

The worst of
WOOMERA



by Dave and Cherry Mckay

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The Worst of Woomera

by Dave and Cherry Mckay

Woomera 2002

My first glimpse of the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (WIRPC) came on March 29 (Good Friday), 2002.

Along with ten other people from a Newcastle group called HOPE (Hunter Organism for Peace and Equity) Ross Parry and I had journeyed to Woomera, South Australia, to participate in the Easter weekend demonstrations in support of asylum seekers. In the crowd of nearly 2,000 demonstrators, there were the usual ferals and political activists; but many were like myself... ordinary citizens who felt a deep concern for people who had apparently been imprisoned for no other reason than that they had arrived on our shores in desperate need, and seeking asylum.

But we learned shortly after arriving that the 334 people being held there were regarded as the worst of the worse asylum seekers in Australia. These were people who had either exhausted all of their appeals and were awaiting deportation as indisputable "illegals", or they had been labelled as trouble-makers and had been sent to Woomera in order to isolate them from other more co-operative asylum seekers. Obviously, our efforts would have been better spent defending someone more deserving.

That same day, when some 800 of us walked up to the fence surrounding the main compound, we discovered just what desperados these people were. Without warning, we found ourselves involved in one of the biggest escapes from custody in Australia's history.

From inside the compound, some of the asylum seekers had managed to pry apart two of the bars on the fence. Fifty prisoners poured through the hole before the guards stopped the flow. Eleven of those escapees were still at large when this publication went to press. (One is rumoured to have been accepted as a refugee in the UK!)

There is much debate in Australia over whether these are innocent victims or dangerous renegades with a potential for terror. In the months that followed that escape, with the help of my wife, Cherry, my daughter, Christine, and her husband, Robin, I had the opportunity to learn something of the background of many of the people being held at Woomera. That information forms the basis for this publication.

However, before we begin, I should state that another interesting thing happened during the first two months after Good Friday, 2002. The population of Woomera IRPC dropped from 334 to 203. To my knowledge there was not a single deportation during that time. Instead, over one-third of these people--the worst of the worse--were given temporary protection visas and allowed into Australia as bonafide refugees!

This book does not include the profiles of any of those people. Instead, it focuses on the 203 who remained, including some of the returned escapees. Assuming that the people given visas were the best of the worst of the worse, then this book could more accurately be described as an account of the worst of the worst of the worse.

Prepare yourself for some shocking revelations!

1. Hope?

On the way to Woomera, we in the HOPE caravan discussed strategies. We were pacifists, wanting only to give hope to the detainees through our presence. We had brought a huge kite with us, capable of supporting a thirty metre long banner with the word FREEDOM on it.

Visual contact with asylum seekers was impossible from the arbitrary line in the sand that the authorities had scratched, some 500 metres away from the centre. But the kite was big enough and flew high enough to be seen from inside the centre. A cheer went up, first from the demonstrators, and then from the detainees when the banner unfurled high above the desert landscape.

Then some demonstrators stepped across the line in the sand. There was no reaction from the authorities. Hundreds of people moved toward the normal camp boundary, unhindered. Our law-abiding group looked at each other, shrugged, and trudged after them. Twenty minutes later we were talking to detainees face to face, through the compound fence. Amazingly, no one had stopped us.

"You Mafia!" a detainee shouted at us in anger.

I was shocked.

"You come for fifteen minutes, then you leave. Are we animals in a cage?" he screamed.

How ungrateful! Yet, I could not escape the truth in what he was saying. Many of these people had been trapped here for more than two years. How could our holiday weekend make a difference to their miserable existence?

And then the breakout began.

Truman*

Fifty people fled the Woomera IRPC on Good Friday, 2002. Truman was number fifty-one in the queue.

"You call it Good Friday," he said. "For us it was bad Friday." Prisoners had been warned that those who remained would be punished if anyone escaped.

Guards trashed rooms, beat inmates with batons, handcuffed the men and forced them to kneel all night on the dirt floor of the compound, tear gassed people who had nowhere to run, and used pepper spray on women and children at close range.

But Truman says it was better than in Iran. There, he demonstrated against the Government, and for that he will be arrested, tortured, and possibly killed if he returns. Unfortunately, he cannot prove it with documented evidence. It's as simple as that. Deportation, he says, is inevitable without documented evidence.

I try to tell him that escape is not the answer. That he would almost certainly be arrested if he tried, that he could die of thirst in the desert, that life on the run is not the same as real freedom. But he is not listening.

"We must have another demonstration," he begs. "Next time I will make it."

Truman weighs up all that I have said against what he says awaits him back in Iran, and there is only the one option for him. He is polite, positive, appreciative of all that Australians have done for him. But for him it is escape here or death in Iran.

His only crime is that he cannot prove it.

**For security reasons, real names are not used.*

2. Freedom?

"Freedom is more than escape from custody," I argued eloquently at the tribal counsel organised by demonstrators following the breakout. Some thirty escapees had made it to our camp, and they were now hiding in various tents. I was campaigning for them to be returned to custody.

"They say they'll kill themselves before they'll return!" someone argued. Nothing eloquent about it, but the truth in what was said was overwhelming.

Suicide is the last resort for someone who has exhausted all other avenues of escape. It is also the ultimate insult to a system which has tried everything it can to break the will of those who resist.

It angers those of us who live on, because there is no one we can punish for what has happened, and the last thing we want to do is to question our own role in such an apparently meaningless death. So we usually take our anger out on someone else, like the guards did to the prisoners who failed to escape.

Could the "war against terrorism" be a bit like that? We would never think of using bombs to wage a war against the common cold. So how can bombs ever wipe out terrorism? How would we ever know that such a war has been won? This supposed war has locked Australia and the West into a plan for world domination that will never be finished. Such wars have often led to genocide, as people imagine terror to be lurking almost everywhere.

Martha

Martha was transferred from the detention centre to a home in the township of Woomera in a much publicised bid to meet the Labor Party's demand for women and children to be taken out of the prison. But women and children in the township are still under constant guard, and they have to leave their husbands/fathers to do it.

There is no end in sight for Martha and her family. They will be held indefinitely like this, unless they agree to return voluntarily to Iran.

The hopelessness of her situation led Martha to attempt suicide. Her 10 year old son also tried to harm himself. Suicide attempts are commonplace at Woomera, averaging around one a week. But the Department of Immigration solution is not to give proper psychiatric care or to consider the causes of depression.

Martha and her son were, instead, returned to the source of their despair, back behind the razor wire. Worse, they were put in the punishment compound, where no TV, no telephone, and no toys are allowed. Like some Eighteenth Century insane asylum, our Government calls this a solution.

One by one families released to the town are being quietly returned to prison as punishment for various "behaviour problems". The untrained guards, some of whom would truly like to help, have only threats and punishments to use as tools in dealing with the highly complex psychological problems that these deeply traumatised people possess.

3. Illegals?

In the end, the Easter demonstrators felt that the only thing they could morally do was to help the escapees in their desperate attempts to cross the hundreds of kilometres of desert between Woomera and relative safety. Demonstrators and escapees headed off in several directions with minimal supplies, most of them almost certain to be caught and charged with escaping or with aiding and abetting escape from lawful custody.

But would their actions be any different to the escapes that these people had already made from their homelands? Was their custody any more lawful than the custody that they fled from in order to get here?

Phillip Ruddock stubbornly refers to asylum seekers as "illegals". Yet Australia is a signatory to the U.N. Convention on Refugee Rights, which states that any human being has the right to seek asylum in another country. They are not illegal at all. We may eventually find that some do not qualify as refugees, but even then, they are not illegals. They had a right to ask.

If anything is illegal, it is their continued forced detention.

Keeping track of people while their papers are processed is legitimate behaviour by any government. But years of punishment and humiliation in prisons that are falsely labelled "reception centres" is not justified. In trying to "make examples" of these innocent people, we have put ourselves on the same level as the regimes that they have run away from.

Marshall

Marshall's father, a former intelligence officer for Savak, was jailed in 1978, held for seventeen years for opposing the Iranian Government, and released under house arrest in 1995.

For five years, Marshall sought a way to escape, hoping to become a Christian when he was safely out of the country.

In late February, 2000, using a forged passport, and assisted by a cousin who worked for the airlines, he boarded an Iran Air flight to Malaysia, and then caught a boat to Darwin. His cousin was subsequently sacked for his part in the escape. The cousin later disappeared, and has not been heard of or from since. He is believed to have been killed for aiding in Marshall's escape.

In Australia, Marshall was refused a visa because he cannot prove beyond any doubt that the man imprisoned for 17 years is really his father, and because he did not openly convert to Christianity before leaving Iran. (Conversion to Christianity is punishable by death in Iran.)

Muslims and Christians, prisoners and wardens all sing the praises of Marshall, who spreads hope and cheer wherever he goes... a result of his faith. "Life is beautiful," he says. "I must enjoy each day here, because when I get back to Iran, I will be dead." And a silent tear forms through his brave smile.

All pleas for mercy have so far failed. Marshall will almost certainly be sent back to his death.

4. Visits

There had to be a better way to meet the needs of these imprisoned people than for them to become fugitives in Australia. Ross and I approached the other members of the HOPE caravan about a plan for the two of us to stay on in Woomera, in Ross' bus, and to become a 'refugee embassy'.

We believed that the first step in giving detainees hope was to provide sustained contact with decent, law-abiding Australians who support their cause. Contact could come through phone calls, by mail, or by approved visits. Visits would be the most beneficial, of course, but they were also the most difficult to secure. The remote location made personal visits to Woomera so rare that the Woomera IRPC did not even keep records of them at that time, nor did they have any official procedure for processing visitors.

People would arrive at the gate asking to visit, and it was the task of the guard on duty to fob them off in whatever way he or she could. "Not taking visitors today," was the most common excuse. "Cyclone warning has been issued... repairs are being carried out... the person in charge of that is on holidays... visits are only allowed on the weekend," (or on weekdays, as the case may be).

We shared with police negotiators at the demonstration campsite on Easter Sunday about our intentions to stay on and become fulltime visitors.

It was a costly mistake.

Nancy

Mae, from Adelaide, had written to Nancy, a young nurse from Iran, promising to visit her personally at Woomera. Nancy, like most Woomera detainees, had never had a visitor. She and her 7-year-old son Porter, looked forward to the visit with excitement.

Mae had obtained verbal permission from the Woomera Department of Immigration representative to make the visit, but when she got there, the guard on duty said that Nancy had changed her mind, that she did not want to see Mae. Mae showed him the letter, in which Nancy had expressed her great desire for a visit.

"Sorry, no can do," the guard smiled. "If you don't like it, you can tell it to Canberra."

Three days later, Nancy wrote to say that the visit had been cancelled "because they don't want anyone to know about our suffering in here."

The letter continued: "I've prepared something for dieing - just I tell you before ...I can't continue, I can't more ...I will die because Ruddock and Howard's dirty policy... goodbye."

She then stationed her 7-year-old son outside their room, with instructions not to let anyone in, and she slashed the main artery in her arm. Blood sprayed all over the cell. Another prisoner, Kyle (See page 13.) sensed something was wrong and broke in.

"Go away. Leave me to die!" Nancy pleaded as she lay in a pool of her own blood, near death.

Kyle called for help and she was rushed to the hospital for treatment and a slow recovery.

5. Betrayal

The police negotiator turned her head, pretending not to see me as I was marched into the Woomera police station.

Minutes after the last busload of demonstrators had left the campsite on Easter Monday, a police car raced over to Ross and me. They said we had 20 minutes to pack up and get out of there or we would be arrested for trespassing.

We were 100 metres away from the WIRPC boundary, on a campsite that had been officially approved by the Area Administrator. Approval extended until the following Wednesday. Ross rushed to see how much of our gear he could pack in 20 minutes, but I objected, and was arrested.

The police negotiators had been nothing more than spies, trying to learn anything they could, to be used against us. Our plans would challenge the unwritten no-visitor policy of the WIRPC. But if they could arrest us on trumped up charges, they could ban us from the entire area as a condition of bail. And they could make us look like law-breakers. So that is exactly what they did.

While driving me out to the Pimba Roadhouse, six kilometres from Woomera, one of the arresting officers boasted, "You won't even get your day in court, because when you turn up, we'll just drop the charge. No one will ever hear your story."

He continued, "We don't have anything against people being different or believing whatever they like, but we don't like them coming to Woomera to do it."

I had eight weeks to wait until my day in court.

Kyle & Delilah

Kyle and his wife, Delilah, are Sabeian Mandians, (followers of John the Baptist). In Iran, he and a cousin were once arrested and interrogated separately by Muslim religious police. He never saw his cousin again after that. They said that during interrogation she had "converted" to Islam and no longer wished to live with her family. Kyle later became engaged to a Sabeian Mandian girl. She too was arrested and never heard from again.

Meanwhile, a Sabeian neighbour, Delilah, had been told by her school teacher that she could get Delilah into a university if she would sign a form. She did, and the teacher secretly added a clause later, saying that Delilah wanted to be a Muslim. The religious police were informed and they came with guns to take Delilah away. (To truly convert, she had to leave her 'infidel' family.)

Kyle and his brother paid a huge bribe (2 million tumons) and succeeded in getting Delilah back. Two weeks later she and Kyle were married.

Sabeian Mandians are heavily persecuted in Iran, and conversion from Islam to this sect is punishable by death. Technically Delilah had been converted from Islam to Sabeianism and so she was in grave danger. Kyle's family was in danger too, for having engineered the conversion.

Kyle, his brother, and Delilah all fled to Australia by boat. His sister fled too, but she arrived by plane and was granted citizenship. His brother had a friendly review officer and was given a temporary visa. But Kyle and Delilah, the ones in the greatest danger, were rejected, and await deportation, victims of an arbitrary and haphazard immigration policy.

6. Pimba

A shearer leaned across the roadhouse picnic table, and pointed his steak knife at me as he said, "If I came across one of them bastards wandering out there in the outback, I wouldn't care if he was eight years old. I'd slit his throat as soon as look at him, and I wouldn't miss a moment's sleep over it either."

I turned to his mate to see if he felt the same horror that I had just felt at such a naked expression of hatred.

"Yup. I'd do the same meself," he echoed. "Why should we work our asses off to pay for them, while the bloody mongrels sit out there and do nothin' but complain all day?"

I suggested that maybe we would all be better off if the refugees were just let out.

"Don't you get smart with me, you f...ing c...t!" the first one shouted. "I'd slit your bleedin' throat too if I could get away with it."

Ross and I had set up camp at the Pimba Roadhouse, and we were experiencing firsthand the amount of racism that permeates our society.

If we really care for those inside the detention centre, we must find ways to change the thinking of such people, and to defuse the hatred.

Unfortunately, people like Pauline Hanson, John Howard, and even Kim Beazley have been more successful than us, by exploiting the fear that has gripped the Western world since September 11, 2001.

The Barton Jones Family

Hatred forced the Jones family out of Iran. Sixty-year-old Barton Jones is blind in both eyes as a result of injuries he received from fundamentalist Muslims in Iran. But hatred is not peculiar to Iran. It has followed them to Australia, where it is slowly destroying their family.

Twenty-year-old Rudy Jones taught himself English by reading a dictionary, and he is now the spokesperson for the 55-strong Sabean Mandian community at Woomera. But he is an angry young man.

"My mother is in hospital. She is not doing well mentally," he said. He refused to elaborate, except to say that their whole family (his parents and two younger brothers), like so many in the concentration camp environment, is falling apart.

Everything revolves around whether or not they can win favour from the guards. If they complain, they are punished. If they harm themselves they are punished. If they disobey a rule they are punished. And the rules change as often as the guards themselves change.

Rudy is called over to a group of delegates for the various social groups. A guard is trying to organise a soccer game, but he says that returned escapees from the Good Friday breakout are still not allowed to play, months after the offence. The delegates quickly confer and decide that, in solidarity with the escapees, they will not play soccer until everyone is allowed to play, despite the fact that one of them (Marshall--See page 9) is a professional soccer player.

The question is: Will they be punished for that too?

7. Poor Communication

I was not allowed to proceed beyond Pimba, because of my bail conditions. Only Ross could enter the township of Woomera. Nevertheless, for ten days we faxed, phoned, and visited the authorities at WIRPC, trying to get permission to visit detainees. Gradually responses eased from "No visitors allowed for three weeks," (the period we had originally said that we would spend in the area) to an open door for both of us to come and talk to two of the detainees.

However, by the time that first visit had finished, official word had come through from Canberra that we were to be refused any further contact with detainees, on the grounds that we were a threat to security and to the "proper order of the centre".

Mike Hughes, the Centre Manager Designate, told us that "DIMIA Intelligence" had been intercepting all of our email, and that they had determined that we had "associated with demonstrators".

"Associated?" I shouted in disbelief. "Hell no, Mike! I AM a demonstrator! Since when is demonstrating a threat to national security?"

Mike expressed sympathy, but said that there was little that he could do about it. He promised, however, that if we would be very careful about what we wrote in our emails (and in particular, if we made no reference to him personally), the decision would be "reviewed" shortly.

Mike is one of the nicest people at the WIRPC.

Sal

When 40-year-old Sal arrived in Australia by boat 18 months ago, his hair was totally black. Today his hair and moustache are grey from worry.

He nearly died of thirst on the boat trip from Indonesia. They left Indonesia, thinking that they only needed food and water for two days. The trip took 14 days instead.

Sal's brothers had been forced to fight for the Taliban. To escape the Taliban, Sal fled for Australia, thinking that he could send for his wife and four children after settling here. Another costly mistake. Now he has lost track of them, and the Red Cross cannot find them. He fears that they may have been taken by the Taliban.

Department of Immigration representatives visited Woomera in June, to tell Afghanian* and Iranian detainees that they would be handcuffed and forcibly returned to their home countries unless they signed papers agreeing to return. If they signed, they would be given \$2,000 each.

All of Sal's appeals have failed. He has lost his family and all of his savings. So he signed the papers. But he said that this time it is Ruddock who has been deceived.

"It may be safe in the cities," he said. "But I am from the country. The Taliban are still there. They only shave off their beards." Like most Afghans, he believes the moment U.S. troops leave, their terrors will resume.

**Afghans say that Afghans are dogs, and Afghans are coins used in Afghanistan. So we have referred to them as they refer to themselves: as Afghans.*

8. The Making of a Dictatorship

The Administrative Appeals Tribunal told us that *some* decisions (such as the decision not to let Ross and myself visit detainees) are exempt from appeals. Decisions regarding national security are among them. We learned from a solicitor that intercepting mail (including email) is permissible in matters of national security. We complained repeatedly to the Commonwealth Ombudsman and three months later we are still waiting for an answer. We applied to see our files under Freedom of Information, and our request was passed on to the Department of Immigration, to be dealt with when they felt they had the time.

Everywhere we went, we found that the Department of Immigration was above the law. Lawyers, the media, the Government of South Australia, the courts, and even the United Nations found themselves locked out whenever it suited the Minister for Immigration. The worst part is that there are absolutely no avenues of appeal.

Furthermore, legislation was introduced into Parliament to make it legal for the Executive to operate under the same sort of military law that had been given to the Department of Immigration. Anti-terrorism they called it. Anti-accountability more likely.

We were (and are) working under a dictatorship, and the Australian public was (and is) either unaware or indifferent.

Sadly, few people realise that most dictators started as extremely popular elected officials.

Malcolm

Twenty-four-year-old Malcolm is also from Afghanistan, but he refused to take the bribe to leave Australia quietly. His case had been rejected by the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT), but when he went to Court, the decision was reversed. The Federal Court declared that he is a genuine refugee.

When the Taliban came, in 2000, and forced his brother to join them, Malcolm was, fortunately, not home. His brother is believed to have been killed in combat.

His father sold a portion of the family farm in order to pay for his remaining son's escape to freedom. Malcolm landed on Ashmore Reef in January, 2001.

Brought to Woomera, he waited patiently for a year and a half before being told that he had been accepted as a genuine refugee.

But the victory was short-lived.

The Refugee Review Tribunal heard what the Federal Court had to say and then simply overturned it. What makes him most angry is that the decision was made without Malcolm himself even getting a chance to appear or to be heard.

"You make trouble, you get visa," he laments. "You good... no."

He has no lawyer, and yet he had personally convinced an unprejudiced court that he has a right to be in Australia. But then, with typical contempt for the judicial system, the RRT made an arbitrary (dare we say dictatorial) decision to ban Malcolm anyway.

9. An End to Diplomacy

Ross and I had decided during the Easter demonstrations to work through legal and diplomatic means to offer comfort to asylum seekers housed in Woomera. We had offered our services to teach English and music on a volunteer basis and were told that we were not needed. We had tried to visit and been banned. We eased back on any criticisms in our emails, in an effort to get our status reviewed. But nothing changed..

Finally, I told Mike, "We're paying the price, but you're not producing the goods. What's going on?" I had emailed a friend who had urged us to attack the dictatorship head-on. I said that we were not there to bring down the Government. We were there as an embassy, to bring comfort through legal channels.

"But," I had added, if we have not had a breakthrough by Monday, I'll be back in touch with you about your suggestions."

Mike had apparently read that email, like so many others that he delighted in telling me about. "I'll have a final ruling for you on Monday morning," he promised. "After that, we'll know whether we are going to be friends or enemies."

On Monday he called. "I wasn't able to get clearance for you," he said, "but if you'll give me a list of all your associates, I'll see what I can do to help *them* to get approval."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "So you can ban them as well. Thanks, but no thanks."

Jarvis

There is much debate amongst asylum seekers over whether it pays to complain. Some say it is only the complainers who get fair treatment; others say it is only the submissive. The rules change constantly.

Jarvis is the grandson of a former Governor of West Pakistan. His family are the leaders of the Hazara people there. Jarvis himself is a dignified and gentle leader, and would be an asset to any country.

His uncle was killed by a local terrorist group in 1997, and then Jarvis started receiving death threats. He fled to Australia in panic at the end of 2000, and has been in Woomera ever since.

Though his application has been refused, Jarvis speaks positively of his time here. He does not feel that he is a victim. He blames no one. He says he will go into hiding on return and try to apply through embassies in Pakistan this time. But definitely not the Australian Embassy

When he senses that there will be no recriminations, he speaks on behalf of other detainees: Phone cards, he says, cost 68 cents a minute for local calls and \$2.20 a minute for calls overseas. The promised monthly excursions ceased after the U.N. visit. There is a display at the visitors entrance, advertising English classes, but the classes do not exist. It costs \$3 to send an ordinary letter to Pakistan, and \$4.50 to England, when the same letters cost only \$1.00 and \$1.50 respectively if sent from the Woomera Post Office.

But will it do any good to complain?

10. Unstitching Lips

Ross and I could not get inside ourselves, but we could help others to get inside, and we could encourage the media, human rights groups, and friendly politicians to place pressure on anyone associated with the WIRPC.

Mail from detainees to ourselves had been blocked by ACM. So we sent an email to everyone on our mailing list voicing our concerns. A few hours later, a fortnight of back mail, to us from the detainees, was raced over to the Woomera post office.

We notified Member of Parliament about the Pay-Tel charges and a question was asked in Parliament. Pay-Tel immediately dropped their overseas charges to \$1.25 a minute, although they still charge 68 cents a minute for local calls.

We complained about not being able to phone in to speak with detainees, and (just before the U.N. delegation arrived) three mobiles were placed in the compounds. Asylum seekers could receive calls through them, but they were still not allowed to call out on them, lest Pay-Tel lose some of their fat profits.

We are fighting to end a rule against asylum seekers using free internet facilities at the town library, and we believe that detainees should be allowed to have their own mobile phones, through which they can call *out*, to lawyers and other supporters.

And this booklet is our effort to get their story heard by the masses of Australians who have been told so many lies about them. Obviously, there was much we could do.

The Zorro Jones Family

The Zorro Jones family is one of the worst cases of injustice that we found at Woomera. As such, it deserves more space.

Zorro has been in detention at Woomera for 11 months, along with his wife, Mazie, three-year-old daughter, Kim, and his 63-year-old mother, Camilla. The family is from Iran and is Sabean Mandeian.

There is a law in Iran that if you kill someone (even by accident), you must pay "blood money" to the family. But if the victim is Sabean Mandeian, the killer is exempt. Sabean Mandeians cannot go to university, employ anyone, or own a shop. They are untouchables.

A Muslim neighbour tried to have a sexual relationship with Mazie, and she refused. He threatened to kill her daughter or pour acid on her face if she did not convert to Islam and become his wife. The neighbour was of high political and social standing. He boasted that he could do whatever he liked to the family and get away with it.

One day, when Mazie and Kim were home alone, soldiers arrived demanding to know where Zorro was. Mazie, who was seven months pregnant, refused to tell. She was beaten and kicked by the soldiers, causing her to lose the baby.

The soldiers went to a shed and returned with a plastic bag containing a gun, a sachet of drugs, a Koran with pages torn out, and a graffitied picture of Ayatollah Khomeini, which they claimed to have found in the shed. Any one item could have resulted in a death sentence.

The religious police officially decreed that anyone who killed Zorro would be doing God a service.

Local children warned Zorro (who insists he was framed) and he went into hiding. He arranged to have his family smuggled out of Iran. (His first wife had 'converted' to Islam under police pressures.)

This family's visa application has been rejected by the Department of Immigration on the unbelievable grounds that they are not suffering from persecution, only from discrimination! DIMIA, ignoring the fact that Sabeian Mandians can convert to Islam, argues that a Muslim would never want to marry a Sabeian Mandian because Sabeian Mandians are regarded as unclean in Iran.

The grandmother, Camilla, was diagnosed with schizophrenia in Iran and took medicine to keep it under control. The same medicine is available in Australia, but "not at Woomera". So the woman must make do with anti-depressants and sleeping tablets. Her agitation makes her an unreliable witness and adds to the DIMIA attempt to discredit the family.

Camilla is incontinent. A request was made by a doctor and an ACM officer on the seventh of March, 2002 for her to be moved to Maribyrnong where there are toilets in the rooms, but so far DIMIA has not seen fit to act on that request.

A psychologist's report states that all indications are that Mazie and Zorro's story about the persecution they suffered in Iran is true. But DIMIA has their own interpretation, and they are presently fighting the case in the Federal Court.

11. Lies Everywhere

When my court case came up on May 27, 2002, the police prosecutor did exactly as the arresting police in Woomera had predicted. He read the police report, which stated, quite honestly, that I had been arrested about 100 metres away from the perimeter fence at Woomera, and he pulled the file, stating that he failed to comprehend how the Woomera police could possibly have charged me with trespassing. I was free to enter Woomera township once again.

But the damage had already been done. I had been banned from Woomera for two months, banned from the detention centre permanently, forced to travel long distances at great expense to be present at the court appearance in Port Augusta, and then been told that it was all a cruel hoax.

What had been done to me was being done to asylum seekers on a daily basis, through misrepresentations that have painted them as terrorists, bad parents, law-breakers, and deranged liars. The Government slanders them at every opportunity and the media quotes the lies as facts, without the slightest effort (in most cases) to question them.

The average Australian would be able to take the Government and the media to court for such false accusations, but asylum seekers have no such rights. But be warned! One day at least one of them will be allowed to become a citizen, and there could be hell to pay for all the crimes that have been committed against them.

The whole issue of refugees has been wrapped up in a military package which portrays their arrival on our shores as some kind of a terrorist invasion. Yet, not one single terrorist has so far been found amongst the thousands of refugees who have been examined microscopically by all the lawyers that the Minister for Immigration can employ. Hundreds of millions of dollars is being spent on a so-called war against terrorism, which is really a war against refugees.

At the same time that lies are told to damn the refugees and all those who support them, other lies are told to cover up the cruel and inhumane treatment that the refugees have received, and continue to receive, at the hands of our Government.

Homer & Paula

Homer and his wife Paula, are from Kabul. They say that only a few years ago, the United States was arming the Taliban against the Russians, and singing the praises of the Taliban. Now the U.S. damns the Taliban and glorifies the Northern Alliance. But the truth is that injustices and persecution have been commonplace under both regimes.

Paula says that in the past, when the Northern Alliance has ruled in Afghanistan, women were often forcibly removed from their homes by the soldiers, and not returned. She says that if women knew that Northern Alliance forces were coming for them, they would often kill themselves rather than allow themselves to be taken. Paula is terrified about going back to live under this sort of a regime.

When they saw the Northern Alliance returning to power, Homer and Paula gave their life savings (\$25,000) to people smugglers who promised them peace in Australia. The people smugglers said that \$25,000 was not enough to allow them to bring their 12-year-old son with them, but they promised that Homer and Paula would be able to send for him later, after they had been accepted by Australian authorities. Just one more lie.

Homer's sister is a dentist, and she is married to a doctor in Melbourne. His brother and nephew are studying at a university in Perth.

Paula is a teacher and Homer is a construction engineer. For three dollars a day, Paula gives the youngest detainees the closest thing to a formal education that they will ever get while they are in Woomera. And together she and Homer run an English tutorial each evening for other detainees who wish to learn English. They do this without receiving any pay for it.

Paula laments, "We spent our life savings to come and live in a cage."

Because they fled the Northern Alliance (and not the Taliban), and because they fled before anyone in their family had been killed, they probably represent one of the weakest cases for asylum that we came across at Woomera. Yet they are hardly worthy of the villification that the Government has heaped on asylum seekers in general. These, the worst of the worst, are simply people in need, people doing only what we ourselves would do if we had the chance, i.e. trying to make a better life for themselves and for their child.

12. Separation

When we spoke with detainees at the razor wire on Good Friday, I was drawn to a short 13-year-old boy whose pleas brought tears to the eyes of many of us.

"We are not animals!" he shouted, gesturing with both hands. "We have eyes like you. We have hands like you. We are not criminals. We want freedom. We want freedom!" He pointed at the ACM guard standing next to me in full riot gear. "These people!" he shouted, and then he rambled on inchoherently. He pulled his T-shirt off, rolled it in a ball and threw it at the guard as hard as he could. It fell short, landing on the razor wire. The guard showed no emotion. The boy was in tears.

An older detainee pointed at the youngest and addressed the crowd. "You see this boy? His father is outside, but they keep the wife and children inside still. What kind of policy is that?"

The decision to stay on at Woomera meant months of separation from my wife. But it did not compare to what so many of these people had experienced. I vowed to find out who this boy was and how the Department of Immigration could possibly give a protection visa to the father, while still keeping the mother and children in detention.

When my wife, Cherry, came out to spend two weeks with me in June, 2002, her relationship to me was miraculously overlooked by DIMIA. She was allowed to visit dozens of detainees. Her visits became the primary source of material for this book.

The Baker Family

Oliver Baker came to Australia in 1998, and was given a Temporary Protection Visa a year later, because he is an Hazara from Afghanistan.

He had come to Australia in the hope of bringing his wife Ruth, and his five children over later to join him. They succeeded in fleeing Afghanistan in December, 2000, but were locked up in Woomera while their papers were being processed. Now, 18 months later, the Department of Immigration has rejected the application from Ruth Baker, and her five children, on the grounds that they cannot prove they are Afghanians! Although their circumstances were exactly the same as Oliver's, they are now awaiting deportation.

The boy who had spoken to me on Good Friday is Allan, Oliver and Ruth's oldest son.

Oliver travelled to Woomera from Sydney for a week of visits with his family in June, 2002, at the same time that Cherry was visiting me. Cherry and Oliver would travel together to and from the WIRPC each day. On the last day, as they returned to the township, Oliver walked ahead. He did not want to be seen crying; but Cherry could hear the sobs as he walked. Finally, he broke down and collapsed on the ground. All of his hopes had been dashed. He might never see his family again.

In 1880, King Abdur Rehman decreed that it is not a sin to kill Hazaras. It appears that something similar happened in the Australian Government between 1998 and 2001.

13. Stall Tactics

The primary thrust of the Howard Government's policy on asylum seekers is to convince the public that all asylum seekers are "illegal", i.e. that they are not genuine refugees. The truth, however, is quite opposite. Almost all arrivals are genuine refugees, and almost all of them are eventually accepted.

But the longer the Government can hold them in prison, then the more they can be made to look, and even to act, like criminals. Experiments have shown that if you crowd enough rats together in a box for long enough, they will soon turn on each other, or try to escape. The same is true of humans.

And there is another strategy for caging the refugees indefinitely: The longer they stay in limbo, the greater the chances are that some change in circumstances in their home country will justify the Government sending them back. That is the official policy with regard to refugees from Afghanistan, even if it takes ten years.

But surprisingly, even in Woomera, amongst the supposedly worst cases, visas continue to be granted. And when they are, the Government even takes the joy out of them winning a visa by making the visa only "temporary" (meaning that they can still be sent back ten years from now if circumstances change). And the Government tops it off by giving detainees a bill for up to \$190 a day, that covers all of their time spent in detention. It is not uncommon for successful applicants to be slugged with a bill for \$200,000.

Sherman

Sherman is 21 years old. He carries himself proudly. He is quick to tell you that he comes from a wealthy family in Afghanistan. He is also quick to tell you that the other asylum seekers at Woomera are imposters.

Sherman, you see, has just been awarded a temporary protection visa. He will be held for some time, until DIMIA is satisfied that he has all of the necessary paperwork. But Sherman has implicit faith in the system. It has worked for him.

Like so many of us who came to this country as migrants, it is easy to think that we deserve, more than others, to be here... that middle-class Western comforts are our birthright... that poverty and suffering are quaint traditions of other cultures or other classes of people.

Sherman's uncle was a commander in the Hezb-e-Islami. Until recently, they were part of the Northern Alliance, fighting the war against the Taliban. Sherman's father was actually taken captive by the Taliban.

But then, as the Northern Alliance gained strength from U.S. funding, it turned on the Hezb-e-Islami. Sherman's father had kept his wealth in U.S. dollars, hidden in the house, so Sherman took the money and paid \$7,000 for passage to Australia. The people smugglers told him he would be travelling on a big ship to Australia, that the leaky boat was only to take him out to the ship. Sherman was furious about this fraud.

Sherman praises the Australian Government and its handling of his case. He hopes to start a business in Australia, and to study.

14. Attitudes

Concessions given to asylum seekers have been used by the Government to aggravate their plight. Government cameras caught them laughing on an outing, and photos were released to the Press as proof that they are happy where they are. Consequently, many refused future outings.

Thousands of dollars worth of donated toys were not delivered when detainees refused to be photographed holding the toys.

"We don't want toys; we want freedom!" they shouted. And the same is true of other gifts. They know that as long as the Australian public believes they are cared for physically, their real problems will not be solved.

But the fruit of this otherwise shrewd assessment has been widespread depression.

We needed a way to get the asylum seekers thinking more positively, if we were to stop suicide attempts.

We came up with an idea for a camp newspaper, *The Freedom Banner*. We could put it together outside the centre, and mail it in, but it would be composed largely of material submitted by the detainees themselves. We floated the idea with our supporters and were soon sponsored by an author from northern NSW.

Contributions came slowly at first, but gradually interest picked up. Asylum-seekers contributed poems, articles, and artwork. One even made a crossword puzzle, with words in it like Ruddock, Freedom, and Iran.

David & Hamish

David and Hamish are brothers, aged 30 and 28, from Iran. Only David attended the interview. A staff psychologist who went public with what he had seen at Woomera commented on the startling difference between the way the two of them have reacted to their situation. David has stayed strong, while Hamish has lost hope.

Together the brothers converted to Christianity while in Iran, a crime punishable by hanging. Their family reported them to the authorities, so they ran for their lives, arriving in Australia 28 months ago.

A few months after arrival, they both participated in a mass breakout which led them only as far as the township of Woomera before they were captured. On returning they were forced to sit in the hot sun without moving for three hours straight.

David says that Hamish is very sick psychologically. He was close to tears and would not elaborate. David's hands shook when asked details about his and his brother's conversion to Christianity in Iran. He said that it was 'secret' and that it would be dangerous to others to tell.

Conversion to Christianity is one of the hardest defences to prove, because there is so much disagreement between ourselves (the professing Christians) over what "conversion" entails. Baptism? Church membership? Religious experience? Things like faith and love?

But Iranian authorities are not so fussy. If anyone has the courage to say, under threat of death, that he or she is a Christian, then it is reason enough to execute them. David and Hamish are guilty of being such Christians.

15. Blood Money

A few days before the DIMIA reps threatened forcible deportation at Woomera, there had been a report of an Iranian being forcibly deported from a detention centre in Western Australia. This was done despite the fact that his brother, who had agreed to deportation, had earlier disappeared upon arrival in Iran, even before leaving the airport. He has not been heard of since. Both men were Christians.

Refugees who had been hanging onto a thin hope that they could win their appeals against the Department, or that there would be a sea-change in Australian thinking about asylum seekers, were suddenly thrown into a panic. A few decided that, if they were to be returned anyway, they would use the money to finance yet another escape from their home regimes.

But most decided to resist the decision. Delegates of the various groups (Sabeans, Christians, Hazaras, and other Afghanians and Iranians) proposed a hunger strike in defence of the Afghanians. The Iranians agreed to support the strike, because they knew that they would be next after the Afghanians had been spirited away.

Condon

Condon is 25. He has been in detention for 15 months. His uncle and brother were killed by the Taliban. His father, who is 65 years old, sold his shop and borrowed money to pay smugglers for his second son's journey to Australia. Condon hasn't heard from his family since he left, and he worries about them constantly, because they have no source of income without the shop.

The Tajiks and Pashtuns are enemies of the Hazaras. Condon, like most Afghanians at Woomera, is Hazara. DIMIA gave him a Dari-speaking Tajik interpreter for his court case. (Condon speaks Hazaraji.) The interpreter claimed Condon was from Pakistan and not Afghanistan, and he was rejected on that basis. Most Hazara people have their visas rejected for much the same reason.

Hazaras who flee Afghanistan also face persecution from their own people on return, because local Hazara leaders, desperate to maintain control of their flocks, say that runaways will have been corrupted by their contact with outsiders, and that they should be killed.

Monty

Monty's English is good. He is soft spoken, and appreciative of the accommodation and food that he has been provided with in his time at Woomera.

He is an Hazara who fled Afghanistan to escape call-up in the Taliban army. Monty is 27 years old. He left his wife and three children, aged between three and seven, hoping to be able to send for them later. Now they are missing. He is divided between wanting to search for his missing family, and wanting to gain admittance to Australia, so that he will have a place to bring his family.

Monty is one of the few who has not tried to hurt himself, and he does it by trying to contribute positively to his surroundings. In Kandahar he was a signwriter, so he paints signs for DIMIA, for \$1 an hour.

Monty was refused a visa when a translator said that his answer was no to a question for which he actually answered yes.

16. Unity

The hunger strike started on Sunday morning, 23 June, 2002. However, only twenty people refused meals on that day.

Then, during the day, a mass meeting was held by the detainees. It was decided that the emphasis should not just be on a return to the status quo, nor should it be just in support of the Afghanians. If they were going to have another hunger strike at all, it should be all or nothing, freedom or death for the lot of them. Of 209 detainees, only 19 exempted themselves because of age (very old or very young) or health. We understand that one or two others may have also refused outright. The other 190 detainees agreed to stick together. This included children as young as nine years old.

The official strike began the next morning, Monday, 24 June. Those who had exempted themselves had agreed to move to a separate compound to cook and eat their meals, out of consideration for the others.

Nancy (see page 11) checked herself out of hospital against the wishes of her doctor, in order to be a part of it. Bobby, the twelve-year-old son of another woman who had been in hospital with Nancy, spoke on the phone to the media, explaining that he and other children like him, were not being coerced into what they were doing. They too had suffered, and many of them had already attempted suicide as well. These were children who had been forced by governments here and overseas to deal with life and death issues at a very early age.

Kevin

Kevin is 17 years old. He came alone to Australia, when he was just 16.

As a Sabean Mandian, he was persecuted in his school in Iran. In religious education classes, he was told that Sabean Mandians are infidels, that they are not humans. Other children were told not to play with him, and he would often get beat up by fellow students.

Kevin admits to being hot-tempered. One day, in his religious education class, he criticised Islam and the Government of Iran. He said that Muslims are non-humans too. His teacher tried to remove him from the class, and he punched him.

Kevin was expelled from school for this, and a complaint was made to the religious police. He could be sent to prison for up to ten years for the classroom incident. The only alternative was to join the army, where persecution would almost certainly be heavier. Kevin feared that if he lost his temper in the army, the consequences would be much more serious. So he decided to escape. His uncle helped him to get a false passport in order to flee the country.

Most refugees bring money with them, but Kevin is an exception. It took all that his family had to pay the people smugglers. His only finances are the \$1 an hour that he gets from DIMIA for work that he does at Woomera. He has had no contact with his family since leaving Iran, and he worries about them a lot.

All the other men in Kevin's compound are Muslims. He says that they too persecute him. Anti-anxiety medication (Lomax) helps to ease his stress.

17. Another Breakout

The hunger strike was bitterly painful. Mattresses were placed in the middle of the two compounds, where, day and night, 190 detainees sat or lay in the freezing winter weather. For five days they refused to give in. Not one man, woman, or child retreated. I spoke with them about their demand for a total end to mandatory detention. Weren't they being a bit unreasonable? Their reply was that they had been reasonable in a previous hunger strike, and it got them nowhere.

"This time it is freedom or death," they said. And every indication was that they meant just that.

The Minister for Immigration continued his lies, saying first that there was no hunger strike, then that only twenty detainees were fasting (and gradually increasing his figures closer to the truth as confirmation of what we at the Refugee Embassy were saying became apparent).

Then, very late on Thursday evening, 27 June, after five days without food, the 190 hunger strikers were awakened by the sound of car horns blaring and people shouting. About five vehicles pulled up at the corner of the detention centre, aiming to cause a stir and to shout their support for the languishing hunger strikers. When the frightened guards failed to show, the rowdies leapt from their vehicle with a video camera and started filming the detainees, who had now crowded around that part of the fence.

"Freedom! Freedom!" they chanted. Indeed, one of them, Kyle (See page 13.) had earlier cut a vein in his arm

and collected enough blood to write the word in both English and Farsi, and in letters almost a metre high on a compound wall. He was taken to the camp hospital and stitched up, and then returned to the hunger strike.

Earlier that day, the hunger strikers had been told that they would be given no further medication of any kind unless they agreed to break the strike. All those people with suicidal tendencies who had been taking anti-depressants, were now being helped along by camp staff in their slow march toward death.

"Freedom! Freedom!" the chant continued.

The rowdies outside explained to the detainees that they had no plan for escape, and that they were a long way from safety, but it had as much effect as my lecture to Truman in my first and only visit to the centre. (See page 5.) Some 35 detainees insisted that they would take their chances regardless. The others opted to stay.

Star pickets were found in the back of one of the trucks, and detainees broke off a pole in the ground, which they used to pry bars apart. The liberators threw blankets over the razor wire, and prisoners began to clambour out.

Escapees crowded into the vehicles, while the original occupants of the vehicles escaped through the desert darkness on foot. The vehicles headed off in different directions.

And all of this was done while the camp guards (all three of them) merely stood by and watched, focussing a video camera of their own on the perpetrators.

18. Recriminations

When we learned of the escape, at 2:30am on Friday, it was with mixed emotions. As expressed at the Easter breakouts, we lamented the reckless foolishness of the protesters. Yet we could not help but feel a measure of relief for some of the people who were finally out.

Publicly we said that escape can never take the place of release, that being a fugitive is no substitute for being free. And we meant every word of it. But having seen what awaits these people back home, we had another perspective. Escape is far better than death, and being a fugitive is far better than being raped.

The reaction from Canberra was as it has always been: to hit back. All visits were cancelled indefinitely; phones were taken away; and the media was allowed only to hear (or to print) one point of view. *The Australian*, on June 29, printed a report supposedly from Raymond (see page 43) that the breakout was a "commando" action done "very shortly". It totally misrepresented Raymond, who had actually provided the story about the horns, the shouting, and the video cameras. My name appeared only as one of the protesters, under an emphasised quote from Phillip Ruddock that the escape was an organised effort by "people in contact with the detainees". The aim was to discredit the Refugee Embassy and to justify further isolation for these people.

The public could never be allowed to consider that they too may have been so moved by the tears and anguish of these people to have at least *considered* taking such extreme action in their behalf.

Martina

Martina is a single mother with three children. She is housed in the township of Woomera, away from the detention centre. Because she is unmarried, she is looked down on by others at the detention centre.

Cherry first bumped into her at the local grocery store. Martina wanted to buy some aerosol cologne, but the guard escorting her objected, saying that it could be used as a bomb. Because Martina argued with the guard, she was very nearly denied a visit with Cherry later that day, and she was heavily grilled over who Cherry was and how she knew her.

Martina's oldest daughter, Peggy, had just been released from hospital. Her 15th birthday had triggered depression and she had slashed her arms. The family have been incarcerated for 11 months, so this was Peggy's first birthday in detention.

But this is one of the luckier families. They have actually been approved as refugees. Martina said she could not talk about what had happened to her in Iran, but apparently it was horrendous enough to win her a visa. However, DIMIA is waiting on police clearance from India, where the family had lived seven years ago. The Indian police, of course, have nothing to gain by sending such a document, and so Martina and her children could be in detention indefinitely despite having been granted a visa.

Martina is the woman who cared for Porter, while Nancy (See page 11) was recovering from her wounds.

19. Advance Australia Where?

This book has been an attempt to introduce the average Australian to the human face of asylum seekers. The profiles in this book have not been specially selected. In fact, they have been the ones that the Government says have the weakest cases for refugee visas.

Our island state is difficult for refugees to reach. And because of that, we get only the best of the best asylum seekers... people who have the courage, resources, and foresight to make the hazardous journey to our shores. Even those who have fled here only to escape poverty represent, on the whole, the kind of people who would make our country proud.

Australia is quickly becoming divided, in much the same way that countries like Afghanistan and Iran are divided today. People who object to Government policies there are silenced, in one way or another, until they have to break the law in order to escape. Phillip Ruddock appears convinced that the majority have a right to silence, and to trample the rights of minorities. And he boasts that he has the votes to do it.

In Nazi Germany decent citizens finally had to break the law in order to help Jews escape. More and more Australians are starting to think that this is the case in Australia. Before that happens, we would ask you to write, phone, and visit your local MP and let your voice be heard in favour of a fair go for asylum seekers.

We must put an end to the lies that have been used and that continue to be used to demonise these very real people who have already suffered such terrible hardships.

Raymond

Raymond is 22 years old. He has been in detention since he was 20. He is one of the 50 detainees who escaped at Easter. Nevertheless, when he was caught and returned to Woomera, the management there asked him to resume his role as delegate for the Afghanians, because he is regarded as a very sensible leader. He is also highly revered by fellow detainees.

Raymond is one of seven children born to a poor Hazara shepherd. He only attended school intermittently because of home duties. But when he reached Australia, he taught himself English by reading and by spending as much time with DIMIA staff as possible.

Raymond has been the most articulate voice of the refugees at Woomera, and is coming to be respected by the media as well.

When the threat was made to forcibly return Afghanians, Raymond gave in and consented to return peacefully. As an Hazara, his life will be in danger when he returns; but he will just have to live ... and perhaps die... with it.

However, when a fast to the death was announced on behalf of all detainees, Raymond was one of the first to volunteer. In fact, he was one of the top organisers. He loves his people, and he is willing to die for them. More than that, he loves people in general... Hazaras, Muslims, Sabeans, Christians. And he loves Australians too.

According to our Government, Raymond is one of the worst people ever to come to our shores, and he must go back. We respectfully disagree.

One More Story

We just learned that we have a leftover page, so we've decided to add this from the stack of stories that we could not include in a booklet this size.

Hoover

Hoover's wife had allowed some of her hair to show below her headscarf and the religious police in Iran had handcuffed, blindfolded, and then separated them. Hoover was beaten, but his wife will not tell what they did to her. She just cries when he asks. Hoover is not sure that he wants to know.

He had been a policeman himself, but he spoke out against the Government there, and he had to flee for his life, leaving his family behind. His visa application was refused because DIMIA says that it does not believe his story. Yet his brother was accepted as a refugee in Canada about 15 years ago.

Hoover has been at Woomera for 14 months. He has three teen-aged children in Iran.

Like everyone at Woomera, Hoover gets depressed at times. He has attempted suicide five times, and he had a scar on his neck from an attempt to hang himself the day before Cherry visited him.

Hoover asked us to buy him a belt to hold his pants up. We did not.

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Mothers who throw their babies in the ocean. Fathers who forcibly stitch together the lips of their children. Deranged young men who cut themselves and engage in criminal acts. Terrorists who invade our country, and compromise the security of decent Australians. Illegal aliens who smash and demolish every thing that lies in their path.

This is the picture that our Government has given us of asylum-seekers in general, and of asylum seekers at Woomera, South Australia, in particular. Woomera is the end of the line for asylum seekers, or as Phillip Ruddock says, for *criminals*, because "they are obviously not asylum seekers."

Here is your chance to meet these unspeakable human beings for yourself. Up-close glimpses never before available to the general public.