

MEDIA RELEASE

Holly's Hell Seven Years in a Thai Prison

By Holly Deane-Johns

'Over the years, many people have asked me what it was like in a Thai prison. I would tell them this: whatever your idea of hell is, multiply it by a thousand.' Holly Deane-Johns

'*Bangkok Hilton*' is a name that's synonymous with some of Thailand's most notorious prisons.

Home to the most brutal jails in the world, if you get caught with drugs in Thailand, the punishment is life in prison or execution.

For Australian Holly Deane-Johns, growing up as one of five children in the upper-class Perth suburb of Mt Lawley, *Bangkok Hilton* was a world away. Until it wasn't.

When the family's real estate business went bust, Holly's mum started an escort agency from home to keep them in the life they'd become accustomed to, but when Holly's father started drinking and became abusive, things took a turn for the worse.

It wasn't long before Holly's parents separated, and her mum took up with a heroin addict.

At just 15, Holly tried heroin for the first time, given to her by her own mother.

Fast forward five years and Holly was found guilty of conspiracy to import heroin as well as possession. She was sent to Bandyup Women's Prison in Perth.

One year later her mum died of a heroin overdose.

After Holly's release from jail, she flew back and forth from Perth to Thailand where her boyfriend Stephen was on the run...until he was arrested at Melbourne Airport and charged with importing a kilo of heroin.

Still in Thailand, Holly was planning to move back to Melbourne to be near Stephen, but on 24 August 2000, the 29-year-old's life changed forever.

She had been to the post office to post a calendar back home to Perth. Hidden inside the calendar was 15 grams of heroin. A small enough amount that Holly was confident it wouldn't alert the authorities.

Later that day, she and Stephen's friend and fellow drug smuggler Robert (Bob) Halliwell drove to get some fast food for dinner. As Holly crossed the traffic-jammed highway to jump back into Bob's car, they were ambushed by several police officers.

Unbeknown to them, the pair had been under surveillance for several months by narcotics agents. After finding heroin in both their Bangkok apartments, they were taken to the Narcotics Suppression Bureau where they were put into small cells known as the 'lock-up'.

'I lay down on the concrete floor with my head against the wall. There were no beds or pillows of any kind. I stared at the sleeping women. I didn't sleep. I kept thinking of the uncertainty but knowing that I was going to be imprisoned for a long time. I was more scared than I ever have been in my life.'

Two days later, suffering from excruciating heroin withdrawals, Holly and Bob stood before the court surrounded by a frenzied media pack.

While Holly had only handled 30 grams of heroin, Bob had 110 grams and they were each charged with the full 140 grams. The death penalty was a very real possibility.

Handcuffed to one another, they were transferred to separate cells in the 'lockup', while they awaited their fate.

Just months earlier, four foreigners had been sentenced to death by firing squad for drug crimes.

Holly remained on remand in Lat Yao Women's Central Prison in Chatuchuk for three years before she was finally sentenced on 4 July 2003.

She was sentenced to 31 years in prison.

In Lat Yao, the conditions were nothing short of horrific. Holly describes it as 'hell on earth' with little regard for basic human rights.

At night, 200 women were squeezed into a small concrete cell with wooden floors. The lights were left on, the humidity was unbearable.

'It was sweltering in that cell. With everyone's bodies pressed against each other, it was like our skin had melted together into one sticky mess. Everyone was sleeping, stomach to back, and when one person in the line wanted to sleep on the other side, the whole line had to turn over. Never in my wildest dreams did I think anyone lived like this.'

Holly describes it as 'living like an animal', and for those first few months she was either high on heroin or antidepressants.

There was never enough food to buy at the prison's shop, and people were often hungry; what little food they did get usually came swirling with stones, human hair, or pieces of glass.

There were only ten toilets for the 2000 female prisoners...and medical care was in short supply. Something as innocuous as a tooth ache could lead to dire health issues. During her time, Holly was held down by fellow inmates who pulled her rotten tooth out with pliers, and no anaesthetic.

'I looked around quite often at some of the women who had been in this hell hole for a long time and could see that they had changed. For some of them the light and life had gone out of their once lively eyes. They sort of just had a blank stare, which was sad to see. I was beginning to get a bit scared myself, for my sanity really, because I could feel that I was coming to the point where something was going to happen to my mind, which would change me.'

After ten months inside Lat Yao Women's Prison, Holly woke up one morning and decided it was time to stop medicating with drugs.

'I had taken a good, hard look at my life and I could see that heroin had destroyed it. It had destroyed the lives of many people I knew – including my mum. It was as simple as that. I knew that I was going to get a long sentence. That was a certainty. I wanted to be in control of my thoughts and emotions – not numb. I can be determined, motivated, strong willed and smart. I knew I could make a better life for myself in the many years I would be in jail if I got clean. It wouldn't be easy, but I knew I had to pull myself together and get on with it. I couldn't undo the damage I'd done and the hurt I'd caused, but I could take control of the rest of my life.'

Through sheer willpower and commitment, Holly was able to quit heroin and stay clean.

Frustrated at not being unable to understand the language, she studied Thai. She also learned to sew from scratch and got a job in prison making silk flowers and clothes.

In 2006, West Australian Labor MP John Hyde visited Holly in prison following calls to reconsider her transfer home, which had earlier been declined.

It wasn't until late 2007 that she received a letter from David Johnston, the then Federal Minister for Justice and Customs and the Senator for Western Australia, giving his final consent for Holly's transfer back to Bandyup Women's Prison in Perth.

At the time, Holly was the longest incarcerated Australian prisoner returned from Asia.

She remained in Bandyup Women's Prison for another five years, until on 6 December 2012, after spending a combined total of 17 years behind bars, Holly was finally free.

'I used to think that I didn't have many regrets. But I suppose I do. I wish I'd never tried heroin because that was the beginning of the end for me. I've spent about half my life – roughly 17 years – in jail because of that drug. I can't get back the years I wasted inside prisons.'

For those 17 years Holly remained silent, refusing media interviews.

But now, at the age of 52, she wants to tell her story of redemption in a bid to help other drug addicts.

'I hope that my story can help people who are still in jail as well as society more broadly. Not everyone in jail is a bad person. They are women, men and children who have made bad choices and big mistakes.'

She is speaking out for the first time about the horror of being imprisoned in Lat Yao Women's Correctional Institution.

A cautionary tale, *Holly's Hell* is released on 8 February 2024 and demonstrates the strength and resilience of the human spirit.

'Holly was at once as hard as nails, and at other times as soft as a marshmallow – especially when she smiled. The real privilege has been watching Holly's recovery. She suffered alone, but her fierce sense of morals, principles and brutal honesty saw her through. It was not easy, but she persevered. Holly always had a plan and a way through.'

Yvonne Zeigler, Australian Embassy in Thailand, 2000 to 2004

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For every copy of *Holly's Hell* sold, \$1 will go to Cyrenian House, Perth, an alcohol and drug treatment service.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Holly Deane-Johns was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1971. At the age of 20 she was arrested on drugs charges and served five years in Bandyup Women's Prison in Perth. In the year 2000, she was arrested in Bangkok. She was later sentenced to 31 years for attempting to smuggle 15 grams of heroin and possession of 15 grams of heroin. Holly permanently stopped using drugs while she was in prison and was transferred to Bandyup Women's Prison in 2007. She was released in 2012.

Holly is a qualified youth worker, counsellor and hypnotherapist, and in recent years she has been working in mining in Western Australia.

She is also a speaker and community advocate on topics that include substance abuse, PTSD, mental health and domestic violence.

TALKING POINTS:

Your early childhood in Perth was fairly stock-standard, money was never an issue, and you say there was a lot of love... what went wrong?

All five children ended up in jail and/or drug addicts, what do you think tipped you all over the edge? Do you blame your mum for giving you your first hit of heroin?

What drove you to start selling heroin?

Prisons in Thailand are some of the most barbaric in the world, what was the hardest thing to deal with?

You made some incredible friendships inside...what about enemies?

You also became close to a woman who worked for the Australian Embassy and would visit you regularly, saying she was the 'light in the dark.' Can you talk about her visits?

If you had money in prison, you were able to buy extra food, toiletries, clothing etc...were you able to get money and how? (The Australian Government extended loans to Australian prisoners)

In the prison, stealing was rife though because money was so tight, how did you guard against that?

You had a lot of visits from fellow Australians when they were on holiday in Thailand, many of them you'd never met. Why do you think they came to see you in prison and how did that impact you?

It was widely known that you wouldn't give interviews but sometimes journalists lied and pretended they were just regular Aussies on holiday coming to visit you, to get a story, why didn't you want to talk to the media?

Suicide was a stark reality inside, you even saved someone's life who tried to hang herself. Did you ever get to that point of wanting to end your life?

A lot of inmates died from other causes like HIV/AIDS, including your best friend Aong...in what was an incredibly inhumane way. Was that one of the hardest things to see in prison?

There is a prisoner transfer treaty between Thailand and Australia whereby if you have a 'numbered' sentence you can apply to transfer home after serving four years but you were initially refused on the grounds it would 'likely cause significant public outrage' – why was that? Did you think you'd ever get out of Bangkok?

There was a rumour that you just wanted to be closer to your fiance Stephen who was also doing time in Perth for drug trafficking, was that ever true?

Yet it was Stephen's parents who played a big role in getting you home?

The Australian government recognises existing and future amnesties granted by the Thai government, and any pardon granted by the King of Thailand, did this work in your favour?

How did Bandyup Women's Prison in Perth compare to Lat Yao?

Sadly, your mum, brother and sister all died of a heroin overdose, are you still drug free today?

Your story is one of resilience and redemption. What do you think got you through?

You can't go through something like that and come out unscathed – you've been diagnosed with depression and PTSD...how did you deal with life once you were on the outside?

What were the biggest changes you encountered?

You and Stephen stayed together after you were both released from prison until he sadly passed this year...you have dedicated your book to him as your soulmate. What was it about your relationship that survived these incredibly difficult times?

Have you ever returned to Thailand?

Since coming out of prison, you've become a qualified hypnotherapist – what drew you to that?

You've also been an Uber driver and worked in the mines as a FIFO (Fly In, Fly Out) and have a diploma in Youth Work and Community Services. What's next for Holly Deane-Johns?

Do you hope your book will make others think twice about taking the sort of risks you did?

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