

**SIEGE  
HOSTAGE**  
*John  
O'Brien*

# ‘HE SAID HE’D KILL US ALL’



“I have never felt such a relief as I did when I turned that corner and saw the armed police waiting,” O'Brien (centre, on Dec. 15) tells WHO.



Man Haron Monis (in 2011) wrote on his website: “[I] will not stop political activity against oppression.”



“I was lucky,” siege survivor John O'Brien (at home in Maroubra on Dec. 17) tells WHO.

*Certain he would die in the Sydney café siege, the former tennis pro made a daring decision*

**U**nder a dazzling blue sky, Sydney’s CBD was sparkling with Christmas trees and tinsel when retiree John O’Brien walked to Martin Place’s Lindt Chocolate Café for a “quick coffee.” Within minutes on that Dec. 15 morning, Man Haron Monis, a father of two and religious fanatic, disabled the café’s automatic doors and drew a shotgun from a blue bag. To the horror of the 17 hapless customers and staff inside the café, Monis ordered them to the floor in the first act of what would be a 16-hour ordeal. “He told us he was going to shoot us all,” O’Brien tells WHO at his home in Sydney’s eastern suburbs. From then, O’Brien planned his escape: “I spent the rest of the day just thinking, ‘When am I going to make my move?’”

Around 3.30 PM that day, O’Brien, 82, took his chance and was among the first group of people who managed to break free of Monis’s deadly clutches. In an exclusive interview with WHO, O’Brien, a former tennis professional who competed at Wimbledon in the 1950s and ’60s, describes the horror of being one of Monis’s hostages and of how he escaped the siege, which ended with the deaths of mother of three and barrister Katrina Dawson, 38, and café manager Tori Johnson, 34. Monis was also killed. Says O’Brien: “It

was a despicable act to go in there and take someone’s life the way he did.”

The December trip to the city was an annual ritual for O’Brien, who has two daughters and two granddaughters. Around 7.30 AM, he left his home in the beachside suburb of Maroubra, where he lives with wife Maureen, for an 8.30 AM eye appointment at the Sydney Retina Clinic on Macquarie Street. “Afterwards, I came into the Lindt coffee shop,” he says.

After Monis—who appeared to align himself with terror group ISIS—took control of the café, he had some hostages place their hands against the windows while one was forced to unfurl a black flag with white Arabic text that read, “There is no God but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” The self-described Muslim sheikh, who had been charged over a series of sexual assaults and also as an accessory in the murder of his ex-wife, had some hostages make demands on his behalf on their personal social-media accounts. One demand: to talk to Prime Minister Tony Abbott. When that demand wasn’t met (or perhaps even



FROM LEFT: GETTY IMAGES; AAP (2)



**'HOSTAGE DOWN'**  
 Katrina Dawson (above right) and Tori Johnson (below) died at the climax of the siege. At 2.14 AM on Dec. 16, police heard a gunshot coming from inside the café. "Window 2. Hostage down," reported a sniper stationed inside the Seven Network building opposite. Police then breached the café with stun grenades.

Police in Martin Place at the time of the siege. "As the day wore on ... a couple of times [hostages] fainted," Seven Network cameraman Greg Parker told WHO.

acknowledged), he told the hostages he would "kill you all, one by one," says O'Brien. "I was quite stunned by it. It was never going to end peacefully. The police would have to shoot him and he was going to shoot all of us."

O'Brien spied his chance to survive around 3.30 PM. "I was lucky in that I was in the right position, really," he explains (he prefers not to elaborate yet on what took place in the intervening hours). "I was up towards the two glass doors in one area and Monis was down the other end of the room—right down the other end of the room." From his position, O'Brien could see a green exit button by a glass door. Would pressing the button unlock the door?

Next to O'Brien was barrister Stefan Balafoutis, who works in nearby chambers on

Phillip Street and was on his usual morning coffee run with friend Katrina Dawson. "I said to him, 'This is it, we've got to do it now. Are you ready?'" says O'Brien, who still competes in tennis tournaments. "And he was ready, right behind me. I was able to slip off the seat, slip onto the floor, turn sideways and get through a small opening about 10 inches [24cm] wide, crawl along the ground and go over to the green button. And that's how I got out. Stefan followed me."

News footage shows the pair bursting from the door at 3.37 PM and running into the safety of a cluster of armed police. Seconds afterwards, a male Lindt staff member also escaped through a nearby service-entry door. From there, the trio were taken to the makeshift police command centre. "The police had a special room and we were interviewed there for about two hours," says O'Brien. "It was valuable [for police] to know who was who [in the café] and what was going on, and if there were two [gunmen]. I think the police thought there were two men in there but it was only the one."

More than an hour later, a further two hostages—café employees Elly Chen and Jieun

Bae—also fled, leaving a dozen hostages inside. They were kept captive by Monis until around 2 AM, when a group of four people made a dash for freedom through the main entry. "I was really happy for them, because this man was quite mad," says O'Brien.

Minutes later, gunfire was heard from inside the café and—after a sniper reported "hostage down"—police moved in. In addition to the deaths of Johnson and Dawson, at least four people were wounded. Two of the hostages were pregnant and admitted to hospital for assessment.

In the siege's aftermath, Martin Place was carpeted with floral tributes and cards. "It was really very meaningful," says O'Brien. "It was an unbelievable display of flowers and cards. I just couldn't believe it was so large. I was just completely taken

with the amount of people who were so kind and wonderful. It helped tremendously."

But for O'Brien, and all the survivors, the trauma from that day continues. "I'm still stressed by the whole event," he says. "I'm going to have some counselling with a psychiatrist because I'm still having trouble sleeping. I've got a tension headache out of it, which I have had for around three weeks or so now. [But] it was a lucky day for me and it was just dreadfully sad for Tori Johnson and Katrina Dawson."

■ By Rachel Syers and Michael Crooks

**"I said, 'This is it, we've got to do it now'"**  
 —hostage John O'Brien

## FATAL ACCIDENT?

Mother-of-three Katrina Dawson was hit by a stray police bullet, according to Fairfax Media. Sources told Fairfax that Dawson, 38, was struck by a ricocheting bullet in the shoot-out between police and gunman Man Haron Monis, after Monis reportedly executed Tori Johnson around 2.10 AM.

NSW Police has not commented on the report.

An inquest, which will begin on Jan. 29, will aim "to determine how the deaths occurred ... and

whether they could have been prevented," said a NSW Coroner's Court spokesman.

Meanwhile, Police Minister Stuart Ayres "will be making no comment whilst there is a critical-incident investigation taking place," said a NSW Police representative.

Fairfax also reported that police had drawn up a "Direct Action" plan to storm the café earlier in the day on Dec. 15, taking Monis by surprise. The decision was later reversed.