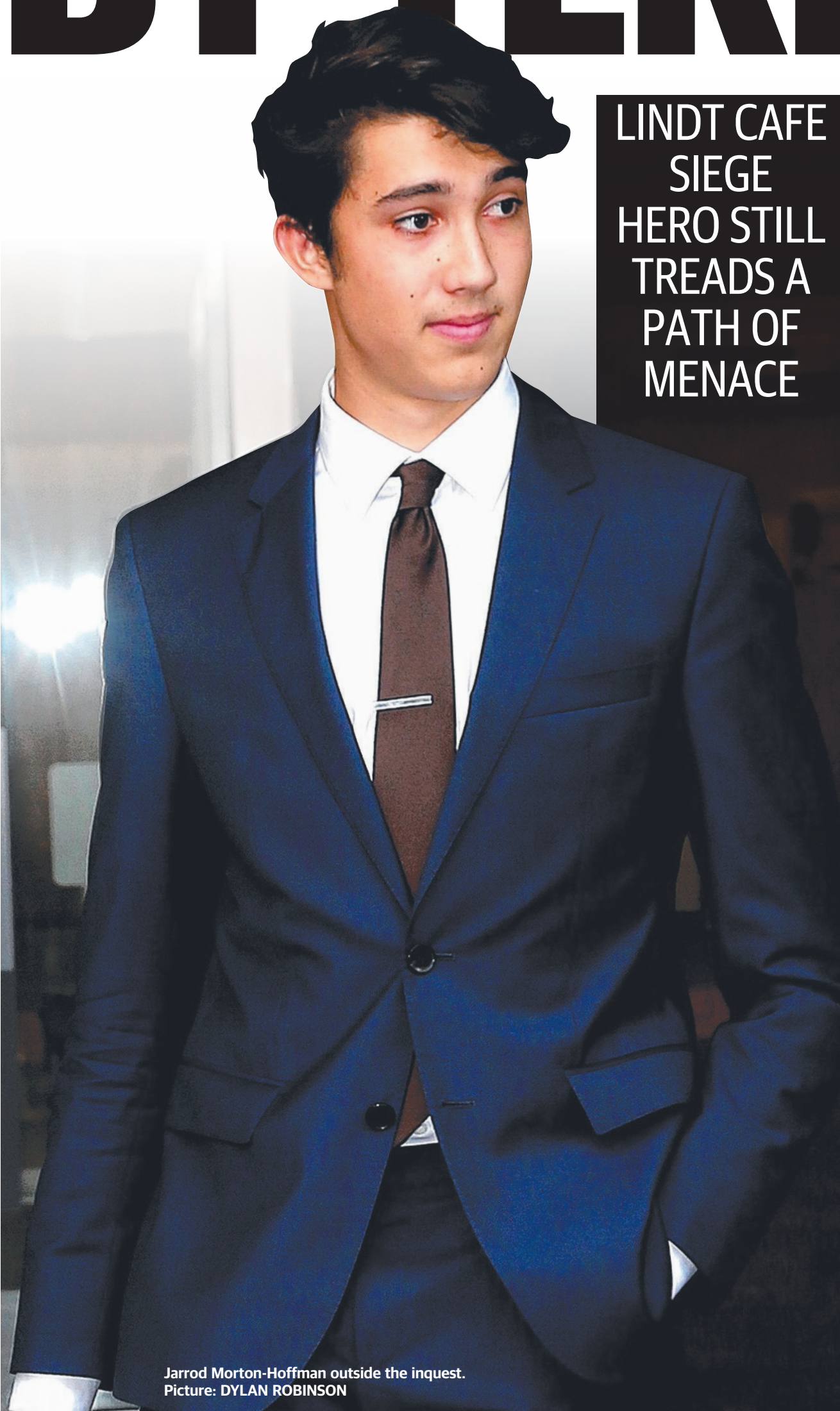


STALKED BY TERROR



Jarrod Morton-Hoffman outside the inquest.
Picture: DYLAN ROBINSON

LINDT CAFE SIEGE HERO STILL TREADS A PATH OF MENACE

AARON LANGMAID

FIFTEEN months after Sydney's Lindt cafe siege ended in a blaze of gunfire, Jarrod Morton-Hoffman is key negotiator in an unending battle of his own.

Man Haron Monis quietly stalks his mind, idling in the shadow of every thought, hijacking even the happiest moments when the drama of that day should be further away.

Hailed a hero for his calm demeanour under pressure, the 20-year-old this week helped draw a clearer picture of the terrifying events that unfolded at Martin Place in December 2014. A key witness at the coronial inquest into the three deaths that occurred there, Mr Morton-Hoffman gave his articulate assessment across two long days on the stand. But by the end of it all, when a counsel thanked him and gently asked how he was doing, the young man couldn't find the words. "I'd prefer not to say, to be honest," he said.

Mr Morton-Hoffman became one of the most recognisable faces in the months that followed the siege that stopped Australia.

It was his face, peering from the window and holding a black flag, that gave authorities and millions watching the rolling coverage a horrifying realisation that homegrown terror was now a reality.

Then 19, the Bondi local had been working at the cafe for 10 months but it was his first-ever morning shift on the day Monis calmly walked in.

The University of Technology student was to become one of 17 hostages held for as many tense hours.

Among them, lawyers, IT specialists, bankers and retirees. But it was the actions of the young Lindt employee that would stand out from the start.

Mr Morton-Hoffman told the inquest that he first became aware that something was wrong when he saw store manager Tori Johnson sitting at a table with Man Haron Monis.

He said Mr Johnson looked nervous and visibly stressed as he listened to the man at the table who had just put in an order for chocolate cake and a cup of tea.

"Tori was hunched

forward," Mr Morton-Hoffman said. "His facial expression, I noticed from the months working with Tori, sometimes when he's nervous he blinks a lot, quite an intense blink."

"He was quite quiet. He was kind of devoid of emotion, which said a lot as he's usually full of emotion, so that's what worried me."

Mr Johnson then called him over, telling the young employee to go and lock the door.

BUT in those tentative moments, Mr Morton-Hoffman said he didn't realise what was actually happening.

He told the hearing he thought the Reserve Bank opposite the cafe was being held up and that Monis was a Chubb security employee.

Under the direction of Mr Johnson, Mr Morton-Hoffman scrawled "Closed" on a piece of paper and proceeded to post it against the main door until Monis addressed him directly for the first time, telling him to stop.

"Sit the f--- down," Monis screamed.

It was only then that he spotted the shotgun in Monis's hand and realised suddenly the danger was not outside at all.



Lindt cafe gunman Man Haron Monis

Monis had stood and was already pacing the floor, now wearing a backpack, a bandanna and a vest.

He ordered customers to stand by windows with their eyes closed.

He grabbed Mr Morton-Hoffman by the arm and forced him to hold up the flag emblazoned with Islamic script.

It was at this exact moment, Monis could be seen in live television footage behind the darkened window, whispering in Mr Morton-Hoffman's ear.

"He said I was holding it upside down. He was bothered by that," Mr Morton-Hoffman said. It was the first of what would prove to be a series of interactions between the captor and his young hostage that authorities would later credit as helping bring some structure to a wildly fluid situation.

Mr Morton-Hoffman said he became aware of the erratic nature of his hostage taker, describing him as "dangerous toddler" who didn't seem to follow logic. He realised that made him easy to manipulate.

"His demands changed with the wind. He was driven largely by emotion and his anger," Mr Morton-Hoffman said.

Monis told the teenager to make a series of calls to

emergency services, police negotiators and the media.

Asked by an operator how many gunmen were in the building, Mr Morton-Hoffman put emphasis on particular words to give them more information, without Monis knowing. "He's not hurt any-ONE," he said.

EXPLAINING his strategy at the inquest, the student said he was taking direction from Monis, who stood beside him during the calls. "The emphasis was my way of trying to answer her question," he said.

Only when Monis holds his gun against the head of one of the female hostages, demanding police move back, does Mr Morton-Hoffman edge close to losing his composure.

"Please, please, very quickly ... two minutes or he will shoot someone," he pleads down the line. "If the police go away right now he is not going to shoot the lady in front of me."

Later, authorities are able to record a conversation between the student and his captor after Monis had issued demands for an IS flag.

Mr Morton-Hoffman saw it as an opportunity to release one of the women.

"If you let a pregnant lady go — I'll print you a flag," he

calmly explains to Monis.

"I'll print you 100. I'll print you anything."

Mr Morton-Hoffman also penned notes and small maps of the layout on the back of business cards, slipping them under a rear door in a bid to tip police off to the dangers inside.

Through the course of the harrowing day, he shifts chairs out of the way to give people a clear path should they choose to run.

At another point, when Monis was eager for a cigarette but didn't want to set off fire alarms, Mr Morton-Hoffman tried to convince him to smoke inside the store freezer.

"I thought this was an opportunity ..." he said. "The roof is about 2m tall and quite easy to reach. We could possibly convince him to go (in) ... and could close the door with him inside."

"We figured if he released rounds (from the) shotgun it

would most likely kill him and not go through the door."

Monis would eventually opt for blowing his cigarette smoke into a bottle, which Mr Morton-Hoffman capped and put into the sink. He later told police so they wouldn't mistake it for an explosive in the kitchen.

But it was his remarkable cool head and final decision to lead a group to safety that resulted in one of the more astonishing moments as the drama inside the Lindt cafe drew toward an ugly conclusion.

Mr Morton-Hoffman told the inquest how he escaped the cafe as the gunman grew increasingly agitated and it became clear the hostages would "have to save (them) selves".

At around 2am, Monis took two hostages with him towards a rear fire exit. Mr Morton Hoffman mouthed the words "I am going" to five

others across from him.

The heart-stopping seconds that followed have been played out in the black-and-white CCTV footage from the cafe foyer.

IT shows Mr Morton-Hoffman sprinting towards the sliding glass door, pressing the exit button and letting it open as the five others spill out behind him.

Then, a flash — as Monis, who realises what is happening, opens fire.

Mr Morton-Hoffman's final act of foresight was to run wide during the escape to give police a clear shot if Monis made chase.

Instead, now completely unhinged, the self-proclaimed sheik fired another round into a wall before turning his attention back to store manager Tori Johnson, who remained inside.

He ordered him on to his knees with his hands behind his head and then shot him in the back.

The brutal execution was the trigger for police and ultimately Monis's final moment of madness.

Mr Morton-Hoffman was the first of a string of witnesses this week at the inquest, which is expected to stretch on for the next two months. He arrived dressed in a smart blue

suit and red tie, holding a white folder, greeting media as he made his entrance.

Through the course of his evidence, he held his composure, delivering clear and concise detail.

Only on the second day, barely an hour into the hearing, did he asked for a five-minute break. He returned a half-hour later.

It was a sign, perhaps, that a kid who had been praised for feats beyond his years was still wading through a heavy stream of emotion.

Media commentators have recommended the young man receive every bravery award available.

A plaque or glowing commendation would be fitting, of course, but ultimately lost to a young mind still trying to comes to terms with the whys and what-ifs.

He thanked the media when he finally walked out of the inquest. From the steps of the building he issued his gratitude for those who had offered him support.

Then he crossed the road, cautious of passing cars and continued along the footpath; another Sydney pedestrian hoping for a clear path and one eager to leave the past behind him.

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