

CAPITAL COMMENT

MY DOG WAS AN IRANIAN HOSTAGE

How Tom Battled for Survival, and Finally Made It Home

It has been almost a year since the 52 Americans held captive by Iranian militants in Tehran were released, but the last hostage just got home. It was my dog Tom.

Tom is a small black dog of mixed origin. When I was assigned to the US Embassy in Tehran in July 1979, I left my wife and son Drew behind in Alexandria and took Tom with me. He roamed the large embassy compound and, with an Iranian street dog who became the mascot of the embassy's Marines, was a regular at tennis matches and social events and in the swimming pool.

Near the end of October 1979 I left Tehran to make a speech in New York. The Shah had just been admitted to a New York hospital, and daily demonstrations were taking place in Tehran. Then the mobs seized the embassy, taking as hostages the embassy personnel. Tom was in the compound, and he also was a prisoner.

None of the hostages saw Tom after the morning of the takeover. I sometimes was able to speak by phone to chargé d'affaires Bruce Laingen, then under house arrest at the Iranian Foreign Ministry. He asked about Tom, but I had no news. It was encouraging to see a picture in *Time* of Tom's Iranian dog friend, but we heard that the revolutionary guards were shooting stray dogs on sight. Drew was optimistic: "Tom always makes friends. Something will work out."

We later learned that the militants had tied him to a fence near the embassy's back gate. Iranians are not dog-lovers; even before the takeover Tom had to dodge those who threw stones at "unclean" dogs. Tom had been known to bark loudly at noisy and undisciplined strangers on the embassy grounds; no doubt he did not endear himself to the militants. While tied up, Tom was given neither food nor water—he was simply left to die.

Help came from an unexpected source: a German woman married to an Iranian and living in Tehran. While visiting a hostage in the compound, the woman spotted Tom. She gave him some water and left. A few days later she returned and saw that Tom was still



Tom the Dog and Drew Sens Safe in Alexandria After an Ordeal in Tehran

not being given food or water. She approached a militant for permission to take the dog home. The militant waved her away, saying she could do as she wished. She took Tom home, washed and fed him, and turned him over to her children.

Thus, Tom was one of the first of those captured to be released—although he was the last to leave Iran.

There were problems at his new home. The woman's strict Islamic mother-in-law disapproved of Tom and was vocal in her objections. The German stood her ground, determined to protect the dog she had saved until the hostage issue was settled. Unfortunately, the political situation deteriorated, and by September 1980 Tom's German mistress was forced to leave Iran. It would be impossible to take Tom with her; he would be left to the streets.

But Tom is an ingratiating dog, and by the time the German woman had to leave, he had won the heart of the Muslim mother-in-law. The old woman agreed to keep Tom until the crisis was over.

Thus, Tom was saved from the streets of Tehran, where he probably would have been shot on

sight. He slept under the old woman's bed, and though there was not much meat in the stores, both of them grew fatter.

By November 1980 the old woman herself was forced to flee. She prepared to join her children in Germany, and she resolved to bring Tom with her.

The old woman tried to leave Iran by bus, traveling through Turkey to Germany. But when she went to buy a bus ticket for Tom, they laughed at her and said there was no room on the bus for dogs. The old woman turned back and decided to try to stay in Iran a little longer.

By this time we had been informed of Tom's plight, through the indirect network that had sprung up. The wife of the embassy cook, now safely in Italy, had put us in touch with the German woman who had first rescued Tom and who now wrote that her mother-in-law might have to abandon the dog. To me, this was unthinkable. I suggested a tragic alternative: put Tom to sleep.

The old woman was to leave Iran shortly after Christmas. One day shortly before her departure, a large car with diplomatic plates pulled up in front of her house.

The driver announced he had come to fetch the black American dog. He was from the Swiss Embassy. Once more, Tom had been saved.

The Swiss granted Tom informal diplomatic asylum as the result of a phone call I had placed several months before. At the urging of my wife, I had concluded a business call to a contact at the Swiss Embassy in Washington by asking whether he knew anyone in the Swiss Embassy in Tehran willing to care for my dog. My contact replied that he would look into it, and at the last moment the Swiss came through.

Shortly after the released American hostages arrived at the US Air Force hospital in Wiesbaden on January 20, 1981, Bruce Laingen relayed a message to me: Tom was now a member of the household of the Swiss ambassador to Iran.

I heard nothing more for several months, and the joy of seeing the hostages returned to the US was dampened only by the thought of the dog who had been left behind.

Finally, in June 1981, we heard from the Swiss ambassador, who had been trying to arrange Tom's passage home. His young children had grown to love Tom—and the ambassador's other dog even tolerated him. Tom always makes friends.

In August Swissair resumed flights out of Tehran. Tom was shipped out—one story had it he flew in the first-class cabin with a Swiss diplomat from Tehran to Zurich. He was placed aboard another plane and landed in New York.

And what bounded out of the shipping crate was a quite different dog from the one we had last seen: an enormously fat, hairy creature that looked more like a large black sheep than our Tom. But we remembered him and he remembered us.

Tom's on a diet now, and he has learned manners—he no longer climbs on our furniture or sleeps on the beds. And now that he's home in Alexandria, the hostage crisis for us is finally over.

—A.D. SENS

Mr. Sens is a US Foreign Service officer.