU patients such as the people for whom we were caring. There were nights when all of our ventilated patients were on 90 – 100% oxygen, and the ventilator alarms would all go off at once signalling there wasn't enough oxygen coming to the ventilators. We had nights of high winds and heavy rain and the power would flicker off and we would have to be ready with torches, bag and mask ready to hand ventilate just in case the power did not come back on.

We spent the entire time in PPE and social distancing from each other. The 'tactile' sense of care had been removed... even when caring for our patients and trying to convey love, we had to do this through a double gloved hand. There was no hugging of work colleagues even when times were so tough. The patients' families were not allowed to spend time with their loved ones in ICU. People had to say "Goodbye" via a mobile phone conversation or 'Face Time' with an interpreter conveying their heart breaking messages. I pondered the significance that dying like this had for our patients. Patients I cared for intimately as they struggled for life eventually had to surrender to death. They never saw my face... only my eyes... but I am sure they felt my love and care for them... and I know God heard my silent prayers for them, as I sat with them night after night.

I think this deployment was different to others SP may undertake because it was a pandemic and not an earthquake, typhoon or natural disaster that affects a 'region' of the world. COVID-19 has affected the entire world and is still working through its second wave. I left Australia, after it locked its borders and headed into the disaster that was COVID-19 not knowing with certainty that my own loved ones may not be struck down with COVID-19 in my absence. This was done because faith won over fear and I was able to share my God-given skills and love for my fellow human beings in ways that I could never have imagined. I know am blessed beyond belief and I am forever 'on call for God'. - Cathy Stiles RN



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Cathy Stiles is a Registered Nurse currently working in a palliative care hospice and doing casual shifts in ICU/ED with an agency in Queensland. Cathy studied the 'Foundations of Faith Community Nursing' course with AFCNA in 2020. She volunteered with Samaritan's Purse Disaster Assistance Response Team in Cremona as an Intensive Care Nurse in a 12 bed Emergency Field Hospital Unit.