

'MIDNIGHT GUNMEN IN ISTANBUL'

AS EXPERIENCED BY MICHAEL MUSGRAVE AND JOE WALSH
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The Gunmen's action was aimed at ending the "bloody and dirty Russian attack on our homeland the Caucasus"

The overnight flight from Singapore seemed like an eternity after one passenger fell ill and failed to re-board in Dubai. And we had to wait. Little did I know that I was about to experience a new twist on the meaning of 'eternity'. My less adventurous travelling companion, Joey from New York didn't like the cardamom in the Arab-style lamb on the dinner tray. (Again, I was to find out later, that he wasn't intending to eat any food other than 'French' or 'Italian' for the upcoming three days we were to be in Istanbul). What about my plans for a Turkish mezze?

These minor travelling details were soon forgotten as we are met at the Airport and driven along the Marmara Sea in the early morning sunshine. On into the old part of Istanbul past the Blue Mosque and the Basilica of Hagia Sofia (that I remember from when I was last here briefly with Eddy in 1987), and on to the Swissôtel on a hill overlooking the Bosphorous. By this time, our appetites for sightseeing were well and truly whetted – sleep could wait. Little did I know how long I might have to wait.

We sipped apple tea with carpet sellers; walked through the old Roman Cisterns; and went through the Hagia Sofia 'Museum' before returning to the hotel at nightfall. The Concierge recommended a 'simple' seafood restaurant on the Bosphorous for dinner. Our multi-million lire supper of artichokes, freshly caught calamari and grilled sea bass (inexpensive, at one million lire to one US dollar) was to last me a long time.

Back in the hotel before midnight - dead to the world in a comfortable bed at last, I was roused by a knocking, and a quiet voice on the other side of the door.

"We need you to get dressed and come to the lobby. There's an emergency."

Drowsily, but with haste, I dress, and thinking that there is a fire, open the door and ask

"Why?"

Composed, the hotel clerk softly answers

"There are men in the hotel with guns"

At which point, two, silent, well-dressed men in dark suits and double-barrelled assault rifles across their chests materialised from the shadows. A few long steps down the hall I was passed over to another seemingly more silent and ominous gunman in the lift, who escorted me downstairs with hands above my head. So far, I was responding like clockwork. I felt no fear. These 'men in suits' did not fit the terrorist stereotype. In retrospect, this first impression belied the menace that should rightly have been identified with an armed siege.



One band of gunmen drove up to the hotel in a van – jumped out, and hurled the hotel's metal detectors into the revolving doors. With one resounding crash of shattering glass, they were able to block the large revolving doors. What use was such a security device ever against a band of terrorists and a vanload of guns?

In the lobby, there were more gunmen patrolling. They were bearded and much wilder looking this time – flak jackets but no balaclavas.

"What to think? Who are these people? What next?"

Thoughts started racing through my head. My first was that they were supporters of the jailed Kurdish leader. But still there was no real fear.

"Lay face down on the carpet and be still"

was the unmistakably unspoken order, as I saw uniformed hotel staff already stretched out, side by side amongst plates of uneaten cakes and drinks on surrounding tables of the cavernous white marble Lounge area, doing just that. I was one of the first guests downstairs, and I draw a blank as to how the remaining one hundred or so arrived.

A cold fear came upon me only after I was left alone, smelling the carpet. For a time, a heaving chest betrayed my attempt at composure and compliance. An attempt at slowly mouthing some prayers, and an acceptance of knowing that one-day I had to go, calmed me down. My life didn't flash before my eyes, and my faith held strong. I could hear my mother saying that we were on this earth for but a short time. Had my time come?

They're going to kill us

Sydney man held hostage in Turkey

By TREVOR MARSHALLSEA
in Istanbul

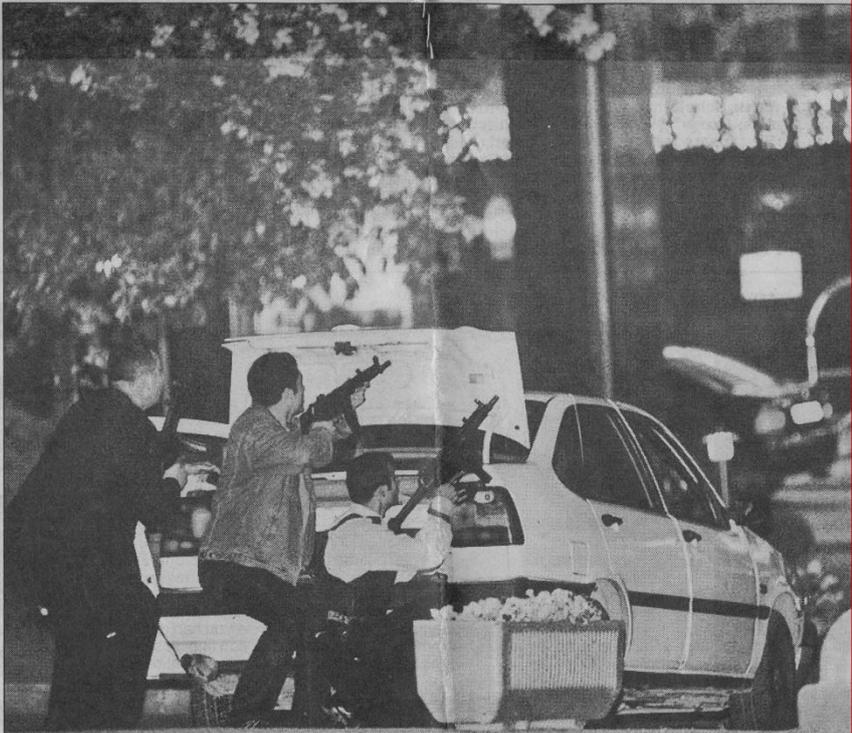
A SYDNEY man caught in a siege at an Istanbul hotel said last night he feared it would end in bloodshed.

Michael Musgrave, 58, arrived in Istanbul on holiday on Saturday and had returned to the Istanbul Swissotel hotel from dinner half an hour before pro-Chechen gunmen, led by Muhammed Tokcan, began herding guests into a basement.

"I got a knock on the door about 11pm. It was the hotel staff who told me to dress and go to the lobby," Mr Musgrave said.

"I thought it must have been a fire at first, but when I got to the lobby I was met by gunmen who told me to put my hands over my head and go and lie face down on the floor."

The gunmen surrendered after 12 hours. Mr Musgrave, one of 11 Australians at the hotel, said the gunmen had treated the hostages well, but tension had started to build during the night.



Turkish police take positions outside the hotel during yesterday's hostage drama. INSET: Comma

After about an hour we were allowed to crouch on the carpet out of sight of the front doors – packed like sardines. A couple of very young Chinese stewardesses held my hand and said that they were scared, but, by and large, the hostages were calm.

But as time passed, I missed Joey, who was checked into a room on another floor. I was glad that he was not there. He would not have taken this detention lying down, and his loud mouth would probably have had him shot.

After the first terrifying moments/minutes/hours lying face down on the floor a few steps below the Main Entrance, a mood of resignation came over me. The first announcement that I can recall was for any 'pregnant' women to leave. I imagined that all women would eventually be released but feared that the men might be in for a long wait. One of my first conscious thoughts was "would I be the unlucky one to lose an ear, or be shot and thrown outside when their demands were not met?"

More rational thinking quickly took over Thoughts like "how long is this going to last?" more than "when am I going to die" occupied my mind. Sitting, cramped on the floor, I struck up a conversation with a Venezuelan next to me. He was in the hotel for a global Conference for the Heads of leading Mining and Steel companies. I no longer felt the initial anguish of being alone. We tried to work through "who are these people? Are they looking to take the Conference delegates hostage, or maybe the Americans? "What are the possible scenarios?" Whatever the motive, a quick end seemed slim. They had chosen a good hotel – with important international guests, and large enough to have provisions for a long time.

I could observe occasional movement and lights outside in the gardens, and intermittently I could hear the sounds of husky voices shouting, and running feet. One resounding crash of shattering glass blocked the large revolving doors as the gunmen hurled the hotel's metal detector into them. What use was such a security device ever against a band of terrorists and a vanload of guns?

How desperate do you have to be to take over a hotel and hold guests at gunpoint – knowing that the best outcome for you personally is life in jail? These thirteen men would consider this an acceptable price to pay as a means to gain International publicity and world condemnation of what they believed to be Russia's role in the plight of their loved ones in Chechnya.

I don't think I ever believed that any of these men would shoot me. Their concentration seemed to be on the outside. However, I was concerned that I could be caught in the crossfire if they were provoked, or injured by shards of glass from the tabletop that I was squeezed under.

The gunmen seemed to have a ready rapport with a few members of the hotel staff, and were on a first name basis. The terrorists appeared to be over-reliant on them to execute all their instructions. The Receptionist communicated with us light-heartedly (in the style of a Cruise Director), and cleverly managed to stretch the concessions for such things as 'escorted' toilet access, and individual trips with the bell-boy to rooms for any medication requirements – ("Were any in cahoots . . .?)" The hotel staff freely distributed bottles of water and blankets – always women first.

Just before dawn, we could see a flurry of activity of the terrorist leaders coming in and out of the Reception area and unknown others coming into the hotel from the outside. Negotiations were taking place. The General Manager walked among us to say that the main demands centred on the gunmen getting publicity for their cause, and encouraged any of us with mobile phones to make calls out and 'spread the word'. CNN was outside.

Exhausted, with lights alternately lowered and raised, dawn breaking, soulful Turkish music blaring, I watched thirteen pro-Chechen gunmen take positions behind massive columns in the hotel Lobby. Word was spreading that they anticipated a commando-assault by Turkish police. These were the tensest moments. (In a letter from the Swissôtel, which was waiting for me on my arrival home in Sydney, the General Manager told me that ". . . regularly-operated zoom cameras in the lobby offered a vital moment-by-moment bird's-eye-view of every action of the terrorists to the Turkish police commander stationed in our Security Room". I now wonder what Security provisions might exist in other hotels to prevent or manage a similar emergency?

Breakfast of sorts was brought out, and we were allowed to approach a table, five at a time. I slapped some sausage and cheese between two chunks of bread and returned to my cramped position under the glass table to eat – quite juxtaposition from hours earlier having drinks and service lavished on you by liveried waiters. The gunmen also helped themselves to the food and water. Hotel guests, who were missed in the midnight round up started appearing, freshly showered, looking for breakfast. They were bemused as the gunmen shunted them into our band of bedraggled, weary-eyed hostages sprawled on the floor. One pompous Brit started to complain, and we 'jumped' on him. After surviving the night intact, we didn't want any hysteria now. (I was still glad that Joe wasn't with us either!).

A less threatening mood permitted a little more introspection into the personal plight of our captors. I also found a 'drinks' tab and a pen in a folder under the table (presumably left there from when the gunmen came in), and started writing. All thirteen were terrorists and all carried lethal weapons, but dress and demeanour made some appear less threatening. The mean bastard on toilet duty looked like he was trained in a dusty camp in Afghanistan, and could very well have 'died for the cause' (and not been missed). The one nearest us (managing the flow of three at a time to the toilets) was very young, and much more human. The hotel receptionist placed the flower from his lapel into the barrel of his gun. On his haunches, he put the butt of his rifle under his arm, cupped the flower in his hands – and smelled it for a full five minutes. Human? What does life hold for him?

Mid morning we got a feeling that an end was in sight. The Turkish music now changed to Mendelssohn's Wedding March. The bar was opened and the bearded, toothless terrorist softened and started throwing cigarettes and bottles of Pepsi into the group of hostages. Their leader, a small man with a little beard and safari jacket, was deep in conversation with the Security guy from the hotel and an unknown outsider. Surprisingly, we saw him lay down his gun and approach a hastily erected table on a dais, and signed the "surrender". Then he strode atop a marble wall where he made a moving speech through a hotel interpreter ". . . . We apologise . . . we didn't want to harm you . . . we had to get our message across to an international audience about the Russian attacks on our homeland the Caucasus. . . . you were the equipment in our campaign". These men had already won our sympathy. An ovation followed.

After our 12-hour ordeal, the other gunmen filed up to the desk, surrendered their arms, and went quietly. The flower-smelling youth hugged and kissed five of the hotel staff on both cheeks and turned for another ovation from all before being handcuffed to his compatriot gunmen. We did not come out discussing the closeness to death, but the friendliness of the captors. Except for the initial burst of gunfire into the glass front of the hotel when they arrived, their actions towards us were largely unthreatening. I learned later that the well-dressed ones were in an advance party. They were drinking coffee and mixing with the guests in the Lounge while they waited for the others to pull up at the entrance in a taxi and the vanload of guns.

The Chief of Police (a squat Sidney Greenstreet look-alike), who had been mounting the operation outside through the night, came to speak to us. Afterwards, we were dispersed to talk to our respective Consulate staff. On expressing some sympathy for the cause of the captors, I was offered 'understanding' and 'counselling' . . . which I declined. (Subsequently, I've learned that the insurance on my American Express Card also offers to cover the cost of counselling in such situations).

The very serious looking Prime Minister of Turkey (with his 'minders' carrying more weaponry than the terrorists) came to visit the site of the siege. No one took much notice of him.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who had just landed from Australia to take part in Anzac Day Gallipoli commemorations, came to see the Australians.

"The thirteen men now under arrest had wielded guns . . . They were terrorists by any definition They should be punished".

He said that he'd just finished an interview on ABC radio to this effect. Mr Downer discounted that these desperate Chechens may have a cause. Nor did I feel that he wanted to hear how I, and more than one hundred others who were 'under the gun' for twelve hours, felt. He seemed more interested in listening to another of our countrymen (fellow hostage) regale him with stories of gun-toting terrorists, and he being used as a human shield, sitting all night in the 'line of fire'. A handful of other Australians, who stayed in their rooms in another wing that the terrorists never reached, bragged of their bravado in avoiding capture.

I might be a sympathiser, but towards the end, I saw the happiness on the faces of some of the 'rough-neck' gunmen, and the very human kid terrorist with the flower from the barrel of his gun. They had achieved their goal of publicity for their frustrating Chechen cause, and were willing to forego freedom as the price. I went to my room and ordered a sandwich – missing the French champagne, legs of ham, smoked salmon and other delicacies laid on by the hotel management. I didn't get much rest – after an hour the phone started ringing. Australian Associated Press in London had my name and room number. They wrongly thought that I was the only Australian hostage. The

next thing my comments are 'on the wire', and 3AW, 2UE, Channel 9, Channel 7 were ringing. The rest is history.

On checking out of the hotel two days later, I was pleased to see that the cost of that eventful night we spent in the lobby (and my room-service sandwich lunch) was not included in the bill. There was also a personal invitation in the letter that I received from the GM in which he extended a personal invitation to enjoy a complimentary . . . and much quieter night, should I return to Istanbul. I intend to return and do more of Turkey, but I might try another hostelry.

. . . . Joey was not roused from his sleep until much later than I, and then he only heard a key being inserted in his door. Being a New Yorker, he kept the catch on and wouldn't open up. He rang the desk thinking he was being robbed, and no answer. Then he rang my room, and again no answer. So, concerned, he hid his passport and cash, and turned on CNN, only to see the police sharpshooters outside his window.. He was more traumatised than those of us being held hostage. He was alone - imagining an assault on his room at any moment, and all the while conjuring up means of escape in his mind. He stayed locked in his room until CNN showed the handcuffed gunmen being loaded into the Police bus - around lunchtime. He went off sightseeing for the afternoon (and wondered why all I wanted was to sleep. The Blue Mosque and the caviar sellers in the Egyptian Spice Market could wait). The following morning he responded to an invitation under his door to go meet the FBI and brief them on events. He was once more in his element.

The Sydney Morning Herald

They rounded us up at gunpoint: Australian hostages tell of terror

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Australian mining company executive Ian Burston was sleeping peacefully at a plush Istanbul hotel when it was raided by 13 heavily armed pro-Chechen gunman early yesterday morning.

What most would have expected to be just another annual international conference on iron ore mining and marketing, albeit in an exotic location, had turned into a frightening ordeal.

There were 11 Australian delegates and spouses at the Turkish city's Swissotel as it was attacked.

Some of the other Australians avoided the drama because they decided to see Istanbul by night or visit local restaurants after the conference's welcoming party.

By early last night Sydney time, just before a negotiated end to the siege, contact had been made with seven of the Australians on their mobile phones by family members, friends or colleagues.

"They rounded everyone up and got us out of our bedrooms and herded us into the foyer," Mr Burston told the Herald by telephone.

"They were all armed with shotguns or rifles or pistols, and most of us thought it would last for a few days.

"They were quite straightforward and said they didn't want to hurt anyone but needed to make a statement. It was fairly tense

until they realised they had made their point."

The 120 hostages were held for 12 hours at gunpoint in the hotel's conference room, but Mr Burston said that once a settlement had been negotiated the rebels "made a nice speech" and said they were sorry for disrupting the plans of all the guests.

"Now that I've had a shower and a shave I feel much better," said Mr Burston, the executive director of Portman. "I guess the chances of this happening twice in one lifetime are pretty low, so it will just make a good story now."

The gunmen, who were protesting against Russian military action in Chechnya, had warned that the situation would turn "into a mess" if Turkish security forces intervened.

But after negotiations with the Interior Minister, Mr Sadettin Tantan, all hostages were released in good condition and 13 suspects detained.

The suspected ringleader was Muhammet Tokcan, a Turkish citizen of Chechen origin who hijacked a Russian ferry carrying 200 passengers off Turkey's Black Sea coast in 1996.

Witnesses said guests screamed and ran in panic when the gunmen entered the lobby, firing rounds into the area.

Mr **Michael Musgrave**, a retired Sydney man, had returned to the hotel from dinner to be greeted by gunmen who told him to put his hands over his head and lie face down on the floor.

He said all the hostages were made to lie down for the first two hours of the 12-hour siege, but were allowed to sit up after that.

Drinking water was distributed, as was bread, cheese and cigarettes, while some hostages were allowed to visit their rooms to collect medication.

"There were a few frightening moments," Mr **Musgrave** said.

"They threw a metal detector into the main revolving door, which made a huge noise. I didn't hear gunfire, but someone else said the front plate glass window had been shot out.

"But they didn't push us around or hurt anyone."

While BHP said it had four employees at the conference, Rio Tinto said it had 11 people there, and Portman said it had three.

The chairman of Portman, Mr George Jones, told The Age that he was in bed with his wife, Penny, when the five-star hotel with 600 guests was raided.

"They went around dragging people out of their hotel rooms, and they just missed ours," Mr Jones said.

"They were on our floor. Our floor was the lobby floor, so we were probably within 50 metres of where it was all happening."

Mr Jones said the first he learned of the drama was at 4am, when he was woken by a phone call from his Perth office after news of what was happening was carried by CNN and the BBC.

He and his wife locked themselves in their room. "It obviously wasn't safe. I didn't even stick my neck out to find out."

The couple only had food and drink in the mini-bar and had been wondering how long that would last.

"I'm standing in the lobby, and there's bullet holes all in the glass at the front ... there's quite a few holes through this door," Mr Jones said.

Colleagues of West Australian businessman Mr Christopher McSweeney said he was returning to the hotel when police stopped him and told him to seek alternative accommodation. He ended staying at a nearby hotel.

The chief operating officer of BHP Minerals, Mr Bob Kirkby, said: "We are extremely pleased that everyone is safe and the incident has been resolved."

While the hostages were being held at gunpoint, the gunmen progressively released women, children and local residents as the

negotiations continued.

A fax from the the hotel's business centre, in Turkish, said their action was aimed at ending the ``bloody and dirty Russian attack on our homeland the Caucasus"

``We will not shed blood," it said. ``If one drop of blood is shed we will not be responsible in the least. The politicians, soldiers and bureaucrats who order this possible operation will be."

Some of the Australian delegates said they thought the conference was unlikely to continue. but said they still planned to go to Gallipoli for the dawn ANZAC service tomorrow.