

The following are my notes of Donna Mulhearn's presentations, Toowoomba 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2004. Any errors, misquotations and omissions are mine. – Neil Godfrey

**“I am a pacifist. I believe if we are serious about being a pacifist we must be willing to take the same risks for peace as we do for war.”** – Donna

## **Donna Mulhearn's Toowoomba Presentation**

*These notes are taken from the presentation at USQ, 6<sup>th</sup> October. I have added other notes from the presentation of the prior evening in Toowoomba out of sequence separately at the end.*

Donna wanted to tell of the challenges of getting through a day in Iraq. D's experiences are mostly in Baghdad, but advised listeners to keep in mind that it is worse outside Baghdad. Donna had been in Baghdad before the war (went as part of the human shield movement) so was able to compare pre and post war conditions.

### **Turning on the light**

First thing on waking in morning: turn on a light switch, and hope something happens – often nothing happens. This is a country that has been used to modern appliances and technology. Iraqis even seemed a little technology-mad. It is a harsh climate, extremes of temperature, so electricity has become a necessity. Imagine no fans, and children screaming and parents unable to apply cold water to cool them. Hundreds have died from heat exhaustion in Baghdad this summer. Parents take shifts they can continue fanning their babies all night long.

Yet in 1991 Baghdad was bombed and all power centres were destroyed then. (This war they were only damaged.) Yet after the 1991 war the electricity was restored within 3 months.

There is evidence to suggest that power is not being fully restored as a means of collective punishment. Americans routinely report that they have cut off power to centres they believe harbour those opposed to them. e.g. just prior to their assault on Fallujah. Surgeons in Fallujah used cigarette lighters and torches for emergency surgery. Same applies to Najaff, Sammara, .... someone turns the power off. and on in those places, too.

Another reason for no power: The Coalition intends to privatize hundreds of Iraq's formerly state-owned utilities (oil, power, etc.). So the thinking seems to be Why should we fix the power now when whoever buys the utility will want to use their own equipment to repair and add to it.

## **Turning on the tap**

Water: First realize Iraq is/was not a Third World country. Before the war one could drink from the tap. Now either there is no water or it is dirty if from the tap. Now many have died from cholera and dysentery, diseases that were unseen for decades in Iraq. Now a middle class household cannot afford to buy bottled water.

Many Iraqis are now saying that they want the old Iraq back.

## **Crossing the city**

At this point Donna began the slide presentation. First image was a Baghdad street, littered with rubbish, rolls of razor wire left strewn across part of the street in the foreground. A journey that once took 10 to 15 minutes across town now took 2 to 3 hours. A trip that once took 2 to 3 hours now took all day to do it.

Coalition forces block the highway apparently at a whim. Donna asked soldiers with a tank blocking a main intersection at peak hour traffic time why they were blocking the road then. She reported that one of them replied: Because we can. 350 people were waiting to pass. It appeared to Donna as a psychological ploy, to show who was in charge.

## **Petrol**

Petrol: One sees cars queueing for petrol 7 to 8 hours, stretching 2 to 3 kilometers down the road. Taxi drivers have to leave at 2 to 3 a.m. to get a full tank by mid-day. Yet this is a place where oil is in such abundance it can be seen on the ground. It costs 25 cents to fill a car.

## **“A blanket of violence”**

The worst part about life in Iraq is psychological, the emotional side. Leaving home in the morning one lives with the sick feeling of wondering if one will come home alive. There are no safe zones. U.S. forces actually attract violence by their presence – whether foot patrols, tanks, choppers. Parents fear to send their kids to schools. Before the war cafes would be open till late at night, now they close at 5 or earlier.

“A blanket of violence has settled on Baghdad.” People are living in fear – fear wondering if a husband or children will come home. People are emotionally exhausted, on the brink. They have had one and a half years of this. They want the same things we do. They feel betrayed and humiliated and want to get the foreigners out of Iraq.

## **Homeless boys**

Donna showed a slide photograph of several smiling Iraqi boys with her.

Donna said she needed to have an excuse for her mother, who wouldn't let her go, to return to Iraq. This came when she was notified of homeless kids on the streets. Before the war there was no homeless for kids in Iraq. Now there are hundreds.

Aid groups have been leaving in droves since the UN was bombed. There were also girls among the homeless children, but these have now been taken off the streets by mosques and churches.

The homeless boys she met were tough kids, living in basements on concrete floors with their filth. They were violent, living with drugs, weapons, robbing and begging to survive. At first Donna/her group bought them a meal a day just to enable them to reduce their need to rob or beg by just a little. They were always filthy. Donna's group shocked staff at a hotel when they took a group of them in to have showers before being given new clothes.

There were 20 takers of the offer of Donna's shelter to house these boys. The conditions they made on the boys for acceptance was that they stop their drugs and violence. What the boys loved was lots of holding hands and one on one time. So she spent many hours playing snakes and ladders with them. They wanted clothes, DVD players, but especially hugs.

### **Achmed**

One time one of the boys (Achmed?) punched his fist through a window and began slashing his arm with a piece of broken glass. When spoken to he said he was "angry at everything." He was put into sport and shone with talent and leadership. Told one day that he could represent Iraq at the Olympics he replied nonchalantly, "I know" – he was good at all sports, esp soccer, which he said he wanted to enter seriously.

### **Leggo and drawings**

Another picture showed the boys playing with Leggo. This is what they should be playing with. They had been earlier playing with bullet shells and tossing razor wire at each other.

The boys did lots of drawings. Their drawings were always filled with scenes of violence and battles. These were always around them, tanks and bombs. Also their drawings always had a palm tree and a sun, emblems of Iraq, and always an Iraqi soldier holding a flag and a gun with his foot on an American soldier. In their drawings Iraq always wins. They are very proud.

### **Nation of kids**

46% of the population of Iraq are below the age of 16. That is, this is a war on a nation of kids. It is a nation of people riddled with post traumatic stress disorders – whether 3 or 6 or 7 years old. Constantly one hears choppers, tanks, and bombs. There were 8 or 9 bombs a day going off in Baghdad. Now the situation is worse.

### **The work of Donna and her friends**

Drawing, also ceramics, art and theatre, and computers and music, helps the boys express themselves – such opportunities were provided them to help them deal with their emotional states.

The home for these boys was built to hold 250. When it opened 400 turned up. 750 now go to its facilities. It is funded by Australians – raffles and dinners are held to raise money.

### **Baghdad City**

Baghdad was clean and beautiful. Now it is littered with sewage, razor wire, concrete barriers. Not pleasant having one's clothes, skirt, torn by the razor wire. And many kids are injured by it as they try to get past it. Every 2 or 3 blocks one sees houses reduced to rubble.

### **Bombing victim: a soldier? Donna? ... an Iraqi.**

Photo of a covered body in street outside a shop, with a crowd around. The man had been buying cigarettes at the shop when his head was split in two by a bomb blast. Donna had been planning to go to that same shop to buy some milk but thanks to her habit of not being able to start the day without a shower she was delayed and thus missed being the victim by 10 minutes. The Iraqis nearby were discussing who was responsible for the bombing, as they always do when this happens. But as always they all ended up agreeing that the Americans were to blame. Their logic is simple and compelling: the bombers are here now because the Americans are here. They never had them before the Americans came, so the Americans must go.

Photo of the American military vehicle which was the target of the blast. It's window is shattered and a soldier sits inside with the door open.

### **Tale of two soldiers**

Photo of an American soldier standing at the scene of the above bombing. He looks worried, feeling emotional. Donna saw two categories of soldiers there, though there are some in between these two types. She asked this soldier how he felt seeing the Iraqi body there, knowing that the bomb had been intended to kill him, the soldier, instead. Soldier replied: "I don't want to be here. I have family at home and want to be with them. What's this all about?"

The other type of soldier is more the Schwarzenegger type: he points his gun at Donna, and Iraqis, keeping them at their distance from him. He is cold and threatening to all. It's his way of coping, surviving. He will be the type who will be having post traumatic stress disorder problems when he returns to America.

### **The military presence**

When Donna speaks to soldiers she can do so in a challenging way and speak badly about them in a way that Iraqis cannot. Donna can take photos of them against the army orders, but not the Iraqis. If they do express criticism of the soldiers they can expect to have their homes raided at night, the women and children forced out into the street in their nightware (very shameful for a Moslem woman), and the men taken off to Abu Grahib (and we all know what happens in Abu Grahib) for some days or weeks or months or never to be released as yet. This reminds Iraqis of the days of Saddam – they are still terrified to speak. What has changed in that score? When Donna challenges the soldiers in a peaceful way the always got applause from the Iraqis.

Choppers: There are always 4 or 5 in the air over Baghdad all day and night. The noise is so loud that one cannot hear oneself speak. And they hover over one house at a time at night, too, in the dark. The noise is so disturbing that people end up shaking their fists at them. Their purpose appears to be to intimidate the population, to remind them of the American domination. Their noise and presence is oppressive.

### **Squatters**

Photo of a squatters' camp: Squatters, those who have lost everything because of the war, live in vacant farm lands or burnt out buildings. This photo was of squatters in tents surrounded by land drenched in open sewage. Donna gave these squatters \$200 to buy some pipes and tools to build a drainage system and change their lives for the better. The aid and reconstruction budget is a joke in Iraq. \$18 billion has been claimed to have been allocated for aid for Iraqis but so far only a smallest fraction of it has been spent, mostly on security guards (private mercenaries, called "civilian contractors" by officials and the media) to protect the staff of Halliburton and Bechtel there. These private mercenaries are from South Africa, some from Australia's SAS, and earn about \$1000 a day.

Donna is to return to Iraq in 6 weeks and will focus on the lot of the squatters.

### **Siege of Fallujah**

The siege of Fallujah was a massacre, not only from the bombing and artillery. The town was shut off so no foreign media was allowed to enter. Snipers shot anything that they thought moved, including ambulances. Most ambulances in Fallujah were destroyed. The Pentagon denied Donna's report of this (the shooting at ambulances) but the photo showed 4(?) bullet holes in the rear door of an ambulance.

The US only ever controlled a quarter of the city. US cut off the hospital there so that only US troops could be treated in it; Iraqi wounded were denied access to it and had to small doctor surgeries and other homes for treatment. With no electricity surgeons would work on patients by the light of cigarette lighters. The Fallujah morgues were overflowing, and 2 cemeteries had to be dug in football fields. Non-stop the bodies would be coming in for treatment at these makeshift surgeries. Most of them could not be saved. A couple of thousand civilians and fighters were killed by Donna's estimate. CNN was not there so this was not a story elsewhere. Patients she saw being carried in were children, women, men in suits (clearly not fighters).

Photo of a very young girl with a gun, with clear anger in her eyes.

Story of an 82 year old grandma who was holding a white flag when she was shot: she had been trying to reach her grandchild who had been shot and was lying in the street.

Men took up guns for fear of the soldiers who were coming to enter into their homes. Every man was willing to fight.

### **Shot at trying to deliver aid**

Donna was in Fallujah trying to deliver aid to the wounded. Donna and her friends were begged by Iraqis to do this, the Iraqis insisting that since they were white they would be able to do it without getting shot. In response Donna and her friends filled an ambulance with food and aid to take to those hiding in the buildings. They then walked ahead to announce their presence, holding their passports, their hands high in the air, with loud speakers, to declare who they were and their intention to deliver the aid. 2 bullets shot over their heads in response. They dived to the ground, picked themselves up and scrambled away, bleeding from where they had gashed themselves in their fall. But once together again, they grew indignant, saying that the soldiers can't do that, that they can't shoot at those delivering aid to the wounded in war, Geneva Conventions, etc.... and with the adrenalin rush they became angry and motivated to try once again. This time they faced the soldiers, knowing know where they were after the shots fired last time. This time, 4 bullets fired just above their heads was the response. They took this as a definite No to their request to be allowed to deliver the aid, and did not try again.

### **"I want you to tell Australians my story"**

Photo of a family inside a tent: they had just buried the eldest son and father(?). Donna was visiting them as part of her mission to build bridges between Iraqis and Australians, to tell them that many Australians opposed the war. One man asked Donna to tell us his story:

None of his family now had shoes. All barefoot. (A shame for the provider of family.) A young boy had deep wounds on his back from when he had to be pulled quickly through razor wire as they were escaping the bombing of their homestead and farm by the Americans. The man said that under Saddam, if

people were politically active, they could suffer. If they were quiet, they were free to enjoy the ballet, theatres, operas, poetry houses, etc. He was one of the politically active ones under Saddam, and his brother and uncle were killed by Saddam. When Saddam fell he was hopeful and looked forward to the time then when the Americans go and a new Iraq could be built. Why are the Americans still here? he asked. "They destroyed my farm and my house.... what is our sin?" Donna heard often: Life was hard under Saddam but the Iraqi speaking would give anything today to have him back in power. Donna: How could the US stuff up so badly! Under the Americans, this man had no future, no hope anymore, no future for his children any more. All that was left for him was to fight till the last American soldier leaves the country. He was not a Saddam loyalist or a Baathist or a foreigner (as Rumsfeld insists are those fighting the Americans in Iraq.)

## **Two film horrors**

Film footage (leaked by an American soldier) showing a heat camera (hence black and white) shot from a military helicopter. The film is also available via Robert Fisk, on the internet. It is footage that shows, with sound, the American gunners taking deliberate aim at a truck and tractor, at unarmed men, including one lying on the ground wounded from a previous hit, to kill them one by one. (Of course shooting to kill a wounded man is another war crime.) The target men were not attempting to fight back, carried no weapons, and appeared to be civilians going about their daily rounds.

Another photo showed the effects of a cluster bomb. A 15 year old boy had picked one up and held it between his legs. He was blind in one eye, lost both hands, and appeared to be 'wiped out' at the genital area.

## **Captured by militia: What Iraqis think of Australia**

What Iraqis think of Australia's involvement: Howard is reported extensively in Iraqi media. Iraqis ask what Australia's reward was for going to war there.

Donna was captured with a British and American by local militia there. The Brit and the American were put to one side and the Australian, Donna, was singled out. Donna wondered if the militia leader was going to cry when he approached her. Why did Australia come here with guns, to kill Iraqis? he asked. He had thought we were friends, - - soccer, trade. Donna told him that thousands opposed the war. Then how could he (Howard) do it then? he asked. The people did not endorse the war, nor did Parliament, explained Donna. And you want to teach us democracy? he scoffed.

Iraqis are hurt by Australia's involvement. They had thought we were friends. Why do we have Australians there with guns? they wonder.

The withdrawal of Spain was applauded in Iraq. The militia leader on hearing of the coming election in Australia said "God willing ALP will become President (sic) in Australia."

They are very interested in Australia's election. It is not a matter of 'academic discussion' or debate – we are clearly an increased likely target since our involvement in the war. Donna went to Iraq before the war, and was at first greatly welcomed there. Now they want Donna to explain Australia's involvement.

### **The reason for Donna's presentation**

Donna's hope was that though we may be disturbed by the talk we had just heard, that we are also empowered by it: to stay engaged with the Iraqi people; to seek the withdrawal of the troops, who represent judgment; and to seek to send humanitarian aid, which represents friendship.

### **And more...**

*The following includes other parts of Donna's above presentation not in sequence, some points from the presentation the evening before, and some responses to questions, some from personal discussion after the talk. – Neil Godfrey*

### **Threat of civil war? Support for the insurgency?**

90% of the Iraqi population support the insurgency. 10,000 were in Abu Grahیب as political prisoners; only 20% of those are foreign fighters (Syrians, Jordanians).

If the Americans leave the violence would halve overnight, including that from foreign terrorists, too.

There is no threat of a civil war.

There is a widespread popular Iraq Democracy Movement (womens' groups, unions, teachers,...) doing workshops and training daily to prepare for democracy. They are capable and ready and willing. They want Iraq to be a secular democratic state; they don't want to become like Iran. We don't hear about this here.

### **Role of Iran, the UN, Bremer ....**

Iran may want to influence religious agenda in Iraq but not the political.

UN is not trusted; it is seen as pro-US; maybe hope for a UN role if they could get respect back among Iraqis.

Bremer was called by Iraqis the "white Saddam".

Depleted uranium has been removed from the Green Zone. This is another story.

## **The Australian area in Baghdad**

The Australian embassy is a fortress – the embassy staff don't meet the Iraqi people – visits are run quickly.... but the people are so traumatized....

Australian area of Baghdad: She said it is a safer area in Baghdad, the building housing the soldiers is opposite the embassy -- it cannot be seen from outside for all the trees etc, although if one looks closely one can see the barrels of guns/tanks pointing out. There is a large hotel opposite the embassy housing many. Also she said the Australian embassy staff never go out anywhere and if they do it is always with 2 "tanks" and ten armed soldiers, which she says only attracts unwelcome attention to them. Compared the Brits who came to visit her work (home for homeless kids in Baghdad) who came in plain clothes and jeep, even the soldiers in plain clothes, though wearing bullet-proof vests. She had to cancel the visit of the Australian embassy staff after they first did a dummy run, because the way it was to be done threatened the peace and security of the area she is trying to help build.-- tanks and soldiers guarding someone "special" only attracting unwanted attention of anyone who would be prepared to launch a missile at them.

## **Response to Howard's claims**

There is no 'normal' life there, she said. Howard talks (Howard's pre-election flyer mailed to all Australians spoke of rosy conditions in Iraq – schools opening, mobiles owned...) of mobiles and universities and schools opening, but she says most mobiles don't work, and unis and schools lack equipment and most staff and are almost still very empty despite being declared 'open'.

## **When the Americans left....**

When the Americans have been forced out of a city even temporarily (as in Fallujah -- imagine a city the size of Toowoomba forcing the American army out!) peace and normal life was restored -- children back in the streets playing, citizens working and going about without fear... but when the Americans return it is another daily series of massacres.

## Other reports by Donna Mulhearn

An article by Donna

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=2400>

An interview with Donna

<http://www.catholicweekly.com.au/03/nov/2/19.html>

ABC Radio's story (with photographs, links)

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/history/streets/stories/s1188594.htm>

### **Donna's response to Howard's pre-election claims about Iraq:**

Feel free to forward this information on, and use it to write letters to Government members challenging the claims. Tell them it was written by someone who was there...

**Claim: Electricity, water, telephone and sanitation systems have been restored to at least pre-war levels.**

Fact: Electricity in pre-war Iraq was constant and reliable. Now it is intermittent, unpredictable and barely there. Iraqis are furious that power is still erratic almost 18 months since the invasion.

Fact: Water quality in Iraq before the war was excellent. Now it is appalling. Often, in Baghdad, when you turn on your tap nothing comes out. If something dribbles out it is brown and contaminated. Outside Baghdad people are drinking from the rivers. All over Iraq hundreds of people, mostly children, have died from water-related diseases not seen in Iraq for decades. These diseases are at epidemic levels.

Fact: Sanitation before the war was of a high standard. Now there are large pools of raw sewerage in the streets in most neighbourhoods. In squatter camps, people are forced to live amongst their own waste. Hundreds of children and adults are dying as a result.

**Claim: Mobile phones, once outlawed, are being sold at the rate of 15,000 a week.**

Fact: Indeed, Iraqis have outlaid a huge investment to purchase mobile phones from Iraqna, an Egyptian company who currently have a monopoly on providing mobile services in Baghdad. But most of the time the service simply doesn't work. Iraqis are outraged at the appalling service provided by the incompetent Iraqna, given the over-priced fees that average Iraqis are forced to pay in US currency. On any given day there are queues of angry Iraqis outside Iraqna offices complaining that they have been robbed and cheated. Many Iraqis end up throwing the phone away.

Most landlines are still not functioning after all the exchanges were bombed during the invasion.

**Claim: All the universities are open and 2,500 schools have been rehabilitated.**

Fact: Of the universities that remain open, many classrooms are lifeless and empty. Students might turn up but many professors have simply left, or were sacked by the coalition. Science labs, medical faculties etc have no equipment for practical lessons. Students are demoralized.

The majority of schools are in various states of disrepair and do not have the equipment or books required for lessons. Some schools have reported any hasty 'renovations' to be shabby and incomplete.

Many students don't turn up because their parents are too afraid to send them to school because of the chaos and violence on the streets.

Teachers also attribute the high drop-out rate among students to poverty and the need for children to contribute to the family's income.

Psychological problems related to trauma, which is widespread among children, are also an issue.

**Claim: All 240 hospitals as well as 1,200 health clinics are operating. As of March 2004, vaccination against preventable diseases was 70 percent completed.**

Fact: It is untrue to say that all hospitals are open as coalition forces regularly shut down hospitals in areas where there are high levels of conflict. Examples of areas that have had hospitals closed down by US military include Sadr City, Fallujah and Najaf.

The hospitals and clinics function without equipment and medicines. Preventable diseases have sky-rocketed since the invasion due to poor hygiene and contaminated water.

**Claim: Some 194 city councils have been established since July 2003.**

Fact: City Councils are considered irrelevant as the coalition controls any major decisions for cities.

**Claim: Crude oil production is already at pre-war levels with the benefits flowing directly to the Iraqi people. Real GDP is forecast to grow by 30 percent in 2004.**

Fact: The reality is the supply of petrol to Iraq is so poor that Iraqis queue for seven to eight hours in order to full their cars.

**Claim: There is an independent media with over 120 newspapers and wide access to the internet and satellite TV.**

Fact: There is no freedom of speech in Iraq. Media outlets that express opinions critical of the coalition are closed down and broadcasters are censored or deported from the country.

Internet access was available in Iraq before the war. **Claim: In March, the Iraqi Governing Council adopted new laws protecting basic human rights. The transfer of power to the new Iraqi Government has been endorsed unanimously by the UN Security Council. On the 28th June, the new Iraqi Government assumed authority with national elections planned for next year.**

Fact: The Iraqi Governing Council was dismissed by the Iraqi community as a group of Ali Babas (thieves). Being out of Iraq for up to 20 years, they held foreign passports and were known only by their criminal records and bad reputations.

Basic human rights do not exist in Iraq.

The new Iraqi Government is widely considered to be illegitimate as is the coalition's election plans.

Conclusion: Iraq is in chaos. The people are bitter that the entire fabric of their community has been destroyed. Basic services are not available.

Unemployment is high, people live in poverty. They are angry that the borders are open for foreign terrorists to enter and that violence is out of control.

Iraqis long for the foreign military occupation to end, for basic services to be restored and for peace and security to return to their neighbourhoods.

A survey conducted by the coalition forces revealed that the majority of Iraqis support the resistance against the occupation and will continue to fight, in either the armed struggle or the non-violent political struggle, until the occupation ends. *Australians, we've had a setback, but let's continue our struggle for truth and humanity.*

*And let's ask the question: Do we really need a war on terror that uses terror as its weapon? How about a war on ignorance, false claims and misconceptions!*

*A war on the lies that hurt people from all walks of life, whether they are Iraqi or American. And our weapons? Truth and humanity.*

Your pilgrim Donna