

# Silent Hero

Corporal Steve Kirtley was one of 52 Americans who survived 444 days as a hostage in Iran. Today, Major Kirtley recalls his struggles, his perseverance, and his ultimate triumph.

Story by Barbara Honegger

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**H**onor. Courage. Commitment. These three words represent the core values of every Marine, and couldn't be better illustrated than by a mild-mannered information technology student at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif.

Major Steve Kirtley's direct gaze and steel jaw are those of a man who has faced destiny and knows he will again. He is one of 52 American heroes who braved 444 days of captivity in Iran, from Nov. 4, 1979, to Jan. 20, 1981.

teered for hazardous duty as a guard at the U.S. Embassy in Teheran.

From his post at the embassy and the window of his quarters across the street, Kirtley saw the demonstrations grow more intense.

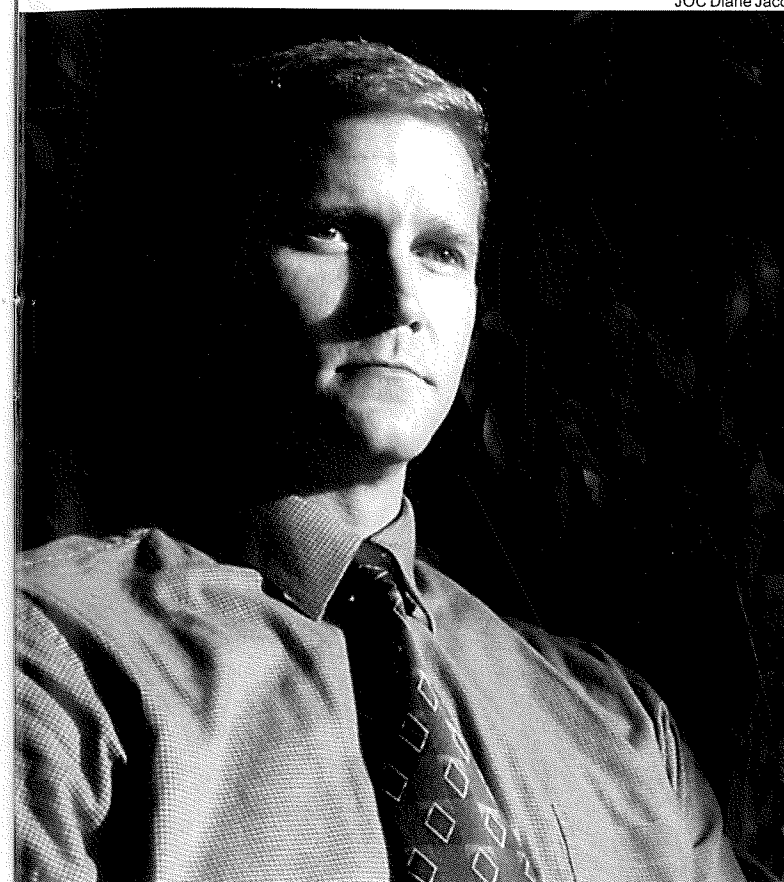
"Never in my life did I dream what was going to happen," he recalled. "I had been on duty the night before the takeover, so the other three guards and I were in the (living) compound across the street. We were awakened by a phone call and told to report back to duty, which meant there was an emergency. But there wasn't time. We looked out the window just as the students were climbing over the walls.

"We called the security post and told them we'd spotted men entering the building and asked what to do. The State Department said to lock the door and not let them in; but, if they knocked the door down, to surrender. Within minutes, about seven men and a half dozen teenagers broke down the door where we were on the eighth floor. When they came in, the four of us were standing shoulder to shoulder at attention."

Kirtley and the other Marine guards were then bound and blindfolded, and marched across the street to the embassy compound where they were held captive until being dispersed throughout the country following the failed hostage rescue attempt in April 1980.

"We were tied up for the next two months," he recalled. "Our shoes were taken away and we were forbidden to speak to one another. After a time, I and two others were taken in a bus to Isfahan where we were held for months. The two others got sick and were moved. I got sick, too, but I recovered and was kept there.

"Other hostages were then brought to where I was in Isfahan, and there were four of us when a van came to pick us up in July 1980. On the way back to Teheran, the van had an accident and I was taken to the 'holy city' of Qom, where we were held for about five days.



JOC Diane Jacobs

Major Steve Kirtley, held hostage in Iran for 444 days as a corporal, is now an information technology student at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif.

"We learned about the hostage rescue mission in September because the Iranians let one of our guys have a German magazine," Kirtley remembered with a smile. "They didn't know he was fluent in German, and there was a whole article in the magazine about it.

"Sometime in December, they came again and took us to a hotel with barred windows somewhere near Teheran. About a month later, a guard came and asked for volunteers to come to a room, one by one. When we did, we were told we were 'candidates' for release. The woman we'd called 'Screamin Mary,' the one who led the chants during the embassy takeover, did a videotaped interview with each of us, asking how we had been treated during our stay. I looked right into the camera and told the truth.

"After the taping we were taken to another room to be checked by the Red Crescent, Iran's equivalent of the Red Cross, and then back to the first big room, where all 52 pairs of shoes were laid on the floor. We were told to pick out our shoes. That's when we first knew we were going to go home.

"On Jan. 19, (1981), they came in all excited. Five of us went to breakfast expecting to be released. But lunch came, then dinner, and nothing happened.

"Finally, the next night a guard came in and said he could only take three of us. I let the others go first, and two of us were left behind. I started thinking maybe I wouldn't be let go.

"But he came back a few minutes later and put blindfolds on us. We were taken to a bus, where we sat for a while, and then to the airport through chanting, ranting mobs. One by one, they took us off the bus, stood us on the steps of the bus, and took off our blindfolds so we could see to walk to the plane. We had to walk through a corridor of screaming Iranians to get to the plane, which was Algerian Air, with Algerian diplomats, security personnel, and crew.

"When we were all in the plane, it just sat on the runway for about an hour. Finally -- we later learned just at the moment of the inauguration in Washington -- it took off. There's never been anything to compare with the feeling of that moment when we were released, except maybe the births of my three kids," Kirtley said.

Kirtley and the other hostages were then flown to Athens, from there to Algiers where they were split up onto two planes, and finally on to freedom in West Germany.

After a layover for medical checks and debriefing at the U.S. Air Force Hospital in Weisbaden, Kirtley flew home to Little Rock, Ark., where he was honored in a parade. Just after the parade, he met with Hillary and Bill Clinton, who had just stepped down as the governor after losing his first re-election bid.

"The Corps told me I had 30 days leave, and basically said I could do what I wanted," Kirtley recalled. "I thought about leaving active duty, but my brother George, a career Army man who had served four combat tours in Vietnam, talked me out of it, and I re-enlisted at the end of '81."

The Corps sent Kirtley to drill instructor duty in San Diego for two years before accepting him into the Marine Enlisted Commissioning Education Program at the University of Florida, where he trained in broadcast news. He received his commission in July 1987 as a second lieutenant and, over the next 10 years, served as a motor transport commander in Hawaii, Desert Shield/Desert Storm in Southwest Asia, and at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Ariz.

Kirtley's broadcast training turned out to be a bridge between what he had been doing and his current work as a student at Naval Postgraduate School.

Five years ago, he married Catherine Payne, a major in the Marine Corps Reserves, who recently reported for active duty at Quantico.

"We read about the (Iranian) students' recent invitation to us (52 hostages) to come back, and my wife thought we should go," he said. "If I didn't have kids, I might consider it." □

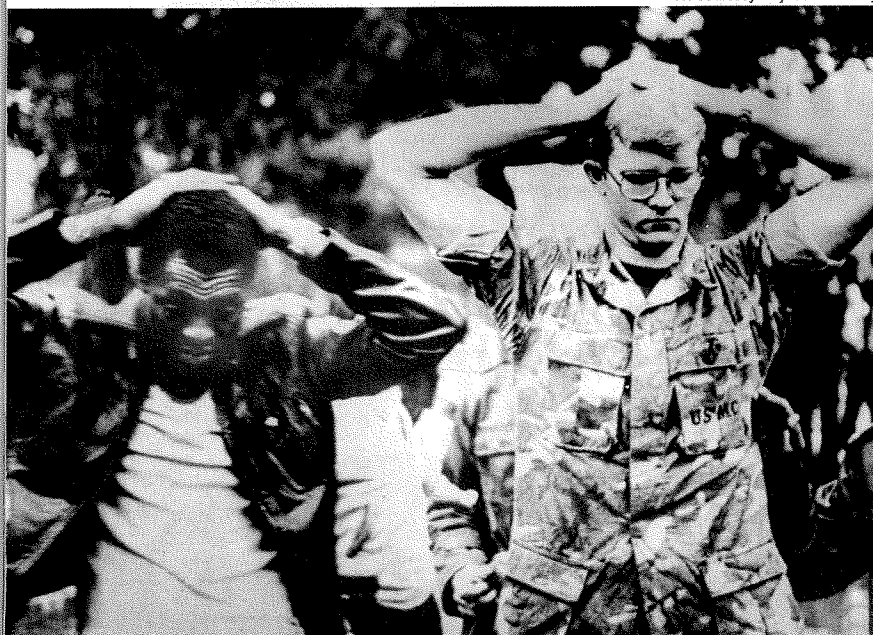


Photo courtesy Maj. Steve Kirtley

Corporal Steve Kirtley (right), a Marine Security Guard at the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, is taken hostage by Iranian students Nov. 4, 1979.

Kirtley decided to become one of the "few good men" the Marine Corps was looking for in 1977, earning his high school equivalency in the Corps and completing Marine Security Guard School. In July 1979, at age 20 and the rank of corporal, after Ayatollah Khomeini's fundamentalist revolution had overthrown the Shah and mobs were shouting "Death to America" in the streets, Kirtley volun-