

A FINE BALANCE

By Ian McKean

ASIO special agent Richard (Dick) Warner had been dishonourably discharged in the last series of “Counter Terrorist Unit” on the ABC.

In a programming conspiracy so common at the public broadcaster it had originally been planned to be a left-wing antidote to American thrillers like “24”. However, it hadn’t had an extremist of Arab extraction for the last three series’ and many of the newer members of the ABC board were getting very worried. In fact the last bad guy intent on global destruction had been a balding, white sixty something, solicitor from Kirribilli.

A reprieve had been negotiated for a final Christmas CTU tele-movie. Dick would be resurrected, but this time operating as a loose canon, an ex-ASIO renegade. However, in keeping with the new ABC program guidelines, the finale would need to be more “balanced”. (The Ramadan special had been hastily canned following an Alan Jones campaign. In the ill-fated special Dick had saved the local Mosque from a nuclear-armed evangelical sect based in the Hills district in Sydney).

EPISODE 418 – “THE FINAL HOUR: THERE WILL BE NO CHRISTMAS IN AFGHANISTAN”

It started out like any normal Saturday morning, Dick was sitting at his local Coin Laundry, catching up on a couple of weeks washing. He’d let himself go since the

end of series six, and personal hygiene had taken a backseat to cans of pre-mixed Bundaberg rum and cola and Indian take-aways.

The gentle hum of the industrial tumble dryers, combined with the warmth and the pungent aroma of washing powder lulled him into a morose reverie. The curry from the evening before had been particularly hot and he asked the swarthy looking attendant if he could use the toilet. He motioned to a back room. He had just stepped through the doorway when he felt a sharp crack on the back of his head. Then. Blackness. Nothing.

Dick was awoken by the sound and smell of dogs. Through blurred vision, he found himself in a cage at an abandoned dogs shelter surrounded by cattle and sheep dogs, kelpie crosses - the loyal companions of Australia's pioneering country folk, all well behaved, slobbering benignly. However, the Afghan Hound in the next cage howled and barked incessantly with murderous intent in its eyes. He gingerly rubbed the golf ball sized lump on his head and surveyed his surroundings. He was on the floor of the cage which was an amalgam of corrugated iron, chicken wire and metal mesh. Dick wasn't going to hang around to get a closer look at the Taliban/Afghan/whatever they all look the same...dog's razor sharp fangs and applied his clever SAS training to remove the roof of the cage and was soon gone.

Speeding back towards the city in a Silver cab Dick knew he needed more information and knew without official ASIO support there was only one person who could help him. His old friend and confidante Rivkah,

also know as “Clairvoyant to the stars” in her promotional material.

Rivkah was quick to reveal that she was aware of a home-grown den mother, who was secretly training jihadists in Sydney’s Arab heartland – the south-west suburbs and there was a plot afoot. Dick was amazed as she hadn’t even begun to turn over her tarot cards.

“How did you know?”

“It was on the front page of today’s Herald, she replied serenely. Oh, and interest rates are going up again, but I guess you know that already right?”

“More importantly though I have a vision of Paddington Markets but there is also this...And on the small lined notepad she drew a sign consisting of a central cross with rays coming out of the central point and surrounded with what looked like the outline of petals.”

Dick knew the sign immediately...his old foe Dulcie el Hilaly. Surely multiculturalism hadn’t made her so brazen as to have set up a stall at the eastern suburbs premier markets!

Dick now knew his destination, but first he needed a weapon!

The cafeteria adjoining the Wayside Chapel was busy with hungry customers. He scanned the dining room and spotted Edith in her usual place beside the Bain Marie. Edith was a French ex-secret agent who had come out for

the Rainbow Warrior project in the 1980's and had liked the antipodes so much she'd decided to stay. However, times had been tough since her French government pension had run out.

He greeted her with an urgent "Bonjour luv" using his best French accent.

"Dick, mon cherie, its been so long, where 'ave you been?"

"It's a long story Edith. Been a bit quiet lately, trying to get more balance in my work/life activities – going to the cricket, reading up about the Anzacs and Don Bradman. Its something all Australian's should know more about. But I can't talk too much today I'm on a top secret mission to thwart a plot to blow up Paddington Markets. I need to get my hands on a gun quickly."

"My God we 'ave our problems in squalid Parisien slums but the Paddington Markets! Will they stop at nothing? But whats wrong with the standard issue ASIO handgun?"

"Look luv don't ask too many questions its just a matter of national security and I don't have much time to play with."

"OK, OK. Go to this address and ask for Sebastian."

Dick uncrumpled the piece of paper Edith had squashed into his hand which detailed the address of the Salon, a stylish hair....salon in east Sydney. Sebastian, the

owner, was standing at the counter inside the entrance holding a small dog with a diamond studded Hermes dog collar.

“Are you Sebastian?”

“Yes do you have an appointment?”

“Ah no Edith sent me....its a bit delicate, can we go somewhere private?”

“Whoa! he whispered crossly, I stopped doing that sort of thing some time ago. I have a steady boyfriend now and whilst we have none of the legal privileges afforded to common law hetro-sexual couples we feel that the government’s stance in this area is entirely justified and are just happy with what we have. And we think they’re right on the money with all that global warming stuff as well. I mean whats the big fuss?”

“Ah, yes I agree, terrorism is a much more immediate threat and certainly justifies my use of one of your unlicenced weapons.”

“I agree. Step this way.”

Arriving at Paddington Markets, Dick was almost out of breath as he pounded past incomprehensible wood carvings and jars of tomato chutney. He rounded a stall of pottery that served no purpose other than to provide an outlet for the hobbies of rich Paddington housewives, who needed something to do while their children were at school and their CEO husbands planned mergers with

other companies and younger women. Finally he found it – the sign. In the centre of a canvas banner swinging gently in the breeze next to one of the old church buildings. Around it was written “Paddington Eastside Arts”. Bingo he thought! However his heart fell when he saw the middle aged lady with tousled grey hair manning the stand.

“Where’s Dulcie he barked at the woman?”

A little startled at first she eventually replied that Dulcie had gone back to the van to collect more exotic merchandise for the stall.

Dick eventually found Dulcie crouched over a gleaming metal cylinder with flashing numbers on a red LED panel in the back of a battered Toyota mini van.

“Finally we meet again, Dulcie. Move away from the bomb please.”

His gun was aimed squarely between her eyes. Perspiration glistened on his brow.”

“Oh Dick, you’re too clever for me. You can have this bomb, we have other plans in motion. Besides, you do know I have diplomatic immunity don’t you?”

“I do indeed Dulcie but I have new masters and guidelines and need to think about balance these days.”

BAM!

