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## South Australians at war – transcript of extracts – OH 670

**Interview with Ruth Russell, who was a 'human shield' during the war in Iraq, recorded by Allison Murchie on 27 July, 3 August, 14 & 26 September, 19 October and 2 November 2003.**

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### **TAPE 2, SIDE A**

#### **Why and how did you come to the decision to be a human shield?**

Well I first heard about this concept late January this year when there was an ABC breakfast program talking about a call from an Englishman for a hundred thousand people to go to Baghdad and maybe we could stop the war and if not, be human shields and protect the Iraqi people. And it just seemed, instantly I just said 'Snap that's what I should be doing.' Because I had already been in countless rallies, we'd been in petitions, we'd done all the letters to the Prime Ministers, we'd done everything we could to say this is wrong, and there didn't seem to be any moving the Australian Government.

#### **Tell me what a human shield is?**

Well I didn't really know.

#### **I heard that show too, but to many people who haven't taken a strong interest they would say, what's a human shield?**

It's a pretty confrontational term in many ways, and I think that has been a bit of a disadvantage. But in real terms what it meant was just living with Iraqi people, on a strategic site, which was a really important site that under the Geneva Convention shouldn't be bombed. So we were there from the aggressor country, really defying the aggressor to bomb their own citizens and so the world would know where they'd bombed. And symbolically I was there as a mother, because I have 2 children and it is highlighting the killing of innocent civilians that was the goal.

#### **The fact that you were a mother in a secure, comfortable job and home in Adelaide, did you have any concept of the danger, obviously you had a concept of the danger. In anyone's mind that is brave decision, how did you come to that decision?**

It was really quite easy. I just thought this is very right for me to do. And I suppose some people fear death, all those sort of things. But I would rather live life to the full and not worry about it. If I died tomorrow I would be able to say I've lived a full and worthwhile life. And that's more important to me, what I do with my life, the value of the things I do.

#### **What did your children think?**



My daughter was away overseas on a holiday at the time and I wasn't able to contact her, so I just had to send an email and tell her. Of course she was just horrified and she sent me an email back in capital letters MUM DO NOT GO. Because it's very hard to explain exactly what ...she was riding an elephant in the back of Thailand ... so all of this would have been completely out of the blue to her. So it was really difficult for her but I said I wasn't going until she'd come back and that I'd seen her and that we'd spoken about it. My daughter, and in fact, all my family, are really proud of the stand that I took, even though they knew that it was a risk, not only for me but for them to lose a mother.

### **And your son, did he feel much the same?**

He was perhaps a little bit more ambivalent, and probably like a lot of teenage boys, not too keen to publicly express his feelings. But yes, I know he is proud of what I've done, but scared also. They don't want to lose a mum, especially when you are at that vulnerable age. It's just so wonderful to have a family, to have a supportive family and a mother still there.

### **TAPE 3, SIDE A**

But if we were to be human shields how were we going to achieve this. What were we going to protect? And so this site committee had been given a list by the Iraqi government of 64 potential humanitarian sites in Baghdad alone.

### **What's the definition of a humanitarian site?**

A humanitarian site is something that under the Geneva Convention is so important for the maintenance of society for the civil population, and I'll explain the types of sites that we are talking about, to have water is absolutely imperative, to have clean water is imperative for your survival. And so water treatment plants were designated as humanitarian sites. Electricity plants were designated as humanitarian sites because they provide the refrigeration for medicine for hospitals, for so many parts of our modern society. Oil refineries, which you wouldn't always possibly think of at a humanitarian level, but they were critical too for the maintenance of machinery and transport to get things here and there, so they were designated as humanitarian sites. Food silos, so that people aren't starving, food silos were designated as humanitarian sites.

And there were other sites as well, like archaeological sites that were important, hospitals that were important. There were a lot of things that were potentially humanitarian sites.

### **You said there were 64 just in Baghdad. What about the rest of Iraq, were there human shields in other cities as well and did they have similar sorts of lists?**

We only asked for humanitarian sites in Baghdad we were expecting the war any day. The coalition of the willing kept saying yes we are going to start the war and every day



there was the hype that it could start any day. So the logistics of us being organised, we could really only organise to have human shields in Baghdad because we didn't want people scattered throughout the country and no one know where they were and for us to be able to support each other. It was really important if you lose communication that we've at least got some support and a central place where we could connect. So it was agreed that unless we had a massive influx of human shields we would only support sites in Baghdad.

### **TAPE 3, SIDE B**

**Tell me about those first couple of days when you were at the silo, basic things like your living conditions, the people you were living with.**

I'll tell you about us moving in, it just explains everything. Anyone who was going there had to bring their bags at our headquarters and the bus was leaving to take us out. There was a huge media farewell for us; there were Buddhist monks who were there. As we hopped on the buses with our bags, they just stood there silently beating their drums slowly in a beautiful sort of sonorous rhythm, peaceful and calming. It was really lovely. So the bus fills up and we are meeting these people, some of them human shields we hadn't met before because we just hadn't had time to come in connection with them. All the media came with us or in cars behind us.

We are driving along and then we get to the site and we arrive. There is a huge sign on the front gate "Welcome to our messengers of peace." And it was just so lovely, even now when I think about it. And that was how we were treated the whole time. We were just seen as their really honoured guests, it was really lovely.

### **TAPE 4, SIDE A**

Oh, there were some wonderful events. I think Australians will relate to this. The human shields decided 'Let's play football, not war.' And of course isn't this so Australian? It wasn't designed by the Australian, but it was absolutely fantastic. So the Saturday before war started, the Human Shields versus the Iraqi University Students from the University of Baghdad to a game of soccer. Well, it was just amazing because, Friendship, Peace and Solidarity said, if you tell us the names of the human shield players we will get a soccer jumper from their country. So we turned up - and remember Iraqi people have not seen anyone from other countries for 12 or 13 years, they have had no contact. And here we came, busloads of human shields, and we had people wearing soccer players [guernseys] from Argentina, Great Britain, Germany, France, all the icons, Brazil, we had them everywhere Finland, Sweden. Everyone was in a different jersey of their own nationality and it was just mind blowing. And for me the wonderful thing was that we had one woman soccer player. This girl Marta a university student, 23 years old, from Slovenia and she said 'I'm a good soccer player, I am going to play in our team.'

**Where on earth did they get the guernseys?**



This was just before war, it's incredible the things that happened. So we all have our photos taken, everyone is cheering and there were hundreds, the place was packed with Iraqi men. The women don't attend football things. I am ashamed to say that all the human shield women were there and we were barracking, we were saying 'Come on human shields.' It was very friendly and just a wonderful atmosphere. This is how good relationships are built.

#### **TAPE 4, SIDE A**

Every day we would have about 4 or 5 events to go to. The Korean group did a beautiful theatre on 'Peace not War' in the main square at 4 o'clock one afternoon. And they had huge puppets, and people on stilts. And it was a silent sort of floating, absolutely surreal beautiful, very moving street puppet theatre. Everybody did so many different things. It was just incredible. Other beautiful things were – one of the English human shields Carl was a folk singer and he had arranged with his wife in England to contact primary schools in England and all the children there did peace drawings and he got them sent over and he exchanged them at a school, at a little school where the human shields were staying at the El Daura Oil refinery which had all the workers children who actually went to a school at the refinery site. There was the school with all the oil flames in the background. And we went there at 9.30 that was the Friday before the war, the war started Monday. Carl sang songs of peace in English, the children sang Iraqi songs. And they had all done beautiful drawings. And Carl collected them and sent them to his wife to distribute all around there.

And this is just how things happened – when Carl was planning this, one of the Turkish human shields who had lost his money or who had run out of money, said 'You know, I'm a very good kite maker. If human shields will contribute, when we go to the school I'd like to make 40 kites for the school children because it would be a nice gift.' So we all contributed a bit of money and he sat down and made 40 kites. We turned up at the school and at the end of the singing he handed out these kites. And I've got photos of the children and the kites fluttering in the air. And you can see all the oil flames behind and the black smoke pouring out. But it was such a beautiful time.

**That's an amazing amount of creativity shown by the human shields. I wouldn't have anticipated anything like that. I thought you would just be there and march and protest and do your bit.**

Exactly. And we were pulling out to go to some other event and we looked back and there was one of the other Turkish human shields who had an absolutely magnificent physique with sort of orange-blond hair past his shoulders. He had got hold of a Ghengis Kahn outfit and he was riding a horse. He was doing a media stunt about isn't it time we moved on from the old warrior days and found a way. And that was his idea, how incredible. You had to be up every night because every moment you looked around there was something new. It was just absolutely amazing.

#### **TAPE 5, SIDE A**



Well I suppose the greatest issues in those first few days was what was really going to happen. We had heard a lot of talk about the shock and awe bombing that was supposed to occur, were there going to be cluster bombs, how horrendous was the bombing going to be. So it was the unknown that you were facing.

That first night we saw cruise missiles going past. The Iraqis had some totally ineffective aircraft guns which would just fire up a small distance in the sky like fireworks and then just fall back to earth whereas the serious bombing were way up high and totally unreachable and able to do whatever they like. The inequity of the whole situation was really brought home very quickly that the coalition could just go anywhere at will and just strike anywhere without any repercussions and they were totally safe. It is very easy to fly in a big plane and just drop however many bombs you like and just fly away again. There was no danger to them whatsoever, which just made it more inequitable. That made us angrier I suppose.

**How did the Iraqi people, particularly the ones you were living with, how did they respond? You said last week that they were amazingly calm when it was known that war was 48 hours away and just went about their daily business. What about when bombs starting dropping all over them?**

It was really interesting. The day the war was announced the only difference was the schools closed and the children were home all the time. There was plenty of sacks of food around. The only concession the people we were living with did was to put tape on their windows in case the vibration or bombing would stop the glass shattering and they were aware of that. Some people had been building big fences around and things like that; there was a flurry of activity like that. But when the bombs would go across, rather when the planes would go across the children would all run inside in fear. And that was quite significant.

And as the time progressed, David, who was observing the children noticed that their behaviour changed and they became quite violent. They used to play soccer and play in the street; within two weeks they were picking up sticks and firing them when they heard the planes. They'd actually come out and they'd fire sticks up and shoot the planes down. This was the psychological change in the children, they obviously felt threatened by these planes, they knew what the planes were doing, the bombing, because it was all there. The children were acting in their own way to defend themselves and to try and play shoot these planes out. That was really interesting to see their play change in many different ways.

**What about their parents?**

Their parents, they hid inside most of the time, we all did in the first few days, we were fearful. For example, we would stay in the centre of the house where there were no windows in the passage way in case things came close until we realised the military base which was 5 kilometres away – all our doors and windows would rattle but in actual fact we weren't likely to be actually bombed. Unless there was a stray bomb and it hit us directly, and what can you do about that anyhow.

So rather than be afraid, we thought, 'Well that's it, we better go up on the roof and start recording.' So we changed our whole attitude altogether and instead of being



fearful and sort of just lying low we thought, 'That's it we're going up on the roof and we better get out there and record what's happening.'

### **Did the bombing go night and day?**

Yes it was continuous 24 hours a day. The bombing of Baghdad itself - the bombing of the military base went day and night - but the bombing of Baghdad itself was mostly in the evening, mostly at night. So what would happen was that the Iraqis very quickly had dug huge trenches all around the city, along the roads and they had filled these trenches with massive amounts of oil. They lit the oil and the whole city was just covered with absolute thick black smog the whole time. They said the satellites wouldn't be able to pinpoint the different possible targets.

### **TAPE 5, SIDE A**

#### **Can we talk through the next chunk of the day where you visit various sites, obviously the ones that were not out of bounds, which would be understandable? What were some of the sites that you did visit?**

There were quite a few sad ones but one of the market places we visited, there'd been a bomb and it had killed 30 people, 16 injured I think. The main impact of the bomb had been in a little restaurant; when we visited they had taken the bodies out by the time we arrived about lunchtime. Everything was just totally splintered and shattered and you could see all the chairs where the people had been sitting just completely splintered, you could see blood still on the walls, the kitchen, everything was in total disarray. And we were filming it and talking to the gathering crowd. One little boy just bent down and picked up a little pocket sized Koran and it was all completely burnt on the outside but when he opened it up you could see all the writing. I filmed that but I should have asked him for a page of it as a souvenir. It was just to show ... it must have been in somebody's pocket or whatever and who knows. It was really sad.

We walked across the other side of the street and there was like a little mechanic's repair shop, and all you could see the front of the little repair shop had been blown away, but on the back wall you could see where he hung his tools like everybody does and he had the shape of a saw, that's where he had all the hooks to hang his tools on. I remember crying thinking he will never use those again. It was just a simple thing and to think someone had just completely lost their life and their livelihood and the family completely gone. He was just innocently going about his own life. It was like bombing somebody's shed an Australian shed in their backyard. That was just how horrible it was.