

Saudi Babylon

Torture, Corruption and Cover-Up Inside
the House of Saud

Mark Hollingsworth with
Sandy Mitchell



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By Mark Hollingsworth

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PREFACE

'As the Roman, in the days of old, held himself free from indignity, when he could say "*Civis Romanus sum*", so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England will protect him from injustice and wrong.'

Lord Palmerston, House of Commons, 25 June 1850

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a country of remarkable paradoxes and contradictions. Any Western visitor to Riyadh is struck by its metropolitan, modern features, such as its flashy shopping malls dominated by familiar brands including Gucci, Lacoste, Next and Nike. Beneath a dazzling sun, the contemporary, palatial hotels and vast office buildings cast long shadows over motorways dominated by luxury cars and stretch limousines. And yet Saudis are ruled by strict Islamic customs. As the foreign correspondent Edward Pilkington noted during a visit in 2002, 'McDonald's is seemingly on every street corner and yet it closes its doors five times a day for prayers - making Saudi Arabia unique as a country where the most powerful franchise on earth bends its knees in front of an even stronger brand: Allah.'

There are women shrouded in their long black abayas, shopping with almost religious fervour at the chic Harvey Nichols store inside an elegant glass and steel building designed by the great British minimalist Sir Norman Foster. Then there are the men pouring into a mosque under an enormous neon sign advertising Sony. These everyday sights are as mystifying as they are disconcerting.

Most Saudis are conservative, devout Muslims. But behind the veil, some women, covered from head to toe in their abayas, flirt with a secret life where they discreetly try on provocative erotic lingerie in the privacy of the opulent boutiques. On any late winter afternoon, meanwhile, drive an hour out into the desert and you might find young restless men racing their Mercedes and SUVs. After passing the Bedouin shepherds and white-robed elders taking their afternoon prayers, the young Saudis congregate around fires, some drinking the strictly forbidden alcohol or taking drugs while they listen to radios pounding out the latest Western music amongst the rolling amber dunes of sand that otherwise are silent. They then race their cars wildly up and down the dunes, young boys hanging out of the windows, whooping and shouting.

This is Saudi Arabia today, ruled by a royal family that craves Western recognition, basks in the protection of American power and revels in the vices of the decadent West. And yet the Saudi royals rigidly and brutally govern the country like a medieval Islamic fiefdom. Despite its ostentatious wealth and the power of its oil, the insular Kingdom is highly secretive and unveils its mysteries only grudgingly.

This book is an attempt to unravel some of these mysteries and to understand the contradictions. The story centres around Sandy Mitchell, an anaesthetic technician at the Saudi Security Forces hospital in Riyadh who was imprisoned and tortured in a Saudi jail for nearly three years.

Sandy's dramatic personal experience highlights how the House of Saud tried to deceive its own citizens and the rest of the world that Al-Qaeda was not a threat to its authority. Instead, Sandy and other Britons were targeted as expendable scapegoats. These intrepid Westerners - initially warmly welcomed by the Saudis for their professional expertise - were victims of a regime that refused to admit

that Al-Qaeda insurgents were behind the devastating bombings in their own country. But they were also sacrificed by the British government on the altar of a foreign policy that appeased the House of Saud because of its oil wealth and strategic military value in the Gulf, not to mention its ongoing purchase of UK arms.

Sandy has emerged from his hell-on-earth experience a humble and forgiving man but also determined to see that justice is done. It is highly unlikely that he would have survived his three-year ordeal without the tenacious support and selfless campaigning of his sister, Margaret Dunn. Fortunately, both of them kept detailed diaries and notes that have enabled me to reconstruct their dialogue in this book. During every telephone conversation and meeting, Margaret meticulously noted the comments of all the participants, notably Foreign Office and consular officials. I am most grateful to Sandy and Margaret for sharing their extensive private papers as well as their vivid memories – both horrific and fascinating – of this mysterious and dangerous country, Saudi Arabia.

The extraordinary suffering of Sandy Mitchell sheds new light on the hidden political, diplomatic and economic relationship between the House of Saud and the American and British governments. For those chapters I was assisted hugely by two excellent researchers. In Washington DC, I was very fortunate to call on Will Ferroggiaro, former head of the Freedom of Information programme at the National Security Archive. His incisive interviews with Chas Freeman, former US ambassador in Saudi Arabia; Walter Slocombe, former undersecretary of state in the US Defence Department; and James Woolsey, former director of the CIA, were invaluable. Will is a researcher and writer on foreign affairs of the highest calibre. In London, I was equally lucky to retain Kate Quine for background research. Her meticulous accuracy and diligence were crucial and I cannot

recommend her too highly. She also compiled the photographs.

Among the many people interviewed and consulted for this book, some understandably wish to remain anonymous, but I would particularly like to thank the following: Richard Fields, a lawyer specialising in terrorism and the Middle East at Dickstein, Shapiro, Morin and Oshinsky in New York City; Jason McCue, a senior partner at the London law firm H2O; Tamsin Allen, a solicitor at Geoffrey Bindman and Partners; Peter Gardiner; the late Sir David Gore-Booth, former British ambassador in Saudi Arabia; Amy Lashinsky; David Leigh, Investigations Editor of *The Guardian*; John Lyons; Poppy Martin; Tom Mills; and Christopher Thompson, the Reuters correspondent in South Africa. As with my previous books, I am especially indebted to Mary Ann Nicholas, who, in addition to helping me in numerous ways, has enhanced the manuscript with her intellectual rigour and tightened the writing with her sharp analysis.

Most of this book was written in Florida at The Four Arts Library in Palm Beach, the West Palm Beach Public Library, and McKeen Towers Library, where the staff, especially Edith Pecan, provided inviting places to write. I also appreciate the staff at Type-It Services for their efficient and swift transcribing of interviews. At Mainstream, this manuscript would have never become a book without the efficiency and flexibility of Graeme Blaikie, editorial coordinator, or the forensic and perceptive eye of his colleague Kevin O'Brien, who expertly edited the manuscript.

Mark Hollingsworth

ONE

THE SAUDI INQUISITION

'Based on 20 years as a diplomat, let me tell you that when governments tell you that they cannot speak out in public but are firm in private, they are lying. And even if they do say something in private, the host government will understand from the fact that it is not said in public that this is a formal protest which has no kind of serious intent behind it.'

**Craig Murray, British ambassador
to Uzbekistan, 8 November 2004**

The prisoner is desperately trying to sleep. It is not easy when you are chained to the steel door of a filthy, damp 5 ft x 8 ft cell with a television camera in the top left-hand corner observing your every move and fluorescent lights burning night and day. Chained to the top of the door by his right hand, he is forced to stand 24 hours a day and cannot reach his thin foam mattress and plastic water bottle. Even when he goes to the insect-infected toilet - a hole in the floor along the passageway - he can barely sit because he is constantly in chains.

As he half-dozes, eyes heavy with exhaustion, his clothes soaked in blood, faeces and vomit, the prisoner can barely believe his situation. Perhaps it is a bad dream and he will wake from the nightmare. But the chain abruptly jolts him back to reality: it is the second day of his detainment and torture in the notorious Mabatha Interrogation Centre in

Saudi Arabia. Known as 'The Confession Factory', Mabatha is not marked on any Saudi map and the ruling royal family like to keep its location secret. Driving south of Riyadh, it can be found past the Ministry of the Interior building. After the final underpass, you turn left and there is a GPS satellite-fixing mast. Further on you turn right to reach the main road and there it is behind an imposing light-grey wall.[1](#)

Suddenly, the door opens and two Saudi guards burst in. 'Get up, get up,' they shout impatiently. Prodding him with a stick, they place a black hood over his head, lock handcuffs on both hands and snap leg irons on his ankles. The prisoner, Sandy Mitchell, a 44-year-old anaesthetic technician from Glasgow, frowns angrily as he notices his chains of torture are branded 'Made in the United Kingdom'.[2](#)

As he is dragged along the corridor, Sandy hears the screams of the other prisoners. Hauled into the interrogation room upstairs, the hood is removed and he is ordered to stand for the next 20 minutes. Then whack! Suddenly a punch to his stomach almost doubles him up in pain. As he drops to his knees, he is pulled up by his wrist chains and slammed against the wall, still blindfolded and with his handcuffs on. The punches pile in - to his face, groin and kidney. He raises his hands to protect his face, blood pours out of his left ear, but he just receives more blows to his body. Defenceless and helpless, he collapses to the floor. The punches stop.

After a few moments, he is dragged up again and thrown against a wall. 'Tell us about the bombings,' one of them shouts, referring to two car explosions which had killed a fellow Briton, Christopher Rodway, and injured three others in Riyadh five weeks earlier, in November 2000.

'I know nothing about the bombings,' replies Sandy.

'Tell us about your family.'

'What about them?'

‘Your wife and son. Were they involved?’

‘Don’t be fucking stupid,’ says Sandy. ‘My son is less than two years old and my wife hardly speaks English. What the hell are you talking . . .’

Whack! That earns him another severe beating before he passes out. Soon he is dragged up against the wall and his hood taken off. There he is confronted by his tormentors. One is Ibrahim, a Saudi intelligence officer who reports to the Ministry of the Interior, overseen by Prince Naif Bin Abdul Aziz, one of the most powerful princes in the Kingdom. His skin is pale by Arab standards, and he has light curly hair with dark-green eyes and a deep, intense stare, with a permanent five o’clock shadow. He is barely 5 ft 7 in., with pointed features, a slim build but physically strong, although he rarely inflicts violence unless the prisoner is in chains. Highly strung, he never smiles and makes no secret of his hatred for Westerners. He needs little excuse to fly into a violent rage.

His sidekick, Khaled, is the interpreter. He is taller, well-built, but, like many Saudis, prone to carrying extra weight. His top teeth are crowned but some of his teeth are brown and rotting. This does not help his attempts to play the ‘good cop’ in the interrogation. He appears frightened of Ibrahim, who is often on the verge of lashing out violently. Sandy does not trust Khaled, despite his comments about his prisoner being released, ‘Insh’Allah’ (God willing). Khaled tries to ingratiate himself by talking about the sexual misdeeds of Western women living in Saudi. But Sandy is not impressed. As his sister Margaret later remarked, ‘His smile never quite reaches his eyes.’

Ibrahim shouts in Arabic at Khaled, who resumes the interrogation. ‘We know you carried out the bombings. Confess.’

‘You know that I had nothing to do with them,’ replies Sandy. ‘Look, why don’t you talk to my alibi? I was at home with my family. Raf Schyvens [a Belgian trauma nurse] was

giving first aid to the victims at the scene of the second bombing and he called me at home. Why are you doing this?’

‘Raf has already confessed,’ counters Khaled. ‘He said you and Bill [Sampson] carried out the bombings and he only helped you because he was scared of you. He said that you and Rodway were rivals in smuggling alcohol, so you killed him to get him out of the way.’

‘Rubbish. I closed down my bar nearly two years ago when my son was born. All the bootleggers are already in jail and they would have told you that I have not been involved in that business. If Raf said all that, then it was only because you beat him until he was broken.’

That earns him another assault: this time with a one-metre-long wooden pickaxe handle. Despite the pain, Sandy tries not to scream, because it would give the interrogators a psychological victory. He can hear them chuckling in the background. But he cannot hold out for long. It is only when he can hardly breathe that they finally stop.

‘We know you organised it and ordered them,’ persists Khaled. ‘Tell us, who told you officially to carry out these bombings?’

‘What do you mean “officially”? Nobody told me to do anything.’

That produces more punches and kicks. Sandy is then stretched out on the floor face down. A huge Saudi comes into the room. He is at least 22 st. and looks more like a wrestler or a shotput thrower than a prison guard. He sits on Sandy’s back while Ibrahim picks up the axe handle and beats the soles of his feet. Sandy screams in agony, his shouts muffled by the 22-st. man on top of him. He is near to passing out when the ‘wrestler’ gets up. Rolling over into a ball, Sandy gasps for air and screams again. Across the room, the wrestler and Ibrahim are smirking and it appears that they are taking pleasure from their violent power-trip. Sandy is furious. ‘You sadistic bastards,’ he thinks. ‘You must

know I am innocent. For years I have cared for Saudi families and this is how they reward me.'

Ibrahim and the wrestler leave the room and Khaled takes a gratuitous kick as Sandy lies on the floor. Retreating to the corner, he hears the screams of another prisoner, Bill Sampson, a friend and expatriate who is also being blamed for the terrorist bombings. Bill's torture goes on for hours as his body and head thud repeatedly against the wall. Part of Sandy wants to pray: 'Please God, let them stop.' But he knows that it will be his turn next.

After what seems like two hours, Ibrahim and Khaled return, grab Sandy by his hair and throw him against the wall. After a lot of Arabic shouting, Khaled interprets: 'Bill said that you ordered and carried out the bombings.'

Sandy knows that Bill would never implicate him, so he stays silent. He knows there is a political agenda: they are covering up for the recent resurgence of home-grown Islamic terrorists. But there is nothing he can do. Sandy is then forced to squat forward with a metal rod placed behind his knees and he is hoisted upside down with his ankle chains attached to a bar, leaving his bare buttocks exposed. He is then lifted between two desks and Ibrahim lets rip with the axe handle into his buttocks and the soles of his feet.

'Confess,' he shouts, as the blows come down. 'Bill has already confessed.' Sandy knows that is a lie, because otherwise they would not be persisting with the beatings.

'What's the point of confessing to something that I didn't do? You would only come back and beat me into confessing to something else.'

This has no effect and his screams do not produce any sympathy. Sandy thinks that his only chance of survival is to hold out long enough for the British embassy to be informed and then he'll soon be released.

But there is not much time to think as he stumbles to his knees. Kicks to his back and kidneys and beatings with sticks are then combined with continuous spitting. Soon he

is saturated with their phlegm. It only stops because it is prayer time. He is ordered to stand against the wall on one leg. The interrogators then leave the room and wash before prayers. But the irony of worshipping Allah the 'merciful' has little impact on his persecutors. On their return, the beatings continue for another hour.

There is only relief when they revisit Bill next door. The horrific screams and the sound of his body bouncing off the walls can be heard with depressing regularity. Their next ploy is crude. 'Bill has confessed to having an affair with your wife,' Khaled tells Sandy.

'Bullshit. You are a pair of liars,' he replies angrily. He is then shown photographs of Westerners and officials at the British embassy. He knows some of them but when he does not recognise others, Khaled shouts 'liar' and the beatings resume.

At 8 a.m., Sandy is returned to his cell and chained to the top of the door. He slumps forward and is desperate to sleep. But just as he is about to nod off, the guard hits him with a stick and he jerks awake. His only sanctuary is daydreaming and his mind wanders off to happier times. But this escape is short-lived as the reality of his nightmare confronts him. His thoughts turn to his wife, Noi, and two-year-old son, Matthew, and a family holiday on a Thai beach. 'What is happening to them?' he wonders, and his eyes fill up with tears. He silently cries and when the guard arrives to check on him, he hides his face. This produces another sharp poke in the ribs with the stick. But this time the daydreaming works and he enters another world - a past of family, prospects and adventure.

Alexander 'Sandy' Mitchell was born and raised in Glasgow. His father was a road-sweeper and he grew up in a tough working-class neighbourhood. But he was always interested in new adventures and travelling abroad. As a schoolboy, he spent weekends as a military cadet in the Highlands and

later signed up for the part-time Territorial Army as a combat medic. He then joined 21 SAS at the Duke of York's headquarters in Chelsea and moved to London. 'It was not a cloak-and-dagger squad,' he later recalled. 'We were basically an airborne commando unit and we were trained as if we were operating in wartime behind enemy lines. Even for the medics, the training was realistic. I was sent to the casualty department of a busy London hospital. When I wasn't fighting off drunks abusing the staff, I was treating their wounds.'

The SAS sent their medics to the emergency departments of hospitals and so Sandy became very experienced in dealing with trauma. Mesmerised and captivated by the military atmosphere, he joined the Queen's 5th regiment. Within two years, he was promoted to full corporal by Major Richard Holmes and was also used as a radio operator, acting as the Major's shadow in the field.

In 1982, aged 25, Sandy was offered a job as an anaesthetic technician at the Military Hospital in Saudi Arabia. The irony was that he was hired by mistake. The management company, Allied Medical, confused him with a 'David Mitchell' who had far more experience. Based in the intensive care unit, he would fly out in helicopter ambulances and bring patients in from rural areas. Two years later, he was transferred to Baghdad and worked in the Ibn Al-Bitar hospital, which specialised in treating wealthy Iraqis. One of them turned out to be Saddam Hussein's father-in-law, who had his toe amputated. Under Islamic law, the toe needed to be preserved and Sandy had the grisly task of taking it to the morgue. He was given a watch with a portrait of Saddam Hussein for his efforts.

Enthralled by life in the mysterious Arab world, Sandy then joined the Sultan of Oman's army in 1985 at the age of 30. The Sultan's armed forces were trained by and modelled on the British, so Sandy felt at home. The Omanis are a generous and hospitable people and welcomed him with

open arms. Based at the military garrison hospital in Seeb, and later in Salalah, close to the southern border with Yemen, Sandy thrived as a warrant officer.

But he had a restless spirit and in 1992 returned to Saudi Arabia as the chief anaesthetic technician at the Security Forces hospital in Riyadh. As the head nurse of the operating room, Cheryl Eichhammer, later recalled, Sandy was diligent, skilled and a hands-on manager. But it was a holiday in 1995 in Thailand that was the pivotal moment in Sandy's life. There he met a beautiful 21-year-old Thai girl called Noi. For Sandy, it was love at first sight. He was captivated by her happy, uninhibited disposition and sense of humour. 'I would find myself studying her every move and when she caught me watching her, I would blush,' he reflected. 'I knew she was the one, or, as the Thais say, "Bupa Sunni Wah". [The one for this life and the next.]'

They married immediately in Thailand and the couple flew to Riyadh to start their new life. But it was not an auspicious beginning. On their way back from the airport, there was a four-car pile-up and a crowd of Saudis began arguing about culpability. Leaving Noi in the back of the car, Sandy and his friend Ahmad, a doctor, grabbed their first-aid kit and climbed into a wrecked car which had trapped a young man of 20. His throat was cut open. Blood gushed all over them and the boy was taken to hospital. Sandy then walked back to his car. But when his new wife Noi saw her husband covered in blood, she was shocked and wanted to vomit. Later that day, the boy received surgery, in which Sandy participated. He was later discharged and his parents were overwhelmed with joy. Little did Noi know that more dramatic, and far worse, events were to happen in her and Sandy's life together.

Sandy and Noi settled into their new apartment in Riyadh near the Security Forces hospital. But his salary was relatively low and he now had a son to provide for. By the summer of 2000, he considered returning to the UK. But by

this time he was a popular figure because of his use of 'wastah' – Arabic for 'to use your influence to help others'. Wastah is the grease that oils the wheels of Saudi life and Sandy was a master of it. Easy-going and jovial, he made friends with both expatriates and Saudis and relished the role of a Mr Fix-It.

As Sandy worked at the Security Forces hospital, he would often receive phone calls from policemen and their families who were trying to get treatment or appointments at short notice. Using his access, he helped them fast-track the system by speaking to the consultant directly. 'The waiting lists were a long and painful experience,' he recalled. 'In Arabic culture, if you help to save the life of an Arab, then they and their extended family are obligated to you for the rest of your life. It is considered a debt of honour.'

In return, Sandy called in these debts when people were unfairly detained by the police and he visited them in jail. He was the man who people called when they ran into trouble. 'Because of my rapport with high-ranking officers, I could speed things up if someone was caught in a misdemeanour like drink-driving or speeding or get them off with a warning,' he later said. 'The Saudi police were very cooperative. They like being able to solve problems without going through the official channels.'³

Sandy was also well connected at a higher level because he treated VIPs and children at the hospital. Occasionally he looked after Prince Naif, the interior minister, who would arrive quietly late at night with his four armed bodyguards and always wanted to be put to sleep while his teeth were polished. He was later sent some gold coins and a gold watch by the Prince. He also treated Prince Naif's son, deputy interior minister Prince Ahmed, who had a hernia operation, and they discussed the use of falcons in hunting just before Sandy administered the anaesthetic.

Softly spoken and always willing to help, Sandy was highly regarded at the hospital. He was particularly adept at

relaxing patients before operations and used a glove puppet to explain to children what he was about to do. And so, in October 2000, when Sandy told his employers that he wanted to resign, they were horrified. They immediately offered him a large new house at 28 Villa Compound and a rise in salary. He was delighted and vowed to stay in Saudi for the rest of his working life and then retire abroad.

That all changed two months later, one cool December morning - the kind that comes as a reprieve from the relentless Saudi heat. As he was loading his car to go to work, his neighbour Steve came over and asked him, 'Have you heard about the latest car-bombing in Al-Khobar?'

'Another one?' replied Sandy. He already knew about two bombings a month earlier which had killed Christopher Rodway, a British engineer, and injured four others. His friend Raf Schyvens had stopped to give first aid to the victims and was later arrested. Nobody could understand why. He was a trauma nurse. He was obviously being set up. But why?

'Sandy, I know this is ridiculous,' Steve continued, 'but the police are telling us to be careful because they are not looking for Saudis or Arabs to arrest. They are looking to blame Westerners.'

As he drove to work, Sandy reflected on his neighbour's comments. The problem was that the Saudi police knew that Islamic militants were responsible for the attacks. But the government and intelligence agencies refused to acknowledge the threat and clearly had a hidden agenda. Two days after the Rodway murder, an officer in the Interior Ministry told Sandy that his bosses were blaming Westerners but the police were dismissing the theories. As he drove through the busy traffic, Sandy considered the police reaction as bringing little comfort.

His friend Raf had been detained for two weeks and Sandy was disturbed because he was not being held in a local police station (his police contacts would have told him if that

was the case). That meant he was being detained at an interrogation centre by intelligence officials, who were a law unto themselves.

At 7 a.m. on 17 December 2000, Sandy parked his 4 x 4 across the road from the hospital. Wearing his white coat and stethoscope, he began to think about the patients he was scheduled to see. He was so preoccupied that he did not hear two cars draw up beside him. All he saw was a flash of blue bodywork and suddenly he was thrown against his car and a hood was placed over his head and throat. Ankle chains and a set of handcuffs were snapped on and he was bundled into the car, which drove off at high speed through the city. 'Christ, what's happening?' thought Sandy. 'Kidnapping is unheard of in Saudi Arabia. It happened in Beirut, but never in Riyadh. What's going on?' During the high-speed journey, he was repeatedly punched and kicked in the face and abdomen. His groin was only half-protected by his handcuffs. His assailants yelled as the metal of the cuffs scratched their hands. Throughout the journey Sandy was in a state of disbelief. 'There has been a big mistake. The authorities will find out about this and rescue me for sure,' he thought.

Eventually the car screeched to a halt and Sandy was dragged into the Mabatha Interrogation Centre. Only when the hood was removed did he see the secret-police uniforms and some plain-clothed officers. They immediately stripped him of all his possessions, apart from his trousers, and marched him upstairs to an interview room and slammed the door shut. An hour later, Ibrahim, Khaled and a third, unidentified Saudi entered the room. Khaled then asked him for what was to be the first of many times, 'What do you know about the bombings?'

'Nothing. Why should I?' replied Sandy. 'We both know that Westerners had nothing to do with them.'

That resulted in a slap in the face.

'Look, all I know is that you have arrested an American called Mike Sedlak.'

Mike Sedlak worked for the Vinnell Corporation, a US company that trained the Saudi National Guard.

'You know about the bombings.'

'No, I am innocent.'

Sandy's head was then banged against the wall. 'What do you want me to tell you?' he shouted in exasperation. 'That we are responsible for bombings that your own Al-Qaeda is carrying out?'

'Lie!' shouted Ibrahim.

'Before you leave this place you will either confess to these bombings or you will go insane from what we are going to do to you,' added Khaled. 'We are acting with the very highest authority and we can do anything we want. Do you understand? The very highest authority.'

Then the beatings started. The third, heavier Saudi held Sandy's chained hands and legs so the others could wade in. The only reason they stopped was because they got tired. 'Thank God they've stopped,' thought Sandy. 'Surely somebody has realised by now there has been a terrible mistake. I am a medic not a terrorist.'

Then an older man, with short-cropped grey hair and beard, came in and sat down. He stared at Sandy intently and paused. 'Sandy, can you hear me?' he started.

'Yes, I want to speak to my embassy and hospital.'

'You speak to nobody but me.'

'What do you want?'

'I want to know about the bombings.'

'Well, you are asking the wrong person.'

'You are going to tell me. Everybody tells me eventually.'

'I know nothing. Why would I kill innocent Westerners?'

'Oh, we'll get to that later. All you need to do is to tell us about the people who carried it out.'

'There is nothing that I can tell you.'

'You will cooperate. Do what's best for you and your family. Your government doesn't care about you. Why should they? You're expendable.'

The man got up and walked out. Khaled and Ibrahim returned. 'Are you ready to tell us anything?'

'Yes, I want to speak to my embassy and hospital.'

'You've been sacked. Nobody wants anything to do with you. You will soon find out that we are the only friends you have got.'

Sandy was raised up and the beatings resumed. He was then taken to his cell, where he was handcuffed to the top bar of the door. At 6 p.m., Sandy was returned to the torture chamber upstairs.

'OK, Sandy,' said Khaled. 'What I want you to do is to write down a list of anyone who can tell us about the bombings.'

'No, why should I do that? Because you tell me to? So you can go and arrest some other innocent people?'

'We are doing this by a process of elimination. Your name has been given to us by other people. We just cross-check their names and beat them also. I'll get you a list of names.'

Sandy looked at the list. They were mainly people he knew or who had been arrested for trivial court fines. It was a meaningless document.

Without warning he was taken downstairs and thrown into the back of a van, which sped away. As the vehicle slowed down, he realised that he was around the corner from his compound. 'We are going into your house,' said Khaled. 'If you do anything to alert your wife or neighbours about what is going on, we will arrest them. If there are any explosives there, we will arrest your family.'

'No problem,' thought Sandy. His only concern was that the secret police might plant evidence in his house. As Sandy was marched into the compound with the handcuffs still on, they were surrounded by some 30 policemen, some with dogs. When he was pushed through the front door, his wife Noi was sitting in front of the television in a T-shirt and

shorts. As soon as she saw his chains and the two burly Saudi guards, he saw the terror in her eyes. As Sandy was thrown into a corner, he called out to Noi, 'Don't worry. It's just a big mistake. Everything will be OK.'

'Shut up,' said one of the officers.

They then ransacked the house: nothing was left untouched. They even emptied food on the carpet and opened up bottles of sauce. Some items, like valuable watches, jewellery and pocket computers, went into their pockets, notably a gift from Prince Naif, the interior minister and their ultimate boss. Next was the bedroom of their baby son Matthew, who was hastily picked up by Noi just seconds before the bed was torn apart. Everything was turned over and scattered onto the floor at random. Furniture was broken. Curtains were ripped off the walls. It was sheer vandalism. Then every personal item was thrown into rubbish bags. Clutching Matthew, a horrified Noi rushed over to a neighbour's house, fighting back the tears. Curled up in a corner, Sandy could only look on, helpless. Sniffer dogs were then brought in. Nothing was found. Noi was in a state of shock but her abiding memory was of them dragging Sandy away in chains: 'I saw the hatred in the eyes of the Saudis. I feared for his life.'

By the time they returned to the Interrogation Centre, it was 3 a.m. Another beating. It was almost like a ritual. 'You are going to confess to this, Sandy. We know you did the bombings.'

'If you think I did it, where is your evidence?'

That just enraged his interrogator. He crunched the handcuff as tightly as possible. The pain in Sandy's wrist prevented him from sleeping and he stayed awake all day. All he could hear were the calls for prayer. Desperate and frightened, Sandy prayed too: 'God, how can you let this happen to me? The Saudi police know that the Westerners had nothing to do with the bombings. Why are they blaming us?'

For the rest of the day, Sandy reflected on his life. He was no saint but surely he had done nothing to deserve this barbarity and injustice?

At 5 p.m. on the third day of his detention, Sandy heard the dreaded rattling of the chains as the guards walked down the corridor. He knew what was coming. Once in the upstairs 'interview room', the guards decided to soften him up for the main event: by the time the intelligence officers arrived, Sandy had lost a tooth and broken two more, blood poured from his nose and he was covered in his own vomit. He was then suspended upside down with his legs hanging over a steel bar while Ibrahim battered him with an axe handle. Eventually it stopped, with the inevitable 'Bill said this' or 'Raf told us that.'

By this stage, Sandy knew that time was running out. Everyone has a breaking point and one of them would confess. His thoughts turned to what he had read about the Spanish Inquisition, when poor souls were tortured and burned at the stake after they confessed to witchcraft. Ironically, sorcery was one of the crimes that still warranted the death sentence in Saudi Arabia. Many women, mostly Asian, are in Saudi jails after being flogged for 'confessing' to witchcraft.

Through the cell wall, Sandy could hear the defiance of his friend Bill and his subsequent screams. But their resilience was getting weaker by the hour. The next day was a routine assault and battery combined with spitting. By now Sandy could not answer their claims because his head was spinning and he was passing out. The best he could manage was to mumble and slur an answer through his swollen mouth, parched throat and broken teeth. His head felt as though it would explode and eventually a doctor saw him and took his blood pressure. It was 170 over 120.

'Try to relax more,' said the doctor.

'But I am being tortured,' replied an astonished Sandy.

‘Well, they all say that. I am not allowed to give you medication. You’ll just have to cope the best you can.’

An hour later, at 6 p.m., another nightly ritual of grievous bodily harm was inflicted. ‘Everyone else has admitted it and they will receive mercy from the King,’ shouted an impatient Khaled. ‘But because you are stupid, you will lose your head.’

The Saudi secret police then used their trump card. While Sandy was hanging upside down, vomiting what was left in his stomach, Khaled sidled up to him: ‘We have the authority from the very highest level to obtain your confession. We can do anything. You have a wife here. She is Thai. We can do anything we want. Do you understand? Your embassy won’t help you. Do you think they will lift a finger to help your wife? We will bring her in here and you will listen to her screams and it will be your fault because . . .’

‘OK, OK. What do you want me to say?’

‘We want the truth,’ said Khaled with a rare smile. ‘You carried out the bombings with Bill and Raf.’

‘If that is what you want. Now can I call my embassy?’

That resulted in a frenzy of violence with the blood-covered axe handle until Sandy passed out. Hung up like a chicken by an iron bar behind his legs, Sandy’s resistance was wilting as dawn broke. That day he was again denied sleep. He was now close to breaking point. He could not doze because the guards walked by every ten minutes. He silently prayed: ‘Oh God. Please protect my wife and son from these sadistic bastards. Please let me die and put an end to this agony.’

An hour after sundown, the Saudis inflicted more lashings from the axe handle and sensed that he was broken. ‘We have sent a car to collect your wife,’ said Khaled as a sweating Ibrahim sat down. ‘Perhaps you will cooperate when you hear her screams in the next room.’

‘OK.’

'Who gave you the orders to carry out the bombing? We want the names of your controllers at the British embassy.'

As Sandy did not want to endanger the lives of anyone at the embassy, he fabricated two names in the hope that the government would be alerted.

'Duncan McDonald and Tom Brooks.'

'They are embassy officials, right?' shouted Khaled. 'They gave you the orders so we would think it was Islamic extremists.'

'Yes.'

Sandy was broken, humiliated and ashamed for falsely accusing his embassy of terrorist crimes. He was then placed in a chair. But his buttocks were hurting so much from the beatings that he could not sit down and kept slipping onto the floor.

Suddenly the atmosphere changed. One of the secret policemen brought Sandy some sweet tea. 'We know everything because we have broken your friend and we have an agent inside your embassy,' said Khaled. 'Now we will only beat you if you give us the wrong answers. Your wife will be safe as you cooperate. Right, so you did the bombings on behalf of your embassy. Who was your team? Who was with you?'

'I did it myself.'

'Liar! We know you have more intelligence cells operating in Saudi.'

The beatings resumed. Sandy collapsed in a heap and was slapped to keep him from nodding off. He resumed his death plea to God.

Just before sunrise, Khaled returned with a new version: 'You received your orders from McDonald and Brooks and they delivered the bombs later.'

'Yes,' replied Sandy, desperately hoping that the embassy would discover his plight and rescue him from this hell on earth.

On Christmas Day 2000, eight days after his arrest and his son's second birthday, Sandy reflected that he had confessed to being a spy, a terrorist and a killer. Driven mad from sleep deprivation, he was rambling incoherently to himself, hallucinating and conducting conversations with his mother, who had died six years earlier. She assured him that soon everyone would know that he was innocent.

His delusions were shattered when a guard ordered him to wash the blood and excrement off and use the toilet. Sandy began to try to rationalise his situation: why were we being tortured to implicate British diplomats in a terrorist act against a 'friendly state'? Could it be that Al-Qaeda has infiltrated the Ministry of the Interior to ensure that blame is placed on the Western infidels?

Later that day, he was in despair and convinced himself that he would never see his young family again. When his meal arrived, he reached up and scraped out a one-and-a-half-inch screw from the wall. When he heard the guard coming, he quickly swallowed it with some food. He hoped that the screw would cause internal bleeding and end his life. 'At least if I die in custody,' he thought, 'they would not be able to use my false confession against the embassy officials and my friends.' He choked on the screw, but it had no lasting impact apart from stomach pains and cramps. It was a cry for help as much as a suicide attempt.

CLANG. The chains fell off Sandy with a loud crash and he collapsed on the floor. It was early the next morning and he was barely conscious as he was dragged outside into a waiting unmarked van. As they sped across the desert, Sandy kept passing out from fatigue, only to be woken up by the guards with slaps across his face. He had no idea where he was going until he saw a modern building made entirely of steel and stone. It was Al-Hiar prison, standing alone on the rocky landscape south-west of Riyadh, its walls rising starkly out of the desolate desert.