

Cover Story

'So wonderful to be home'; 'One long nightmare' finally over

By Debbie Howlett

ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE, Md. - The first thing Sharon Justus noticed about her husband was the smell of him - the sweet, stale aroma of the cigarettes he started smoking again while he was in hiding in Kuwait.

Tom Justus, who last saw his wife Sept. 7, when she fled Kuwait, was pale, 30 pounds lighter and sporting a scruffy gray beard. But he never looked better to his wife than when he walked into the Air Force base gymnasium 130 days after holing up in his suburban Kuwait City apartment.

"Oh, God," Sharon Justus cried as she threw her arms around him. "I never imagined this would be so wonderful."

Tom Justus, 50, of Wells, Nev., a construction supervisor for Washington, D.C.'s DeLeuw Cather who had worked in Kuwait for nine years, was at a loss for words. Before telling his story, he held his wife and fought back tears.

"The whole thing has been one long nightmare. Taking off from Baghdad is where it really came down that we would be coming home," he said.

Justus was among 152 U.S. citizens - the first large group to leave Iraq since Saddam Hussein announced six days ago all Western hostages would be freed - who arrived aboard a Pan Am jet at the sprawling Air Force base outside Washington, D.C., at 4:56 p.m. EST.

"When we touched down, everybody put up a big applause and a huge roar," Justus said. "We were finally home."

Greeting him with his wife was his boss, Ellis Walker. Five of his co-workers were aboard the flight, including Hugh Hardaway and Dwayne Corn. Their families were also on hand.

Ann Hardaway and Sharon Justus had their arms around each other as they waited for the vans to bring their husbands from the tarmac to the gym. It was too much for them to watch the reunion of Barbara and Dwayne Corn, even when he hugged her and let out a loud "Whoop-eee!"

"When the Iraqi Parliament passed Saddam Hussein's resolution to free us, then there was some celebrating. We hadn't believed it before because they lie like rugs," said Hugh Hardaway of North Carolina. "Now, I can't believe I'm back. It's so wonderful to be home."

Amid the chaos at the base gymnasium, Sharon Justus gave her husband the two small gifts she had in her purse: a Snickers bar and his gold Rolex watch she bought him when he quit smoking 18 months ago. Then Tom Justus, sipping a Coca Cola, dredged up the memories of his months in hiding - the Iraqi troops that knocked on the doors of the apartments weekly and the Kuwaitis and others who brought food and smuggled letters home.

On Thanksgiving Day, a Kuwaiti managed to bring the men holed up in Justus' apartment building a turkey and a \$140 case of beer.

And it was an Indian acquaintance who rented a van and drove several men in the apartment to the airport three days ago. They were stopped three times by Iraqi troops, but as soon as they said they were U.S. citizens they were allowed to pass.

"The reprisals for the Kuwaitis were horrible," Justus said. "If it hadn't been for the Kuwaitis we wouldn't have made it."

But the low point was not Thanksgiving, he said, it was Sept. 7 - the day his wife left.

Everyday in the three months since, Justus said he rose at 8 a.m. and did two hours of exercise and then listened to Voice of America. In the afternoons, he read. At 5 p.m., he would cook dinner, mostly rice and beans, with another man whose apartment he had moved into. "It was easier to have company than to be alone," he said.

They could not leave the building and could only move from apartment to apartment at night. He kept a calendar, crossing off the days as they passed and making notations about significant events.

Often, usually once a week, they shut off the lights and air conditioners as Iraqi soldiers walked door to door and knocked.

"You just pretended you weren't home and they left you alone," Justus said. "They only looted the empty apartments."

Justus also said a 15-year-old Iraqi soldier knocked on the door of an Indian family's house at dinner time to ask for a glass of water. They invited him in and fed him. He told the family that he was forced to go to Kuwait to fight, leaving his mother and a younger sibling behind. His father had been killed in the war with Iran.

Iraqi soldiers also sold their machine guns to Kuwaitis for their flowing white robes, intending to use the garb as a disguise while escaping. The weapons offered Kuwaiti resistance fighters better armament.

Another hostage reported there definitely was a Kuwaiti resistance movement and their were deadly conflicts on the street.

Justus said that the men in hiding rarely thought of trying to escape or of turning themselves in. "I'd rather be in my own control than in the hands of that madman," he said.

Justus has strong feelings about Saddam and the Kuwaitis.

"I owe those people a lot over there. ... and he has absolutely destroyed Kuwait: buildings and cars and everything," he said. "With everybody gone now something will have to be done and Kuwaitis can't do it themselves."

At the same time that Tom Justus was leaving Frankfurt for the seven-hour flight home, Sharon Justus was boarding a 5:45 a.m. MST flight on Delta Air Lines out of Salt Lake City to Dallas and Washington.

Sharon Justus, 48, her hair a bit grayer and nails bitten to the quick, still had her digital watch on Kuwait time, as it had been since she left. "It helped me feel closer to him," she said. "And when one of the grandkids would ask what was grandpa doing I could say he's having dinner."

When she broke down crying on the plane, the flight attendants came to her aid. After they calmed her, they put together a gift pack of peanuts and liquor and a bottle of wine from first class for the Justuses.

The wait for the flight, about 30 minutes late, seemed interminable as hundreds of family members stood in a chilly wind on the tarmac.

As Sharon Justus paced and smoked outside the terminal she was deluged by reporters from the Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, CBS, People magazine and National Public Radio: "It seemed like I spelled my name a dozen times - and they'll probably still spell it wrong," she said.

Meanwhile, Tom Justus had spent a sleepless night at the airport Sheraton in Frankfurt. He'd eaten lasagna and drank a couple of beers, but sleep was elusive. "I probably haven't had six hours sleep in the last six days," he said.

On the flight home, there were hamburgers and champagne for the hostages, and much retelling of the days since the Aug. 2 invasion. And then there was the cheer upon touching down.

Outside, as the sun set pink and blue over the horizon, hundreds of family members stood outside a fence with balloons, banners, magnums of champagne, and tears.

As the men began to descend the stairs that had been rolled up to the jet, a cheer went out. But it would be another hour before Sharon Justus would get a glimpse - and a whiff - of her husband as he walked through that gym door.

SUBJECT

HOSTAGE: ARAB: WAR: FOREIGN COUNTRY

SECTION

NEWS

ACCESS

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CATEGORY

Cover Story

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ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE, Md.

CUTLINE

BACK ON U.S. SOIL: Martha Haddad, who is in her 90s, is carried from a Pan Am jet that brought 152 freed U.S. hostages home from Kuwait and Iraq. The plane arrived Monday afternoon at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., from a stopover in Frankfurt, Germany.
