



Source: James Glanz, 'US failing to track weapons for Iraqis', *New York Times* in *The Age online*, 31/10/06.  
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You can go crazy fighting back in small ways. Like last year, when I went west on a mission to get something fixed. The easy thing would have been to chuck out the corroded old bathroom fittings and get new ones, but that would have meant new screw holes and the tiles would probably have cracked. It would be better to get the old fittings recoated, and save maybe fifty bucks. I can be obsessive when it comes to fixing things.

The people I called from the yellow pages told me it was not going to be easy. They sounded scared of the smallness of the job and of my intention too. I could feel my mission drifting sideways as we spoke. You could hear their relief as they hung up, having given me the flick. But one place in Canterbury encouraged me. They wanted to see the parts first—the towel rail, bathrobe hook, toilet roll holder and soap holder.

They were a family business that had been doing this stuff for ages. They anodised tables and chairs and whole car bodies. The woman who ran it, a big tall middle-aged blonde, was keen to help. But their resident expert said the pieces of metal couldn't be coated until they had been stripped and they didn't do the stripping, not for aluminium. It mightn't work anyway. And they didn't know if it would be worth it. 'Everyone throws things away these days,' said the woman with a shrug. 'Nothing lasts.'

She said I could go out to Condell Park and ask for Mohammad. She gave me an address and told me to tell Mohammad that Christine sent me. Normally I fly overhead on the freeway. Now I was down on the ground, driving into unfamiliar territory, checking the street directory. And it was getting hotter the further west I went.

Then I found the place, just off Gallipoli Street.

Gallipoli Street, Condell Park had been on the radio news. Police had swooped on a house there the night before, in Australia's biggest ever anti-terrorist operation. They arrested eight men in western Sydney and nine in Melbourne who apparently had stuff for making bombs in their backyards, lengths of plastic pipe and unstable chemicals. One of the papers had a story about the new battle of Gallipoli. The street was the new frontline. It looked pretty sleepy in the morning-after heat.

By the time I found the powder-coating workshop, Mohammad had gone to lunch, his friendly receptionist told me. She called him and, when he heard that Christine sent me, he said he'd be back in half an hour. I went in search of lunch too. I found a felafel place that was shaded and cool and as empty as the surrounding streets. I ordered a coffee and some food from the old man behind the counter. He shuffled round, heating it up before he brought it over. He must have wondered what I was doing there, a stranger, out of place. What brought

me to his shop, an unhappy quest, a private mania, or something more suspicious? Was I an investigator, a journalist or a spy? He was exquisitely polite, but I didn't linger.

And Mohammad was polite too, when he met me in the relief of his air-conditioned office. He examined the wretched bathroom fittings in my bag and said he could powdercoat them like new, but only once they had been stripped. He gave me an address. I was surprised by his appearance. He said he was from Vietnam originally, a Vietnamese Muslim who had been given the name Mohammad when he arrived in Australia as a child because it was easier to remember than his Vietnamese name. On this particular day, after the police raids and media blitz, and the arrest of a man around the corner who shared his name, he must have wished he was called almost anything else. He seemed to sympathise with my determination to repair the unrepairable, and looked at me as if to say, 'We have to stick together', those of us who want to make things work.

Mohammad had given me the wrong address and I stopped at one yard after another as I looked for the stripping place. It turned out to be just round the corner from where I started all along. Behind a neat grass verge was a corrugated iron hangar with a series of tanks and overhead harnesses for dipping heavy metal parts. I rang the buzzer in the counter. After a while a woman appeared, moving slowly in the heat. She had straight fair hair and a freckled face and about as much meat on her as a chicken's foot. I told her Mohammad sent me. Her cigarette stayed in her mouth as she took in what I wanted. She took the bathroom bits in her hands as if they were coins and disappeared for about ten minutes. When she came back she gave me a docket and said she couldn't guarantee how they would turn out. She'd call me when the job was ready to pick up.

The whole area was the same, engineering shops and wreckers' yards and all the little businesses serving construction and transport. Any of the sheds in this suburb of sheds tucked under the freeway probably had the chemicals and other stuff needed to make an explosion. It had always been this way. Only now some of the people doing this hot, tough work had different names and faces.

On the long drive back to central Sydney from the west I could feel the sun on the metal even in the air-conditioned car. The parts were successfully stripped, successfully powder-coated and successfully put back in the bathroom. It all took time. It allowed me to encounter a kind of civility from an interesting cast of characters. It lets me tell a different story about the news of that day.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nicholas Jose.*