

# 472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf



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*The Survival of Australian  
Warren Rodwell*

By

Bob East

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The Survival of Australian Warren Rodwell

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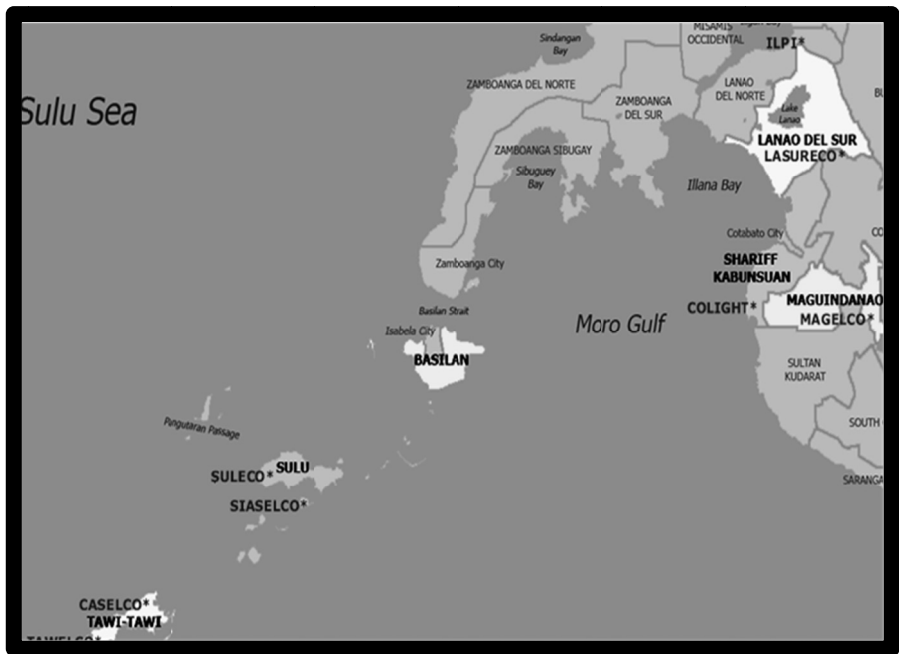


Fig. A. The region in southwest Mindanao where Warren Rodwell was kidnapped and held captive. Zamboanga Sibugay, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.



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## EPIGRAPH

At the beginning of the task of writing this book, it seemed impossible that any author could do justice to the account of the hardships and deprivations endured by Warren Richard Rodwell over 472 days of captivity in 2011–2013. Four hundred and seventy-two days of captivity would, to any average person, seem an eternity. However, add to this the pain of an untreated gunshot wound; an almost starvation diet; the humiliation of being forced to plead publically for help, something totally out of character; losing over one third of his body weight; being forced to walk and climb in the heat of an almost inaccessible jungle environment; being subjected to sleep deprivation; being unable, in the main, to understand the language of his captors; and above all not knowing his future or indeed his fate, and this gives the reader some idea of what Rodwell endured.

I wrote much about Rodwell whilst he was in captivity, despite the Philippine and Australian authorities insisting on a media blackout. When questions were asked about why a media blackout should be insisted upon by Australia when an Australian citizen was involved, an arcane answer was given quoting “national security.” Two to three hundred mainly non-allied criminals whose only motivation was crime for profit were hardly a national threat to Australian security. However, given the media blackout I had nevertheless been successful in conducting some interviews by electronic media on my assessment of Rodwell’s chances of survival, which I thought were about 50/50. (Where applicable my written articles and interviews will be cited in this publication.)

When Rodwell was finally released in March 2013, an emaciated, once-bold world traveller, ex-soldier in the Australian Army and university teacher, he looked like a broken man both physically and emotionally. I, along with many others, thought that he would take years to recover from his life-changing and life-threatening experiences, if he did at all. However, we were to be proven wrong. Within days, the irrepressible nature and mild larrikinism of this man came to the forefront. He smiled and waved in front of the cameras, and made light-hearted comments about his physical appearance. It was obvious that this experience—which

would have changed the lives of most—would not be an impediment to his future. One could almost sense his belief in *de brevitae vitae*—the shortness of life—and that there were still many opportunities open to him as soon as he had recuperated enough to go on with the next venture.

In the latter part of 2013, after corresponding with Warren Rodwell, I arranged a short interview with him, hoping that I could convince him to tell his story in written form. Expecting to be confronted by an individual who was in the tedious process of recuperation and readjustment to his life, I was surprised to find someone quite jovial, who had regained weight (and some) and was full of enthusiasm for a new start in life. He had already made numerous enquiries, including one to a formal community services training course, about how he could put his experiences to use by helping others. If there is one phrase to describe Warren Richard Rodwell it is this—“He is tough.”

Much of the material accessed for this publication came from detailed interviews conducted by the Australian Federal Police between Warren Rodwell and two officers—F/A Kurt Wesche and F/A Gail McClure. These interviews were conducted from March 29, 2013 to May 3, 2013 in eight sessions, and comprise 243 pages, including 646 questions and their corresponding answers. Permission was obtained from the Australian Federal Police to use the written content of these interviews as the basis for a book. In addition, numerous interviews were conducted, both face-to-face and online between Rodwell and the author. This account of Rodwell’s 472 days of captivity and suffering is testament to his tenacity and will to live. He can rightfully claim to embrace the adage *carpe diem*—seize the day.

## FOREWORD

The tide of human events is unforgiving. Individuals can get swept up in events beyond their comprehension, paying a heavy price as a consequence. Australian kidnap victim Warren Rodwell was just such a person, as this intriguing study by Dr Bob East makes abundantly clear. Rodwell was in the wrong place at the wrong time. His story is a fascinating blend of the personal and the political which can serve as a salutary warning to all. In the end, some people simply run out of luck. Rodwell survived his twist of fate, fortunately, and here he is able to recount his story with the aid of a shrewd biographer who has been studying the law and order situation in the southern Philippines for some time. A remarkable account of courage in the face of malevolence and cruelty emerges. Hope and despair, along with the gamut of human emotions, play out in these pages in a way that should give any traveller, armchair or otherwise, cause for reflection—and reason enough to arrange holiday insurance before leaving home!

Being kidnapped is a fate that can befall anyone, of course. Any person can be taken against their will, anywhere and at any time. With the rise of home invasions in developed countries, the wealthiest people can be held hostage even in their own domain. Hollywood has explored some of the darkest scenarios to create a genre of hair-raising kidnap movies, but there isn't always a Liam Neeson or Mel Gibson around to help out. Being seized against one's will is usually a very lonely affair indeed.

For a Westerner, it begins with difference. Any visitor to the Philippines, holidaymaker or long-term resident, is subjected to a persistent and debilitating version of the one-sided gaze—what might be referred to as the “Hey Joe” phenomenon, whereby any Anglo is assumed to be a wealthy American. In circumstances which belie the persistent idea that the Philippines is a friendly and hospitable destination, each visitor is singled out for this mild abuse and identified as different, always standing out in a crowd. This contributes to an experience which is at once disarming, annoying and creepy. Every Westerner is aware of being spotted as a possible target for God-knows-what; the potential for anything

from begging by street urchins to daylight robbery and even kidnap is ever-present.

This unwelcome attention is reciprocated in the scrutiny applied by those Western males who come to the Philippines on sex tours and the like. Everybody is looking, watching and evaluating. An entire black economy is built upon people appraising other people; a cash figure is attached to every transaction, while all the players in the drama become acutely aware of the monetary value of the objectified Other.

Difference hurt Rodwell. He became isolated in a vast sea of humanity. He didn't fit into his adopted community; that should have told him something. He appeared to have been carefully weighing up his situation, but Dr East provides a useful account of the way in which ignorance of subtle changes in an environment can prevent a person from appreciating an imminent danger, leaving him devoid of any protection from it.

While there is a slight possibility of mishap for us all, the risk remains low in most places, but very high in others. The likelihood of harm increases exponentially in the so-called Third World and in some locales far more than others. The explanation lies in a number of factors, all to do with poverty, corrupt practices, politico-economic instability, and serious failures in governance.

Dr Bob East has established himself as an expert on the workings of the terrorist/kidnap for ransom (KfR) group Abu Sayyaf (ASG). In this book he brings his skills and knowledge about the ASG to bear on the plight of a fellow Australian who was unlucky enough to endure enforced captivity at their hands for well over a year. East's analysis is perceptive, searching, and he reveals an abiding compassion for the people involved. His perspective emerges from a sensitive consideration of the circumstances of a single incident played out against a much broader canvas.

The important thing to realize about the southern Philippines is that resistance to centuries of colonial oppression has created a culture of violence which has imposed itself on the basic functioning of society. Mindanao is one of the most militarized parts of the world. It is an armed society in which weapons buttress the authority of military officers, militia leaders and clan warlords, reinforcing a sense of fear and a pervasive misery among the vast mass of ordinary people.

There has recently been a dramatic and controversial Islamic resurgence among Malay Muslims. In Mindanao, the so-called *Bangsamoro* people have been seeking independence or greater autonomy within the Philippine state. In this struggle, the largely secular Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) surrendered to the Ramos government in 1996 and was replaced on the frontline of the separatist struggle by the more religious breakaway Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Earlier still, a militant Muslim group called the Mujahedeen Commando Freedom Fighters (also known as Abu Sayyaf, as well as by other names) was formed by disgruntled *mujahedeen* trained in Afghanistan and influenced by Islamic jihadists.

The intervening years of bloodshed and savagery have dramatically confirmed that it is not possible to solve ethno-cultural problems through socio-economic programs or military action. If national self-determination is considered a fundamental human right, then better initiatives must be devised and implemented to satisfy the special concerns and needs of the minority Muslim Filipinos. For now, the demands of the *Bangsamoro* people remain unmet. Consequently, frustrations run high and lawlessness is endemic.

Hostage-taking has become a cottage industry in the southern Philippines, where incidents of kidnapping soared in 2008 and have remained high thereafter. It is a lucrative money-generating activity. Hundreds of people have been seized, some more high profile than others. Most are Filipinos, but Western victims generate much more publicity.

Since September 11, 2001, the southern Philippines has also been subsumed into the US global “war on terror,” after the Americans deemed it to be the ‘second front’ in their fight against Al-Qaida and its regional offshoots. Mindanao has transformed from merely being the home of nearly 25 million poor and struggling people to becoming part of the notorious “T3”—Terrorist Transit Triangle.

The issues on the ground in Mindanao include the prolonged confinement of Western hostages by the Abu Sayyaf Group. Sacrosanct beach resorts have been raided and lurid stories about beheadings and other atrocities have been circulated. Such incidents do much to foster the prevailing view held by outsiders that Mindanao is a lawless and dangerous place, which requires some drastic reforms. Meanwhile, the south and its problems remain a factor in the self-serving political game

being played in Manila under the watchful eye of the United States. Former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo allowed American intrusion into the contested offshore islands of Basilan and Sulu as part of a calculated gamble to use the emerging war on terrorism to divert attention from her domestic problems. President Noynoy Aquino subsequently promised to bring a political settlement to Mindanao, but the problems continue and allow criminal groups like Abu Sayyaf to operate with impunity within their own bailiwicks.

It can truly be said that Mindanao, to borrow from the Bard, is more sinned against than sinning. As one of the poorest places in God's creation, it remains crippled by extreme poverty and its populace languishes without adequate housing, education, health and other services. Crime and criminality prosper in these circumstances.

Mindanao occupies a peripheral and problematic space in the national consciousness. It is said that more Filipinos have been to the United States than have ever been to Mindanao. Most Filipinos are frightened of the place and choose never to go south, even for a visit. But what are the factors underlying such caution? What is the reality—grim or otherwise—of the Mindanao existence? Context is essential and some background information is useful in understanding Rodwell's saga. *472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf* provides such information. It combines both the rough-and-tumble of everyday life on the Philippine frontier with the deeper reality of feudal practices in an area dominated by corrupt politicians and powerful warlords.

Some parts of Mindanao are especially bedevilled by violence, and Ipil in the province of Zamboanga Sibugay is a case in point. Yet, this is where Rodwell chose to live. The setting for a barbaric attack on April 4, 1995, the little town is one of many so-called crossfire villages throughout Mindanao, the inhabitants of whom find themselves at the mercy of forces much larger than themselves. On this occasion, two hundred armed men attacked Ipil, a mainly Christian enclave of fifty thousand inhabitants in a Muslim area, and destroyed much of it. Over fifty people were killed and dozens taken hostage. Banks were robbed and stores looted. The culprits were never accurately identified. Abu Sayyaf and other Muslim rebels, so-called "Lost Commands," and even elements of the Philippine military have been implicated. (Much later, fifty-nine victims were murdered in the nearby Maguindanao massacre of November 23, 2009, by local police and

militiamen). Ipil remains deeply divided to this day. It was foolish for a Westerner—a demographic always regarded as wealthy—to live there.

The bystanders who saw Rodwell being dragged away could do nothing. Reprisals for interfering in such incidents are brutal and immediate, and men disguised as police, as these hoodlums were, can too often turn out to be the real thing. Many lawmen and other office-holders raise funds by operating criminal cartels. Kidnapping, piracy and extortion have become an essential part of the regional economy.

Locals are nervous enough about their own circumstances to wish to become too involved in the problems of an outsider. Because so many Filipinos plan to leave the country, they remain puzzled by and distrustful of anyone who wants to settle in their neighbourhood. There is a sense that any stranger who tries to set up house in their troubled domain truly deserves anything that might befall them.

Meanwhile, the reach of the central government remains weak, its authority in the peripheral areas of the archipelago diluted through clan chieftains and military commanders. Through wheeling and dealing, criminal formations like the ASG are able to exercise influence and assert control over large swathes of territory in the south. What should perhaps have worried Rodwell more than it apparently did was the collusion between the various powerbrokers in this area. KfR is used by local strongmen with more or less official status as an easy means of raising funds. In an essentially feudal environment, kidnapping can resemble the payment of tribute.

As with any tale of human endurance, there are lessons to be learned here. The story told by Dr East is a melancholy one, to be sure, but it needs to be publicized and understood. The Philippine and Australian governments imposed a media blackout during Rodwell's imprisonment, something which should have provoked outrage. More scepticism needed to be shown about official methods and the role of some of the worst rogues in the country. There was madness in leaving the investigation in the hands of those such as Governor Rommel Jalosjos of Zamboanga Sibugay and his henchmen, bearing in mind that their policy of secrecy was implemented so that portions of any ransom could more easily be shared between all stakeholders, including the negotiators. The US "Rewards for Justice" scheme has also over-heated the situation and increased the amount of corruption involved in all such operations.



Regardless of anything else, Western input has too often been heavy-handed and counterproductive.

In the interim, Canberra remains a major sponsor of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and refuses to acknowledge the horrendous abuses it has perpetrated. Our aid to the military is second only to that of the US itself. Australia maintains a contingent of police, intelligence agents and other contractors in Mindanao. We recently gave the Philippines armed forces no less than thirty airboats ostensibly for hunting terrorists, but more likely for getting into shallow estuarine waters and evicting Moro communities from resource-rich areas in and around the Liguasan Marsh which are slated for development by foreign corporations. Australia's role in this process needs to be thoroughly investigated for potential human rights abuses, especially its support of right-wing vigilante groups like the Barangay [village] Intelligence Network (BIN). What frequently goes unacknowledged is that such external meddling leads to strong resentment against foreigners, an important factor in kidnapping situations.

Rodwell survived his ordeal, but he was poorly served by local officials and his own government, which is capable of great dissembling and has largely been all too willing to deal with the worst rascals in Mindanao. We are also playing clandestine games there, earning much local resentment and fuelling some nascent anti-Australian resentment. There are many (im)pertinent questions yet to be asked about spooky activity by intelligence agencies throughout the southern Philippines. This dimension of the drama requires much more study, not least because it compromises the friendship between Filipinos and Australians. For now, we have in this impressive new book, *472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf*, a thorough and intriguing account by a seasoned expert about a brave and resilient Australian who endured what for most of us remains beyond our worst nightmares. One can only be humbled by reading about the tumult he had to endure. The author is to be complemented for fashioning the story so that personal concerns are persuasively interwoven with the larger picture. We should salute Warren Rodwell while at the same time congratulate Bob East on a tale well told.

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## PREFACE

In 1991 a disgruntled Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) member, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani—born on the island province of Basilan in 1959—together with a coterie of likeminded Muslims formed the Abu Sayyaf Group, hereafter simply referred to as the Abu Sayyaf. The original goal of the Abu Sayyaf—not unlike the original goals of the MNLF or indeed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)—was to establish an independent Islamic state in the Mindanao region. After Abdurajak Janjalani was killed in 1998 his younger brother Khadaffy Janjalani assumed the role of supreme commander of the Abu Sayyaf, although other members disputed his claim and insisted on power sharing.

In the early years of the formation of the Abu Sayyaf—pre 1995—most if not all violence attributed to, and acknowledged by, the Abu Sayyaf was directed against Christians and Christian groups—Baptists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and, of course, Catholics, who in the main were seen as proselytising in the Zamboanga peninsula region. The Zamboanga region was the main focus of the Abu Sayyaf at that time. *Inter alia*, Zamboanga del Norte and del Sur were established in 1952, whilst the city of Zamboanga had been officially that since 1937. Zamboanga Sibugay was established in 2001—the same area in which Warren Rodwell was to be kidnapped in 2011. The first attack by the Abu Sayyaf—attributed to them but not claimed by Janjalani—occurred in Zamboanga City on April 4, 1991 when two American evangelists were killed when a grenade was thrown at them. In the same year, Janjalani claimed responsibility for a grenade attack which killed six on a ship that was distributing Christian literature in the port of Zamboanga.

In 1994 kidnapping for ransom entered the Abu Sayyaf’s criminal activities. In the same year, seventy-one people were killed in the Zamboanga provinces—all deaths which were attributed to the Abu Sayyaf. On April 4, 1995 an attack, unequalled in ferocity to date, occurred in the predominately Christian town of Ipil, Zamboanga del Sur—now Zamboanga Sibugay. In a well-planned manoeuvre, over two hundred Abu Sayyaf operatives destroyed scores of buildings and killed at

least fifty civilians, and a number of Philippine National Police (PNP) personnel. Abdurajak Janjalani claimed responsibility. Sporadic violence and kidnappings continued in the Zamboanga region for the next couple of years but the focus of attention for Janjalani now turned to the Sulu Archipelago provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. (The Sulu Province, together with Basilan and Tawi-Tawi, comprise the three predominately Muslim provinces of the Sulu Archipelago, and also form part of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao [ARMM]). This change of venue was to prove fatal for Janjalani—he was killed by the PNP in Basilan on December 18, 1998. Khadaffy Janjalani was now the titular head of the Abu Sayyaf.

Between 1999 and 2002 numerous atrocities and kidnaps for ransom occurred in Basilan and Sulu, as well as a devastating bomb blast in Zamboanga City in October 2001 which killed eleven people and injured dozens. Not all these atrocities were admitted to by Janjalani and his cohorts. However, by far the three most serious kidnappings and associated murders that were admitted to were: (a) twenty-three teachers and thirty students kidnapped, either killed or died, from four schools in Basilan on March 20, 2000; (b) twenty-one tourists kidnapped from the Sipadan holiday resort, Malaysia, and subsequently taken to Sulu, in April 2000; and (c) dozens of tourists kidnapped from the Dos Palmas resort, Palawan Province.

From 1998 to 2007 the Abu Sayyaf lost, either in skirmishes or under dubious circumstances such as “attempted escape,” most of their commanders, sub-commanders and/or major-domos. One of the original long-serving members, and heir apparent—although more likely pretender to the throne—Abu Solaiman, was killed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) troops on Monday January 16, 2007, in Talipao Municipality, Sulu Province. A little over a week before Abu Solaiman was killed, three other major figures in the Abu Sayyaf met the same fate—sub-commanders Jundam Jamalul and Abu Hubaida together with leading bombmaker Binang Sali.

With the demise of Khadaffy Janjalani, Solaiman, Jamalul, Hubaida, and Binang Sali in 2006–2007, a huge vacuum appeared in the Abu Sayyaf hierarchy. Although Philippine security sources claimed the young, long-haired, handsome Albader Parad would take over as leader of the Abu Sayyaf, this was not to be. Parad may have been a member—in Basilan—of the Abu Sayyaf in the first two or three years of the twenty-first century

but he had been in Sulu for at least five years commanding a group of followers who specialised in kidnapping and making money by extortion and crime in general. It was very doubtful if Parad at this time saw himself as a part of the Abu Sayyaf organisation, least of all as having any ambitions to lead the group. Parad was killed on February 21, 2010 in an encounter with the AFP. That left only two genuine contenders to the Abu Sayyaf throne—Isnilon Toton Hapilon and Radullan Sahiron. (Both could reasonably be ruled out, although at the time of writing Sahiron's name was still being touted—mostly by the media—as the “head” of the Abu Sayyaf. Neither Hapilon or Sahiron had been seen or heard of for years). Both were very identifiable in the close-knit communities of the provinces of the Sulu Archipelago, especially Sahiron, who was in his seventies and only had one arm.

By 2011 the Abu Sayyaf had fractured into a number of criminal cells whose sole agenda was kidnap for ransom. That these groups had a common agenda is not disputed. What may be disputed, however, is whether they acted solo or in conjunction with other likeminded groups. It is more than likely that these groups had individual leaders. Names such as Nurhassan Jamiri, Long Malat Sulayman, Puruji Indama and Sulaiman Pattah, among others, had been put forward as Abu Sayyaf commanders, none of whom could rightfully claim to be the “Commander-in-Chief” of the Abu Sayyaf.

It is worth mentioning here that the Abu Sayyaf as an organisation was different in Sulu and Basilan in the first half-decade of the twenty-first century. The Abu Sayyaf in Sulu was a complex phenomenon insomuch that it did not lend itself to the assessments made by the AFP and the Manila administration. Unlike the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan it was not an organised entity but rather a group of individuals without true leadership and motivated solely by crime for profit. After the death of all its major commanders the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan became more like its namesake in Sulu—leaderless and motivated by quick money.

The majority of these grouped individuals, although Muslim by faith, thought nothing of killing a captive who became of no value. Women hostages were just as valuable, if not more so, than many male hostages. (Even the Quran 4:19, which states in part “nor should you treat them [women] with harshness,” was ignored at times). Kidnap for ransom became a commercial enterprise with many auxiliary players—drivers, boat owners, traders, guards and so forth—all profiting in some way,

expecting something in return for their “services.” The more auxiliary players to be compensated, the greater the ransom amount asked.

Of course, most ransom amount demands were ambit in nature, remembering that if a price is asked it is near impossible to increase, much easier to reduce. The domestic insurgency cause—that is, fighting the various Manila administrations in the hope of gaining some form of self-determination—was moribund, if not extinct for most of these criminals. And, because foreigners—especially white foreigners—were all thought to be if not wealthy then capable of raising large amounts of cash, they were, in the main, targeted. This was the scene in which Warren Rodwell found himself on December 5, 2011 in Upper Pangi, Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay, Mindanao, Republic of the Philippines.

Because of the complexity of the Abu Sayyaf it is necessary in this publication to differentiate, at times, between how the organisation was in its earlier times as opposed to how it was when Rodwell was kidnapped. Terms such as “original Abu Sayyaf” and “neo-Abu Sayyaf” are therefore used frequently.



## INTRODUCTION

Warren Richard Rodwell was born on June 16, 1958 at Homebush, a suburb of Sydney, Australia. He was the youngest of three children. His adolescence and early teen years were spent with his mother and siblings, and occasional periods with his father. Because of his unstable family life he was forced to live in various church-run children's homes, including the Salvation Army Boys' Home in Goulburn, in the Australian State of New South Wales. By his mid-teens, around 1973, he was working and living independently in Taree, New South Wales. By mid-2011 Rodwell had—among other things—travelled to most continents, taught at and studied at various higher education institutions—mainly in Asia—completed a term in the Australian Defence Forces, been married twice, and visited the Philippines no less than four times, including the Zamboanga region where he was to be eventually kidnapped.

In May 2011 Rodwell arrived in the Philippines after completing almost a decade of university teaching in China whilst studying at the same time. This inveterate world traveller was now in his early fifties and ready for semi-retirement—perhaps. Having travelled to the Philippines on three previous occasions he had been charmed by its people and had admiration for their stoicism in times of natural and man-made disasters. He believed this was indeed a place he could embrace for the remainder of his life. That there were dangers, especially where he chose to reside—the Zamboanga Peninsular region—was a consideration to him, but not a deterrent. He had read all the warnings issued by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) about travelling to this particular area of the southern Philippines, but his life experiences had prepared him for any dangers or eventualities that might come his way. Also, the Zamboangas—del Norte, del Sur and Sibugay—although considered dangerous by DFAT, were not the scene of the majority of “kidnaps for ransom” in Mindanao at this time. This dubious honour belonged to the province islands of Sulu and Basilan, and to a lesser degree Tawi-Tawi.

Rodwell was keen to take advantage of the relatively inexpensive cost of owning property in the Philippine provinces—to purchase property in

Metro Manila was financially impossible for him. The far-flung provinces of the Mindanao region particularly appealed to him. However, to purchase a property and build a house anywhere in the Philippines is not easy for a non-resident. There are many restrictions that ensure Philippine land holdings, in the main, remain the property of Filipinos (a building can be purchased but not the land it is built on). Hurdle number one, owning or jointly owning a lot of land, can be overcome by becoming a permanent resident of the Philippines. No problem—get married and apply for a spousal permanent residency. Accordingly, Rodwell, like many other expat Australians—and of course many resident Australian men—joined an international dating website that specialised in finding eligible Filipina brides for foreign men. The Filipina, in the main, is a caring and loving individual sought by many foreign men for those qualities. This is not sexist lyricism, but a calculated appraisal of just such qualities. It did not take all that long for Rodwell to find a lady who on face-value seemed to fit his idea of a good lifetime partner. He was particularly taken by an attractive dark-haired 26 year old, single mother named Mirafior Gutang. After a whirlwind and sometimes tumultuous romance lasting all of four weeks—during which time doubts arose in Rodwell’s mind as to whether he was making the correct move—they were married in Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay on June 1, 2011 by the Municipal Mayor, Eldwin Alibutdan.

Once the marriage ceremony was finalised Rodwell started the process of buying a house and land package at Green Meadows, Upper Pangi, Ipil, at a cost of just 660 thousand Philippine pesos—around 16,500 Australian dollars. The supervisor of the building of his house would be Baldwin Santuyo, a very competent builder whom Rodwell felt totally at ease with. Having felt comfortable with what he was about to do, the next step was to obtain spousal permanent residency. Straight forward enough—just a matter of applying, paying the necessary fees, and being interviewed by Philippine Immigration officials. Rodwell was of good character and, there being no impediments or objections, his application was approved on October 19, 2011. All was going to plan—or so it appeared.

Meanwhile, his marriage to Mirafior was deteriorating to the point where they were not living together; however, at that stage reconciliation was still a possibility because regular communication was being maintained. Nevertheless, he rented a room in Ipil whilst Mirafior eventually returned home to live with her mother. *En passant*, Rodwell enjoyed a good rapport with his new mother-in-law and not long after his marriage to her daughter she told him about rumours she had heard about



him possibly being kidnapped. He was not unduly concerned because rumours always abounded when a foreigner came to live in Ipil.

Whilst the progress of building his house was well under way, a number of events occurred that, in isolation, could have been handled by Rodwell, but together gave him reason for concern. As mentioned, his marriage was struggling; however, he had been in this position before and ridden out the storm. Then an unusual event occurred—an unexpected visit from Major Torres of the PNP anti-terrorist squad on October 22, 2011.

Torres warned Rodwell that he had been singled out as a potential kidnap victim by a local criminal gang. Exactly how Torres came to have this information is not known, but there were (and no doubt still are) any number of informants in the Ipil area who, for whatever reason, are willing to pass on rumours or gossip, perhaps hoping for favourable treatment in the future. Torres advised Rodwell it was in his best interests to leave the immediate area for one week. Of course, Torres could not force Rodwell to leave, but in the event he was kidnapped, Torres could advise his superiors he had warned him. However, it was not in Rodwell's make-up to be intimidated, and it just so happened that he had been cautious enough to purchase—with Miraflor's assistance—a 9mm Norinco handgun, as well as a Taser and some pepper spray.

At around the same time, quite unprovoked, he had fallen foul of a local teacher, Julian Castillo, who took exception to Rodwell asking him to supervise his students more carefully, some of whom at times had damaged his property whilst the house was under construction. Castillo was also in the habit of carrying a Russian Ingram submachine gun and boasted to anybody who would listen that he was capable of killing Rodwell. Rodwell called Castillo's bluff and made it known that he was unafraid of him, and indeed that it was Castillo who should be afraid. The situation deteriorated to the point where, in the company of the headmaster of the National High School, Castillo was responsible for Rodwell being interrogated at the Sanito, Ipil police station. All ended with little event, except that Rodwell was given a passing blow by Castillo whilst at the police station—something Rodwell was unable to return.

Meanwhile, Rodwell had been receiving electronic correspondence from a young lady, Melanie, who claimed to be 18 years old—there was no way to substantiate this—and who wanted to be his “text buddy.” His

cautious nature led him to suspect it was a “plant” from Miraflor in the hope of proving his unfaithfulness, thereby increasing her chances of obtaining a monetary settlement should divorce ever eventuate. Caution! Rodwell was feeling lonely and as such was vulnerable.

The pluses of owning his own home and being able to afford semi-retirement in a provincial region—the Zamboanga peninsular—were now being outweighed slightly by the minuses of aggressive “neighbours,” suspicious police officials and visits, a wife whose underlying reason for getting married appeared to be financial gain, and an overenthusiastic young Filipina. He must have wondered why he had chosen a “dangerous” region in Mindanao rather than a more peaceful provincial area such as Cebu, Samar, Leyte, Panay or a dozen other places in Luzon and/or the Visayas. However, hindsight is just that. A little later, his situation had improved slightly. Although it was not completely finished he was able to move into his house whilst it was being completed. He toyed with the idea that he may sell up and move on once it was finished. Whether this would be to somewhere else in the Philippines or a similar country somewhere in Asia would have to be determined.

In the first week of December 2011 whilst living in his new home, a number of other incidents occurred that gave Rodwell reason for concern or indeed suspicion. He later would admit to the interviewing Australian Federal Police that he was “[feeling] uncomfortable about the attention being drawn to me given the serious threat of kidnapping in the area.” Rodwell was not prone to panicking or giving way to unfounded suspicion. He was a world traveller who had seen life in many of its complexities. For him to admit he was feeling “uncomfortable” suggests there must have been more than just a sneaking suspicion. *Inter alia*, there may have been expectations of kidnapping in the area, but as mentioned the Zamboanga region was not a hotbed of kidnapping for ransom at that time. The logistics involved in the kidnapping of a foreigner in the southern Philippines are quite complex, especially in the area in which he was living, as time was to tell.

On the night of December 3, 2011—two days before his kidnapping—he was startled by a gunshot that shattered the usual quiet. The next incident that caused alarm occurred the following night when some local children were detonating some large firecrackers. These explosions had the effect of startling an already jumpy Rodwell. Whether they were the same children he had chided in the past for damaging his property was

unknown. A little while later he heard some quite audible noises outside his house. These were not passing noises but deliberate enough to make him suspect somebody may have been attempting to break in. This prompted Rodwell to turn up the volume on his television set in an attempt to convince whoever was responsible that he was not asleep but awake, and prepared for an intrusion. It was known in the immediate area that Rodwell was well-armed and very capable of using his armoury and associated protective items—the grapevine works well in small communities of provincial Philippines.

Meanwhile, Miraflor was still maintaining some contact with Rodwell but it was more just an opportunity for her to make sure he was still in Ipil and had not sold out. In addition, she never missed the opportunity to exchange tit-for-tat remarks. In one text Rodwell light-heartedly told her to beware of “terrorists.” Her reply came back instantly: “well where I am, all my friends are the terrorists.” Was this just a passing remark? Or did she know or indeed have some friends who may have been capable of the crime of kidnap for ransom? Had she also, like Major Torres, heard something?

On the morning of his kidnapping Rodwell asked one of the workers who was building his house: “Do you think I’m safe here?” The answer was somewhat confused, but this may have been to do with the workman speaking Bisaya as his first language, and having limited knowledge of English. The day of December 5, 2011 started and continued as usual until 5 p.m. when the workers left. It was then that Rodwell felt an uneasiness, a quietness that signalled to him that some sinister event may be imminent. He went to make a cup of coffee for himself, but found the water supply to his home was not working—no problem, possibly it had not been turned back on by the workers. He decided to watch a little television and turn on the lights—it was approximately 5.45 p.m. There was no electricity. Again, no great reason to panic—brownouts were common in this area. He looked out the window and saw his neighbours all had lights. No electricity, no water and an eerie silence descended on Lot 21, Block 4, Green Meadows, Upper Pangí, Ipil. The usual perspicacious nature of Rodwell was being tested.

Fig. I.1. Rodwell's house at Lot 21, Block 4, Green Meadows, Upper Pangl, Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay, Mindanao region. It was here that he was kidnapped on December 5, 2011.



## CHAPTER ONE

### DECEMBER 2011: CAPTURE AND PROOF OF BEING ALIVE

#### **Captured & Wounded**

6 p.m. Monday December 5, 2011—Rodwell’s mobile phone rang. He answered the call thinking it may be Mirafior. The “voice” signal strength on his mobile phone was not all that good at the best of times, and indoors it was less than satisfactory. He took his mobile phone outdoors and was surprised to hear it was Melanie. (Unsure of her age he had told her before not to contact him but she was persistent—there may have been some misunderstanding due to the language differences.) It was whilst Rodwell was outside his house—he had gone out the back door—that he saw a very muscular shirtless male bent over on the other side of his fence.

His immediate thought was that the man was pulling out weeds, so he was not unduly concerned about his presence. Simultaneous with this sighting of the shirtless man, and still engaging in small talk with Melanie, Rodwell heard what appeared to be his front gate being smashed. The thought did enter his head to go back inside and collect his handgun and Taser, but as later events would show this would almost certainly have meant his immediate death. However, the urgency to investigate what the sounds was took priority. Dropping his mobile phone he ran around the side of his house. It was here that he was confronted by four heavily armed “uniformed” men. Training had taught him that he must do something to address the odds. He grabbed a large piece of timber and started hitting the wall of his house quite aggressively. If this was designed to in some way intimidate the armed men—who in the main were smaller than Rodwell—it had just the opposite effect. Rodwell was shot in the right hand. (Media reports later claimed he had been shot in the foot—this was simply not true.) The bullet, which was fired from what appeared to be an M16, entered Rodwell’s right hand between the index finger and the thumb, just below the metacarpophalangeal joint.

The bullet wound was quite severe and left a gaping hole in his hand. He remembers thinking at the time that had it been about nine centimetres lower the bullet would have severed the radial artery in his wrist, which would have almost certainly led to him bleeding to death. Hovering between shock and anger Rodwell screamed at his attacker “you shot my fucking hand! You shot my fucking hand!” Whether the shot was intentional or just a startled reaction by the gunman to Rodwell’s smashing of the piece of timber against the wall of the house is problematic. The fact remained he had been injured—not lethally, but certainly severely enough to require immediate expert medical treatment, something that simply did not occur.

Although suffering from shock, pain and considerable loss of blood Rodwell was nevertheless astute enough to make a mental note of the four attackers for future reference. The leader of this quadripartite criminal group was a solidly built male, around 40 years of age and approximately 168 centimetres tall, and gave the impression that he may have had some military experience, not necessarily in the PNP or AFP. It was more than likely he may have been a paramilitary member of either the MNLF or the MILF. (The Abu Sayyaf Group, although a paramilitary organisation of some note a decade before, was now more an assortment of opportunist criminal gangs, who, although adequately armed, lacked the disciplinary disposition of either the MNLF or the MILF). This male was later identified by other extended members of the kidnap coterie as Abdullah Amala. The other three kidnapers were considerably younger than Amala and could very well have been in their teens, since they were small in height and slightly built. Nevertheless, even a child armed with a M16 is worthy of respect, so Rodwell obliged when ordered to put his wrists out so that he could be handcuffed. The fact that he had a badly wounded right hand made no difference to the demand.

Even though it was Amala who had shot Rodwell, as opposed to the other three he seemed quite composed. The firing of the shot may have been accidental or simply designed to serve as a warning to Rodwell that Amala was dictating the scene and obedience was required. Even Rodwell would admit after his release that he did not believe Amala deliberately shot him. A kidnap victim in that part of the southern Philippines was potentially lucrative, as had been proven in the past, and therefore the prize had to be protected. After all, a considerable amount of time, planning and money had, in all likelihood, already gone into this crime, and many people stood to benefit if a ransom was forthcoming.