

Sydney siege: Trauma after the terror

- [THE AUSTRALIAN](#)
- DECEMBER 17, 2014 12:00AM

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A SWAT team searches for a suspect after the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013. Source: AFP

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EVEN for Australians who don't call Sydney home, the dramatic events of Monday have brought home the fragility of life even in big, busy and expensive cities.

On Monday, as workers headed towards their annual Christmas break, their confidence in the capacity to feel safe and secure in the middle of a well-ordered central business district on a regular summer's day was breached in the worst possible way.

A fellow citizen had taken up arms against them — in a city cafe where people, as Tony Abbott noted, were indulging in that most innocent of activities, a morning coffee. The violence at the Lindt chocolate cafe was more than reckless behaviour: the siege was mindless, murderous and motivated by hatred and loathing.

Rolling television coverage took the threat into people's living rooms and on to their smartphones. Soon #sydneysiege was trending across the world.

Then, after the longest day when it began to seem almost surreal, in the early morning of Tuesday, two Sydneysiders were killed, their lives and their deaths seeming to personify the city they called home. As the country awoke, it was to the sight of snapshots of the two victims, Katrina Dawson, 38, and Tori Johnson, 34, their smiles lighting up social media like an epitaph for the emoji generation.

A city and a nation mourned all that has been lost, and wondered whether it would ever be quite the same again.

Of course Sydney is not alone — many other cities have endured tragedy, much of it on a far greater scale than Monday's terrifying events.

In 2001, planes were deliberately flown into the World Trade Centre in New York as part of four co-ordinated terrorist attacks that killed 2996 people and caused damage in terms of property and infrastructure worth at least \$US10 billion. The events led the US and its allies to embark on military action in Iraq and Afghanistan on the premise of reducing the future risk of terrorist attacks.

In 2004, bombs in the Madrid train system left 191 dead and 1800 injured. Coming three days before Spain's general election, the attacks caused a political outcry and desperate attempts to bring those responsible to justice.

In 2005, four suicide bombers caused explosions on the London Underground and a double-decker bus, killing themselves and 52 others. The attacks — which came a day after London was awarded the 2012 Olympics

— shut down the city’s public transport network and forced Britain to rethink its national security.

Last year, two bombs exploded near the finish line for the Boston Marathon, killing three people and wounding an estimated 264 others. Amid the chaos, authorities shut down the city, ordering residents to seek shelter, until those responsible were found.

Reflecting Australia’s struggle to make sense of what happened, Abbott, himself a resident of Sydney, described it initially as our “brush with terrorism”.

What happened in the chocolate shop and cafe was something that normally happened elsewhere, not here, not even at the hands of someone such as Man Haron Monis. This was politically motivated violence in a country more accustomed to political apathy, where freedom is embraced by surfing or entertaining rather than fought for in protests and violent uprisings.

Others, less tactfully, described the tragedy as a wake-up call, a harsh reminder that extremists threaten our way of life, no matter where we live; this was Australia’s twin towers, our Bali bombings, our London terror attacks, and Sydney would never be the same again — or would it? Could Sydney prevail and even grow stronger in the wake of such terror?

Former marathon runner Rob de Castella has seen cities stumble in the face of adversity but ultimately endure and emerge stronger. His home city of Canberra was regarded by some as a soulless place, in the middle of nowhere, until the 2003 bushfires revealed its community spirit. He was in New York when Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc in 2012, then returned last year not for a memorial of what was lost but a celebration of what had been built.

He was leading a group of indigenous runners at the Boston Marathon last year when bombs exploded at the finish line and terror took hold. But here, too, the community took a breath and took back control.

“After the bombings there, not just the city but the whole international running community came together in a way that I had never seen before,” de Castella says.

“On the marathon circuit cities normally compete against each other, for runners, for sponsors. Post-Boston, all of the events came together and a group was formed called Boston Strong. That was really to demonstrate, in

the face of such insulting and barbaric actions, how strong the world running community was and how resilient people can be.

“It showed, really, how acts of terrorism have the opposite effect, how they bring people together, united by the things that make us human. Whether it is an act of God or an act of violence like this, people rise up. That’s the great thing about mankind.”

With Sydney rocked by random violence and silenced by grief, it is inevitable that people will test their opinions of the city, of its place in the world, of their own place in the world. When an enraged and volatile gunman disrupted the customary wind-down to a summer break, taking hostages in a chocolate shop all decked out for Christmas, their inner fears may have been realised.

When two innocent Sydneysiders were killed and brave police, and skilled doctors could not save them, their dreams may have been shattered.

Then they awoke, as everyone did yesterday, to a new reality.

Margaret Alston, a professor in the department of social work at Monash University, says people will be better off in the long run if they can appreciate the “complexity and efficiency of our institutional structures” such as police, emergency services and governments, and realise that they are there to help.

“We have very strong institutional structures, whereas in a lot of post-disaster circumstances these structures break down and people feel less safe, less secure,” Alston says.

She downplays the idea the siege could have been prevented, as well as the idea that the failure to prevent the incident could destabilise our institutions.

“Even during the siege, and right through the dreadful experience, people felt reassured, they knew what authorities were doing and trying to do,” she says.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the Sydney siege and other criminal acts, even other natural disasters, is how it played out.

Hostages were taken in the centre of a city, opposite a television studio, and the events played out on TV screens, social media, and news websites almost in real time. Some journalists became players, whether they wanted to or not, and their audience was embedded in the action. The question for authorities was not how much information on the siege to release but how much information they could possibly keep secret.

The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma brings together media and trauma professionals to work towards effective reporting on violence matters. It also advocates support for those on the front line. The centre's Asia-Pacific chief executive Cait McMahon says the siege has personalised events for many reporters because it happened "on Australian soil".

"You can get traumatised just by engagement with the story and the subject, you know, if you have been to the chocolate shop or spend a lot of time in Martin Place," McMahon says.

"Right now the reporters will be working on adrenalin, in what is now a 24-hour news cycle. Their audience really needs to read their own reactions and if they are feeling overwhelmed or saturated, then really just switch off.

"We get repelled by the horror but we are also attracted to it, in a sense, because we want to know and understand what is going on. We get caught between this going towards and going back. People need to regulate what they are exposed to because too much horror is too much horror."

Before the siege reached its tragic climax, there was a surge of unity on social media, signs of a community attempting to join together and protect each other, through the #illridewithyou hashtag. Everyone from parents to politicians offered to stand alongside Muslim Australians, lest the community fracture under pressure, resulting in a kneejerk response to the siege.

Alston believes that exercise helped cushion the impact of the deaths.

When fears of casualties were realised, Sydneysiders responded with urgency, flooding to the site of the siege in Martin Place to leave flowers and pay their last respects, all the while demanding authorities explain how it could happen and, better still, promise it will never happen again.

Alston says people need to be able to grieve after such an event, and the makeshift memorial is just one of those opportunities.

She says the community is trying to make sense of what happened and suggests everyone should choose their language carefully.

Compassionate, positive, strong, united, determined and, above all, resilient responses are needed now, she argues.

"There are people and families grieving very, very deeply at the moment, and it is important that some good come of this," Alston says.

De Castella says the 9/11 memorial in New York is a symbol of how cities affected by tragedy have no choice but to move on, to become stronger, to become more defiant and more resilient.

“Even though these things are absolutely horrific and we don’t want these tragedies to befall anyone, they always manage to bring out the best in us,” he says.

“They provide a platform to spit in the face of individuals who try to attack us for our values.”

There are lessons from other cities.

Former Howard government minister Richard Alston, who was Australia’s ambassador to Britain at the time of the London bombings, says the British put the phrase “Keep calm and carry on” into action.

“I think there’s something like three million people a day who travel on the underground and I think the thing that seemed to resonate with everyone was the need to get back to normality as quick as possible, concentrate on doing what you normally do,” Alston says.

“The logic of the alternative is you just worry yourself to death and you still can’t do anything about it. This is unfortunate but the world can be a dangerous place and bad things do happen from time to time. But people are inherently resilient, and I think Australians will show that resilience.”

The reality is that Australia’s “brush with terrorism” has not damaged infrastructure or left a visual reminder of a city’s weakness. The siege was concentrated on a single business and by yesterday the normal hum of the city was returning.

The psychological scars and memories will take time to fade, but Tourism and Transport Forum chief executive Margy Osmond says: “Sydney is fundamentally a safe city and will continue to be an iconic destination for visitors. We can be reasonably confident the city will bounce back.”

