

A bus with the former Iranian hostages and their families aboard prepares to leave Andrews Air Force Base, Md., bound for Washington, D.C., in January 1981 following the release of the hostages.



ONE OF 52

Marine Sgt Rocky Sickmann,
Held Hostage in Iran, Recalls 444 Days
in Captivity



COURTESY OF SOLDIERS MEMORIAL MILITARY MUSEUM



COURTESY OF ROCKY SICKMANN

A POW bracelet, pictured to the left, bearing the name of Marine Sgt Rocky Sickmann, pictured above, is on display at Soldiers Memorial Military Museum in St. Louis, Mo. Bracelets like this one were worn during the Iran Hostage Crisis to remember the 52 Americans who were held captive.



WHILE SICKMANN HAD BEEN UNABLE TO SEE THE WORLD AROUND HIM DURING THOSE LONG, ARDUOUS MONTHS, THE EYES OF THE WORLD HAD BEEN ON HIM.

By Sara W. Bock

The distinct rumble of a jet engine on Jan. 20, 1981 was the first indication to Marine Sergeant Rodney V. “Rocky” Sickmann that something might be different about this particular movement within Iran.

For the past 444 days, he’d learned to rely on his sense of hearing to gather information.

The thick, white cloth that had been forced over his eyes whenever he was escorted from the small room he shared

with fellow Marine Sgt William “Billy” Gallegos and American businessman Jerry Plotkin prevented him from visually surveying his surroundings. But while Sickmann had been unable to see the world around him during those long, arduous months, the eyes of the world had been on him. Appearing in newspapers around the globe, riveting photographs of American hostages, blindfolded with their hands bound, offered a tiny glimpse of what life was like for the 52 Americans who were inside the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979, when it was seized by protestors.



Above: Iranian students protest American involvement in Iran near the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran, Nov. 6, 1979, where staffers were being held hostage after the embassy was seized two days prior.



Above: Prior to his assignment to the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, Sickmann, pictured here in 1977 at Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Japan, served with 3rd Marine Division.



Former Iranian hostages and their families disembark upon their arrival at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., in January 1981. The hostages had been reunited with either their spouses, if married, or their parents, if unmarried, at United States Military Academy West Point in New York prior to their arrival at Andrews, where the rest of their family members waited anxiously to greet them.

zealous student protestors, dreaming of an Iran eradicated of Western influence and backed by Iran's newly empowered religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, blatantly violated international law and stormed the sprawling 27-acre embassy compound.

The timing of the hostages' release—on the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration as President of the United States, just minutes after his inaugural address—was an intentional message to his predecessor, President Jimmy Carter, who had worked tirelessly, but to no avail, to secure their freedom. The Iranian people deeply resented Carter for his support of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the authoritarian monarch who fled Iran in January 1979.

After the shah was permitted to enter the U.S. to undergo cancer treatments in October 1979, the Iranians' hatred grew. Khomeini demanded that the American government return the shah to Iran so he could be put on trial, and when the U.S. refused, the seizure of the embassy was a brazen act of retaliation.

For 444 days, Sickmann wondered if he'd ever make it home to the small town of Krakow, Mo., where his parents, four siblings and girlfriend Jill were waiting anxiously for his safe return.

"This is something that you've prayed for, you've cried for, you've hoped for the opportunity," said Sickmann of his release, adding that aside from Gallegos and Plotkin, he hadn't seen or heard about

any of the other hostages since they were captured more than a year earlier. Their captors had withheld information about what was going on both inside and outside the walls of the embassy. Sickmann didn't even know if the others were still in Iran, or if they'd also been held in the embassy, or if they were even still alive. He also was unaware that the 14 people who had been among the 66 original hostages were released on Nov. 19 and 20, 1979, making Sickmann one of 52 Americans who endured the entirety of what history has termed "the Iran Hostage Crisis."

But as joyful as that moment of realization should have been, after more than 14 months of "mind games" and subjection to mock firing squads, Russian roulette and physical abuse, Sickmann didn't really feel anything at all. The spitting and now-familiar chants of "Death to America" that he and the others endured as they were removed from the vehicles and allowed to board the aircraft did nothing to calm his anxiety.

"We're on the airplane, there are 52 hostages, but nobody's saying a word. Nobody's excited. You're free, but you're not excited. You're on that airplane in shock," recalled Sickmann. "Here you are, looking at people that you haven't seen for 444 days. You look bad, you smell bad and you're in shock. You have no idea what's going on."

The pilot accelerated down the runway before bringing the aircraft to an idle.

"We thought this was them wanting to screw with us one last time," said Sickmann. "But it wasn't that. What they wanted to do was humiliate President Carter."

He still recalls the sights, sounds and emotions of that day—and every other day in captivity—in vivid detail more than 40 years after the embassy was taken. On Nov. 4, 2019, the 40th anniversary of the day they were first held captive, Sickmann and other hostages spent the day in Washington, D.C., as guests of the White House, where they were honored for their courage and sacrifice. The following day, Nov. 5, Sickmann shared his story with *Leatherneck*.

He describes the small detachment of Marines at the embassy, nearly all of whom were new to Tehran. Earlier in 1979, the embassy had been closed for a short period of time after it barely survived an attack by Iranian revolutionaries and subsequently had seen a significant turnover in its staffing. Sickmann and Gallegos were assigned as embassy security guards, as were Staff Sergeant Michael Moeller, Sergeants Kevin Hermening, Paul Lewis, James Lopez, Gregory Persinger, John McKeel, Ladell Maples, William Quarles and David

COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES



COURTESY OF ROCKY SICKMANN

Above: Sickmann, left, and fellow leathernecks assigned to 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment are pictured here during a "float" in the Pacific in 1977.

Right: A section of the "St. Louis in Service" exhibit at the Soldiers Memorial Military Museum in St. Louis, Mo., features Sickmann, and includes a banner that hung from the control tower at Lambert Airport to welcome him home, as well as excerpts of the diary he kept during his 444 days as a hostage. (Photo courtesy of Soldiers Memorial Military Museum)



"WE'RE ON THE AIRPLANE, THERE ARE 52 HOSTAGES, BUT NOBODY'S SAYING A WORD. NOBODY'S EXCITED. YOU'RE FREE, BUT YOU'RE NOT EXCITED. YOU'RE ON THAT AIRPLANE IN SHOCK," RECALLED SICKMANN.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

The 52 hostages arrive at Rhein-Main Air Base in Germany after their release in January 1981.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Sickmann is embraced by his sisters Judy and Debbie at Andrews AFB, Md., in January 1981.

Walker, and Corporals Steven Kirtley and Wesley Williams. Unbeknownst to the others, Maples, Quarles, Walker and Williams were freed later in November with the other African-American hostages; the remaining nine Marines endured more than a year of captivity.

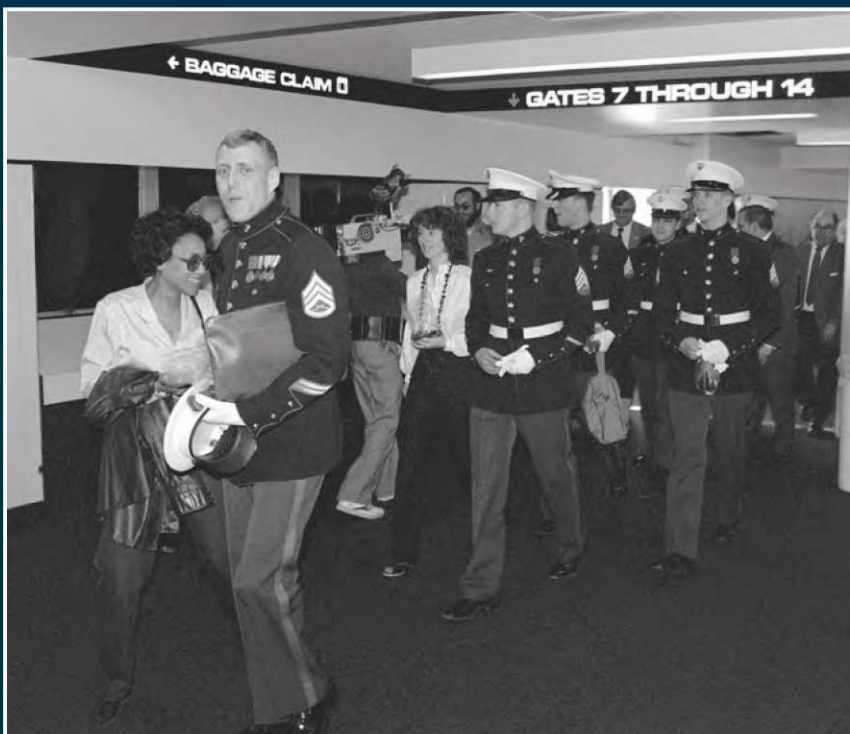
The morning of Nov. 4, 1979, Sickmann, who had arrived in Tehran just 29 days earlier, was walking through the embassy's motor pool gate when he heard a startling message crackle over his walkie-talkie: "Recall! Recall!"

Sickmann made it to the door of the main chancery building just as Gallegos was starting to close it. He looked over at the front gate and an eerie feeling washed over him as he noted the absence of the Iranian guards that normally provided security.

He slipped through the door just as hordes of Iranian students began to scale the embassy walls and force open the gates.

For three hours, wearing gas masks and armed with sawed-off shotguns, Sickmann and a handful of other Marines attempted to hold off the mob from inside the chancery. But with orders to stand

DURING THOSE LONG HOURS, DAYS, WEEKS, AND MONTHS, SICKMANN FOUND COMFORT IN CONJURING UP THE DEAREST MEMORIES OF HIS CHILDHOOD AND MENTALLY SAVORING HIS MOTHER'S HOME-COOKED MEALS.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

A group of the Marines who had been hostages arrive in New Orleans in March 1981 as guests of the city's Mardi Gras festivities organizers.

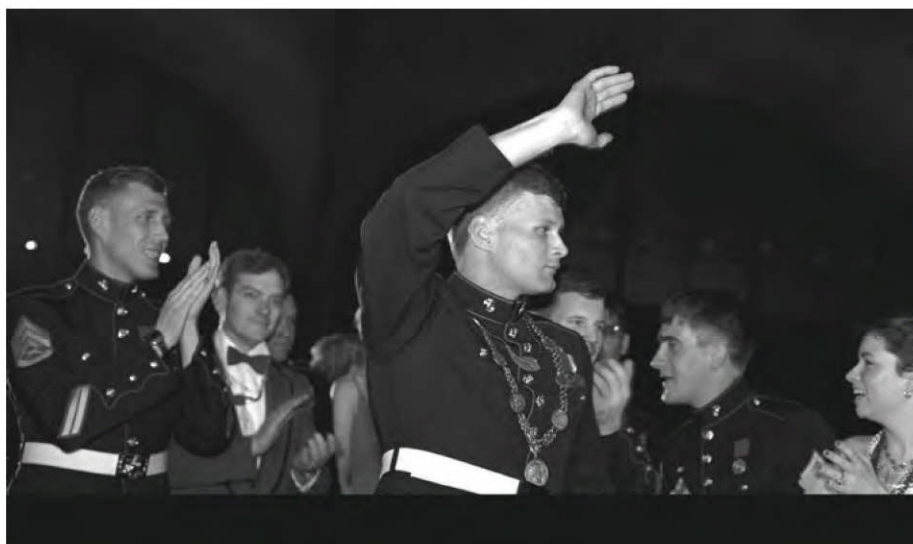
down—"We're going to get this solved with diplomacy and it's going to take 18 hours" was the message from Washington, said Sickmann—they never fired a shot. Meanwhile, State Department officials hurriedly worked to destroy classified documents inside the embassy in preparation for the inevitable.

"They finally broke through the bars of the window in the basement," recalled Sickmann. "And who did they bring first but Iranian women in black chadors, knowing the mindset that we as military would not shoot innocent women."

Sickmann recalls the adrenaline-pumping action as he and the other Marines who were with him cleared up to the very top of the embassy and barricaded themselves in. He'd been trained to guard the embassy, but never to protect it against the government of an entire country.

"What they started doing was bringing [American] people that hadn't made it into the chancery, and they put them on the other side of the door and put a pistol to their head, and they were begging for their life," said Sickmann.

During his first 30 days in captivity, Sickmann sat tied to a chair, allowed up



Sgt John D. McKeel Jr. waves to guests as he and other former hostages are introduced at the Bacchus Ball in New Orleans in March 1981. Sickmann is the Marine pictured on the far right.

COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES



LEATHERNECK PHOTO

The Marines who had been held hostage listen to remarks from BGen George Bartlett, USMC (Ret), then-executive director of the Marine Corps Association, before Col J.L. Cooper, MSG Bn CO, presents them with bound volumes of *Marine Corps Gazette* and *Leatherneck*. The magazines covered Marine Corps news during the months the MSG Marines were held in captivity.

only to occasionally use the restroom and eat. He describes the anguish, frustration and hatred that plagued his mind day in and day out.

"Your mind is just racing and it's going through so many different situations," said Sickmann. "On Nov. 4, 1979, 52 Americans were stripped of their freedom, their dignity and their pride."

A "See the World, Join the Marines" recruiting campaign with a photograph of a Marine standing in front of an American embassy first attracted young Sickmann to the Corps three years earlier in 1976. He viewed the Marines as a ticket out of small-town Missouri and a chance to follow in the footsteps of his father, who served in the Army during World War II. His parents, devout Catholics, taught him the "love of family, love of faith and love of country," he said.

The reality he was living as a hostage, however, was a far cry from what he had

envisioned when he graduated from MSG School after spending time in Asia with 3rd Marine Division and later completing a deployment and Mediterranean cruise with 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment.

"You tie someone to a chair for 30 days and deprive them of sleep and food, you put a gun to that person's head, it will screw with you," said Sickmann. "I just said, 'I'm not going to let these people get the best of me,' and that's what I strived for. I prayed a lot."

After the first month, he finally was allowed to take a shower and was moved into the room he shared with Gallegos and Plotkin, which contained little more than a thin foam mattress on the floor, providing a minimal amount of comfort.

"You have no privacy. That bar of soap becomes your toothpaste and your finger is your toothbrush and you make do with whatever you have," said Sickmann, who

added that the discipline, respect and code of conduct he learned in the Marine Corps helped him survive. He and Gallegos channeled their frustration into physical fitness, doing 600 sit-ups and 300 push-ups together daily.

The captors used physical force and mock firing squads, among other techniques, said Sickmann, to try to break the hostages so they would make derogatory statements against the United States. But it was the lack of freedom and autonomy that was perhaps the most dehumanizing of all.

"If you wanted to go to the restroom, you knocked on the door, put your piece of paper under the door to let the guard know," said Sickmann. "They had complete control of you for 444 days."

He spent his days dreaming up escape plans, but with locked doors, handcuffs, and no shoes aside from a pair of sandals that were three sizes too small, he never made an attempt, "but the thought was always there," he recalled.

During those long hours, days, weeks, and months, Sickmann found comfort in conjuring up the dearest memories of his childhood and mentally savoring his mother's home-cooked meals.

"That first Thanksgiving, I sat there knowing what my parents were doing in Krakow," said Sickmann. "We didn't have a lot of money, but [my parents] made it look like the Ritz-Carlton for every holiday. I just sat there and 'lived' that. I yearned for it and wanted so much to be back."

He describes the "wonderful place" he went to in his mind: sitting in the corner of the room eating his mother's pancakes, fried chicken and casseroles.

"I could remember the bubbling of the pancakes and how she would put the butter on them," said Sickmann, recalling the vivid details that mentally transported him to a place where he felt safe and free.

On April 25, 1980, Sickmann, Gallegos and Plotkin were handcuffed, blindfolded, photographed and transported to a new location. All of the hostages were dispersed throughout the country to spend the remainder of their captivity in various Iranian prisons and other facilities.

It wasn't until he was released in 1981 that Sickmann would understand the reason for the abrupt movement: a failed rescue attempt known as Operation Eagle Claw. It was an aborted mission that claimed the lives of eight servicemembers from an all-volunteer Joint Special Op-

erations Group—five airmen and three Marines—when a RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter collided midair with an EC-130 transport aircraft over Iran’s Great Salt Desert.

The relocations ensured that any future rescue attempts would prove futile.

He notes the significance of Operation Eagle Claw as the impetus for the creation of the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), as it brought attention to the inadequacies in the Defense Department’s reactionary capabilities in similar crises.

“The manpower and capabilities that we have now to what we had then [are] completely different,” said Sickmann, noting that the vertical takeoff and landing capabilities of the Marine Corps’ MV-22B Osprey would be ideal for a similar rescue mission.

After he and the other hostages received a hero’s welcome home to the United States with ceremonies on the White House lawn and fanfare as they arrived in their home towns, Sickmann left active duty, settled back in to life in Missouri and asked his girlfriend, Jill, to marry him.



The members of the USAF 8th Special Operations Squadron who died in a fatal accident during Operation Eagle Claw are pictured in the top row of this undated photo (encircled in red, left to right): Capt Richard L. Bakke, TSgt Joel C. Mayo, Capt Lynn D. McIntosh, Capt Harold L. Lewis, and Capt Charles T. McMillan II. Three Marines were also killed during the failed attempt to rescue the hostages in Tehran.



Sickmann delivers a keynote address to a crowd gathered in front of Soldiers Memorial Military Museum for the 36th annual St. Louis Regional Veterans Day Observance Ceremony, Nov. 9, 2019.

He soon learned that during those harrowing 444 days, his parents had spiritual and emotional support from Father Bob Kincl, a Catholic Navy chaplain he had formed a bond with at Camp Geiger, N.C., prior to his MSG assignment. Father Kincl traveled to Missouri to serve as a liaison for his parents during Sickmann’s captivity and the priest quickly became a special part of the Sickmann family’s life.

Kincl officiated Sickmann’s wedding ceremony in 1981 and at the wedding

ceremonies of both of his daughters decades later, as well as the funeral services for both of Sickmann’s parents when they passed away just months apart. Eight years ago, he performed a vow renewal ceremony for Sickmann and his wife at the Vatican. The chaplain also has taken the Sickmanns’ son on a trip to Israel and most recently spent Thanksgiving Day with the Sickmann family in 2019.

Sickmann has also maintained a close friendship with Gallegos and a number of the other hostages. It’s a bond that



Just months after returning home to St. Louis in 1981, Sickmann married his longtime girlfriend, Jill, who faithfully waited for his safe return during the entirety of his 444 days in captivity.

he says was vital to his reintegration following their release and return to the U.S. and continues to be an important part of the healing process after their shared traumatic experience.

“I’m telling you a story, it’s just a story to you, but Billy [Gallegos] remembers the smells, he remembers the sounds, just like I do,” said Sickmann.

After retiring from a sales career with Budweiser in 2016, Sickmann has ded-



COURTESY OF ROCKY SICKMANN

SICKMANN HAS ALSO MAINTAINED A CLOSE FRIENDSHIP WITH GALLEGOS AND A NUMBER OF THE OTHER HOSTAGES. IT'S A BOND THAT HE SAYS WAS VITAL TO HIS REINTEGRATION FOLLOWING THEIR RELEASE AND RETURN TO THE U.S.



COURTESY OF ROCKY SICKMANN

Above: From the left, Neal Katcef, Billy Gallegos, Rocky Sickmann, Ryan Luz and Ronny Jackson visit the White House on Nov. 4, 2019, the 40th anniversary of the day the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was seized. Katcef, Luz and Jackson are close friends of Sickmann and accompanied him and Gallegos during the trip to Washington, D.C.

Left: This recent photo of the Sickmann family includes Rocky and Jill, center, their three children, two sons-in-law and four grandchildren.

icated his time and efforts as a vice president with Folds of Honor, a national nonprofit that provides educational scholarships to spouses and children of America's fallen and disabled servicemembers. The opportunity allows him to leverage his business experience to help grow the organization's foundation, as well as serve as a liaison for its partnership with Anheuser-Busch.

But most of all, he says, his work with the nonprofit group offers him the opportunity to honor the lives of Captain Richard L. Bakke, USAF; Capt Harold L. Lewis, USAF; Capt Lynn D. McIntosh, USAF; Capt Charles T. McMillan II, USAF; Technical Sergeant Joel C. Mayo, USAF; Staff Sergeant Dewey L. Johnson, USMC; Sergeant John D. Harvey, USMC;

and Corporal George N. Holmes Jr., USMC, who in 1980 bravely volunteered for a risky rescue mission—meant to save him and 51 others—and never returned home.

He'll never be able to go a day without recalling the details of his 444 days as a hostage, but, he added, there's another thought that's always at the forefront of his mind.

"Every morning when I wake up, I don't forget about those eight individuals who paid the ultimate sacrifice to try to regain my freedom." 🇺🇸

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