

JOURNEY TO THE JIHAD

She was the all-Australian girl who embraced radical Islam – and took her children to live in the heartland of the global jihad movement. In this exclusive extract from her new book, *Sally Neighbour* examines the extraordinary transformation of Robyn Mary Hutchinson.

// PORTRAIT VANESSA HUNTER

In 1990 Australian Muslim convert Rabiah Hutchinson packed up five of her six children – the youngest still in nappies – and headed off from Sydney to join the jihad (her eldest daughter remained in Malaysia, where she was studying). Her destination was Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, which was the main base for the mujahidin fighting to oust the Soviet-installed government in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Rabiah must have seemed an unlikely jihadist. She grew up as Robyn Mary Hutchinson in a poor family in Mudgee, New South Wales, and spent her teen years as a surfer chick on Sydney's northern beaches, before backpacking to Bali.

In Indonesia she'd married a Muslim and converted to Islam, and later joined the student Islamist uprising against Suharto. Through her student friends she met a dissident cleric, Abu Bakar Bashir, who invited her to come and work as an English teacher at his Islamic boarding school in central Java, where she became the only Westerner to join Bashir's inner sanctum.

When Suharto cracked down on the Islamist movement, Rabiah returned to Australia with her (third) Indonesian husband, who was later appointed emir (leader) of the Australian branch of Bashir's new organisation, Jemaah Islamiah (JI).

After five years in Australia, their marriage came to an end, and Rabiah took off to join the mujahidin.



Hutchinson at Sydney's Manly beach. "The transformation from Robyn to Rabiah to Umm Mohammed has just been a natural process of progression of who I really am," she says.

THE ARRIVAL OF A THIRTYSOMETHING, unmarried Australian woman accompanied by five children in the desert town of Pabbi, in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, created something of a stir, by Rabiah's account. "People couldn't comprehend how a woman had just turned up, because the other women there came with their husbands. For a woman to just turn up with that many children saying, 'I'm here for the jihad, just like you', it was a concept they just couldn't get their heads around."

Rabiah and the children were allocated half of a traditional Pashtun mud-brick house, with a kitchen, sitting room and one bedroom, which the six of them shared. The electric blankets she had brought after being warned of the severe winter cold were never unpacked. Pabbi had no electricity, just a communal generator that provided power for about two hours in the morning and two hours at night. In any event it was so hot that when they walked along the road clumps of melted bitumen stuck to their shoes, which then became caked in dirt. They used kerosene lamps for lighting and gas cylinders, called *ambooba*, for cooking. There were no telephones or televisions and virtually no communication with the outside world.

"Pabbi was hardcore," Rabiah remembers. "Even by Afghanistan standards. The living conditions were shocking. The scorpions used to crawl out of the roof and the cockroaches would climb on you and the mosquitoes were so big you had to tie yourself to the mattress or they'd carry you off in the night. In summer it was 50 to 52 degrees, and in winter it got so cold the water would ice up and wouldn't come out of the taps. There was cholera and typhoid – and the dust!"

In spite of – perhaps in part because of – its privations, Rabiah remembers Pabbi as "the best place in the world". "It's hard to believe you could be so happy," she says. The harsh simplicity of their existence evoked memories of her childhood in Mudgee and Wollar, except that the socio-economic tables were turned. Here poverty, frugality and sacrifice were virtues that would surely be rewarded. "It didn't matter, because we thought after all this hardship Afghanistan will become an Islamic country and we'll all go and live there happy ever after."

Rabiah was put to work in the al Jihad hospital, where inmates of Pabbi's rambling refugee camp came for medical treatment. The hospital was run by Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, a principal protagonist in the Afghan jihad.

Like everything else the hospital was made of mud-brick, with upper walls fashioned from plywood frames and mosquito wire to allow the air to circulate. The women's hospital where Rabiah worked had four wards: maternity, surgical, infectious disease and children's. There were ten or 12 beds in each ward, and often two patients to a bed. Hundreds more lined up for outpatient treatment each day, and the crowd waiting for treatment sometimes got so unruly that the hospital employed an orderly armed with

a stick to whack them into line. Rabiah was trained on the job. Her superiors were an assorted collection of mostly foreign volunteers, including an Algerian vet and a Pakistani gynaecologist trained in the US, who told Rabiah, "I'll teach you everything I know." She became a proficient midwife and learned to diagnose and treat common ailments such as cholera, typhoid and hepatitis, and injuries caused by mines, which were treated with Yemeni honey, renowned for its healing properties.

The conditions were primitive, to say the least. "We used to use and re-use disposable syringes until you could literally no longer push them through the patients' skin. There was no such thing as cleaning the tables where the women gave birth. If the patients died we simply pushed them aside." Within a few months of their arrival, Rabiah's youngest boy, three-year-old Ilyas, contracted cholera. He grew so thin

"PABBI WAS THE BEST PLACE I'VE EVER BEEN IN MY LIFE. IT WAS THE CLOSEST THING TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ISLAM TO THE FULLEST EXTENT."

Right: Pabbi, a town of cholera, typhoid and dust.

widely known as "Umm Mohammed Australie". She says the patients called her Doctor Jan, which translates roughly as "dear doctor".

Pabbi became home for Rabiah and her children for the next three years. Her rare provenance ensured everyone knew who she was. "People knew me because I was unusual, I was weird – an Australian with no husband and six kids who came and gave up *dunya* [worldly comfort] for the sake of Allah." For Rabiah, her new moniker signified another milestone in her personal journey, marking her transition from a Muslim who has merely "submitted" to Islam, to a true believer. "The transformation from Robyn to Rabiah to Umm Mohammed has just been a natural process of progression of who I really am," she says. "The difference between Rabiah and Umm Mohammed is that Rabiah became Umm Mohammed with knowledge and understanding of what true Islam is."



that his ribcage protruded beneath his waxy skin like an African famine baby. After a few weeks in hospital, the doctors told Rabiah to take him home. "They sent him home to die. They said, 'There's nothing more we can do. Just take him home and whatever Allah has written for him will happen.'" Despite her own faith, she railed against their fatalism. "We were living a life where you realise your limitations. You become very resigned to death – but I wasn't yet." The boy was gravely ill for three months but finally made a full recovery.

Like all the so-called "Afghan-Arabs" (foreigners who'd joined the mujahidin), Rabiah was known by her *kuniya*, an Islamic nickname derived from the name of the individual's eldest child, which is at once a term of endearment and respect. Men are known as Abu – which means "the father of" – followed usually by the name of their eldest son, while women are referred to as Umm (pronounced "Oom"), which means "the mother of". Rabiah was known as Umm Mohammed, "the mother of Mohammed". Because there were so many women whose first sons were named after the Prophet, she was

It was a spartan life. They rose each morning at 4am as the *azan* [call to prayer] resounded across the flat mud rooftops. After dawn prayers, the boys would run to the bakery down the street, a lean-to shack where the Afghan baker used a stick with a nail in it to flick steaming rounds of flat naan bread from a wood-fired tandoor set in the dirt. At home they would eat the warm naan for breakfast with jam or honey and cream made from buffalo milk. At 5am the children boarded a bus that took them to school in Peshawar, an hour-and-a-half journey along a potholed road prowled by *khatta aturk* [bandits] who mercifully let the school bus pass unmolested.

The legendary jihadist Abdullah Azzam, founder of Makhtab al-Khidmat (MAK), the forerunner of al-Qa'ida, had established the school they attended. Azzam's military motto was "Jihad and the rifle alone; no negotiations, no conferences, no dialogues". Yet he also believed the children of the jihad needed a solid education, and had founded the Al Ansar school in Peshawar for the offspring of the Afghan-Arabs.

Despite the war dragging on across the border in Afghanistan – and notwithstanding the

poverty, dirt and disease – life in Pabbi was a secure and ordered existence, centred on the family, and governed by a code of discipline and morality that was uniformly understood – all of which Rabiah had longed for. “It was a society built on the belief that everybody had a place and everybody had a time. The children were very independent in their lifestyle and had the security of their homes. They had very few chores because we had so few material possessions. You sweep your house, wash your clothes, cook your food, and that’s it. Because it was such an ordered life, you always knew where your children were; they had freedom, they were safe, everybody knew each other, there was no fear of child molesters. It was very safe and secure.”

Just like in Mudgee, everyone knew everyone else and there was a palpable sense of community. But here there were no “haves” and “have-nots”; and the dirt and deprivation only intensified the



sense that they were part of an exclusive elite, united by their unyielding faith, their disdain for material wealth and their righteous sense of mission. And unlike in Indonesia, where she had always felt a foreigner, here it also didn’t matter where you were from. It was like a little United Nations of Muslim fundamentalists.

“It didn’t matter what colour, size or shape you were, you were judged on your piety and knowledge,” Rabiah says. “I had American friends, French, German, Chinese, Indonesian, Malays, Filipinos. The majority of the sisters were very well educated; there were vets and an engineer; one was a professor of maths, another was a biochemist; there were numerous graduates from Islamic faculties. Most were bi-or tri-lingual, many spoke French or English. The idea that Muslim radicals are poor, downtrodden and uneducated is a myth. They were exceptionally intelligent women.”

The men and women of Pabbi modelled their behaviour on the first generations of Muslims known as the *Salaf al-Salih*. “Pabbi was like a little Islamic state in Pakistan,” says Rabiah. The men wore the trousers of their *shalwar kameez*

above their ankles and their beards at least the length of a man’s fist. The women wore flowing black gowns like the Prophet’s wives and covered their faces in the company of men who were unrelated to them. There was no music, because music was regarded as the *azan* of *Shaytan* (Satan). There were no two-storey houses, so no-one could look down on unveiled women in the courtyards of their homes.

The social regime precisely prescribed the roles of males and females, and enforced a respectful distance between the two. For Rabiah it was a welcome alternative to the chaotic domestic life she’d known as a child and teenager. The role of women was strictly circumscribed, in a way that both tightly defined their activities and ensured their honour was sacrosanct.

“It might be seen by non-Muslims as oppressive but for us that’s one way that you honour somebody and you show you hold this woman in the highest regard,” says Rabiah. “In Islam jealousy is a positive – protecting your women means you’re jealous over their honour.”

RABIAH WAS IN HER ELEMENT. “PABBI was the best place I’ve ever been in my life. It was the closest thing to the implementation of Islam to the fullest extent, and it was a place that consisted only of people who had all gone there for the same reason. They were people who’d given up everything because they wanted to live under Islamic law. There were doctors, teachers, engineers, nurses, people from all over the world – every Arab country, Somalia, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, some Sunnis from Iran, there was even a Japanese, French, Germans, Americans, any country you can think of.”

The only other Australian she encountered in Pabbi was her friend Aisha, the Aboriginal convert whose husband had arranged Rabiah’s entrée into Pakistan. By now the couple were living in Peshawar and Aisha came to visit, bringing a jar of Vegemite. “What’s that you’re eating?” asked an American friend who found her tucking into a piece of naan toast daubed with the spread. “It’s called Vegemite. It’s an Australian food. Would you like to try some?” The visitor screwed up her face in disgust at the taste of it. “Are you sure this is halal? I can’t believe something can taste so bad and be halal.”

A FAMILIAR FIGURE IN PABBI WAS A TALL, aristocratic-looking Saudi in his early thirties, who was fast becoming an icon among the Afghan-Arabs. Osama bin Laden had left his homeland of Saudi Arabia to join the jihad against the Russians in Afghanistan. The devoutly religious 17th son of a billionaire construction tycoon, bin Laden had been eager to make his mark by volunteering his services and wealth to support the Afghan cause.

Arriving in Peshawar he teamed up with Abdullah Azzam, who’d been a professor at the Jeddah University where bin Laden studied

business administration. By this time Azzam was heading up the Islamic Co-ordination Council in Peshawar, which united 20 organisations there to support the Afghan struggle. It was Azzam who established MAK to co-ordinate the influx of foreign fighters, and bin Laden who provided the funds to cover accommodation, living expenses and a monthly *khafalla*, or stipend, for every foreign volunteer. Together in 1988 they formed a new organisation to keep the jihad alive after the Russians had gone, which they called simply “The base” – in Arabic, al-Qa’ida.

After Azzam’s assassination in 1989, bin Laden had taken over the mantle of emir of the Afghan-Arabs and al-Qa’ida. He worked closely with Pabbi’s supremo, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, who shared his Wahhabi creed. Bin Laden provided the funding for Sayyaf’s military academy and for his University of Dawah and Jihad in Pabbi. In return Sayyaf provided training for most of the foreign volunteers, until bin Laden began to set up his own network of training camps under Sayyaf’s protection and in his territory.

IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG AFTER Rabiah’s arrival in Pabbi for bin Laden to learn of the presence of the foreign mujahidah known as Umm Mohammed Australie. As Rabiah tells it, bin Laden was walking down the street past her house with a companion, an Algerian known as Abu Abdul, when he spotted her children playing in the street. Their conversation was related to her afterwards by Abu Abdul’s wife, Rabiah’s best friend in Pabbi.

“I bet you can’t guess where those children are from,” Abu Abdul remarked.

“They look sort of Arab,” bin Laden replied, noticing the children’s olive complexions inherited from their Indonesian fathers.

“No, they’re Australian.”

“*Subhan Allah* [Praise Allah]!” bin Laden exclaimed. “Australian – that must be a first!”

“It’s a woman on her own,” Abu Abdul continued. “She came with her children, she works in the hospital, she doesn’t have anything, they don’t even have air-conditioning.”

“Well they do now,” bin Laden replied.

A few days later, his emissary delivered a new air-conditioner to her home.

The encounter with the Australian children who spoke fluent Arabic piqued bin Laden’s curiosity, according to the account related by Rabiah’s friend. “It fascinates me, I like to hear those kids talk,” bin Laden said. “If you hadn’t told me they were from Australia and their parents were not Arabs I wouldn’t believe it. They speak such good Arabic.”

Not long after, bin Laden ran into Rabiah’s

children in the street again while walking with Abu Abdul. Eight-year-old Rahmah would remember the occasion vividly many years later, although at the time she didn’t know who the bearded stranger was. “All I remember was I was walking with my brother to the bakery and we came across two uncles. One I knew as he was the husband of my mother’s friend and the other I had not seen before and did not know his name.” The two men called the children over.

“Rahmah, do you know who this is?” asked Abu Abdul.

“No,” she replied.

“This is the uncle that bought your air-conditioner for you.”

Bin Laden knelt down and put his hand on Mustafa’s shoulder, gave them some Afghani coins, then spoke to them in Arabic.

“What are your names?”

“My name is Rahmah, and this is my brother, Mustafa.”



JUST LIKE IN MUDGEES, EVERYONE KNEW EVERYONE ELSE ... BUT HERE THERE WERE NO “HAVES” AND “HAVE-NOTS”.

Above: The house in Mudgee where Hutchinson grew up.

“And where are you going?”

“To the bakery.”

“We shall accompany you then.”

Rahmah recounts that bin Laden walked with them to the bakery, where dozens of families from the refugee camp were queuing for naan. “Why are these people lined up here?” bin Laden asked. Abu Abdul was about to explain but bin Laden interjected, “Let the children answer.”

“It’s for the poor families, because they can’t afford to pay for their bread,” Rahmah explained. The baker had a credit system under which each family was given a stick; he would carve a notch in the stick for every naan he gave them; later, when they received their *khafalla*, they would bring their sticks to the bakery and pay what they owed. Bin Laden’s reaction was to hand the baker enough money for a year’s supply of bread: “Ten loaves for the morning and ten for the afternoon for everybody that stood in the line.”

Bin Laden’s gesture caused quite a scene at the crowded bakery, by Rahmah’s account. Women began chanting “*Allahu Akbar!*” and uttering prayers of thanks while young boys mobbed him, trying to kiss his hands.

Rahmah says bin Laden was so embarrassed that he raised his hands above his shoulders so they couldn’t be grabbed and kissed, while he retreated from the crowd.

Stories like this about bin Laden’s generosity and self-effacing manner abounded among the Afghan-Arabs, and helped cement his iconic status. “ASIO asked me, ‘Did Osama bin Laden ever give you money?’” says Rabiah. “And I laughed – he probably did. Maybe it [MAK] is where the *khafallas* came from, I don’t know. We never asked questions, especially the women, because we didn’t need to know. Women didn’t know these things.”

Soon after the incident at the bakery, Rabiah received an intriguing proposal. Her marital status had been an ongoing issue since her arrival, with “the brothers” insisting that if she wanted to stay in Pakistan she would have to get married. The proposition was relayed to her by bin Laden’s friend in Pabbi, Abu Abdul: “Umm Mohammed, there is a Saudi man who has inquired about you. He has other wives but they are in Saudi Arabia. He travels backwards and forwards, he is very well off, and he is interested in marrying you.”

Rabiah says she didn’t ask the Saudi’s name but agreed to consider his proposal. This was passed on to her suitor, who was due to return to Saudi Arabia shortly and reportedly replied, “*Inshallah* [God willing], if it’s my fortune, good.” However, the anonymous propositioner never came back to press his offer. This was around the time that bin

Laden’s passport was seized by the Saudi authorities and, after a final trip to Pakistan, he fled into exile in Sudan. While it was rumoured that the mysterious Saudi who had proposed to Rabiah was indeed Osama bin Laden, she says she never found out for sure. ☉

Postscript: In 2000, Rabiah and her family travelled to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan where she set up a medical clinic and married a senior al-Qa’ida figure, Mustafa Hamid. When the US attacked Afghanistan after 9/11 they spent three months on the run, before crossing into Iran where they were detained under house arrest until their return to Australia in 2003. Rabiah now lives in southwestern Sydney and is deemed a threat to national security because of her links to al-Qa’ida, the Taliban and JI.

This is an edited extract from *The Mother of Mohammed* by Sally Neighbour, published by MUP, available now.