

He Recalls Captivity's Diet Of Fear

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His empathy is apparent each time the latest development in the Iranian hostage drama unfolds. The loneliness of captivity reverberates in Irwin Stovroff's voice each time he picks up an old photo or document, a reminder of his imprisonment 35 years ago.

Stovroff says he can identify with the trauma of living on a captive's diet of fear and rumors as he envisions the personal ordeals that the 50 Americans in Tehran must now be experiencing.

And although he admits no expertise in the field of psychiatry, his reflections as an American prisoner of war during World War II offer valuable insights into the present and future psyches of his captured countrymen.

A Greensboro resident and furniture salesman in Thomasville, Stovroff spent 13 months in a German "stalagluft" after he was shot down over France in 1944. He pulled out a rare photograph taken by a wingman of his B-24 as it plunged towards earth after being hit by anti-aircraft fire. Ironically, it was supposed to be his 35th, and last, combat mission.

Those subsequent months, he said, taught him much about the resiliency of the human spirit. He says the answer to the mental well-being of the hostages lies in their ability to adapt to the cruel situation.

When a person is held prisoner, he said, "Your mind vacillates from fear, to belief that it really isn't happening to you, to reliance on those who hold you captive that they will not harm you."

First comes the shock of being captured, he said. Then comes the "total, complete fear that you're in the hands of the enemy. I guess it's like being kidnapped."

"I counted everything, hours, days, seconds, the whole bit," the 55-year-old ex-bombardier recalled. He pulls out another remembrance, his pink-colored prison record with "Jude" followed by a question mark printed on it.

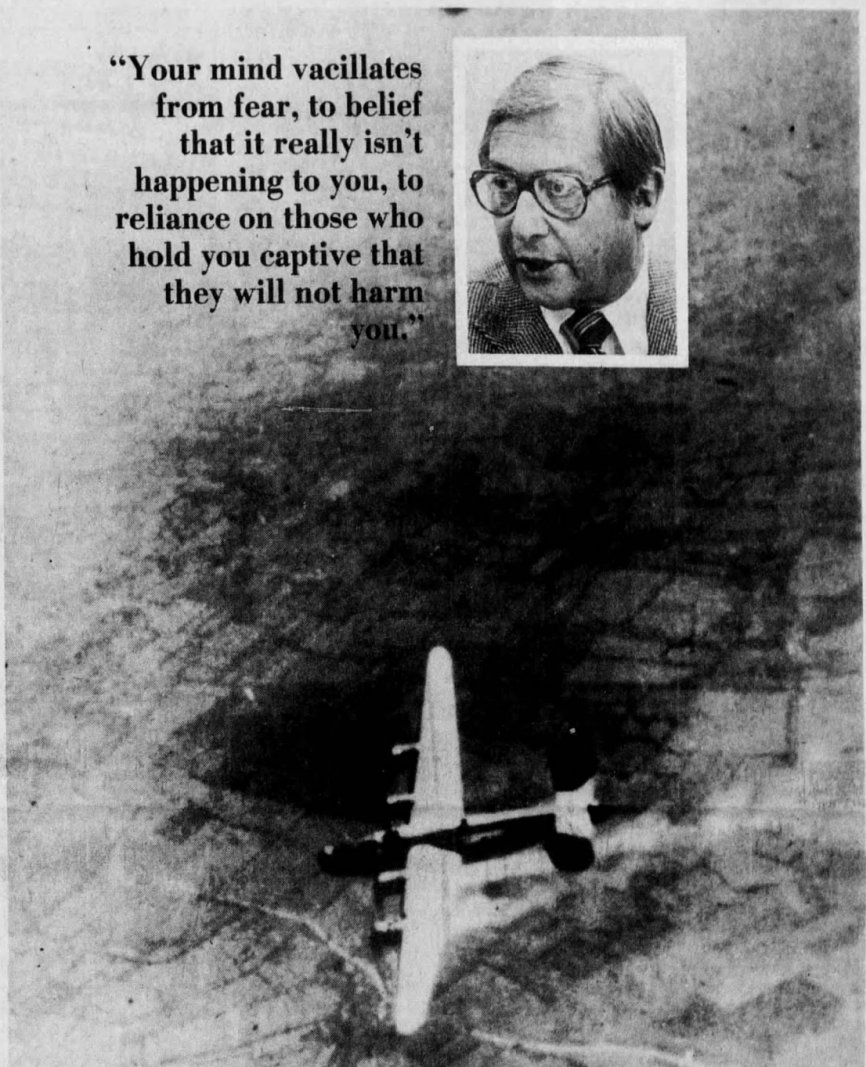
"They didn't know my background in the beginning," he said, "and for obvious reasons I tried to conceal that I was a Jew." The deception lasted seven months before he was sent to a special all-Jewish barracks where, Stovroff says, he experienced what those hostages in Iran who are held in solitary are probably feeling.

Another six months passed before the camp was liberated by Russians and Stovroff was sent to a repatriation camp in France. But he said that because his stomach had shrunk considerably it took him almost three years before he could eat a complete meal and keep it down.

Now, as the hostage situation drones on into its third month, Stovroff said that time may work to the captives' advantage because their Iranian guards are probably beginning to know their prisoners on a more personal basis, similar to what he experienced.

"I had a loss of security where I became dependent upon my captors. Being alone, living in daily fear, knowing that escape is impossible is probably a night-

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Stovroff, Inset, Reflects On Days As POW

Photo Shows His B-24 Bomber Being Downed Over France In 1944

mare for them," he said. "Now we here in America don't know what the hostages are being told or what's happening. But if they're being kept apart from each other, then I sense that when they are released they'll need a lot of help."

"If they have been held together, at least they can have that contact where one's mind probably won't go through as many funny stages, where you're trying to constantly think of something other than the constant threat of death."

Stovroff credits "Yankee ingenuity" for keeping him alive. "You'd be surprised what a lot of guys were able to do in their time there, besides just reading and keeping your body fit. I don't know, over in Iran, what opportunities the people have to keep themselves physi-

cally fit. The only thing we've seen is that they took somebody out into the compound and they led him around with his head wrapped up."

Although the outlook may seem dismal, Stovroff says he is optimistic about the hostages' eventual readjustment.

"I would say that when we get these people back from Iran, they'll probably have a hell of a time in readjusting — but I think they can do it."

Then he chuckles loudly, saying: "The greatest thing about my being here today is that fact that I made it. I'm a very fortunate man. A lot of guys weren't as lucky. But if I can make it, I'm sure that our hostages can. People are funny, but that's why they usually survive."

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