

Children overboard

TWO WOMEN, TWO STORIES

In the six years since the “children overboard” affair first confronted the nation, nearly all the people on board that overcrowded Indonesian fishing vessel have been given permanent residency in Australia. The majority of them live today in Sydney and Melbourne, although a few families have built new lives for themselves in Perth. **David Leser** speaks to one of the asylum seekers and to a young woman who helped rescue them on that historic day.



Above: The rescue of asylum seekers from the sinking Olong in October 2001. Opposite: Hawraa Alsaai, 18, her younger sister Banin, and mother Widad, at home in Melbourne.

IF YOU WERE TO MEET Hawraa Alsaai, there would be nothing in her smiling countenance, nothing in her dancing brown eyes to reveal the catalogue of horrific experiences she has been through. At first glance, the most you would probably see is a pretty young woman attending university by day, returning home at night to her sick parents and younger sister, making friends quickly, finding her way slowly in the new world. Only after gentle prodding and only after six years of her having said nothing to anyone, would the truth slowly emerge. The truth of how she and her family fled the killing fields of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and found their way to Australia via five other countries, including Indonesia. A journey to hell and back.

It was in Indonesia that Hawraa, then 12 years old, boarded the rickety old fishing vessel, the Olong, with her father, mother and seven-year-old sister, in the desperate hope of getting to Australia. Even then, to

her untrained eyes, Hawraa could tell the boat was not seaworthy. “I thought it would break down as soon as I stepped on it,” she recalls to *The Weekly* now in the cramped but welcoming confines of her family’s inner-city Melbourne apartment. “Everyone had got on the boat except me and one other girl. We were the last to get on because it didn’t look safe and there was hardly anywhere to sit.”

Hawraa had no idea – how could she? – that she, her family and the other 215 Iraqi asylum seekers on board that vessel were about to sail into Australian political history. On the day their boat edged itself out into the inky night, the Australian prime minister, John Howard, called a federal election, indicating that border protection was going to be the centrepiece of his re-election strategy. Hawraa’s boat, soon to be named SIEV 4 (standing for Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel number 4), was to be the first test of this new policy.

“We were four days on boat,” Hawraa’s father, Ali, a former government clerk in Iraq, says in his broken English. “It seemed >>>



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more like a week,” Hawraa counters with a confidence that belies her 18 years. “My mum had little snacks in her bag, but [apart from that] there was no food and we all got seasick. Everyone was throwing up and we were all so thirsty because there was hardly any water on board.

“Also we couldn’t sleep,” she continues, “because we were right near the engine.” What kept Hawraa’s spirits alive was the prospect that they would soon find safe harbour and thus end the nightmare that had begun with their panic-stricken flight from Iraq a month earlier. (Already, Hawraa’s two uncles had been tortured and killed by Saddam’s Ba’athist guards and Hawraa’s father was next on the list.)

The first contact with Australia came the following day, on October 6, 2001, with the sighting of the “big ship”, as Hawraa calls it. It was the Australian frigate, the HMAS Adelaide. By this stage, all the children on board had become dehydrated and weak from hunger. Their parents were pleading to be taken aboard the HMAS Adelaide, but the crew were under strict instructions to turn the boat around.

“We just wanted to get help, to get off the boat,” Hawraa says, “but they brought us food and water bottles, and then told us to turn back to Indonesia. We were scared. We told them we couldn’t go back after what we had been through.”

For six years, Hawraa has refused to talk about her ordeal, even to her new Australian friends, but the recent granting of a permanent visa to her family, plus her admission into an Australian university, has given her the confidence to finally tell her story.

Besides, as she tells *The Weekly* now, “It doesn’t hurt as much as it used to.” What she means is she can now bear to recall how sick and terrified she was, how she nearly drowned and how she and her family lost everything in the water that day – jewellery, clothes, documents, soft toys ...

By the dawn of October 8, the fishing vessel’s engine had stopped and the two main pumps had ceased working. There was a gaping hole in the hull and another below the waterline. Passengers had been bailing and pumping all night and day, but the water had still kept rising. In total, there were 56 children on board, including a three-week-old infant and a 12-week-old baby. The hysteria was mounting.

One woman had begun vomiting blood. Others had been threatening to suicide. The men had been begging the sailors to rescue their wives and children for the past 24 hours, but the navy had its orders – no one was to be rescued unless the boat had sunk and everyone was in the water. (This order was to be ignored later, when two desperate mothers pushed their babies into the arms of two sailors as the boat was foundering.)

By about 5pm, the fishing vessel began to

break up and the asylum seekers were ordered to abandon ship. “I didn’t want to jump,” Hawraa says. “I saw everyone jumping in and I was so scared looking at the water.”

Hawraa was the last person to throw herself into the sea. Just before she did, she noticed the shape of a person dropping into the ocean from the second deck of the frigate. It was an awesome sight. “I saw that lady jump into the water to rescue people,” she says with incredulity.

Laura Whittle grew up in Tasmania and joined the Australian Navy in 1999, aged 17. It was the only thing she ever really wanted to do. On October 6, 2001, she was the navigator’s yeoman and gunner on board HMAS Adelaide, when it happened to spot a small wooden fishing vessel heading towards Christmas Island. Initially, she couldn’t see how many people were on board, but it would have made no difference – HMAS Adelaide was invested with the task of keeping boats like this out of

Australian waters, as part of the federal government’s new border protection policy.

This boat, however, was proving stubborn. The boarding party that had come bearing food and water failed to get the captain to turn back towards Indonesia. People were yelling and screaming for help. It was now up to Laura to show them the other face of the Australian warship.

“I fired some warning shots to show them we meant business,” Laura recalls now, speaking publicly for the first time about an incident that has long tormented her. “We could see their faces and the screaming was just horrific. They were yelling, ‘Help us!’ and, at one point, it was more deafening than the 50-calibre machine gun.”

Laura readily admits that, at this stage of the stand-off, she was largely indifferent to the asylum seekers’ fates. She had a job to do and that was to keep illegal vessels out.

“I can remember thinking – and this is a horrible thought – ‘Just go away, I want to go off watch and go to sleep’. At that time, I wasn’t thinking about them as people.” At least not until a father suddenly appeared >>>



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HMAS Adelaide crew member, Laura Whittle, jumped 12 metres into choppy seas to rescue the asylum seekers.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIP BLACKWOOD.

on the upper level of the fishing vessel holding his young daughter in his arms.

"When I saw that man with his daughter, it just made my heart melt," Laura recalls now. "The girl had on a pink jacket and she had curly hair, and it was like the father was saying to our guys in the inflatable rafts, 'Take her, take her'. That was the gesture he was making – 'Just take her'. It was like 'Give her a chance' and it was then that I moved out of work mode and the humanity began to kick in.

"I thought, 'He just wants to save his little girl. He just wants her to have a better life.' The boat was jam-packed full of people and people were screaming out, but he stood out – a tall figure holding his little girl – and it was sort of surreal. Everything just went quiet."

Shortly afterwards, the boat began to break up and sink. Laura Whittle was stunned into action. "I was standing next to Commander [Norman] Banks and he



Refugees from the sinking Indonesian fishing boat being rescued by sailors from HMAS Adelaide.

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was overwhelmed, and I was thinking, 'I have to do something', and so I took my boots off and looked at Commander Banks, and he looked at me as if to say, 'Yes, please, do it', and so I leaped off."

Laura Whittle had decided to jump into the Indian Ocean without a lifejacket and from a height of 12 metres, roughly equivalent to a four storey building. It was a leap of frightening, epic proportions, especially given the choppy seas, the undertow from the ship and the number of bodies floundering below.

"I remember pin dropping and, when I hit the water, I was thinking 'Oh, my God' ... I kept going down and didn't think I would ever come back up."

Once she had surfaced, Laura began pulling people into the life raft, only to realise that, a few metres away, a woman and her son were about to go under. The woman's name was Fadeelah Al Hussaini and her eight year-old son, Hassan.

"Putting a name to the face ... well, it makes it more human, doesn't it?" Laura says now, visibly overcome with the impact of learning the names of those she rescued. "I'm just overwhelmed hearing their names ... I could see her struggling with her child and I knew they needed help. It all happened so fast, but it was like someone had to do something. It was just commotion out there ... but it all started for me from the minute that man held up his little girl.

"That's when I started to think differently, 'How could somebody be so desperate to do something like this, to head towards the unknown with their children on a rickety boat and to put everything at risk?' They

must have been coming from something terrible and it made me think, 'This isn't right, this isn't how things should be'."

After their dramatic rescue at sea, Hawraa and her family, together with the other 215 Iraqi asylum seekers, were transferred to a basketball hall on Christmas Island, where they were kept for 11 days while the details of their secret transfer to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea were thrashed out. "They told us we were going to Sydney," Hawraa says now, unable to conceal her dismay. "And we were dancing and singing. That was the first day we slept because everyone was so relieved. But then they put us on a plane and we were taken to Manus Island."

When the doors of the plane opened, the asylum seekers were greeted with a blast of hot air and the sight of a group of Papuans with beetlenut-red teeth ordering them out the doors. "I was really scared," Hawraa continues. "I could see black people with red in their teeth and I thought it was blood in their mouths. I thought they were going to kill us."

For the next three months, the family was housed in a disused World War II naval base and it was here that Hawraa became increasingly sick with what was eventually diagnosed as diabetes. "One day, I went into a coma," she recalls. "I was just standing near the door and everything just went blank. I can remember screaming my mum's name, being caught from behind and then waking up in bed."

The conditions were appalling. For the first few weeks, drinking water was scarce, the food barely edible and the second-hand clothes putrid. After one-and-a-half months, they were given a television set, only to be confronted with the greatest indignity of all – to their horror, they discovered they'd been accused by the Australian government of throwing their children into the sea.

"I was very angry and upset and hurt when I saw this," says Hawraa's father, Ali Alsaai, speaking to *The Weekly* with the help of his daughter's translation skills. "I couldn't believe that the prime minister would lie to 20 million people. Why would we throw our children into the water?" His wife, Widad, a nurse by training, opens her palms in a gesture of disbelief and says quite simply, "I love my children".

The accusations only served to reinforce the deep resentment the asylum seekers were already feeling towards the government. Cut off from lawyers and the media, there was no way of correcting the record.

After three-and-a-half months on Manus Island, Hawraa was sent to a hospital in Cairns and her family placed under guard in a nearby hotel. Shortly after their arrival, Hawraa's mother prevailed on the guards to let them telephone her three sons, Hawraa's three brothers, in Iraq. When she finally got through to them, she discovered to her horror that – in the absence of any news from Indonesia or Australia – she and her family had all been given funerals in Iraq. "Everyone started crying on the phone," Hawraa says. "They all thought we were dead."

Four months after arriving in Cairns, the family was transferred to Melbourne's Maribyrnong Detention Centre, where they would remain for the next one-and-a-half years. For five months, they would be housed in one small room, a condition which >>>



While her daughters have adapted well to their new home, Widad, a trained nurse, agonises over the fate of her three sons still in Iraq.

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being under guard, they didn’t know what to do sometimes without it. “I was so used to having someone watch me all the time that I was always looking around to see who was beside me,” Hawraa says.

Hawraa excelled in her studies and was able to make lasting friendships at Footscray City College. To the former Year 8 coordinator, Peter Noss, she was a credit both to the school and to her family. “She was the best student,” he tells *The Weekly* now. “When she came to us, she was only speaking English for a couple of months and she became so good. All she ever wanted to do was become a doctor, so she could help people.”

After returning to Australia from PNG, Hawraa and her family had moved into a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Footscray, furnished with donations from charity groups such as St Vincent de Paul. Peter could see how impoverished they were. He decided to broach the subject with Hawraa herself.

“Hawraa came to school one day and I asked her what she’d had for lunch. She told me she’d had an egg. I said, ‘Well, I’m coming around tonight to see what food you have’ and when I got there and opened the fridge door, the only thing they had in it was water. That was just after they’d been released from the detention centre. So I passed the hat around among the teachers and we raised \$500, just to give them a bit of dignity.”

Hawraa and her family live gratefully, but certainly, with their mixed blessings. On the one hand, they agonise over the fate of Hawraa’s three brothers and sister-in-law, who were forced to remain behind in Iraq when they fled. They know their home in Najaf has been destroyed, a cousin killed by a stray bullet and their country all but ruined.

Also, Hawraa’s parents have not been well. Ali, her father, has had heart surgery and her mother, Widad, struggles with diabetes and high cholesterol.

Against this is the fact that both daughters have adjusted well to their new country. Banin is happy in high school and, at the beginning of this year, Hawraa began a double major in biomedical science and engineering at Melbourne’s Swinburne University of Technology. She has decided not to become a doctor, but rather to pursue medical research. A few months ago, the family was given permanent residency.

Like all those on board that fishing vessel six years ago, the family still finds it difficult to understand how or why the Australian government allowed them to be so mistreated and why it was that they accused them of wanting to harm their children. “Why would we come here and then throw children into the water?” Hawraa says, speaking on behalf of all the parents on that boat. “That is what I couldn’t believe – that people would think this is true. That’s why I think he [Mr Howard] should apologise. It’s the least he could do because that hurts. It hurts very much.”

Tony Kevin, a former Australian diplomat, is among the many prominent Australians critical of the Howard government for its harsh approach to refugees over the past decade. His primary concern in the children overboard affair, however, has not been the use of incorrect photos, nor the false accusations made against the refugees, but rather the brinkmanship engaged in during that 24-hour period when Hawraa’s boat was at risk of sinking.

“What is remarkable,” he tells *The Weekly* now, “is not the brouhaha over misrepresented photos, but that 220-odd people were put in risk of their lives under the nose of one of our navy ships. That’s why the [HMAS Adelaide] crew became so distressed ... because they knew they had been forced to take part in a terribly wrong procedure. Those people were kept in their boat for 24 hours rather than allowed to be put on HMAS Adelaide for their safety. It’s a miracle that no one drowned.”

For Hawraa and her family, it’s a double miracle. Just before they left Indonesia on that ramshackle vessel, they held a family conference to see whether they should take the next boat heading for Christmas Island. “We nearly went on the next one, but we didn’t want to miss our chance,” Hawraa says.

The next boat was, of course, the vessel dubbed SIEV X, which left south Sumatra on October 18, crammed beyond capacity with 421 people, many of whom had been forced onto the vessel at gunpoint by Indonesian officials. The boat sank the following day, after a hellish night of desperate bailing and last, tearful prayers. Among the 353 people who perished were 150 women and children, a number of whom had relatives and friends on board Hawraa’s boat.

As one survivor was to recall later, wherever you looked, you could “see dead children like birds floating on the water”. To this day, we still don’t know their names. ■

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