

Putting lives back together



Surgeon Munjed Al Muderis and Prince Harry speak with injured war veteran Ali Spearing during a 2015 visit to Macquarie University Clinic. Picture: Rohan Kelly

By TINA ALLEN •

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The medical supplies Munjed Al Muderis had intended for 50 asylum-seekers were completely inadequate for the 160 who were “jam-packed” on to an Indonesian fishing trawler in November 1999, bound for Christmas Island.

The doctor felt responsible for those on board, including three women in the latter stages of pregnancy. After 36 hours at sea, a police boat pulled alongside their vessel and Al Muderis thought to himself: “We’ve made it.”

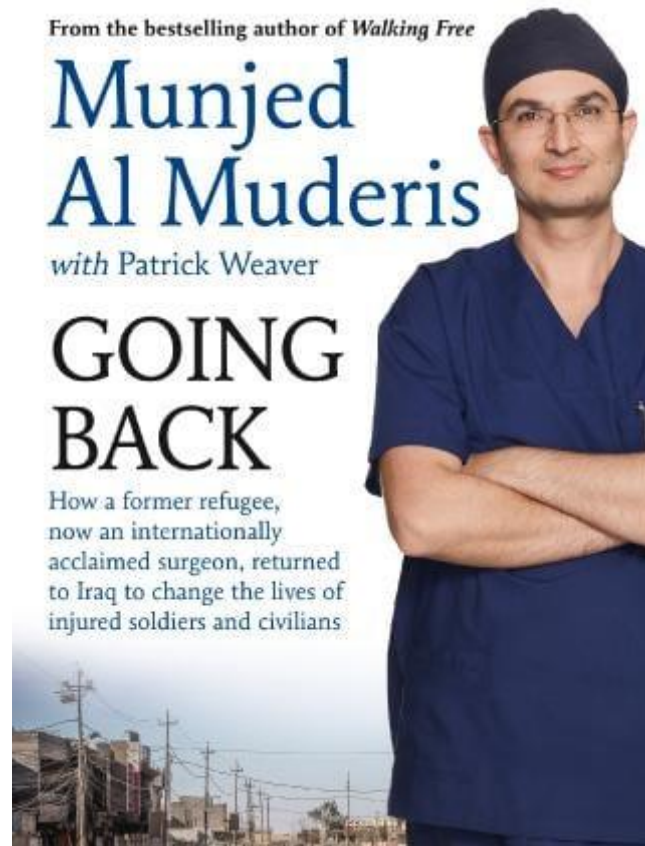
He could not have anticipated the isolation, oppressive heat and “completely dehumanising” experience of being known only as 982 during the nine months he spent at the now-closed Curtin Detention Centre in Western Australia.

In his 2014 memoir, *Walking Free*, Al Muderis documents his story from privileged upbringing in Iraq to becoming one of Australia’s leading orthopaedic surgeons.

Now, six years after the success of that book, Al Muderis has again collaborated with former journalist Patrick Weaver, this time to deliver a sequel, *Going Back*.

The event that triggered his decision to leave Iraq in 1999 was an order by Saddam Hussein to surgically remove the top half of the ears of army deserters, who had arrived by the busload at the Baghdad hospital where Al Muderis worked.

Al Muderis was confronted by the “greatest dilemma” of his life and knew he had to escape his homeland or face imprisonment, torture or execution.



Going Back, by Munjed Al Muderis, with Patrick Weaver.

The event that provided the impetus for the current humanitarian phase of his career and his second book was less dramatic, but equally life changing.

In February 2017, he was in Sydney’s Rocks area when he received a phone call. Someone asked, in Arabic: “Would you be prepared to take a call from the prime minister of Iraq?”

Iraq has more than 150,000 amputees, and the prime minister was keen for Al Muderis to perform osseointegration operations (anchorage of artificial limbs to the human skeleton) to allow people to walk again and lead relatively normal lives.

From the age of 12, Al Muderis had been fascinated by the idea of “half man, half machine” since watching Arnold Schwarzenegger in the first Terminator movie. He dreamed that future surgeons would be able to replace amputated limbs with mechanical devices.

That dream became a reality when it was realised that titanium integrates with bone, to which a robotic limb can then be attached.

Unlike the constant chaffing and occasional cuts where traditional prostheses rub on a limb after an amputation, with osseointegration it is far more like walking with a natural leg. One of his early Australian osseointegration patients, Brendan Burkett, puts it this way: “You also have much greater feedback on the surface you’re standing on. You can tell if it’s a hard surface or something like sand ... now I walk because I want to.”

When Al Muderis received the request to return to Iraq in 2017, he had already performed 500 osseointegration operations. His patients at Macquarie University Hospital in Sydney include mainly Australians and some British soldiers who had served in Afghanistan.

During its five visits to Iraq in 2017 and 2018, Al Muderis’s surgical team was shocked by the horrific injuries among those who arrived in great numbers to be treated. These included physical traumas caused by grenades, sniper fire, or stepping on explosive devices.

The motivations of the patients, who had previously been shunned by employers and suitors, were simple, Al Muderis writes. “They were tired of being the forgotten people left on the scrapheap because of the injuries they’d suffered.”

During escorted drives around Baghdad, Al Muderis was brought to tears by how little remains of the city’s prosperity from before the war with Iran and the Gulf wars. The peaceful tree-lined streets by the banks of the Tigris where he grew up have disintegrated into violence and decay.

Going Back works well as a stand-alone account of this surgeon’s career. However, for a far more complete experience of his life before and after that fateful day in 1999 when he received Hussein’s orders, I recommend reading both of his memoirs.

They left me much more knowledgeable about this ancient civilisation and reaching for a map to locate the positions of the neighbouring nations he mentions in this conflict zone.

When people in Iraq ask him, “Do you feel as if you’re coming home?”, he is honest and tells them, “No, I’m an Australian who’s coming here to help you because I care about you and the country”.

It is 20 years since Al Muderis crammed on to a fishing trawler bound for Christmas Island, and sometimes he reflects on that journey, made when he was

27. He thinks all politicians should take a more empathetic attitude towards asylum-seekers, who mostly are not “enemies of the state”.

Like him, they are human beings wanting to make a difference in their new homeland. Australia is fortunate to have him.

Tina Allen is a medical writer and medical scientist. Her first book is Bill Gibson: Pioneering Bionic Ear Surgeon.

GOING BACK

By Munjed Al Muderis with Patrick Weaver. Allen & Unwin, 298pp, \$32.99