



Moments in U.S. Diplomatic History

444 Days: *Memoirs of an Iran Hostage*

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More than thirty years later, the Iran Hostage crisis still ranks as one of the most traumatic diplomatic events in U.S. history. Dissatisfied with the corrupt and ineffective regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi, many Iranian citizens began protesting the Iranian government in 1977. In 1979 after nearly two years of protests and strikes, the Shah was exiled from Iran and was succeeded by the radical Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader of the newly established Islamic republic. The Shah sought asylum and medical care from his erstwhile allies, particularly the United States, which agreed to help. Enraged members of the Iranian Revolution insisted on his return so that they could prosecute and punish him for his actions. The 444-day-long crisis began on November 4th when some 3,000 militant Iranian students stormed the United States embassy in Tehran, taking nearly sixty diplomats hostage.



Revolutionaries demanded that the U.S. return the Shah to Iran. After much internal debate, President Jimmy Carter decided not to do so, given the Shah's medical condition and his many years as a stalwart American ally.

Shows such as ABC's "Nightline" with Ted Koppel had daily updates on the crisis and counted the days of "America Held Hostage." Ultimately, the long grind of negotiations and bad publicity took its toll on the American psyche and the Carter presidency; he lost to Ronald Reagan and his campaign for "Morning in America" in the 1980 elections.

In these excerpts from his oral history, John Limbert describes how the mob of Iranian Revolutionaries attacked the embassy, his "stupid" attempt to calm the crowd, his initial days of captivity, and a mock execution. [Part II on the End Game can be found here](#). You can also read the account by [Chargé d'affaires Bruce Laingen](#), who had a much different experience as a captive at the Foreign Ministry and that of [Mike Metrinko](#), another hostage who spent most of his time in solitary confinement.

"All these people want to do is read a statement and leave"

LIMBERT: I had been, for about the week before, traveling outside of Tehran, so I wasn't completely up to date on what was going on in the capital, but Sunday morning as I say was the beginning of our work week. [Chargé d'affaires] Bruce Laingen and Victor Tomseth, head of political section and number two, plus one of our security officers, went to the Foreign Ministry on an appointment that they had been seeking for a week before that, so it wasn't specifically related to embassy security. In the morning, groups had been marching by the embassy, going to a demonstration scheduled at the university. One of the parade routes for demonstrations at the university went by the front gate of the embassy. About 10:30 in the morning one of the groups stopped in front of the embassy, and began shouting slogans. That wasn't unusual but instead of continuing to march towards the university the demonstrators attacked the front gate.

We had some local security in police uniforms. Whoever they were, if they were actually police, Iranian police or just neighborhood vigilantes dressed up in police uniforms, they melted away. They were not going to confront the crowd. They came into the compound, they breached the gates. The gates were nothing like today's security arrangements, the barriers were nothing like you see today in embassies, with all the high-tech stuff and the razor wire and the bollards and all that sort of thing. It was essentially an ornamental fence.



And they came into the compound. We shut down the doors of the chancery. We shut down the doors of the consulate building. The embassy is a series of buildings spread over about thirty acres in the middle of town. And figured that the best thing to do would be to shut them out physically, and keep them out until the host government could respond. As they had responded some nine months

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earlier, on February 14th, when a group had also attacked and the authorities did respond, and sent a force in to kick out the attackers.

So we figured they would do something similar and in the meantime the best thing to do was to shut down and lock down the building.

I was in the main chancery. We were on the phone with Washington. It was like two or three in the morning, Sunday morning in Washington. It's an example I've always used. We got the Operations Center, they patched us through to either Hal Saunders, the assistant secretary for Near East, or one of the deputy assistant secretaries. I've used that example since when I noticed that recently some of our bureaus have appointed less than experienced people to be deputy assistant secretaries. I said, "Look, in a situation like that we needed somebody with judgment and experience on the other end of the line. I don't care how damn brilliant they are or who they know. We need somebody good." You can see of course by the results how effective that has been. But that's parenthetical.

We were on the phone with Washington. Ann Swift, who was our number two political officer, was the ranking Foreign Service person in the embassy at the time. She was on the phone with Washington. I got on the phone with the Iranian government. Mike Metrinko got on the phone with some of his contacts. First I called was the Foreign Ministry, then the prime minister's office. The Foreign Ministry was surreal. First of all I called and the woman at the other end thought I was Metrinko. We were two of the Persian speakers there and before I could describe what was going on, she said, "Oh, Mr. Metrinko, it's nice to talk to you. Those passports we sent over, are the visas ready yet?" And all I could say was, "Lady, one this isn't Metrinko, two if you don't do something about this situation you can kiss those visas of yours good-bye. You're never going to see them." I don't know if they ever saw them or not. But that was the tenor of the time. "I want my visa and I can shout my anti-American slogan at the same time."

I called the prime minister's office and they reassured us me that, "Oh, don't worry, we're going to send some help. All these people want to do is read a statement and leave." I said, "That's fine. Let 'em read it quickly and get out of here before something happens." I kept reminding them, "Listen, you are responsible. This is your responsibility. Our safety, the safety of this compound, is your responsibility. If there is bloodshed, if somebody gets hurt, you will be responsible." That made no impact at all.

They said that there's a force on the way or some group on the way to get these people out, and it will be there at any time, very soon. After a short period of time it became clear that no force was on the way, there was none one coming to help. So I called back, I pressed them, I said, "I don't see any evidence of this." "Oh, no, no, don't worry." And I said, "Well, tell me what you are doing about this." And they said, (this is about eleven o'clock in the morning) "Oh, well, for this afternoon we've scheduled a meeting to decide what to do about it." I just hung up on this guy. I remember saying to Ann Swift, I said, "Ann, we're on our own. Whatever happens is here."

Again, presumably, had there been a functioning government able to do something, Hal Saunders in Washington could have woken up somebody at a high enough level to call someone in the Iranian government to get these people out and remind them of the seriousness. But there was no one to talk to. There was no one to answer the phone at the other side. All you could get was a lot of hand wringing.

The mob enters the embassy

Q: Well what was happening while you were making the call? Were people pounding on the door?

LIMBERT: First they were outside the main building and then they got into the main building. They broke a window, and they pulled out some bars. They found a vulnerable spot. I don't know if they had cased the place or not but they found a vulnerable spot, pulled out some bars and got into the chancery basement. The marines tried to slow them down with teargas. Eventually we got everybody, including our Iranians employees, (there were probably more Iranian employees than American) up onto the second floor of the building, which is behind a steel door. We shut the steel door, and tried to delay. Eventually they got up the stairs, were outside the steel door. We weren't quite sure what was going on over at the consulate building. There were people whose offices were outside of the chancery. We weren't sure what happened to them. Our security officer earlier had gone out to try to defuse this. He eventually became a hostage or was taken prisoner.

So there we were. They were outside the door, we were inside the door and we didn't know what was going on. We were worried they might try to burn us out. As far as we knew there hadn't been any bloodshed. We hadn't seen anybody armed with anything but sticks at this point. As far as



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hurt, from either side. No shots had been fired.

We were in radio contact with the Chargé at the Foreign Ministry and we told him, "See what you can do there. You're better off there, if you can get some help for us. Don't come back here." And ever since that time, ever since that day, for the rest of my Foreign Service career I have been a great pain in the neck to my employees about radio communication, because I think it was a lifesaver for our people at the Foreign Ministry that day.

Anyway, so they were at the door. It was a stalemate. We had reached a stalemate but we were on our own.

"I did probably one of the most stupid things I've ever done in my Foreign Service career"

The Americans and the Iranians in the consulate were able to get out. As I mentioned, we weren't doing visa services that day and there was a direct door between the consulate and the alley, the small street, behind the compound and the students hadn't attacked from there. So a group of them slipped out. When they got out on the street of course the question is what do they do now? And I think half went right, half went left. Those that went right eventually made their way to safety and were hidden by the Canadians. There were six of them, including two spouses who were working as consular assistants. And the others were captured.

Q: So there you are behind the locked door.

LIMBERT: There behind the locked door, and people are destroying documents. We were in communication by telephone with Washington. We were in communication by radio with the Chargé at the Foreign Ministry. But there we are. It's a standoff. What do you do?

Well, I did probably one of the most stupid things I've ever done in my Foreign Service career. I volunteered to go out and talk to these guys. I'm a Persian speaker, so perhaps I can go out and see if we can defuse this somehow, or delay it, defuse it, divert it. We did not see these guys being armed or anybody getting hurt. So that's what I did. I went out, they opened the door, I went out the door and started talking to these guys. And at first they were shocked, because they thought I was an Iranian. I kept reassuring them, "No, no, no, I'm not an Iranian, I'm an American employee of the embassy, you should get out of here." I took my most professorial tone with them and was as overbearing as I could be and saying, "You are where you should not be. You have no business here. You should get out as soon as you can. You are causing trouble. Who do you think you are?" So forth and so on. And they weren't having any of it.

I'll tell you a little story about this. About 1991 or '92 there was a made-for-TV movie about the hostage taking. It wasn't a great bit of moviemaking but it was not bad. And part of the movie shows this particular incident, where the actor playing me goes out to talk to these guys and gets taken. I was showing this at one point to an audience, using this as an example and one of the people in the audience, perhaps he didn't realize this character was supposed to be me and in this stage whisper said, "God, what an idiot!" although he didn't use the word "idiot." He used a more anatomical descriptor. True, I must admit he had a point. I've always called this the low point of my Foreign Service career and my least successful negotiation.

So I spent a few minutes palavering with these guys, who were high and nervous and they didn't know what was going to go on. They didn't know if the Marines were going to come out shooting or not, so they didn't know what to expect. But I did see somebody with a pistol, at that point, which wasn't very reassuring. But anyway, I became a captive early on. And then they announced if we didn't open the door in five minutes they were going to shoot me and the security officer, whom they also had. Well, Ann Swift and Bruce Laingen. God love 'em both, they eventually agreed. They didn't call the bluff and they did open the door and then most of the staff was taken there. There were some people who locked themselves in the vault and they managed to hold out for another couple of hours.

Under normal circumstances there would have been plenty of time for the host country, for the Iranian authorities, to send some help, but they did not. And to this day, I blame those who had the power to react and didn't take the responsibility to do so....

I was very glad to be alive. I didn't know whether we were going to survive this or not. We didn't know what was going to happen. We were facing a mob. So after this immediate capture was over, the fact that I was still alive, that was a pretty good thing, given the alternative.

Second was that, "This can't go on very long. Somebody is going to sort this out. Whoever is in charge cannot permit something like this to stand, and in a day, two days, three days, it'll be sorted out and either these guys will leave or we'll be put on a plane.



The third was a little different, when we discovered that the ostensible reason they were holding us was the return of the Shah, my first thought was, that's absurd. Then after a while I thought, "Well, what's the Shah ever done for me? Sounds okay to me, if they want us to return the Shah, if they want us to throw in Henry Kissinger in the bargain we can do that, too. It's all right. Sounds like a reasonable trade."...

Well, water had us blindfolded and led

inside. I felt good getting out in the fresh air and being alive. Then we were taken across the embassy grounds to I think it was either the ambassador's or the DCM's house and put in rooms there....

“They dragged us out and tied us to chairs in the living room and blindfolded us”

Once we got there we started talking with the students. There was no plan. As far as we could tell, these guys did not know what they were going to do next. Now they had done this, the question was kind of “Now what?” There was no particular plan. The plan was just to take the embassy and improvise from there. So one of the things they tell you in a situation like this, I remembered this from a half-day course I had taken before, was to establish some common ground with these people. They're less likely to kill you if they see you as an individual. So I started talking, just talked with them I might with my own students.

Q: So how did things develop then, the first day or two?

LIMBERT: They deteriorated seriously. Basically we were waiting for somebody to come around and get us out of there and nobody ever came. The first day or two we were able to listen to news and the students were just dying to know how they were being portrayed in the international news. We listened to Tehran news, we listened to BBC Persian. But things took a bad turn the next day. I spent the night in the cook's room of the DCM's house and the next morning, they came in about nine or ten o'clock in the morning and dragged us out and tied us to chairs in the living room and blindfolded. Sitting there in this room blindfolded, tied up to chairs and hearing the screaming crowds outside. That was about as bad as it ever got for me. I didn't know what was going to happen but I figured if those people outside got in either they were going to shoot us right then or if those mobs got into the embassy we were going to be dead....

They were doing this for some reason but Rule One of being prisoner is you don't expect any logic or reason for what happens. You cast aside logic and reason at that point. That's the way you survive. You do whatever you can do to keep other people calm, but you couldn't do much, beyond Day One, because we couldn't communicate with each other. I think, for the most part, from what I saw and heard, most people took this very professionally....

We're sitting there. The radio is on. I'm thinking the worst possible thoughts. It's very bizarre, I'll never forget this, they're playing the *Funeral Music for Queen Mary* by Henry Purcell. Remember *A Clockwork Orange*? It's the music from *A Clockwork Orange*. It's beautiful, absolutely gorgeous music. But not what I really wanted to hear. Not very upbeat. And this went on.

We were in this state for a couple of hours until around noontime they fed us, brought in some food. I forget what it was. I took that as a good sign. I said, “Well, if they were going to shoot us they probably wouldn't feed us.” And that went on through most of the day. But it's amazing what you can get used to. I think eventually they put us in separate bedrooms. I remember one of the colleagues needed some medicine and I took the role of designated nagger and I would just nag at them to get him his medicine, because they couldn't understand his English. But again there was a sense of not knowing what was coming next. Once again, I think we were all grasping at that straw that, “Well, this doesn't happen and this can't go on and somebody's going to straighten it out.” So that was my thought through the next few days. I remember hearing the news about the resigning of the Provisional Government. Not good news. And so we spent the next few days in various rooms of either the DCM's or the ambassador's residence, sleeping on the floor, tied up.

The one thing I do remember from that time was they gave me a *Time* magazine to read and there was an article in there about admitting the Shah to the U.S. and in this article they quoted President Carter as saying he was opposed to it but agreed anyway. And when he agreed, though, he said, “What are you going to advise me to do when our embassy is overrun and our people are taken hostage?” You could imagine what that made me feel like.

The blindfolds they would take off during most of the day. They only used the blindfolds when they were going to move us somewhere. I don't remember the exact day but it was a after few days, they came in the middle of the night and said, “Okay, get up, we're going.” My first thought, “Oh, that's good. Finally somebody has done something.” But I got hustled off with some others and got in the back of a car. We drove for a while. I ended up, with a group of others, in a villa up in the northern part of town.



What had happened, I learned subsequently, there had been rumors of some rescue attempt and so they took some of us and scattered us around the city. So this was a villa that had obviously belonged to some wealthy Iranian who'd either been executed or had taken off, because his shirts were still hanging in the closet. And so I ended up in the bedroom, had a mattress on the floor. Our public affairs officer was there and one of our communicators was there. And the three of us just sat there for about ten days or two weeks. There were other people also in the house....

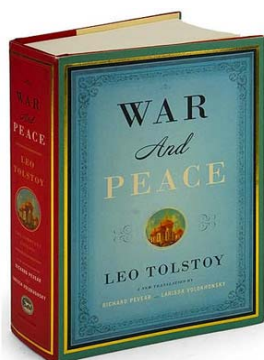
the author mean here?" Or "Here's a word I don't understand." And then we'd end up talking about that. That was about the extent of the interaction.

"You live an hour at a time"

There were some interrogations later on, half-hearted stuff. In terms of trying to convince me of something, they didn't do much. I know that others got into more extended arguments. I wasn't really interested in getting in political discussions with them. When they would try, I would say, "Listen, you don't do a political discussion under these conditions. If you want a free discussion you need a free setting. If you want to talk about this you let us go and we'll go sit in a cafe somewhere and we'll talk about it. But not under these conditions." Again, one of the things they taught in this three-hour course, whatever it was, is avoid the political discussions. They're not trying to convince you. If they tried to convince you they wouldn't have done what they did. And I'm not going to convince them.

I can work on them psychologically and I did, to catch them out in little lies and things. One of the things I liked to do was to catch them out in a lie somewhere and I would say, "Oh, it's really too bad that you're lying because to do that means that your prayers and your fasts are invalid and that's really too bad, isn't it?" Just kind of get under their skin a little bit or I would say things like, "That coat you're wearing, I recognize it. That belongs to one of us, doesn't it. That's stolen goods and what kind of a person steals or uses stolen goods? I'm sure if you had asked the owner he would have been happy to have you use it." Or I'd say, "If you say prayers on a usurped area, or on somebody else's property without their permission, those prayers are not valid. Too bad. People used to visit my house and before they would pray they would always ask permission." Little psychological warfare. I don't know if it made any impact or not. Some of these guys were simple enough that it would. Made me feel a little better, anyway....

Wherever you were you could adjust to that. You got accustomed to it. You said, "Okay, I'll make my nest here for the time being and see whatever happens." And basically what you learn is that you live an hour at a time or a day at a time or a week at a time.



I don't remember when it was, but there must have been a point at which we figured this is more than we had bargained for. I remember, the attack happened on a Sunday, and I had an airline ticket on Friday to go to Saudi Arabia to visit my family. The first day I kept thinking, "Boy, am I going to have a story to tell!" And then as this got on I said, "I hope I get out in time so I don't miss that flight." Well, of course, as things went on, it dragged on and on. When the message really came home to me was after the first Christmas in 1979. I got a care package from my family and there were some books in it and the books were things like *War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Middlemarch*, average length about 1100 pages. And I'm thinking, "Someone is trying to tell me something."

They had their routines, they had their shifts. I don't know what their routines were or what their organization was but somebody out there was obviously running this thing, if only to manage the food and the other logistics. I do remember, this must have been

after a month and a half or so, I was back in the embassy compound and they came over and they pulled me out, it was during the day, to an interrogation. I went over and they took me to my own office and there was a guy sitting there with a burn bag over his head, so I wouldn't know him. And I'm thinking, "Now what's wrong with this picture? I'm supposed to have the burn bag over my head, not him!"

"They were publishing embassy documents"

And it was funny, he asked me about the 1953 coup, the coup that overthrew Mossadegh, organized by Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA. He asked, "What was your role in that?" And I said, "Well, I was about ten years old at the time. I don't think I had much of a role."

And he said, "What do you know about it?" I said, "Basically what I've read." And he said, "What have you read?" I said, "Well I read this book by Professor Richard Cottam at the University of Pittsburgh." And he said, "Oh, you mean the book *Nationalism in Iran*?" I was very surprised because very few people in Iran knew about that book and it was definitely not available there. It was written in English. I don't know if it had been translated into Persian. Maybe there was a bootleg translation somewhere, but very few Iranians that I knew were familiar with it, although it was one of the standard books on the Mossadegh period. So obviously I was dealing with somebody who was a cut above the 19-year-olds that we saw most of the time.

But in terms of the interrogation, I don't know what they were after. They asked me, "What Iranians do you have contact with?" So I said, "Well, the guy at the dry cleaners, the baker, Ayatollah Montazeri, this minister, that minister" Basically I gave them everybody I could think of. I figured if I gave them three hundred names and let them sort out if there was anybody there. But I couldn't see any rhyme or reason to what they were doing.

Q: *Did you feel that you were part of the Iranian power struggle?*

LIMBERT: The awakening came gradually, but I did get an inkling of it in a couple of ways. At one point, I



what the U.S. was doing or the U.S. embassy was doing. They wanted to know, "What Iranians did you know?" And I knew three thousand Iranians so I started reciting my list of three thousand Iranians, until they realized that was a dead end.



But the other piece was, sometime in late February, early March, the people in the next cell stole a transistor radio from the guards and smuggled it to me. So I was able to listen to Radio Tehran broadcasts. Until that time we were cut off from news, except what bits and pieces I could pick up. It was the first time I learned, for example, that the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan. I hadn't know that had happened. Then the students were holding media sessions.

They would hold a press conference, and they would call it "a press conference with revelations" and they would publish a series of embassy documents. They were going through embassy documents and there were a lot of them. And they were hunting for Iranians they didn't like. Not royalists. They were after nationalists, secularists, liberals, people who had been part of their own coalition and selectively releasing documents about them. And they were holding press conferences and presumably they had enough allies in the system that they had access to radio and TV. And their targets, as I said, were not former royal officials or Americans, but people associated with the old National Front, people associated with the social democratic movement, people they called "the liberals." I think they shared Ronald Reagan's view of "the liberals." And they would go through the embassy files, they would find a mention of one of these people, they would find a meeting with one of these people and use that fact to launch a campaign against their former coalition partners.

In other words, I sometimes compare what was going on at that point to a chess game but it was more like a three-dimensional chess game. A three-dimensional chess game that became a contact sport....

"People came in at two in the morning and dragged us out, lined us up against a wall and pretended they were going to shoot us"

We were in groups but we weren't supposed to talk to each other, not that we had much to talk about. But we might be four in an area, six in an area but we were not supposed to talk to each other. Then sometime around January they put a group of us in this basement of one of the buildings, a large open room and they set up cubicles there. It was called the "Mushroom Inn." Although, again, we weren't supposed to talk to each other we could see each other and eventually I ended up playing chess with one of the other hostages. It was, for me, anyway, a source of reassurance that other people were there.

Q: Were your keepers sort of keeping an eye on each other?

LIMBERT: I think so. I think they had to worry about their own rogue elements. For example, as near as I could tell, this was pretty much a seat-of-the-pants operation but, for example, if they got near us most of the time they did not come armed because they didn't want one of us trying to take their weapon away. Occasionally there would be words between one of us and one of them and generally they would move that guard around, try to keep him out of contact because we were in close quarters for a long time. Politically, one of the things that we tried to do and I tried to do was sow a few seeds of distrust, to drop hints, when I picked up something from some source like the radio or somewhere else, I might just drop a hint that I knew something that I wasn't supposed to know, 'cause I wanted them to think that I was getting it from one of their own people....



At one point people came in at two in the morning and dragged us out, lined us up against a wall and pretended they were going to shoot us. I guess that doesn't fall into the same category.

Q: Well, no, but I mean, what was behind that?

LIMBERT: Never knew. We never figured it out. They came in and dragged us out of our places,

lined us up, started chambering rounds and said, "Okay, go back." Never figured it out. I've often asked myself what it was.

One of the things I guess every prisoner has learned since Biblical times is that there is no reason or rationality to what happens to you. You are in the hands of an irrational system and the sooner you adapt to that the better. So you don't ask questions like, "Why are they doing this or what's the reasoning behind it?" They're doing it because they can do it, I suppose....

Q: Did you ever feel the United States had let you down?

LIMBERT: Not really. I don't think I ever thought that. I think the Iranians would have liked us to think that but you could see how difficult this was going to be, when there's no government to talk to, when power had been left to the mobs in the street. What are you going to do? What alternatives do they have? So I never felt that. And then there were occasionally, between the lines of letters or something we might see, hints of how much concern there was back here.

Q: Were you able to communicate with the others? Were there sort of topics of conversation, without moving your lips, talking to your comrades?

LIMBERT: Very difficult. We had notes, we had ways of passing notes back and forth. We had tap codes with each other but the subject matter, because our outside contacts were so limited, was "How

six colleagues who escaped with help from the Canadians [made famous in the movie *Argo*]. I was able to spread that around. People who knew about the rescue mission spread that around. People who knew that the Shah had died spread that around. That kind of thing...



We were moved out of Tehran after April. What happened was this. We knew things were coming to a crisis of some kind. You could read that almost in the tone of the demonstrations in front of the embassy and there was kind of a growing hysteria in these demonstrations....These were almost daily events. The tempo of them picked up in April 1980. I didn't know it, but this was the period when relations were broken, officially and there was a sense of a growing crisis. And so you had a much more strident and shrill tone of the demonstrations. You could almost tell the difference between

sort of the large-scale, religious-based demonstrations and the much more shrill and strident and smaller leftist demonstrations that were going on outside. The latter had an almost hysterical quality about them....

The problem was, the functioning government, such as it was, had distanced itself from this event. They said, "Look, we don't have anything to do with this. We're as appalled by this event as you are." The problem was, they had no power to do anything. So there was this facade or pretense of correct relations. For example, our three people at the Foreign Ministry were using a Foreign Ministry telex to communicate with the State Department.

And it was useful, I guess, for us to maintain this fiction for a number of months, in the hope that the so-called government, whatever government there was, could take some action. And that was the whole basis of the aborted UN mission that went to Tehran in February-March of '80. And at one point it looked like we were going to be turned over to "the government." And that deal fell apart at the last moment....

Q: What about living conditions or food?

LIMBERT: Again, one of the things they taught us in this training course was "Whatever it is, eat it. You will survive." I hadn't been in the Army but I'm told if you had been in the Army it would have been good training for the food. It wasn't very good but it kept us alive. I think what happened was that the Chargé d'affaires' cook, a Pakistani, stayed on for a while and he did some cooking for us. He did the best he could with whatever was available.

Q: Did you get any feeling for looting of the embassy? Were people showing up with clothing or watches or what have you from embassy quarters?

LIMBERT: As a matter of fact, they did. One day while we were still in this large communal area, some fellow walked in wearing our security officer's jacket or overcoat. These kids didn't have a lot of money, so this was a chance for them to get some nice clothes. So he was wearing this jacket and the security officer said, "Hey, that's my jacket, that's my jacket." So when he came near me, I said, "It's too bad, isn't it?" He said, "Why?" "All your prayers are all your fasts are invalid, now, because you have taken stolen goods and you have taken them without the consent of the owner. And as I understand things, that means that everything else that you do is invalid." Dig at them a little bit. But, yeah, they did do that. They took jewelry, they took watches. I'm sure that's been redistributed.

I did lose a few things. I had a very nice collection of Iranian music on tape, in those days it was reel to reel tape, that I had made over many years and I had taped things from the radio, from archives. Some of it was quite rare. And I remember at one point being in the basement of the embassy and I was close to the wall and I could hear some of my music being played. Those bastards, they stole my music!

Q: What did they do after the abortive rescue attempt?

LIMBERT: They came in, they told us, pack up, you're moving. Of course we had been moved around a lot, usually from room to room or building to building, but now they said, "No, no, this is a long move. So prepare for that." And they put us in vans and cars, around sundown, and scattered us around the country. Talk about things being stolen — Col. Holland said later that one of his worst experiences was being blindfolded, having his hands tied and being taken around the country in his own car. "The bastards stole my car and then used it to move me around the country!" But anyway, we were in a van. I ended up in Esfahan, which was about three hundred kilometers south of Tehran.

"I know how you must feel as a prisoner. After all, I'm in the second grade"

Physically, [conditions] were probably a little bit better, in the sense we were in somebody's private house that these guys had confiscated, but the difficulty there was the isolation. I had very little contact with anyone else. I was in solitary there the whole time. And the fact psychologically that the farther away we were from Tehran, there was absolutely no chance of our being released....There were a lot of books around. That was basically the activity, reading, and then they showed up with some music tapes at one point. They even let me watch a little bit of the 1980 Olympics.

Q: Did you get any feel that something was happening, anything?

LIMBERT: No, that was the hard part. The only thing I found out, and this was shortly after we got to Esfahan, was about the rescue mission. I did learn about that. I stole a newspaper and there was a sketchy account of it. I knew about the rescue mission but that was about it. There wasn't much else. They weren't letting anything slip. Oh, and the other thing I found out, in July, was that the Shah had died....It did remove the pretext for us being there....



I think the biggest change, after we got back in August happened once the Iran-Iraq War started in September. That was, I think that was a tremendous shock to the Iranians. Up until then I think they had been kind of playacting at revolution and now all of a sudden things got much more serious. A very bloody war and the Iranians took some serious losses at the beginning....

Q: Were you getting letters?

LIMBERT: I was. It's hard to know what you don't get, but I estimate, of the letters from my family or friends, I would get one out of twenty. And of the letters that I wrote, maybe one out of ten would get through. But that was something.... You didn't really know the depth of what had happened, what was going on back here. The worst part of it, if you got a letter it might be from your family, it might be from some fourth grader in Illinois who was writing a letter as part of some class project. Now, that's all very nice but given a choice you'd much rather have the letter from your family but that displaces the letter from your family, it's not necessarily a good thing. Somebody wrote me, though, I forget, it was some kid wrote a letter, "I know how you must feel as a prisoner. After all, I'm in the second grade."

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