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## Sydney's terror Guardian Angels

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WE walk towards a squat, two-storey brick and steel bunker, past equally bulky men wearing masks, flak jackets and blue and black clothes.

Most seem to be carrying three weapons: a machine gun, a pistol strapped to the thigh, a knife fastened to their webbing.

Three of us enter the building. Officially it's called the Critical Incident Response Training Facility -- but to NSW's anti-terror police, it's the place where Australia's fears are realised. This is our Moscow Theatre, American Airlines Flight 77, and anthrax-laced Capitol building.

A plywood door shuts behind us, and we pause while our eyes adjust to the unlit interior. We walk forward, a policeman in front and behind, through a maze of steel-framed doors and wooden walls.

We stop again. The edge of a desk emerges from the gloom. The leading policeman grabs my arm and says there's a chair next to the desk and I should sit in it. He speaks loudly because we are wearing two levels of hearing protection: ear plugs beneath industrial strength earmuffs.

"You are a hostage," the policeman says. "Behind you are two (chipboard) terrorists. A police squad is about to try and rescue you. They will shoot the terrorists. They will probably not kill us hostages, although our rescuers failed their shooting test yesterday."

The policeman is joking, I think.

In truth, I don't really have time to think that, because the room explodes with light and noise. Even with industrial hearing protection, the effect is like jamming your ear beside the exhaust of a backfiring car -- as someone fires a camera flash at your face.

It's very disconcerting, but I try not to cringe or move too much, because I can also feel the slipstream of bullets passing above my hair. An instant later, everything is dark once more.

We have just been "rescued" by the NSW police service's Tactical Operations Unit, which is part of the State Protection Group. These are the special operations police who have the state's most intense workday.

The unit's 60 members are employed to intervene when normal policework and negotiation has failed to prevent or resolve incidents, such as armed robberies, domestic violence and sieges. Along with the SAS troops, they'll also be deployed if terrorists strike in NSW.

Each new international outrage is incorporated into their training -- you can be sure that scenes from the Moscow Theatre siege and the September 11 hijackings are played out inside this building. They've already studied the January 15 killing of a British anti-terrorist policeman, and worked out how they can prevent a similar death.

The internal walls of CIRT can be moved to recreate any setting: classrooms, broom closets, aircraft galleys. An upper floor of the building has been remodelled into the inside of a passenger airliner, with airline seats and economy class legroom.

The building is regularly assaulted via foot, car and helicopter. Teams of police attack it every half hour. Once they're inside, the building rattles with shouts of "Police, Don't move!" and the explosion of concussion grenades. The floor is littered with the cases of concussion grenades and bullet casings.

Rubbish chutes on the first floor have been installed to help the officers clean up their mess. The bullets used here are plastic-tipped and filled with paint, and the walls of the building and the clothes of the TOU officers who play terrorist are marked with blue impact points. "Die" in here and you might survive in the real world.

The officers relish training days. They're followed by instructors and filmed. Mistakes are analysed and corrected. The video camera remembers things that are quickly forgotten in the heat of the moment.

All I remember of the TOU assault is an explosion and the novel feeling of guns firing a metre or so from my face. Later, I'm told four police threw nine concussion grenades before killing the plywood terrorists with five bullets. The two terrorists have blue impact marks in the centre of their foreheads. The bullets that seemed to part my hair actually flew a 0.3m higher.

I thought I remained remarkably calm and still -- but a video of the assault shows my head lolling back and forth like a sideshow-alley clown.

So the TOU officers seemed pretty effective to me. Deputy Commissioner Andrew Scipione, who has worked and supervised counter-terror operations for much of his career, says these police are as good as those anywhere in the world. They're as good as the SAS, he says.

"These guys do operations day in and day out. Their record is just great in terms of successfully negotiating a peaceful end to incidents," he says.

"In terms of a terrorist incident, we are as well prepared as anyone in the world."

In a terrorist emergency, the TOU officers will be sent into action by a new arm of the NSW police force -- the Counter Terror Command Centre (CTCC). This centre, based in Sydney, also co-ordinates the gathering of intelligence and analysis about terror threats.

The police emerge from the CIRT facility and peel off their gas masks. Their faces are wet with sweat. They carry 20kg of gear and must sometimes wear it for 12 hours. The masks make it hard to breathe, says one officer. He passes it to me to try on, and I make the mistake of saying that it doesn't seem too bad.

I decide not to argue with a man who bears more guns than Queensland, so I'm soon running around the building wearing a flak jacket and helmet, wheezing through a gas mask. "Now give us 10 push-ups," he says, and he starts to count them out. "One ... one and a quarter, one and a half ... come on, touch your chest to the ground ... one and three quarters ... "