



TOMMY GILLIGAN/PV



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

(Left) William "Bill" Gallegos, former U.S. Marine Corps guard, shakes hands with cadets along the cordon as he heads to Jefferson Library where panel discussions were held Jan. 21. The 30th anniversary of the Iranian hostage repatriation was observed Jan. 20-22 with 15 former captives and five members of the rescue team returning to West Point, the site of their original homecoming in January 1981. The entire Corps of Cadets formed a cordon along Thayer Walkway to salute and cheer their arrival as the group started their day's activities. (Above) Members of the Glee Club performed at the evening reunion dinner. The cadets performed several selections that their predecessors sang for the former hostages upon their arrival at West Point 30 years ago.

A complete Iranian Hostage Reunion photo album is available at:
http://www.flickr.com/photos/west_point/sets/72157625751090019/

THEN AND NOW West Point community honors former Iranian hostages, recreating celebration 30 years ago

By Mike Strasser
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Thirty years ago, the U.S. Military Academy served as a historic waypoint when the nation cheered the return of a group of American citizens taken hostage from the U.S. embassy in Iran.

The West Point community took part in that celebration on Jan. 25, 1981, welcoming home the 52 hostages who enjoyed a few days of respite with their families on the installation at the Thayer Hotel.

West Point welcomed them back Jan. 20-22, as 15 former hostages, five rescue personnel and family members returned for a reunion and to share their experiences with the Corps of Cadets and faculty.

Re-creating their convoy through Highland Falls into West Point, they were met by thousands of cheering cadets who lined Thayer Walkway, applauding and shaking hands with the returning guests of honor.

Brig. Gen. Timothy Trainor, dean of the academic board, said the reunion was particularly poignant for him, having been witness to the original homecoming.

"It's an especially personal welcome for me, because lost in the sea of cadets that lined that cordon when you came through 30 years ago was Cadet Trainor," he told the reunion participants. "And there's another Cadet Trainor here today, my daughter [Cory], who just experienced the cordon coming through this morning. So there's a personal thread for me also."

Trainor said the former hostages, participants in the ill-fated 1980 rescue mission that was derailed by an aircraft collision at a desert staging area, and family members all serve

as examples of extraordinary service to America.

"Your insight into the events that unfolded 30 years ago today are invaluable," Trainor, a Class of 1983 graduate, said. "Invaluable in the fact that you were on the front line confronting religious, ethnic and political extremism, and an ideology of which many Americans were unaware, or to which we were certainly unaccustomed to at the time. It's an ideology that does not go unnoticed today at a time when America is at war on many fronts in a time of volatile, uncertain conflicts."

Like Trainor, Col. Mike Meese, a Class of 1981 graduate, stood roadside three decades earlier to witness the arrival of the hostages to West Point. The former social sciences major, now head of the academy's social sciences department, recalled reading about the embassy takeover in the newspaper. That morning, his national security class's instructor was absent because the Army officer was recalled to the National Security Council in Washington, D.C., to assist the administration with the crisis.

Cheering the hostages through the gates at West Point and later sharing a meal with them was a momentous occasion, Meese said.

"They served with honor and the values that we are teaching cadets every day, ... and I learned a lot just from seeing the example of these 52 great Americans who came to West Point 30 years ago," he said.

The reunion attendees had another chance to relive history when they returned to the Cadet Mess Hall, an event that three decades earlier Trainor described as a joyous event for the 4,400-plus cadets. Another generation of cadets made the experience just as memorable the second time.

"It was truly exceptional to have the hostages back at West Point for the 30-year commemoration of their release from

terror and return to freedom," Firstie Tom Witkowski said. "I was overwhelmingly awestruck by the valor and resolve that each hostage and their families embodied to endure such a terrible situation. Eating lunch in the Mess Hall gave me a unique opportunity to meet these brave and courageous people who embraced unbelievable valor and strength. To me, they truly represent what it means to be an American."

L. Bruce Laingen, a Navy veteran of World War II, chuckled at the bottle of water in his hand, which bore, as most things at West Point do, the "Go Army, Beat Navy" slogan. Laingen, who served as the Iranian foreign ministry office's chargé d'affaires during the siege on the embassy, joined a panel discussion on Iranian-U.S. relations, with two fellow former captives—Barry Rosen, former press secretary, and former senior political officer Victor Tomseth—plus Wade Ishimoto, a member of the rescue team.

Other panels focused on the embassy takeover and crisis resolution, the hostage rescue mission and the 1972-79 Iranian revolutionary crisis.

The panels provided a wealth of insight, some levity and moments when tears simply couldn't be contained.

Paul Needham, an Air Force captain working in the embassy on temporary assignment, was in the security vault at the time of the takeover, destroying sensitive materials before surrendering. Standing twice before a firing squad—a scare tactic used by his captors, though none were shot—Needham said, he learned the value of inner strength, which steered his resolve through the 15-month ordeal. He found the America he returned to was much different from the one he left, he added.

"I left here in 1979 as a captain. People did not go to work in the Pentagon wearing their uniform; we were coming out of Vietnam and people were not proud to be Americans,"



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(Left) Reunion participants were honored before the Army-Navy Men's Basketball game Jan. 22 at Christl Arena. (Above) It was a joyous and memorable occasion 30 years ago when the Corps of Cadets shared a meal with the returning hostages. The current generation of cadets tried to match that hospitality when the former hostages returned to the Cadet Mess Hall Jan. 21. (Below) Firstie Nate Webster, of Uniontown, Pa., meets with L. Bruce Laingen, who served as the Iranian foreign ministry office's chargé d'affaires during the siege on the embassy. Laingen participated in faculty and cadet panel discussions Jan. 21 where the former hostages and rescue personnel shared their experiences and insight with an attentive audience on several subjects related to the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979-81.

Needham recalled. "I came back here and the streets were lined with people [waiting] to see us. I still get choked up. It was extremely emotional coming here to West Point."

It was supposed to be a yearlong volunteer assignment for retired Air Force Col. David Roeder, one of the more senior military officers captured. Roeder said he spent a lot of time in solitary confinement, but was able to communicate for a couple of months with fellow captive Bill Daugherty in the adjoining cell without getting caught by the guards. Daugherty said it became an exercise in the leadership of one.

"The leadership of one can be very difficult," he said. "This can be just as difficult as leading a platoon or company, because you're your own worst critic."

Daugherty said he lived by two standards: to protect classified information and to do nothing that would harm another hostage. He also practiced intelligence gathering.

"I wanted to find out as much as I could about these guys, why they were doing it. ... I tried to remember every single thing, every single face, every single conversation," Daugherty said.

Barbara Rosen, an elementary schoolteacher, wife, mother and homemaker, first heard of her husband's capture when she was awakened by

a phone call from her mother-in-law. She was quickly thrust into a situation she was never trained or prepared to handle.

"I had to figure out how to go about dealing with all the problems that were now placed before me," she said.

During the first few months of her husband's captivity, Barbara said, she spent a lot of time sleeping to pass the time. She later found solace in advocacy work and giving media interviews. Thirty years later, she still has a vivid memory of coming to West Point on the homecoming trip.

"The roads were totally lined with Americans; there was a dog with an American flag tied around its neck," she recalled. "Men and women who were former hippies protesting the Vietnam War for years were out there waving American flags."

She told the cadets attending the panel discussion that while she was seeing everything at the time, she wasn't able to truly feel it. Today, she said, she had a second chance.

"This morning, when all of you were out there welcoming us to West Point, ... when you re-enacted it for us today, those feelings were so strong it brought tears to my eyes," she said, "and it did so for many of the others being welcomed."



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