

from
444 DAYS: THE HOSTAGES REMEMBER
1985

Tim Wells

In the late 1970s, a religious revolution swept Iran. Led by Islamic holy man Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolution forced the Shah (king) of Iran to flee the country. A temporary government was established that was violently anti-American. On November 4, 1979, Islamic revolutionaries seized the United States embassy in Tehran, Iran. For over a year, 52 Americans were held hostage. In the following selection, several of the hostages describe the first terrifying hours of their captivity.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias

What is the view of these Americans toward the Iranians?

The Takeover

BILL BELK (*communications officer, at the chancery*): When they said they were going to kill the two men outside, that was a rude awakening for me. I thought it was just a demonstration. I never dreamed that they were going to take over the embassy. It was an eerie feeling to know that someone might get blown away.

Captain Robinson said, "Hold on. We've got Laingen on the phone. We're talking."

JOE HALL (*warrant officer, at the chancery*): Ann Swift was on the phone talking to Bruce Laingen, who finally gave us the order to let them in. There was nothing else we could do. They might've actually killed Golacinski or Limbert.

COL. CHARLES SCOTT (*chief of the Defense Liaison Office, at the chancery*): When the time came to surrender, everyone conducted themselves in an exemplary manner. There was a feeling of genuine fear among all of us, but there wasn't any panic. No one was yelling or screaming or falling apart. A couple of our Iranian employees were hysterical, but all of the Americans took it calmly, and did what they were supposed to do in order to avoid any unnecessary violence.

JOE HALL (*warrant officer, at the chancery*): I was standing right beside Ann Swift when the marines pulled the table and sofa away from the door. The marines hollered out, "Do not shoot. We are not armed, and we are letting you in."

JOHN LIMBERT (*political officer, in the stairwell*): Finally, after seven or eight minutes, someone yelled down from inside, saying, "We're coming out."

The militants took me downstairs and out the front door. I was very relieved to get out of that gas and smoke. It was rainy and cold. It was good to be in the

fresh air. I was feeling relieved to be alive. At that point, I remember thinking, being alive was a pretty good thing.

BILL BELK (*communications officer, at the chancery*): When we opened that door we were taken over immediately. The Iranians swarmed in. One guy looked at me and said, "Walk out the door." So I walked out the door. Two guys grabbed me, one on either side, put my hands behind my back, and tied my hands. They had a long nylon rope that they used to tie us up. After my hands were tied, this guy tried to cut the rope with a knife. The rope slipped and he gouged me, stabbed me in the back. I said, "Ouch!" And he said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." Which amazed me. They were much more gentle than I'd expected.

They blindfolded me, and I didn't know what to do. I'd never experienced a blindfold before. I thought maybe they were going to take us out and shoot us. I just didn't know what to expect.

BRUCE GERMAN (*budget officer, at the chancery*): The first thing I saw was a mob of these bearded, dirty, screaming, fanatical types, with headbands and pictures of Khomeini pinned to their shirts. They came rushing in and looked in every possible room. They ran around looking for people, weapons, or whatever they could find.

We were given instructions to line up in the hall, women first. They told us they were going to escort us out of the building one at a time. As soon as we got to the checkpoint they had set up, they frisked us, blindfolded us, and tied our hands behind our backs.

I was escorted by two of them. As we were going out, they asked me to make some kind of a statement. They wanted me to condemn Carter and the United States government. I said, "I won't say anything. I'll give you my name and my position in the embassy. That's all you're going to get from me."

I was escorted down the steps and out onto the grounds, toward the screaming mob. I thought we were going to go in front of a firing squad.

JOE HALL (*warrant officer, at the chancery*): They said they did not have weapons, but the first guy I saw walk through the door had a pistol in his hand. Another guy had a holstered pistol. So they did have weapons. They had chains and sticks, and rakes and stuff.

They came in, in a mad rush, and took the phone out of Ann Swift's hand. She had been talking to someone at the State Department, giving them a blow by blow description. They said, "Line up. Line up. Do not talk. Do not for to speak." One by one they were tying our hands behind us and putting blindfolds over us.

COL. CHARLES SCOTT (*chief of the Defense Liaison Office, at the chancery*): As I was being dragged down the hall, I saw the militants pushing people around. They were questioning a couple of marines, who were dressed in battle fatigue uniforms. These Iranians were very agitated, and they kept asking the marines, "Where are the weapons? Where did you put your weapons?" The marines told

them that there weren't any weapons. One of the militants got very, very nasty. He said, "I know there were weapons! I saw them! What did you do with them?"

"There aren't any weapons!"

"This is a lie!" He threatened, "If you don't tell us where the weapons are you will be taken out and shot! Right now! Right now!"

The marines just stood their ground and refused to tell him anything.

BILL BELK (*communications officer, at the chancery*): Two of them took me and started to lead me out. The stairs were crowded with Iranians, absolutely mobbed, and the crowd outside was chanting, "Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar! (God is great! God is great!)" Over and over again. "Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!" It was continuous, as though God had delivered us to them.

As they were leading me down the stairs, these two guys were saying, "Don't be afraid. Don't be scared. We won't hurt you. We just want to teach you. We will bring you Khomeini's thoughts. We will teach you about God. We will teach the CIA not to do these terrible things to our country."

They led me out the front door, and that's when the picture of me was taken, the one that appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*. I can recall the thoughts I had at that moment. I wasn't really frightened. I guess I was more caught up with the excitement of events. But I do remember thinking that they might shoot me. I thought, "My God, if they are going to get rid of me, then I'll die with my head up." I could hear the constant chanting, "Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!" In the face of all that ranting and raving, I raised up and stood at military attention. I could hear the cameras clicking. I thought, "To hell with them! I'm not going to let them think they have me at an advantage." So I stood straight and tall.

Captivity

MALCOLM KALP (*economics officer, at the ambassador's residence*): As soon as the terrorists were in the house, they started writing everywhere—over the walls, on the ceiling, on the lamp shades; they'd open a drawer and write in the drawers. Everywhere. "Death to the shah!" "Death to Carter!" "Long live Khomeini!" I thought, "Boy, this is going to cost the American government a good bit of money to get this crock cleaned up."

RICHARD QUEEN (*consular officer, at the ambassador's residence*): They put Gary Lee and myself in one of the upstairs bedrooms. I remember we faced the mountains in the distance. The first snows had come on those mountains, and it was a very beautiful sight.

The Iranian militants seemed like a bunch of kids who had just had their day. They had defied authority and were bouncing around. We had been taken prisoner by a bunch of children. I was still sure that it was going to be over in a short time. I was sure that the Iranian government would come in and clean them out. It was just an interesting experience, something I could write friends and parents about. In a letter home I could say, "We were captured today. . . ." I remember Gary Lee said he was sure that an American plane was on the way over, and that it would

pick us up when it arrived. I agreed with him. We were sitting in the bedroom having a calm, quiet conversation.

One of the Iranian militants went in to one of the back rooms and got some cigars. He smoked a cigar and was joking around. A couple of them tried to start political discussions. Stupidly, I got involved in one or two. They were incredibly naive and said the most ridiculous things. I remember one guy said something to the effect that Americans built Iranian roads poorly so they could get Iranians killed. I said, "No, Iranians are just lousy drivers. They're crazy. They've got to show everybody how fast they can drive." But he insisted that Americans built Iranian roads poorly to get Iranians killed. The conversations were actually on that level. Over and over again they came back to the idea that the shah had ruined their country, and America was responsible for the shah. Every evil that had ever befallen Iran was America's fault, and they were convinced that they were going to get the shah back. There was no doubt about that.

I'd speak to them in my blundering Farsi, but wasn't sure that I was being properly understood. Then, as evening rolled around, I remember watching the sunset. With the mountains it was nice, real beautiful.

The Next Day

JOE HALL (*warrant officer, at the ambassador's residence*): That morning was the first time all of the guards were armed. They'd gotten the marine weapons they'd found in the safes, and they were armed to the teeth. Some of them were also wearing marine fatigues that they'd pilfered from personal quarters.

I remember looking over my shoulder and seeing a guard sitting there with one of the marine shotguns. He had that gun pointed right at my head, and his finger was resting on the trigger. He wasn't trying to intimidate me, he was just sitting there talking to one of the other guards. In the midst of all that chaos, I thought the chance for a fatal accident was pretty high. Those guys had no idea of what they were doing with those weapons. I thought, "Holy cow! This guy is going to blow my head off just because of some stupid accident." So I looked at one of the other guards who was standing near me, and sort of whispered to get his attention, "Hey, hey."

He said, "What do you want?"

"Could you ask that guy to point his gun somewhere else?"

So he walked over to the guard with the shotgun and said something to him. When the guy realized what he was doing, he looked at me with sort of a stupid sheepish grin on his face, and pointed his gun at the ceiling.

JOHN LIMBERT (*political officer, at the ambassador's residence*): It must've been about eleven o'clock in the morning when they came and pulled me out of my room. I remember going through the dining room, seeing the people tied up and blindfolded, and I thought, "Okay, things are going to take a turn for the worse."

I was led to a chair in the living room, tied to the chair, blindfolded, and warned not to talk. I was sitting next to a window, which was open, and I could

hear the crowds outside. Behind us, the students were walking around cocking their guns.

We didn't know who the students were or what their purpose was. Some of them didn't know, either. The unfamiliarity of the situation was terrifying. There was always the feeling that they might be capable of killing us.

When you can't see what's going on around you, you tend to imagine things going on around you—and it's easy for your imagination to get the best of you. As I sat there, I heard a rustling of paper, which was very frightening. I thought, "Maybe they're writing something down." I remembered having seen pictures of people who had been executed. Handwritten signs had been left on the bodies that identified the person as being guilty of this or that crime. So that rustling of paper frightened me. I was able to sneak a look out from underneath my blindfold, and saw it was just a student reading a newspaper.

LEE SCHATZ (*agricultural attaché, in hiding across the street from the embassy compound*): The Iranians called for people to come down to the embassy. I guess they issued a call over the radio, saying that there would be a rally in front of the embassy that afternoon.

I remember a mullah came in before they had their public prayers. The students escorted him onto the compound, and it was kind of like show and tell. They took him on a tour. After they paraded him around, he came back and led the masses in prayer from the tarmac in front of the motor pool. The mullah wasn't on the podium or anything. He was down on the ground, in the middle of the courtyard, with all the others. After their prayers, they had some speeches, and of course there was a lot of violent chanting.

That was a big crowd. The street was six lanes wide and had wide sidewalks, and that entire area in front of the embassy was mobbed. The street was solid with people for several blocks.

BILL BELK (*communications officer, at a staff house on the embassy compound*): I sat tied to my chair for the entire day. Outside I could hear shots being fired in the street, and there was a crowd out front. It sounded like there were millions of people in front of that embassy, and all of them were calling for our blood. Their screaming was causing the house to vibrate. I could actually feel the walls vibrate to the rhythm of their chants. "Marg bar Amrika! Marg bar Amrika!" Over and over again. "Marg bar Amrika!" Or, "Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!"

CAPT. PAUL NEEDHAM (*air force logistics officer, at the ambassador's residence*): Around eleven o'clock that morning I heard Don Sharer being moved. As they were taking him out, he said, "If anyone gets out of here alive, tell my wife and my daughter that I love them." He thought he was going to be taken out and shot. So did I. I wasn't even free to make a move on any of the Iranians because I was tied to the chair. That was a frustrating feeling. So I just sat there and thought, "Oh boy, here we go."

They had tied us to chairs in a circle in one of the main rooms of the ambassador's residence, so that we were all facing outward toward the wall. I thought,

“This is so that if someone does come in and try to rescue us, the Iranians can execute us very easily. They only have to keep a couple of people in the middle of the room with all of us tied up in a circle like this.” I fully expected to be killed.

JOHN LIMBERT (*political officer, at the ambassador’s residence*): I thought we were all going to get shot, and if we weren’t shot, then the crowds would eventually come in and kill us. I knew Iranian history, and there are numerous instances of mobs being stirred up into extremely violent acts. I knew that if that mob outside was stirred up enough, and got into the building, they’d find us sitting there tied up in chairs. We would be helpless. I remember thinking that I was either going to get shot, or I was going to be killed by the mob outside. Either way, there was nothing I could do about it, and at least I could be thankful for having had a good life so far.

BILL BELK (*communications officer, at a staff house on the embassy compound*): Outside the mob was just raving, but inside the Iranians were sort of relaxed. You know, they were students, and they would talk with us. This one guy, Seyyed, sat down beside me and talked to me about the Moslem faith. He told me about the teachings of Khomeini and the teachings of Ali Shariati. I think he was trying to convince me that the students were right in taking over the embassy and right in demanding the return of the shah. He talked and talked, which made me feel a little bit better. He obviously wasn’t going to take me out and shoot me. But still, with that crowd out there, I didn’t know what to expect.

Interrogation

LEE SCHATZ (*agricultural attaché, in hiding across the street from the embassy compound*): Apparently the Iranians up front knew that they were going to be able to whip that crowd into a frenzy, yet still be able to control them. Some of the things I’ve read tend to make me believe that Iranians can be very violent in their verbal actions—you know, chanting, raising fists, throwing insults—yet never rise to action. I remember a quote from a book about an Iranian that said, “Haji Baba was all for the glory of war, except for the dying of men.”

And that’s sort of the way that crowd was. They were all for the beating of chests and getting whipped up into a frenzy. But they weren’t going to take that additional step to violent action. If you had a crowd in the United States that whipped up, they’d rip apart anything that was close by just to get it out of their system. But out there, the mullahs seemed to have a very good understanding of the crowd and how to manipulate it. They knew what they were doing, and they used it to the hilt.

JOHN LIMBERT (*political officer, at the ambassador’s residence*): At about three or four o’clock in the afternoon there was one hopeful sign. They untied us and took us to the kitchen two at a time to feed us. The students stood around while we ate and made sure we didn’t talk to one another. I remember thinking that if they were going to shoot us, they wouldn’t bother to feed us.

SGT. PAUL LEWIS (*marine security guard, at a staff house on the embassy compound*): Later that afternoon, the guy who had been talking to me about wars of imperialism brought some other people into the room. He said they were from some sort of central committee, and that they had some questions to ask me. These people weren't nearly as friendly as the first guy. They wanted to know the combinations to safes, and they wanted to know the combinations to doors in the embassy. They also wanted to know who worked where. Of course, I knew absolutely nothing. I'd only been in Tehran fourteen hours before I was captured. So by this time I'd been in captivity longer than I'd been at the embassy. I didn't know who the administrative officer was, and I didn't know who the political officers were. I'd never checked in. I didn't even know how to get in the front door.

Of course, these guys didn't believe that. They yelled and grilled and warned and threatened. They'd say, "It's going to be very rough on you if we don't get into those safes! Now tell us the combinations! If you don't cooperate you're going to be here for a very long time!" I told them that I didn't know anything. But they kept on grilling and threatening. They said, "We know you're CIA. We've found documents in the embassy, and we know you're a spy. We also found the torture room. We know about that. We know that you participated in torturing innocent Iranians, and helped train SAVAK to torture."

Now I don't know if they actually believed what they were saying or not, but there wasn't anything that I could tell them. I knew there wasn't a "torture room" at the embassy, and I thought maybe they were talking about what we called the "bubble." The bubble was a secure, soundproof room for conferences. You can go in there to eliminate hostile electronic surveillance while discussing sensitive topics. It's a room that can't be bugged. And it is soundproof; if someone was standing out in the hallway, it would be impossible for them to hear any sounds coming out of that room. Maybe the Iranians thought it was there so no one could hear the screams. Maybe they did think it was a torture room.

CPL. WILLIAM GALLEGOS (*marine security guard, at the ambassador's residence*): Some of the militants came and got me in the afternoon and took me over to the marine office in the chancery. They wanted me to open the safes. I refused to do anything. I wouldn't say anything to them. They kept asking me my name, and I wouldn't tell them that. I just sat there. They blindfolded me. Some other guy came in who spoke good English. I don't think he was one of the regular students. That's probably why they blindfolded me. Anyway, he started asking me stuff like: "How do you open the safes? What are the combinations? Where are the weapons?"

I just sat there. I didn't say nothing. So they got a little rough. They pushed me around and slapped me a few times while I was sitting in the chair. I don't think they were trying to hurt me. It was more like they were trying to intimidate me. Still, I wouldn't say anything. I mean nothing.

They were asking me about people in the embassy. "Who is CIA? Who does this? Who does that?" They wanted to know the job functions of people on the

embassy staff. They wanted to know what certain equipment was for. I wouldn't talk to them. I didn't say anything to anybody.

They put a gun to my head, and I still refused to answer them. I just sat there. I could hear this guy cock the gun. He pulled the hammer back, and I didn't know if he was going to shoot me or not. I didn't know what they were going to do. They kept asking: "What is the combination to the safe? How do you get in there? What do you have in there?" At the time, we probably had some weapons in there, and some radios. Maybe a bulletproof vest or something like that. Not much. We didn't keep anything important in there. But I wasn't about to help these guys. He pulled the trigger and dry-fired an empty chamber. Just like that—*click!* By this time, I was ready for anything. I mean, I was ready to be tortured. I figured that physical torture would be the easiest part of it. The psychological torture—the waiting, the seclusion, not knowing what was going on—was much worse. If they were roughing me up, I knew what I had to do. They could do whatever they wanted to me, and I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of doing anything for them. That was my job. I was a marine. That's what I was trained for. I'm a firm believer in the armed forces, and I'm a firm believer in America. If those guys wanted to play games, they weren't going to get anything from me. I just sat there and didn't say nothing.

After a while, they took me back over to the ambassador's residence and tied me up in a chair. I could look under my blindfold and tell that everybody was sitting in a circle facing the walls in this one large room; it was the ballroom of the ambassador's residence. I was waiting for somebody to come in and get us out.

BILL BELK (*communications officer, at a staff house in the embassy compound*): You can't imagine what it's like to sit there tied up and listen to that chanting hour after hour. Those people were rabid. I was getting sick of it. I wanted it to stop. It just went on and on, hour after hour. All the while, this kid Seyyed was sitting there giving his religious lectures. He was telling me about Ali, the first imam,¹ and said he was going to teach me about all of their prophets. He was sincere, too. There was a lot of coming and going and confusion among the students, but the chanting outside was the one thing that was constant.

SGT. PAUL LEWIS (*marine security guard, at a staff house in the embassy compound*): That chanting went on all afternoon and on into the night. It sounded like hundreds of thousands of people in the street—and they weren't that far away, either. They were just on the other side of the wall. Those people could really make some noise. Over and over again, "*Marg bar Amrika! Marg bar Amrika!*" It was so loud the sound almost became physical. The noise would just kind of throb through me.

I was worried that things might get out of hand and those people would come over the wall. I couldn't understand Farsi, and I didn't know what the speakers on the other side of the wall were telling those people.

JOHN LIMBERT (*political officer, at the ambassador's residence*): At about ten or eleven o'clock that night, we just got out of our chairs and lay down on the

1. **imam:** a Muslim leader claiming descent from Muhammad

floor. One of the students had the brilliant idea that they could tie our feet together to keep us from running away in the night. So I spent that night stretched out on the floor with my feet tied together. Fortunately, there were carpets on the floor. It certainly wasn't deluxe accommodations, but it was good to have gotten through the day alive.

COL. CHARLES SCOTT (*military attaché, at the chancery*): At the embassy, my interrogation continued on into the night of November 5. Those guys didn't let up. It went on both day and night. There were threats, and veiled threats, and more physical abuse. I was kicked in the groin, punched in the stomach, and knocked off my stool. They continued to accuse me of being the CIA station chief, and they wanted a confession. They told me that I was never going to get out of there alive unless I sat down and wrote out a confession. I figured, "If they're going to kill me, they're going to kill me, and there's nothing I can do about it." My main objective was to protect my own integrity. I thought, "All I've got left is me. If I'm going to go out now, I'm going to go out in style."

Years and years ago, I'd read a book that proved to be helpful throughout the course of my interrogations. It was called *Brainwashing*, by a writer named Richardson. In his research, Richardson interviewed a number of prisoners from the Bamboo Curtain days when the communists took over in China. He wanted to know how some of these prisoners managed to survive the Chinese attempts to brainwash them, and do so while keeping their sanity and mental well-being intact. He discovered that those who survived had certain techniques in common, and among those techniques was that before the brainwashing actually started, before the physical and mental pressure began, these men set goals and objectives for themselves. These goals became their salvation when they were being tortured, or denied sleep, or kept in isolation. So when I was dragged over for interrogation on the first night, I knew I had to set some goals and objectives, because it would be very easy for me to become so exhausted or so frightened that I'd say, "Sure, I'll sign that confession for you. The American people will understand. They'll know it was done under duress." But as a soldier in the United States Army, I had certain loyalties to my country that I was obligated to uphold. There was no way around it. So I had to set goals, and they had to be realistic. You have to set limits beyond which you're not willing to go in order to save your life. And that's what I did.

My first goal was, no matter what the militants did, I wouldn't write a thing down for them. I knew they were looking for a written confession that they could take and wave before the TV cameras and the crowds. I wasn't about to let them have that. My second goal, right out of our military code of conduct, was that I wouldn't say anything that could be embarrassing to the United States. If they had the interrogation on tape and I said something that was contrary to U.S. policy, even if it was something that I believed, then that was the kind of thing that could have been broadcast over the news media and broadcast in the United States. That was also the kind of propaganda they were looking for, and if I ever came home I didn't want to have to hang my head. Third, also from the code of conduct, I

wouldn't say anything that could bring any additional pressure or danger to my fellow hostages. And last, as a way of clarifying the situation in my own mind, I told myself, "The Iranians are the enemy. Even though we are not at war with Iran, they are the enemy in every sense of the word." In my simple soldier's mind, I had to keep that very clear.

During the first interrogation session the militants played the good guy/bad guy bit. But on the second night they were all bad guys. Like I said, I'd written myself off. I didn't think that I was going to get out of Iran alive. My only objective was to maintain my integrity.

They wanted me to confess to being the CIA station chief. They would say, "We know you were working on a military coup against our government." I'd deny it, and they would say, "We know otherwise! You were working on a military coup against Khomeini!" They tried everything they could to get me to sign a confession—threats, veiled threats, and physical abuse.

I'd been knocked off my stool and kicked so many times that I was pretty sure I had some serious internal injuries. They would threaten to burn my eyes out with cigarettes, and they'd threaten me with my life. There was one guy in there with a big knife like a machete. They would put my arm up on the table, and this guy would raise the knife like he was going to lop my arm off. And what can you do about it? All I could do was sit there. When they failed to follow through on their threats, that was an important signal. I knew that if they ever started cutting off limbs or fingers, not only would I not get out of there alive, but my body would never be found. Nobody would ever have heard from Chuck Scott again. But when they failed to follow through on some of their threats, it was my first indication that they weren't going to do anything that would put a permanent scar on me, which gave me an immediate edge. I knew I still had a chance of getting out of there alive. So that gave me hope, and it was an extremely important signal. I began to realize that there was only a certain level of violence they were going to carry out, and that they wouldn't proceed beyond that point.

They got out their rubber hose and beat on me with that, and they continued to knock me off the stool and kick me around until I thought I had a hernia. But I also became aware of the fact that they were being very careful not to mark my face. They weren't going to put any permanent scars on me. Finally, late at night on the fifth, they told me that if I did not sit down and write out a confession right then, they were going to take me outside and turn me over to the Iranian people. I was sitting in a chair with my elbows and wrists wired together. I was blindfolded. They stood me up and led me outside. I could feel the cold air against my face, and I could hear the mob. I couldn't see them, but I could feel and hear that there were huge mobs out there. They walked me over to the front gate to parade me in front of the mobs. They stood me so close to the gate that people could take punches at me and kick at me. If they'd left me there long enough, those people would have torn me apart. They really would have. The women were the worst—I could hear them, and feel them kicking and clawing away. As I stood

there, I thought, “Sooner or later you’re going to feel warm blood flowing. Somebody is going to slip a shiv² in you.” Those people were volatile. There’s just no other way to describe it. They were extremely volatile. But the clowns who dragged me out to the gate stayed right there, and I could hear them shouting commands in Persian, saying, “Don’t hit him in the head! Don’t hit him in the head!” They were making sure that nobody put any permanent marks on me. There was a certain solace in hearing those commands. “Bear up under this,” I said to myself. “It’s not going to get any worse.” And of course it never did. After a few minutes they took me back to the chancery, where the interrogation continued.

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2. shiv: knife