



Don Sharer today. "I told them, 'If you're going to shoot me, I'm gonna be standing up.'... I wanted to go out on my terms."  
 Photo by Lynae Sowinski

On the morning of November 4, 1979, Navy Captain Don Sharer sat down at a desk in the U.S. Embassy in Iran to type a letter to his superiors in Washington, D.C. Sharer had been in Tehran for nearly eight months, working at the embassy as a Navy attaché and F-14 Tomcat fighter jet specialist, and he'd seen enough to know that it was time to leave. After several weeks of watching anti-American protests outside the embassy walls grow in size and intensity, Sharer had woken up that morning with the contents of the letter he planned to write clear in his mind: "They don't need an F-14 specialist here. Unless otherwise directed, I am coming home."

A professional soldier and officer with almost 20 years of experience as a U.S. Navy flyer who'd served two nine-month tours in Vietnam, Sharer was no stranger to duress. But the situation in Tehran had become so chaotic in the wake of the recent Islamic Revolution that Sharer's main job—working to forge alliances within the Iranian Navy—had been rendered moot when his main contact there had fled the country only days before. Hundreds of Americans living and working in Iran had left, and the embassy staff had been reduced from more than 1,000 to about 60. That morning, the Iranian mob outside the embassy gates was even larger and more frenzied than usual, chanting, "Marg bar Amrika!" (Death to America!). It was time for even the most hardened soldier to go. Sharer began to type.

And then all hell broke loose. "They're coming in! They're coming over the wall!" Sharer heard the shouts and froze, his hands suspended above the keys. He heard glass breaking and suddenly embassy workers were racing past him, up the stairs to the building's uppermost, "secure" floor.

"C'mon," yelled Alan Golacinski, the embassy's head security officer. Sharer was already on the move, abandoning his letter in mid-sentence. Within moments, the entire staff was barricaded on the top floor. As Ann Swift, deputy head of the embassy's political section, got on the phone to Washington, staffers began furiously shredding documents. Every military staff member and CIA operative was armed.



Somehow, Sharer got ahold of an M3 submachine gun. As it became clear that the Iranian police were not coming to their rescue, the Marines wanted to take the fight to the Iranians, to hold their ground. Golacinski talked them down. "I'm gonna go talk to them, see if I can reason with them," he said.

Standing near a window overlooking the embassy courtyard that was overrun with chanting, shouting protesters, Sharer watched in disbelief as, moments later, Golacinski was led outside by shotgun-wielding Iranians, blindfolded and bound. "Holy shit," Sharer thought, "this is really happening. What are we gonna do?"

Just then Ann Swift hung up the phone. "I have orders from Washington," she said quietly. "We're going to lay down our weapons and walk out with our heads held high."

#### A flag from the president

"Were you scared for your life?" I asked Sharer when we met at his small but comfortable home in Bedford, Indiana, where he's lived since 2002 with his wife, Judy.

"Scared?" he said, as though my question didn't quite make sense. "Not scared. Concerned. That's a fighter pilot's mentality. When you're captured, your mission becomes to survive. And to survive you have to go with the flow, don't resist." Let the enemy take you where they're going to take you, Sharer said. It could be to a firing squad, "but until you're up against the brick wall and they pull the trigger, you're still alive."

Sitting at his dining room table, Sharer, now 71, white haired and a bit stooped, hardly looks the part of a fearless, tough-as-nails soldier. He more closely resembles the retired grandfather and great-grandfather he is today.

Clockwise from top left: In this November 9, 1979 photo, one of the hostages, blindfolded and with his hands bound, is displayed to the crowd outside the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by the Iranian hostage takers. (AP Photo/File) An armed student patrols outside of the embassy, walking past a "Death To Carter" sign on the wall. (AP Photo) American hostages being paraded by their militant Iranian captors on the first day of occupation of the embassy. (Copyright Bettmann/Corbis / AP Images) Eight of the 52 American hostages are shown in a newspaper clipping, with Don Sharer (bottom row, second from right), Ann Swift (bottom row, far right), and Alan Golacinski (top row, second from left). (AP Photo)

## Don Sharer of Bedford, an American Hero

By **Jeremy Shere**



The Ben Affleck movie *Argo* tells the story of six Americans who were spirited out of Iran during the hostage crisis of 1979. Bedford resident Don Sharer was one of the 52 Americans who were not so fortunate, remaining a hostage for 444 days, from November 1979 to January 1981. **This is his story.**

His living room, filled with comfortable furniture and pictures of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, displays little evidence of his more than 30 years as a captain and commander in the U.S. Navy. The only reminder of the time Sharer spent in captivity in Iran is a square wooden box containing a small American flag and official note from President Ronald Reagan commending Sharer for his fortitude and conduct befitting a U.S. Naval officer during the ordeal.

“Was there ever a point that you thought you weren’t going to make it?” I asked, probing for an emotional response.

“I never thought about it like that,” Sharer replied. “I took things day by day, moment by moment. That’s how a soldier is supposed to act in that situation.”

#### An IU business grad

A military career was not always in the cards for Sharer. After graduating from Plainfield High School in Plainfield, Indiana, in 1959, where he’d starred on the varsity football team, Sharer went to IU Bloomington to study business, with an eye toward working for his uncle’s insurance agency after graduation.

By 1961, though, during Sharer’s junior year, America’s growing involvement in the world’s military hot spots fostered rumors of an imminent draft. Instead of waiting and taking his chances, Sharer enrolled in the Navy Reserve on the theory that doing so gave him a better chance of not being drafted into the Army. After graduating in 1963, he was sent to Seattle to run an officer’s club at a naval air station and applied to naval flight school to become a fighter pilot. Due to his relatively weak eyesight (it turned out he needed glasses), Sharer trained as a “back-seater” working radar intercept.

By the mid-1970s, after two tours flying combat missions in Vietnam, Sharer had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander and was part of the first crew to test fly the new F-14 Tomcat. As one of the

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military’s top experts on the plane, Sharer was sent to Iran in 1979 to work as a liaison between Washington and the Iranian Navy, which had purchased several dozen F-14s a few years before the Islamic Revolution had swept Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from power and ushered in the reign of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Although the new regime was militantly anti-American, the United States had not yet formally severed diplomatic ties with Iran, and in the chaotic aftermath of the revolution the Jimmy Carter administration wanted someone with F-14 expertise to find out what the Iranians planned to do with the planes. Don Sharer was their man.

While working closely with Iranian revolutionaries who did little to hide their “pure hatred” of Americans, Sharer also did odd jobs like selling cars left behind by American workers and families who’d fled after the revolution. Every day after work, hanging out at the apartment block that housed embassy personnel, Sharer and his compatriots watched the anti-American protests steadily build, the streets right outside the embassy packed with students shouting in Farsi, “Death to America!”

In late October, Sharer got a hint that the situation might become even worse when his main contact in the Iranian Navy, General Morteza Saffari, showed up one day at the embassy and begged Sharer to help him get out of the country. The next day, Saffari fled to the United States. “It seemed like if an Iranian general didn’t feel safe enough to stick around, it was time for me to pack my bags, too,” Sharer recalled.

He never got the chance. On November 4, after the American embassy was overrun and occupied by a gang calling themselves the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam’s Line, Sharer and the other captives were bound, blindfolded, and taken outside to be paraded in front of the chanting mob. In the ensuing chaos, Sharer and a few other hostages were taken to the ambassador’s residence, where their blindfolds were temporarily

removed. For the first time, Sharer was face to face with one of his captors, a young, bearded student pointing a shotgun in his face.

“I kept pushing it away and he kept swinging it back up at me,” Sharer said. “I didn’t think he was going to shoot me, and I didn’t like having a gun in my face.” It would not be the last time he dared to defy his captors.

For the next few weeks, Sharer and two other captives were held in an apartment in the northern section of Tehran. Near the end of November they were once again blindfolded and taken back to the embassy, where Sharer and 15 other Americans were imprisoned in makeshift “cells” made from liquor cabinets. Then the interrogations began.

“They wanted to know what I was doing in Iran, if I was a spy,” Sharer said. “I told them I was there to help the Iranian people. I wouldn’t even tell them my name. When they asked, I told them it was Mickey Mouse.” Not amused, the Iranians tied Sharer’s hands behind his back with a rope and slung it over a rafter, stringing him up. “They probably left me there for ten minutes, but it felt like forty years,” Sharer recalled, wincing at the memory. Still, he refused to give up his name or any other personal information—especially the identities of his wife and two children back home in Virginia—even when his captors stuck a gun in his ear and threatened to blow his head off. Frustrated, the Iranians locked him away in solitary confinement for a week. Still, Sharer held tough.

“I basically went into survival mode and leaned on my training,” he said. “We were taught to go inside our head, to look down the road and think about other things, to escape mentally.” Sharer thought about his favorite jogging routes in Virginia. He took strength from the example of one of his heroes, John McCain, who’d been a prisoner of war in Vietnam for five and a half years. He stayed busy by exercising, working up to hundreds of pushups and situps at a stretch.

As the weeks turned into months, Sharer took out his frustrations on his captors—one of whom, he claims, was current Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (some former hostages and the CIA dispute the claim). Teaming up with a fellow hostage, U.S. Army attaché Charles Scott, who spoke fluent Farsi, Sharer became the “bad prisoner” to Scott’s “good prisoner.” After Sharer would deliberately anger the guards by cursing at them or throwing his cup at them, Scott would

swoop in to calm things down and earn the guards’ trust. “It was our way of trying to get information from them,” Sharer said. “Sometimes they’d be so riled up that they’d let something slip about what was going on in the outside world, and we’d feast on that information for days.”

Even during a horrifying incident—dramatically depicted in the movie *Argo*—where Sharer and several other prisoners were rounded up in the middle of the night, blindfolded, and shoved against a wall as their captors ordered the hostages to their knees to be executed by gunshot, Sharer refused to comply. “I told them, ‘If you’re going to shoot me, I’m gonna be standing up.’ My goal was just total defiance. I thought that was the end, and I wanted to go out on my terms.”

The low point for Sharer came on July 4, 1980, when he and a few fellow prisoners were being held in Tabriz, a city in Iran’s northwest region. Having hoped in vain that they might be released and back home in time for Independence Day, the hostages were demoralized, sitting in a small exercise yard, their heads bowed under armed guard. And then Sharer started singing.

“The Star Spangled Banner,’ ‘America the Beautiful,’ all sorts of patriotic songs,” he recalled. “The other guys joined in, and it bucked us up. I just wanted to do something to remind us of who we were, of the fact that despite our situation we were still Americans, and that we enjoyed the kind of freedom and liberty that the Iranians would never have.”

From that moment on, Sharer said, he never again allowed himself to lose hope. Throughout the next six months, until the hostages were released on January 20, 1981, he stuck to his strategy of uncompromising defiance. On the plane ride out of Iran, where Sharia law forbids drinking alcohol, Sharer and his fellow former prisoners enjoyed one last act of defiance by sharing a bottle of brandy that one of the stewardesses found in the hold.

“We were laughing, hugging, everybody was talking, it was a real scene,” Sharer recalled. “The main feeling for me was, we made it. It was sort of hard to believe, but we’d actually made it through, and now we were going home.”

#### A hero’s welcome

Back in the States, the former hostages were treated to a hero’s welcome, including a ticker-tape parade along the Canyon of Heroes in New York City. They met newly elected



Sharer on the cover of *Commonwealth* magazine. (right) A letter proclaiming January 29, 1981, as “A Day of Thanksgiving to Honor Our Safely Returned Hostages,” signed by President Reagan. *Courtesy photos*

President Ronald Reagan at the White House, which for Sharer was “one of the neater moments of my life, next to meeting [former IU basketball coach] Bobby Knight.” But for the most part Sharer eschewed the spotlight, instead quietly returning to his home and family in Norfolk, Virginia, and, after only a few weeks, resuming his Navy career, rising to the rank of commander. He retired from active duty in 1993.

Today, Sharer lives a quiet life in Bedford. He keeps in touch with a few of his fellow former hostages—in particular Charles Scott—and gives occasional talks about his experience to local school groups and Rotary clubs, and he has been interviewed on Fox News. But although Sharer is strongly opinionated about politics and current affairs, especially concerning the Middle East, he keeps his opinions largely to himself, instead focusing on staying in touch with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren (who live in Texas and Virginia).

Of course, having been one of the 52 Iran hostages is still an important, even central part of Sharer’s life. He went to see *Argo* the week it came out. His review: “It was pretty good.”

Upstairs, in Sharer’s home office, he keeps a file labeled “Hero Shit.” He pulled out an issue of *Commonwealth*, *The Magazine of Virginia* from July 1981. On the cover, staring right at the camera, is Sharer at 40, in a flight suit, not six months removed from captivity. He’s young looking, slender, with a boyish face and soft eyes.

“Is it hard for you to look at this, to think and talk about what happened?” I asked.

He thought for a minute, then shrugged. “Not anymore,” he said. “What happened happened. It’s a part of history. It’s something people need to know.” ✖

Flag from President Ronald Reagan. Photo by Lynae Sowinski



Don Sharer (right) shaking hands with Reagan in 1981. Courtesy photo

