

This feature was written for TNT Magazine about the recent arrival from NYC, at that time, of the "people's public transport protection group," The Guardian Angels onto the London Underground

Those Who Dare to Care

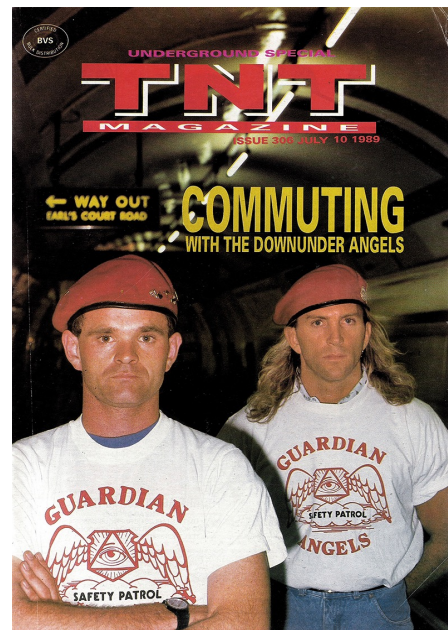
By Lyn Ashby

THE BUSKER just around the corner droned on mercilessly. She wasn't really that bad and in other circumstances, I may have thrown her my spare change. But by now I was feeling a little overexposed. For here I was late one night, squatting against a wall and waiting with a patrol of Guardian Angels at the side of an unconscious young drunk, sprawled precariously across the floor, down somewhere in the underground maze of Moorgate tube station. We were waiting while two of the patrol reported the derelict's presence to the station guards and perhaps call the police. The police never showed up. The guard said they never do.

It was at the tail end of the night when the patrol was on its way back to King's Cross, their usual start and finishing point, after a fairly normal eventless evening on the tubes, when it stumbled upon this unconscious man. It was the sort of sight that most of us don't even notice now, taking it as we do, as part of life in the big city. But not the Angels. They'd checked his breathing and pulse, and deciding that he wasn't dead or in need of immediate medical attention, discussed what they should do about him. Clearly the Angels, learning their trade on the job, were still formulating strategies for such an event. We waited and waited, and as the time for the last train drew nearer, and with it our only real form of transport home, a strange tension grew between self-interest and this professional altruism which, more than anything, characterises the Angel's existence. For although, as is printed on their T-shirt uniforms, they call themselves safety patrols (and definitely not vigilantes), it is not essentially to combat excessive violence on the tubes that they exist, it seemed to me. But rather their presence in the tubes and on the streets of London, where they intend more to venture, is primarily a defiant gesture of involvement in a world increasingly out of most people's control. Their PR pamphlet says "Dare to Care", and as they crouched there in Moorgate station over a man oblivious to their existence, for all the world like angels hovering, unlike most of us, this is exactly what they seemed to do. Care.

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Since Curtis Sliwa, the main man, (the archangel) from New York City, who with others set up the group here in London, went back to America, 30 men and women have graduated into the London



Above: Cover of TNT magazine for the Guardian Angels feature.

Below: the first page of the published article inside.



Chapter of Angels. Amidst their ranks are two Australians, Shane Knock and Tim Anderson, who by chance are both born-again Christians.

"I read a passage in the new testament", said Shane, "and it said 'When we become born again, God will send two guardian angels to protect us in all our ways'. And so when I heard of this group in 1983 called the Guadian Angels and what they do, I thought wow! what a reference to the bible that was. He sends two guardian angels to protect us and in the same way two Guardian Angels go out to protect others." On the underground.

While Tim and Shane are the only born-again, most of the Angels exhibit an great moral sense of what they're doing down in the trouble spots of the city.

Tim explains: "You don't have to wear a red beret and a special T-shirt to help people. It can be anyone that helps. It's obvious that people get beaten up and no-one helps them. We just set a good example for others". "I need to help people" said Shane, an expert in kick-boxing and martial arts. "And this is one of the best ways I could think of for doing it."

Soon enough, it will be for the people of Sydney that Tim and Shane don their berets and prowl the streets and trains. For when they're ready, (and their visas expire), they'll return to Australia and constitute the core of the Sydney chapter of what seems to be a growing international network of Angels.

"Lately there's been a lot of trouble in Sydney on the late trains. People have been robbed and bashed. There's a lot of trouble in the streets too. In Redfern and out west. There's a lot of unemployment and people get pretty bored and have nothing better to do than make trouble."

That these angels of mercy and martial arts will be greeted with any less animosity in Australia than they were initially here is unlikely. Already a move is underway in the Police Association in Sydney to pay (unarmed) off-duty policemen to patrol the rail system at night. If nothing else, the existence of a popular people's safety patrol is a message to the authorities that their system of law and order is inadequate. Authorities don't like to be told such things, and the London Angels were constantly and illegally hounded out of Hyde Park by the police during early attempted training sessions until a private space was donated to them.

Just as Shane and Tim identify their greatest future problem areas in Sydney as the suburban gangland streets, so too the angels here have their collective sights set well above ground and perhaps unlike their American brothers, see the underground as a mere starting point for their activities. Almost universally they talk of the important role they intend to play in the streets and on the housing estates where violence is territorial and governed by local gangs.

"At the moment, there's just one London chapter of Angels. But eventually we hope that there'll be perhaps a South London chapter, an East London chapter and so on. Chapters that are made up of local people that can look after the violence in their area and on their own housing estates." Local people's safety patrols.

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Although the general reaction from the travelling public is positive ("you're doing a good job", handshakes, thumbs up), not everyone that must brush up against them is convinced the descent of the Angles is a step in the right direction. Transport officials are predictably miffed.

High up on the fourth floor of the fortress of London Regional Transport in Westminster (which owns London Underground and London Buses Limited), way above the rumble and grind of underground trains, an LRT spokesman shakes his head sadly and contemplates the advent of the Angels.

"The Guardian Angels are an unfortunate development here in London, because they actually generate fear. One of the major problems with crime is when people feel afraid. It's unfair to the passengers to instil the idea that the underground is a dangerous place. People say that violence will escalate here to the New York level (since we copy everything else the Americans do), but in New York a lot of the violence occurs on the all-night trains, which we don't have. It doesn't follow that just because Britons like eating McDonalds too that they'll turn around and gun down a crowd!"

He tables statistical evidence that violence on the Underground is really only a shadow of its media image. That in fact, crime overall (most of which is petty theft) has decreased by five percent last year. The evidence, he says, suggest that the transport police (whose numbers have been expanded since the angels hit London), are a highly effective and strategic force.

"They've just about eliminated steaming." Steaming is when gangs go through whole carriages or even a whole train, mugging or robbing 20 or 30 people at a time, begun on British Rail trains.

The official line, backed by the statistics, is not only that crime is down on the underground but that the "system generally is working to within 97 percent or so of its target efficiency". One hundred percent is when every scheduled train runs on schedule, but whether the number of scheduled trains for any given period is sufficient to service the travelling public is not considered in the statistics. As always with official numbers on paper, they reflect a remoteness from people's real experiences. Six floors below us, another overcrowded, late train, in all likelihood, shuffled past. Or worse, another cancelled train didn't.

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The actual commuting experience is often the flip side of the official picture. Overcrowding, delays, cancellations, escalating expense and now strikes are all the things that people take in their manacled stride as patrons of the public transport system. The average commuter's experience may not be so much one of violence as of (sometimes violent) inconvenience. Comments from random travellers reflect widespread dissatisfaction. "It's a joke!" "How can they charge so much for this so-called service?!" "How do they always manage to get the buses to come in groups of three with great long waiting periods in between?" Efficiency and speed are not qualities generally associated with LRT.

The official average train speed on the underground is 20mph, but if you're catching a combination of buses and trains or changing tube lines in your daily trips across London, then you can expect to travel at an average speed of about six and a half miles an hour. (Consider that most people walk at about three and a half miles an hour.) If you take to the streets on pushbike, (something that people are discovering since the beginning of the age of regular tube strikes), then you can expect to get to your destination in about half to three quarters of the time that LRT would get you there. What you gain in time and save in money, however, you'll probably pay for with black lung.

If it's often seemed crowded to you down there, it's because it is. More than two and a half million people pass through the tubes everyday. A huge jump in participating public travellers occurred in the days of the infamous Greater London Council as a direct result of initiatives introduced by the Council. One of these was the Travelcard, the introduction of which the LRT fought hard against at the time, but now examples as one of its great management achievements. Before it could follow

through with the necessary strategies to cater for increased usage, the left-leaning GLC fell in 1986 under the wheels of the great Tory machine. With it perhaps went any hope of a sane long-term public policy for a public transport system. The notion of privatisation, in one form or another, behind management thinking seems to justify a whole range of cockeyed attitudes that seem to leave the user of the system, bizarrely, more and more out of the equation. The LRT Annual Report for 1988 in reporting on London Buses Limited clearly states its goal to move out of the public sector. This it will do by "improving passenger loading from 17 to 18 per bus" (using less buses per passenger head), "increasing mileage per employee from 6700 to 7300" (increasing the workload of drivers) and by "the closure of central departments". All this besides selling off some of the more cost-efficient routes to private operators. Ultimately, it seems public transport bodies would like nothing more than to have nothing to do with public transport in London.

Why do most people find the system inefficient and costly? In a moment of refreshing candour, LRT offer an honest answer: "Because it is!"

"It's a very old system, the oldest in the world, and there's just been too little official encouragement to keep it efficient or improve it."

These are official words that at last correlate with the sense of decay that pervades the Underground literally, and the whole London transport system metaphorically. If there is such official apathy, what is to be expected actually out there on the buses and down in the tubes of the system? Enter, from the west, the Angels.

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We'd been waiting now many precious minutes. Anthony, the patrol leader was calling for suggestions, not pretending that he should necessarily know so much more than the others. Someone suggested that they should at least move the unconscious man out of the main thoroughfare. Someone else argued that he might be aroused to consciousness and thinking they were going through his pockets, panic and cause a scene. Eventually they decided that he was safe and that they could leave. Strangely, the net result was the same as if they'd never stopped in the first place. Or never even existed. The drunk would sleep if off and never know that he had been the subject of such intense contemplation and compassion. But the invisible fact was that someone had taken a step to turn the disintegrative tide of the system. Both down on the Underground and in the world at large.

Who else would be crazy enough (surely not mere mortals) to even try it, except the angels.

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