



Long Live the Red, White and Blue!

Story and photos by MSgt Tom Bartlett, USMC (Ret)

Because the Iranian militants couldn't read Spanish, Sgt James M. Lopez got away with posting a patriotic slogan on his cell wall while he was being held as a hostage in Tehran.

President Ronald Reagan welcomed the former hostages back to the United States during ceremonies on the White House lawn in January 1981. The president singled out Marine Sergeant James M. Lopez, who had written on his Iranian cell wall, "Viva La Roja, Blanca Y Azul!"

"Now the Iranians couldn't read Spanish," President Reagan said, "and so they permitted the sign to remain. They may not understand what it means in Iran, but we do, Sgt Lopez, and you've filled our hearts with pride."

Translation? "Long live the red, white and blue!"

Many of the former hostages gave their captives digs, and some suffered as the result of their defiance. Sgt John D. McKeel Jr., in true Marine fashion, gave only his name, rank, social security num-

ber and date of birth. The Iranians wanted "secret information."

They kicked out one of McKeel's teeth. They got a tooth, but no information.

Heroes? The hostages don't consider themselves "special."

"I never felt I deserved this," remarked Sgt William Gallegos, referring to the hostages' welcome home. "And I still don't. There are many men who have endured much more."

"I know it's impossible," admitted Sgt Lopez, "but I'd like to get back to leading a normal life. Your arm gets tired from waving after a while."

The Marines were noticeably embarrassed by the welcome home they received. Heroes? Not in their minds, although it is possible that some will be decorated for bravery and the heroic acts they performed during their 14 months as hostages.

Lopez was on duty at the consulate when Iranian militants stormed the compound on Nov. 4, 1979. For almost three hours he prevented the invaders from entering, despite having been ordered not to fire his rifle.

"At one point, the students tried to break into the consulate through one of the windows, but [Lopez] beat them back," said Mark Lijek, a consular official.

When the militants regrouped, Lopez guided 14 Americans and 46 Iranians who were in the consulate, upstairs to the second floor. He divided them into small groups, and then eased them out of the compound through a side door.

Five Americans, including Lijek, made their way to the Canadian Embassy, where they were hidden. Another American managed to sneak into the Canadian Embassy, and all were smuggled back to the U.S.

Lopez continued sending small groups out of the compound, and finally it was his turn. He had smashed all of the official visa stamps, removed the stripes from his dress blue trousers and made it to a nearby side street, but that was the end of his journey.

He was captured.

During the 14 months of his captivity, Lopez said he was "kept in some really bad-hole places, like closets." He had been beaten several times.

But he denies being a hero. He and the other former hostages became a symbol of the entire nation being held in bondage;

The March 1981 MSG School graduating class stood in formation before entering the base theater at Quantico, Va., where they would hear a speech by LtGen Richard E. Carey and meet with the Marines who had returned from Iran.



The former hostages attended an MSG School graduation ceremony at Quantico, Va., which was covered by the major TV networks and many newspapers.



with their release came the venting of pent-up emotions and a spontaneous outpouring of patriotism.

The yellow ribbon became the banner alongside the red, white and blue.

Who are these former hostages, the Marines?

Sgt William A. Gallegos was born on Sept. 12, 1958, in Pueblo, Colo. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in July 1977 and graduated from recruit training at MCRD, San Diego, Calif. He is a 3051 (general warehouseman) who served with the 3d Force Support Service Group on Okinawa prior to applying for the Marine Security Guard (MSG) Program at Quantico, Va. Following graduation from the MSG School in July 1979, he was assigned to Company B, MSG Battalion, American Embassy, Tehran, Iran. He joined the unit in Tehran on Aug. 6, 1979.

Sgt Kevin J. Hermening was born on July 14, 1959, in Milwaukee, Wis. Enlisting in the Marine Corps Reserve in November 1976, he received recruit training at MCRD, San Diego, Calif., and was assigned as a 3061 (subsistence supplyman) with Marine Aircraft Group 36 at Marine Corps Air Station, Futenma, Okinawa, Japan. He attended the MSG School and was assigned to the American Embassy in Tehran, Iran, on Aug. 6, 1979.

Hermening's mother, Barbara Jean Timm, traveled to Tehran to visit him during his captivity. Asked about his mother's visit, the Marine said:

"Well, of course, I was very glad to see her. And I must say that [her visit occurred] just at the time we moved out of the chancellery building and were dispersed around the country. And as far as my own experiences, my treatment had not changed at all" (as the result of his mother's visit).

Upon his return to the States, Hermening told his family that they could take down the Christmas tree they had kept decorated. He also told his mother that he could hardly wait to eat some of her barbecued pork chops.

The youngest of the Marine hostages, Hermening was surprised to find a Marine Honor Guard awaiting his arrival at the Milwaukee airport. Returning the salute of the senior Marine, Hermening, wearing dress blues, briskly inspected the formation.

Sgt Steven W. Kirtley was born on Oct. 19, 1958, in Little Rock, Ark. He enlisted in the Marine Corps on June 17, 1977, and went active on June 30. Graduating from recruit training at San Diego, he became an 0151 (admin clerk) and an 0121 (service record books clerk) with

Schools Battalion at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Headquarters Bn, Twentynine Palms, Calif., before applying for the MSG School. Following graduation, he was assigned to Tehran on Aug. 6, 1979.

Sgt Paul E. Lewis was born on July 12, 1957, in Danville, Ill. Enlisting in the Marine Corps on Feb. 14, 1976, he graduated from recruit training at San Diego and was assigned as an 0331 (machine gunner) with the 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

He completed the Marine Security Guard School in October 1978 as the class honorman, and was assigned to the MSG Bn, American Embassy, Budapest, where he served until being assigned to Tehran on Nov. 3, 1979.

Although his enlistment expired in January, he was retained on active duty "at the convenience of the government."

Lewis was something of a celebrity before enlisting in the Marine Corps. A football star and "prom king" at Homer High School, he was taken hostage the day following his assignment to Tehran.

Upon his return to the United States, Lewis quietly moved through the streets of Danville to reach his home and spend time with his family. But the townspeople wanted to express their "welcome." More than 3,000, including Governor James

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with their release came the venting of pent-up emotions and a spontaneous outpouring of patriotism.

Thompson, provided the Marine with a parade.

From the reviewing stand, Sgt Lewis could only say, "It's very good to be home."

Sgt Lopez was born on May 21, 1958, in Globe, Ariz. He enlisted in the Marine Corps and was called to active duty on April 29, 1977. Graduating from recruit training at San Diego, he was assigned to the U.S. Army Military Police School, Fort McClellan, Ala., for training as a 5831 corrections man (military police).

He was assigned to Headquarters Squadron at the Marine Corps Air Station,

persed around the country. And it was done in such a helter-skelter style that many of us were crammed into small cars, and the lodgings were last-minute affairs so that conditions we were living in were, even for the standards before ... well, they were below that."

Sgt John D. McKeel Jr., was born on June 26, 1953, in Dallas, Texas. He served two years with the Army, attaining the rank of sergeant. He enlisted in the Marine Corps on Feb. 18, 1977, and graduated from recruit training at San Diego, Calif. His assignment took him to Marine

upper left-hand corner of the envelope, as his return address, he wrote: "Hostage, Tehran, Iran."

During a press conference at the United States Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., McKeel said: "I don't know how the rumors got out about some of us hostages supposed to be suffering from some mental condition, but I feel from the people I've been talking to since my stay here at West Point that we're all right. And as soon as they let us get home, especially the Marines, so we can get back to chasing women, everything will be perfect. We are all right, physically and mentally."

On the commercial airline flight from Washington, D.C., to Dallas, Texas, McKeel was preparing for a nap. Then the captain of the aircraft announced, "Ladies and gentlemen. We are honored to have with us ..."

Flight attendants served small chocolate cakes decorated with American flags. They broke out champagne. Passengers crowded around, toasting the Marine, who sipped beer.

Landing at Dallas, he kissed a pretty flight attendant and went quietly off to his parents' house.

Staff Sergeant Michael E. Moeller, the highest ranking of the former Marine hostages, was also the oldest. Born on Feb. 18, 1951, in Loup City, Neb., he enlisted in the Marine Corps in November 1970 and went on active duty in March 1971. Graduating from recruit training at San Diego, he was transferred to Vietnam to serve as a rifleman with the 3dMarDiv.

Participating in Operations Freedom Torch and Song Thang 6-72, he was awarded the National Defense Service Medal and the Vietnam Service Medal with star.

Returning stateside, Moeller joined the 1stMarDiv and was assigned as an instructor/troop leader with the Infantry Training Unit at Camp Pendleton. Re-assigned as a platoon sergeant, he joined the Communications Electronics School at Twentynine Palms, Calif., as a troop handler.

In early 1977, Moeller attended MSG School, and in July 1977, he was assigned to the American Embassy in Karachi, Pakistan, serving there until June 1979, when he was reassigned to Tehran.

His enlistment expired, and like Sgt Paul Lewis, Moeller was retained at the "convenience of the government."

Selected for promotion to gunnery sergeant while a captive, SSgt Moeller was described by the other former hostages as acting "cool as ice."

When he arrived at Wiesbaden, Moeller took advantage of a long bank of telephones and called his wife, Ann, in Virginia.



Former hostages Sgt Rodney V. Sickmann and Sgt Gregory A. Persinger talked with Sgt Vicki L. Gaglia during a reception for recent graduates of the MSG School.

El Toro, Calif., and then attended the MSG School, graduating in October 1979. His tour in Iran began on Oct. 6, 1979.

During his captivity, he was kept in solitary confinement. At night, he could feel centipedes crawling across his face. In the morning, "We would wake up and practically break the ice off the water so we could wash or drink."

Asked to describe his captivity, Lopez recalled what Mark Twain had written about being tarred and feathered. "If it wasn't for the honor, I'd rather do without!"

Following the return of the former hostages to the United States and their reunion with families and loved ones, Jesse Lopez, father of the Marine, confided that James was his old self, still cracking jokes.

What kind? "Unprintable!" his father grinned.

In reply to a reporter's question, the Marine replied, "Were we subjected to torture? No, Sir. I think what you're referring to is the fact that we were dis-

Barracks, Naval Ammunition Depot, McAlester, Okla., and later, Headquarters Battery, 11th Marines, at Camp Pendleton as an 0847 (artillery meteorological man).

McKeel attended the MSG School and graduated in October 1979. He was sent to Tehran on Oct. 12, 1979.

After being taken captive, he was told by the militants that his mother was dead, "and if you want to go to the funeral, tell us what you know," they said.

He gave his name, rank, social security number and date of birth. They kicked out his tooth.

When the former hostages arrived at Wiesbaden, Germany, Sgt McKeel called home to Balch Springs, Texas. His mother, Wynona, answered the phone.

"Hello," she said. And for a long moment, she heard only the crackle of the long distance line. "I thought you were dead," her son said. "They told me you were dead."

During his captivity, McKeel wrote: "I have been here so long I've gotten used to this and it doesn't bother me at all." On the

The telephone rang, and his 5-year-old daughter, Amy, answered.

"Hello. Is your mommy home?" the Marine asked.

"Yes," Amy replied, and gently hung up the phone ...

Sgt Gregory A. Persinger was born on Christmas Day, 1957, in Wilmington, Del. Enlisting in the Marine Corps in June 1976, he attended recruit training at San Diego, Calif.

Assigned duties as an 0341 (mortarman), he served with the 3dMarDiv on Okinawa, and with Force Troops at the Marine Corps Base, Twentynine Palms, Calif., before requesting assignment to MSG School.

Persinger reported to Tehran on Aug. 6, 1979, along with Gallegos, Hermening and Kirtley.

Sgt Rodney V. Sickmann was born on July 26, 1957, in St. Louis, Mo., and enlisted in the Marine Corps in May 1975. He began his active duty on Aug. 26, 1976, and attended recruit training at San Diego.

A rifleman, he served with the Third Marine Division on Okinawa, and with the Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, N.C., before applying for MSG School. Upon graduation, he was assigned to Tehran, reporting there on Oct. 6, 1979.

In one of his letters home, Sickmann wrote: "Hopefully, some way, we'll see through this mess. What an experience. Ha! Ha!"

Upon his return to the United States, he told his family that he "only went outside about 25 times in the past year," and that "mail and packages from home were received sporadically."

After the welcoming home ceremonies in Washington, D.C., Sickmann flew on to St. Louis where he was greeted by a group

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of screaming teenagers. "I love you," he shouted, shaking hands along the route. He was presented a replica of the St. Louis Gateway Arch.

Captives for 14 months, some of the Marines talked about an escape plan they had been working on. They had hidden razor blades and pins, and mixed a strong detergent with kerosene.

According to Sgt McKeel, six of the Marines planned to make their break on Feb. 12, if they hadn't been released by that time.

"When the Iranian guards weren't looking, we took whatever we could

[items which might be used as weapons] and hid them," McKeel said.

They had hopes of reaching the Turkish border.

Asked if the plan had a chance of succeeding, McKeel admitted that the chances were "slim" and "none."

"I think I could have gotten out of my area of confinement, but I don't think I could have gotten out of the country of Iran," he said. "I would have been shoeless, moneyless and unable to speak the local language."

Most of the Marines retained their military bearing, but, on occasion, they gave way to youthful exuberance. When the aircraft from Tehran landed at the Houari Boumedienne Airport in Algiers, the former hostages were divided into two groups aboard the C-9A Nightingale hospital planes. "A" to "K" were to board one aircraft; the remainder would fly in the other.

Some of the Marines sprinted for the waiting planes, with the winner raising his arms overhead, shouting "God bless America."

Colonel J.L. Cooper, commanding officer of the MSG Bn, met the Marines at Wiesbaden, Germany. "Our initial meeting was a very emotional time," the colonel said. "I don't recall all that was said, but I assure you, upon welcoming them, I did not instruct them to march right down to get haircuts and shaves!



BGen G.L. Bartlett, USMC (Ret), then-Executive Director of the MCA, presented bound volumes of *Leatherneck* and the *Marine Corps Gazette* to Sgt John D. McKeel and the rest of the Marine hostages as Col J.L. Cooper, MSG Battalion CO, looked on. The magazines covered Marine Corps events during the 14 months the MSG Marines were held in captivity.

Nancy Reagan, the first lady, entered. She shook a few hands, smiled and exclaimed, "I can't stand this!" She then hugged and kissed the former captives.

"I recall that Sgt Lopez apologized to me for his appearance. He said, 'If I had a chance, I'd have cleaned up.'"

"And you know? Two hours after landing at Wiesbaden, the Marines were clean-shaven, they had haircuts, and they were all wearing Marine Security Guard T-shirts!"

"I was told by more than one of the former hostages that our nine young men never ceased to be Marines. That's a fine compliment."

"In fact, I was told by one elderly gentleman that if it hadn't been for the Marine in his cell, who insisted that he eat and exercise during those 444 days and nights, that the man didn't think he would have survived the captivity."

During the White House reception, the hostages stood in the Blue Room as Nancy Reagan, the first lady, entered. She shook a few hands, smiled and exclaimed, "I can't stand this!" She then hugged and kissed the former captives.

Later, as a White House aide called their names, each of the former hostages stepped forward and received a rosewood box, engraved with the president's signature, and containing an American flag.

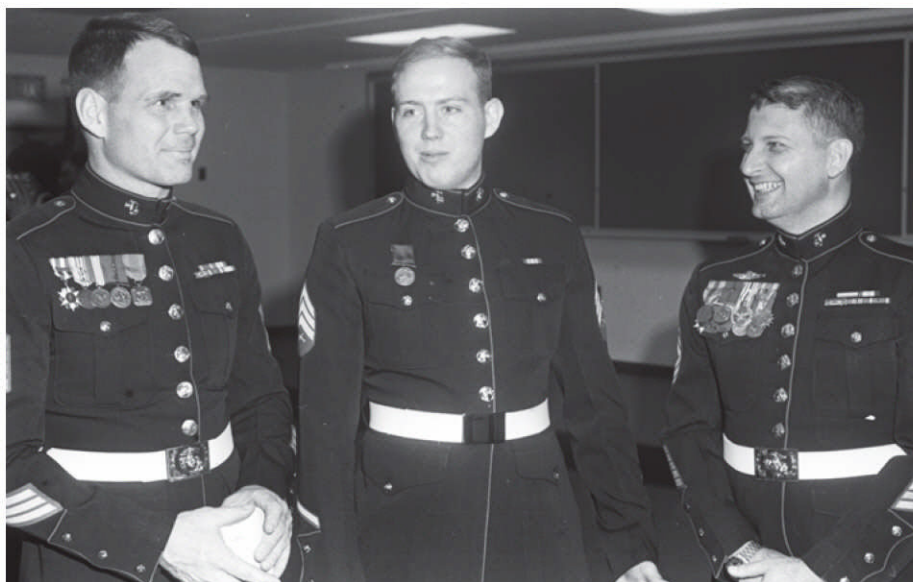
There were 52 former hostages returned to the States. Nine were active-duty Marines; but two more had ties to the Corps. One had split service and another was a Marine reservist.

William Earl Belk was serving at the embassy in Tehran as a communications specialist.

A 20-year veteran of the Air Force and Marine Corps, it was he who was blindfolded and photographed while being shoved and taunted by the Iranian militants following their takeover. The photograph was repeatedly published until it became the symbol of the crisis.

William J. Daugherty, a civilian embassy employee, was a Marine reservist who was selected for promotion to major during his captivity. "We aren't heroes," he said. "The real heroes have been our families ..."

"Some of the statements that I made to my family were misquoted," Sgt Lopez said. "Every little piece of information that came out [of Iran] was made to look like more than it was."



Sgt George A. Persinger, center, a former hostage, met with two of his MSG instructors, 1st Sgt Terry Taylor and GySgt Charles Constance.

"The statement I made that it was so cold that I had to break the ice to get a drink of water was a joke. It wasn't quite that cold. We were treated bad," he continued, "but I think our treatment is overblown and exaggerated. I think it's important that we maintain our integrity, otherwise, we're no better than Iran."

"The Iranians didn't know what they were doing," he said. "We were afraid they were going to come in and execute us and then find out they weren't supposed to do it."



He also referred to the proposed escape plan. "We were going to get it over, taking down as many as we could, making it expensive for them."

As for being a hero, he said, "It's embarrassing. We were doing our job."

During their stay in the Washington, D.C., area, the Marines met with General Robert H. Barrow, Commandant of the Marine Corps, who welcomed them and told them he was pleased with their conduct.

"Based on preliminary official reports, I can only conclude that the discipline, leadership and professionalism of you Marines can only be characterized as 'outstanding,'" the Commandant said.

"I have nothing but confidence that

each of you performed as we might expect Marines would perform. I have even heard reports of praise from fellow hostages that you assisted those who were in need and that you contributed to upholding their morale."

The former hostages were unaware of the attempted rescue plan that was aborted after three of the helicopters suffered mechanical failures in Iran. One of the helicopters collided with a transport loaded with fuel, resulting in the death of eight Americans, including three Marines.

For members of the Corps, the return of the nine former Marine hostages was cause for celebration. But it was also a time to remember those who sacrificed themselves on the all-volunteer rescue attempt in Iran.

The Air Force personnel were: Capt Richard L. Bakke, Capt Harold Lewis, Capt Lynn Davis McIntosh, Capt Charles McMillan and TSgt Joel Mayo. The Marines were: SSgt Dewey L. Johnson, Sgt John D. Harvey and Cpl George N. Holmes Jr.

Family members of all eight who perished in the rescue attempt attended the White House ceremonies and received the thanks of the returned hostages.

Diane Johnson, the widow of Marine SSgt Dewey Johnson, said during the ceremonies, "I don't know. I really thought I ought to be here."

Her husband, she continued, had carried out his duty, and she felt that she too "had a duty, to be present for the hostages' official welcome home. They all said they were very, very thankful," Mrs. Johnson remarked.

Yellow ribbons continued to flutter. There's a new-found pride in American communities. 🇺🇸

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