

## **Return of the Hostages from Iran**

January 25, 2016 was the 35th Anniversary of the return of American hostages from Iran after 444 days of imprisonment. They were flown back by way of Germany to Stewart Airport, Newburgh. At that time the airport was operated by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and was not used by scheduled airlines as it is today.

The country was elated at the hostages' release. In order to allow them to reconnect with their families without being overwhelmed by well-wishers, it was decided to limit access to the airport to the hostages' family members, a few public officials and selected military personnel, mostly from West Point.

Troop F was tasked with securing the airport. Under the command of Major Pete Gromacki, a detail was assembled on Sunday, January 25th. The detail was divided into two groups. One group, led by the Troop F Zone Two Commander, Lieutenant (later Superintendent) Jim McMahon, was responsible for securing the outer perimeter of the sprawling airport and for keeping the press corps corralled in an area well removed from the terminal. The second group, led by the Zone One Commander, Lieutenant Dan Scribner, was responsible for securing an inner perimeter consisting of the terminal building, parking area and tarmac and for re-screening and vetting everyone who had been permitted to pass through the outer perimeter.

As for the inner group, our orders were pretty simple. NO PRESS and no one, no matter how important they looked, allowed in unless their names were on the list. We were provided with a list of permitted attendees which was updated from time to time by our military liaisons. Most of the family members and other dignitaries arrived by bus and in a few cases our instructions also allowed for some busses to be parked on the tarmac once the visitors entered the terminal.

Our job at the terminal was probably a bit easier and more enjoyable than the outer perimeter group. The families arrived quite a bit before the planes did. As you would expect, the troopers were great.

I recall that many of the children hadn't seen snow before and some of the troops took them out so they could play in the snowbanks and showed them how to make snowmen.

There were a couple of inconsequential but memorable incidents:

A bus pulled up to the terminal and an Army bird colonel got out. He approached me and I saluted. Then he said, "Lieutenant, my party and I will be going into the terminal and the driver will be parking our bus on the tarmac." I checked my recently updated list and replied "Colonel, you and your party have just been added to the list and you're welcome to enter the terminal. I don't have any information about your bus being permitted on the tarmac, but I'll check right away. If I get clearance I'll personally see to it that it gets out there." The colonel, much to my surprise, said "Who the f\*\*\* do you think you are?" Before I could say anything, a voice behind me said "He thinks he's the officer in charge and he is. I would advise you to enter the terminal while you still can." I turned around and there was an Army Brigadier General standing behind me. He said "Carry on lieutenant.", I said "Yes, sir" and the colonel scurried into the terminal, a bit abashed in front of his entourage.

About an hour before the planes were scheduled to land, one of my sergeants came up to me and told me they had learned that the chief photographer from the local paper had struck some kind of deal with an airport manager and was hiding in a closet in the manager's office, ready to run over to the window and start snapping pictures as soon as the planes arrived. The photographer was well known to the troops and was a great guy. He was the kind of guy who, when he was getting ready to take photos at a serious accident, would walk over to the troopers at the scene who didn't have their Stetsons on and let them know he would shortly be taking pictures which might be on the front page tomorrow.

Nevertheless, our orders were pretty straightforward with regards to allowing the news media anywhere near the returning hostages. The sergeant asked me what they should do. I thought about it for a minute and said "Leave him there for now. If we throw him out now, he'll just come up with

another plan to get back in." About five minutes before the first plane landed, a trooper went up to the manager's office, opened the closet door and said "Mike, it's time to go." They drove him off to the remote press area with no time for him to come up with Plan B.

The last vignette I recall was when the first plane actually landed. There were no Jetways at Stewart in those days, just stairs which were rolled up to the plane. I was standing near the bottom of the stairs when one of the hostages, a Naval officer in uniform, came down. When he reached the bottom I saluted. He returned my salute and without missing a beat quipped "Remember me? 76 in a 55 on Route 17, headed for Grossingers?" Given that I was wearing the "bus driver's hat" (officers' uniform at that time) and given all that was happening, I was surprised that he even recognized I was a trooper, much less still had a sense of humor.

The hostages and their families were bussed off to the Thayer Hotel at West Point to decompress for a few days. On January 27th they were bussed back to the airport and flown out. The troopers provided a second, much smaller, security detail.

Attached are two photos of the second detail. In one of the photos, New York Governor Hugh Carey, followed by Major Gromacki, is shaking hands with Lieutenants McMahon and Scribner.





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After sending out the foregoing email message, I received several replies from retirees stating that the security detail for the event was one of the most memorable special assignments they participated in during their careers. Several added little snippets I had forgotten which, in turn, brought to mind one vignette which I had forgotten about completely.

As with the "cameraman in the closet caper", this one also involved photography.

After the troopers assigned to the airport terminal area had received their briefing and their post assignments, I took a walk around to ensure everyone was where they were supposed to be and understood what they were supposed to do. (Actually it would probably be more accurate to say that the purpose of my tour was to ensure I knew where they were and that I understood what they were supposed to do, As usual, the troopers already had a good handle on it.)

As I spoke with individual troopers it quickly became apparent that a significant portion of the detail had cameras with them. It was certainly understandable that the troops would like to have some personal memories of what promised to be an historic and patriotic event, but I didn't think Major Gromacki would be pleased - to say the least - if he looked around and saw his troopers snapping

away at the precise moment their attention should be directed towards the perimeter. And the major had never been shy about expressing his displeasure.

I suppose I could have approached the major for clarification on the issue, but I had a pretty good idea what his answer would be and we would then be saddled with a direct order which probably wouldn't leave much wiggle room. Enter Plan B.

Parked on the tarmac right next to the terminal entrance was a U. S. Army recreational vehicle which had been retrofitted as a communications van. The vehicle was manned by a Signal Corps sergeant who turned out to be a pretty good guy. He advised that he would be holding down the fort for the duration of the event.

"Sarge, is there any chance you could safeguard the troopers' personal cameras in your van?" "Sure."

So the word went out to the troopers that they were not to have personal cameras in their possession once the hostages arrived. They could either secure them in their vehicles or in the Commo Van, "You know, the one parked right next to the place where the hostages will be walking down the ramp when they arrive. Oh, by the way, the sergeant is a camera buff, so if you decide to leave your camera with him, make sure to take a minute to show him the features of your camera and how it works."

The last time I looked in the van there were at least two dozen cameras lined up on the table by the large rear window. I don't know for sure - at least officially - but I'm guessing the sergeant was a pretty busy guy once the planes landed.