

# STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



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*CIA Goes Hollywood*

## A Classic Case of Deception (U)

Antonio J. Mendez

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Antonio J. Mendez served in the Directorate of Operations and the Directorate of Science and Technology.

When briefing the CIA's Directorate of Operations (DO) or other components of the Intelligence Community (IC) about the Office of Technical Service's (OTS) exfiltration capability, I always made a point to remind them that "readiness" is the key.

This is one of the full-time concerns of my former OTS office, the Graphics and Authentication Division (GAD).

In arranging for the escape of refugees and other people of potential intelligence value, who are subject to political persecution and hostile pursuit, prior planning is not always possible because they show up at odd hours in out-of-the-way places. Current surveys and collection of up-to-date intelligence regarding travel controls and procedures are vital. OTS engages in this activity worldwide.

The readiness to move clandestine agents out of harm's way using quasi-legal methods is equally important. CIA's policy and practice is to bring its valuable human assets out of the cold when they can no longer remain in place. Sometimes, this includes their families. Public Law 110 gives the IC the authority to resettle these people in the United States as US persons when the time comes and the quota allows.

OTS/GAD and its successor components have serviced this kind of operation since OSS days. "Authenticating" operations officers and their agents with personal documentation and disguise, cover legends and supporting data, "pocket litter," and so forth is fundamental deception tradecraft in clandestine operations.

Personal documentation analysts, personal disguise specialists, graphic artists, and other graphic specialists spend hundreds of hours preparing the materials, tailoring the cover legends, and coordinating the plan.

Infiltrating and exfiltrating hostile areas are the most perilous applications of this tradecraft. The mental attitude and demeanor of the subject is as important as the technical accuracy of the tradecraft items.

Sometimes, technical operations officers actually lead the escapees through the checkpoints to ensure that their confidence does not falter at the crucial moment.

### Going Public

The operational involvement of GAD officers in the exfiltration from Iran of six US Department of State personnel on 28 January 1980 was a closely held secret until the CIA decided to reveal it as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations in 1997.

David Martin, the CBS News correspondent covering national security issues in Washington, DC, had the story early on, as did Mike Ruane of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The Canadian Broadcasting Company and *The Reader's Digest* both have done serious pieces since the CIA opened the files on this important success story.

Jean Pelletier's book, *Canadian Caper*, published in 1980, mentions that some CIA help was given to the Canadians in the form of forged

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entries in Canadian passports to enable Canadian Ambassador to Iran Kenneth Taylor to engineer the escape of the "houseguests." A brief passage in Hamilton Jordan's book, *Crisis*, alludes to CIA officers on the scene in Tehran. After he left office, former President Carter, in statements to the media, gave some hints of even more credit due his administration for the only true operational success of the hostage crisis.

My recollections of the long national emergency, which began on 4 November 1979 with the takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran and which ended with the release of the 53 hostages on Inauguration Day in January 1981, encompassed several major plans and operational acts supported by OTS and focused on Iran. These included intelligence gathering; deception options for defusing the crisis; rescuing the hostages; secret negotiations with the Iranian Government; and the exfiltration of agents and the "Canadian six."

In those days, the atmosphere in CIA was one of full alert. OTS, like many Agency components, was buzzing with intense activity. There are numerous stories about technical and operational innovations resulting from the emergency-like environment; the rescue of the six is one of many.

**New Job, New Challenge**

On 11 December 1979, about a month after the takeover of our Embassy in Tehran, I moved from my job as Chief, OTS, Disguise Section, to Chief, OTS, Authentication Branch. I had operational responsibility worldwide for disguise, false

documentation, and forensic (counterterror and counterintelligence) monitoring of questioned documents.

I had already spent the first days of the crisis creating a deception operation designed to defuse the crisis. President Carter decided not to use this option, however, and he has since lamented that decision.

The requirement for dealing with the six State Department employees hiding under the care of the Canadian Embassy in Iran was one of many chores I had to address on my first day on the new job. I immediately formed a small team to work on this problem.

The issues facing us were typical for exfiltration planning. The fact that we were concerned with six Americans with no intelligence background, coupled with the task of coordinating a plan of action with another government department and the administrations of the US and Canadian Governments, appeared particularly troublesome. A failed exfiltration operation would receive immediate worldwide attention. It would reflect badly on the United States, the President, and the CIA, and it would make life even more difficult for all American hostages in Iran. The Canadians also had a lot to lose, including the compromise of their Embassy in Tehran, but we had a perfect record of success with this kind of operation over many years.

**Collecting Basic Data**

We had recently moved one agent out of Iran through Tehran's Mehrabad Airport. As a result of this operation, we had a body of technical data on the airport controls and the efficiency of the groups operating them. The task of collecting and analyzing current document intelligence simply calls for verifying fairly recent information and ensuring that it is up to date.

We also had continued to support the infiltration and exfiltration of a few intelligence officers and agents who were traveling in and out of Iran on intelligence-gathering and hostage-rescue planning operations, and we could use these people as collection sources.

We were most concerned about the positive controls in the airport, particularly the immigration exit controls. Long before the revolution, the Iranian immigration service had adopted a two-sheet embarkation/disembarkation form. This form was printed on no-carbon-required paper and filled out by the traveler on entry. A white sheet was retained by immigration, and the carbon-copy yellow sheet was retained by the traveler, who was supposed to present it at immigration exit control on departure. The immigration clerk theoretically matched the two forms to verify that the traveler left before his visa expired. Many countries in the world have similar systems; few complete the verification process on the spot, if ever. We hoped to determine whether the militants operating at Mehrabad were completing this kind of positive check before travelers cleared the airport. Earlier in 1979, the controls were so unprofessional that the forms were not

collected unless volunteered by the departee. We had to confirm that this was still the case.

The other significant problem we faced was to select a cover story and supporting documentation for a group of North American men and women. We debated three interconnected issues related to this aspect of our planning: the type and nationality of passports we should use, the kind of cover, and whether we should move the six out in a group or individually.

CIA management had strong opinions on these points, as did the State Department. And the Canadian Government had to be drawn into these negotiations at some point. Once it was, it would also tend to take a position.

### Passport Problems

The passport debate started with considerations for using ordinary US passports, other foreign passports at our disposal, or Canadian passports. CIA managers were not comfortable with approving any foreign passport; they were concerned that nonprofessional persons might not be able to sustain a foreign cover story.

Initially, no one was confident that the Canadians would overlook their own passport laws or expose their government unnecessarily by providing Canadian passports. With the elimination of these two options, OTS was left with building a cover for the use of US passports, something we judged would call unnecessary attention to the subjects. Our experience recommended in favor of the Canadian passports.

The Iranians had found two OTS-produced foreign passports in the US Embassy that had been issued to two CIA officers posted to Tehran. One officer was among the hostages being held in the Embassy. The discovery of the passports was the topic of extensive media coverage in Iran and other countries.

The OTS team decided initially to push for Canadian passports and to concentrate on devising cover for the group before making final recommendations on the type of passport.

We began an all-source quest for information on the types of groups traveling in and out of Mehrabad Airport. In the meantime, the DO's Near East (NE) Division was developing information on overland "black" exfiltration options, hoping to identify a smuggler's route or a "rat line" into Turkey.

H. Ross Perot, the Texas billionaire, had used a similar plan to exfiltrate two of his employees early in the Iranian revolution. He had already offered his support to the Agency for the hostage rescue effort.

We soon developed information which indicated that the groups traveling legally to Iran included oilfield technicians from European-based companies, the news teams of all nationalities covering the hostage situation, and all sorts of curiosity seekers and do-gooders from around the world; many of them were US citizens. None fit our purposes, given the pattern or profile of these groups and the careful scrutiny and control given to them by Iranian security and immigration services. We believed that it would be most important for professional intelligence officers to

make the final probe into Iran and to meet personally with the subjects in order to access their state of mind and ability to carry out the operation.

### Contacting the Canadians

We requested a meeting with senior NE managers to present our position and to review the options. We were also aware that the senior NE officer in charge of the rescue of the six and of the liaison with the Canadians regarding the crisis had already been to Ottawa, where his meeting with officials in a Canadian ministry included the topic of Canadian passports. Our meeting with NE Division officers went fairly well, and they agreed in principle with our position.

Because the Canadians were understandably concerned with the mechanics of the exfiltration and how their passports would be used, we suggested that OTS get approval to go to Ottawa to explain these details. An OTS documents specialist, "Joe Missouri," and I arranged to depart for Ottawa immediately. We prepared passport photos and appropriate alias biodata for the six to take with us in hopes we could win the Canadians over. We had already directed many questions to Ambassador Taylor, and his replies gave us a good feeling about his penchant for clandestine planning.

In our meeting with Canadian officials, we learned that the Canadian Parliament had already approved the use of Canadian passports for noncitizens for humanitarian purposes. We immediately requested six spares for the six houseguests to give us a redundant capability for the operation. We

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also asked for two additional passports for use by CIA "escorts." The Canadians agreed to the spares, but they declined on the two additional passports because Parliament had not approved the exception to their passport law to cover professional intelligence officers.

We had an opportunity in our meeting with our ministry contact, "Lon DeGaldo," to display a bit of magic. He thought one of the proposed aliases had a slight Semitic sound—not a good idea in a Muslim country. We quickly picked another name, and I forged a signature in the appropriate handwriting on the margin of a fresh set of passport photos. This trick was mostly showmanship, but it helped to establish our credentials as experts.

**Cover Stories**

Next, we discussed cover legends. We explained the different points of view on group cover versus single cover, the need to gather more information on travelers, and our intention to send an officer or officers into Tehran to do a final probe of the controls and to meet with the six houseguests.

This allowed me to try out an idea for a cover legend that had occurred to me the night before at home in Maryland while I was packing. Cover legends hold up best when their details closely follow the actual experience or background of the user. If possible, the cover should be sufficiently dull so that it does not pique undue interest. In this case, however, I believed that we should try to devise a cover so exotic that no one

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**Hollywood Consultation**

In my former job as chief of the OTS Disguise Section, I had engaged the services of many consultants in show business and motion pictures. Our makeup consultant, "Jerome Callo-way," was a technical makeup expert who had received many awards. (Recently, he was awarded CIA's Intelligence Medal of Merit, one of a few nonstaffers to be so honored.) His motivation for helping us was purely patriotic.

We had already involved Jerome in the hostage crisis. One week after the takeover, I called him to Washington to help prepare a deception option. He, the disguise team, and I had worked around the clock to complete this option in five days.

When we got the order to stand down, Jerome returned to California. Before he left, he reaffirmed his desire to help in any way possible in the rescue of our diplomats. As soon as I checked into my hotel in Ottawa, I called Jerome at his home. He had no idea what I was working on, and I simply said that I was in Ottawa and that I needed to know how many people would be in an advance party scouting a site for a motion picture production.

Jerome replied that this would require about eight people, including a production manager, a cameraman, an art director, a transportation manager, a script consultant, an associate producer, a business manager, and a director. Their purpose would be to look at a shooting site from artistic, logistic, and financial points of view.

The associate producer represented the financial backers. The business manager concerned himself with the banking arrangements because even a 10-day shooting schedule could require millions of dollars of expenditures on the local economy. The transportation manager rented all types of vehicles, from limousines to move the stars about to the heavy equipment for constructing a set. The production manager made it all come together. The other team members were the technicians-made-good who create the film footage from the words in the script.

Making movies is an unusual business. Most people would not be surprised by the fact that a Hollywood production company would travel around the world looking for the right street or hillside to shoot a particular scene.

**Cover Options**

Recommending this kind of coverage for most clandestine operations would be out of the question, but I sensed that it might be just right for this operation. I tried the idea on Lon, our contact in the ministry, and he was intrigued with it. Certainly, it was not incompatible with the Canadian passport option. Film companies are typically made up of an international cast of characters. The

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Canadian motion picture and television industry was well established. We discussed the motion picture cover option as well as another idea or two. Lon had also thought about the problem of cover, and he had an idea for a group of food economists who might be seen traveling to various places in the Third World. The State Department had already given us their idea about a group of unemployed school teachers looking for jobs in international schools around the world. We felt obliged to mention this idea, even though we were not too excited about it.

We adjourned our meeting and made arrangements for follow-up meetings. We then sent a cable back to CIA Headquarters outlining our accomplishments and included our discussions on the three cover options. This was the first time that we mentioned the movie idea.

Over the next week, I commuted between Ottawa and Washington. An OTS team began forming in Ottawa to prepare the documentation and disguise items for the Canadian pouch to Tehran. The GAD team at OTS continued to collect information on Iranian border controls. All worldwide messages were sent and answered with the Flash indicator, CIA's highest precedence.

CIA managers did not summarily reject the Hollywood option, which had its advantages. The task of rescuing the hostages by paramilitary means seemed impossible at the outset, given the geographic location of Tehran. The ideal approach would be to pre-position the Delta Force close by the target before they launched the final phase to breach the Embassy compound.

The movie cover might allow us to approach the Iranian Ministry of National Guidance with a proposal to shoot a movie sequence in or near Tehran. The Ministry had been charged with countering the negative publicity by promoting tourism. It was also looking for ways to alleviate some of Iran's cash-flow problems caused by the freezing of Iranian assets in the United States. A motion picture production on Iranian soil would be an economic shot in the arm and would provide an ideal public relations tool to counteract the adverse publicity of the hostage situation.

Because a moderate was about to be elected President of Iran, we judged it possible that he could be sold on these points and then win over the radical factions of the government. If so, the cover for infiltrating the Delta Force as a team of movie set construction workers and camera crews to prepare the set was a natural. We imagined that it might be possible to conceal their weapons and other material in the motion picture equipment.

### Forming a Film Company

On a weekend, between trips to Ottawa and planning sessions with NE Division, I made a quick trip to California. I brought \$10,000 in cash with me, the first of several black-bag deliveries of funds to set up our motion picture company. I arrived on a Friday night and met

with Jerome and one of his associates in a suite of production offices they had reserved for our purposes on the old Columbia Studio lot in Hollywood. I had invited a CIA contracts officer to the meeting to act as witness to the cash delivery and to follow up as bagman and auditor for the run of the operation. It would take two years to clear all accounts on these matters.

The production company, "Studio Six Productions," was created in four days, which included a weekend. Our offices were formerly occupied by Michael Douglas, who had just completed producing *The China Syndrome*.

Jerome and his associate were masters at working the Hollywood system. They had begun applying "grease" and calling in favors even before I arrived. Simple things like the installation of telephones were supposed to take weeks, but we had everything we needed down to the paper clips by the fourth day.

We arranged for full-page ads in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, the two "trades" most important to any business publicity campaign. We tried to keep Jerome's well-known name hidden, but the trades had their reporters hot on our trail, and the word was out that something big was brewing in the industry.

When the press discovered that Jerome was connected with this independent production company, interest mounted and more press play followed. Hollywood was an ideal place to create and dismantle a major cover entity overnight. The Mafia and many shady foreign investors were notorious for backing productions in Hollywood, where many

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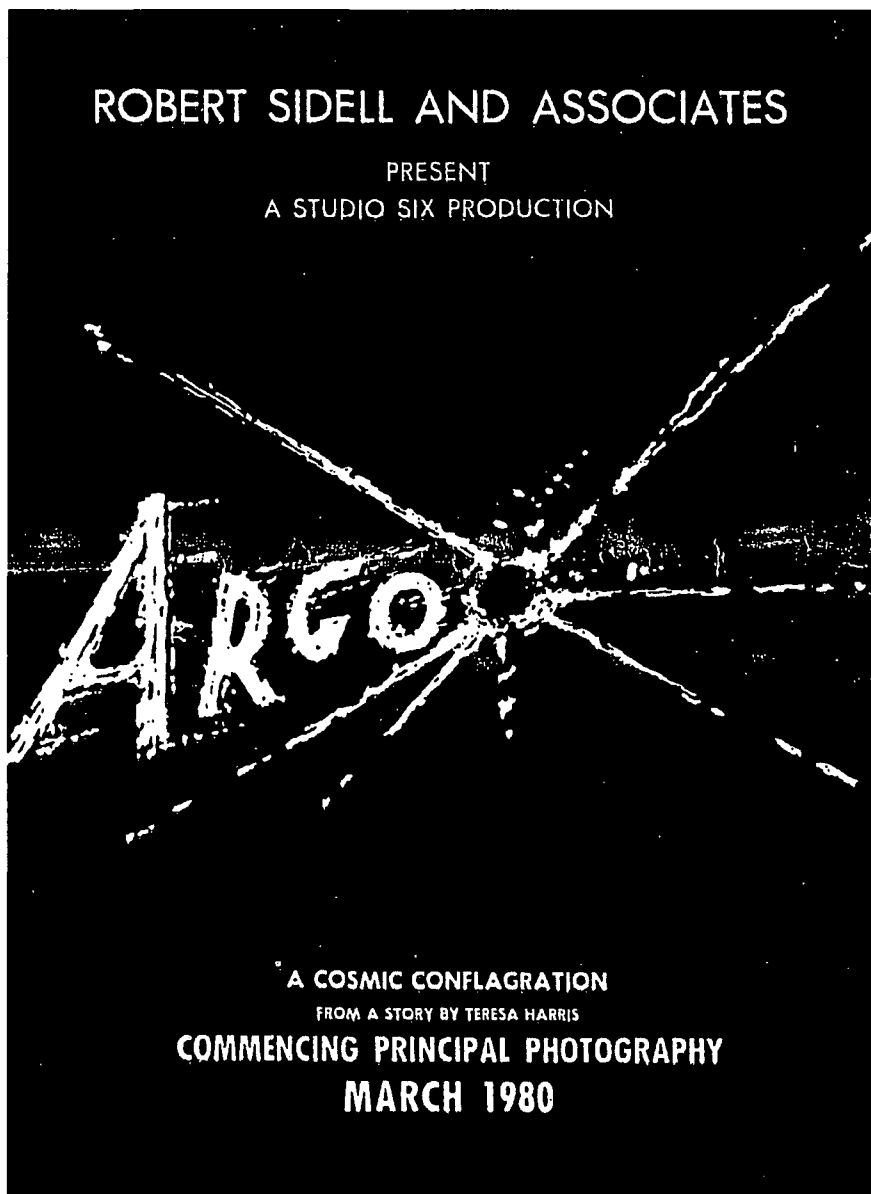
fortunes are made and lost. Hollywood is also an ideal place to launder money. Our efforts to keep Jerome's involvement secret actually added credibility to our company.

### Picking a Script

Once Studio Six Productions was set up, we tackled the problem of identifying an appropriate script. Jerome and I sat around his kitchen table discussing what the theme should be. Because *Star Wars* had made it big only recently, many science-fiction, fantasy, and superhero films were being produced. We decided we needed a script with "sci-fi," Middle Eastern, and mythologic elements. Something about the glory of Islam would be nice, too. Jerome recalled a recent script which might serve our purpose, and he hauled it out of a pile of manuscripts submitted for his consideration.

The script fit our purpose beautifully, particularly because no uninitiated person could decipher its complicated story line. The script was based on an award-winning sci-fi novel. The producers had also envisioned building a huge set that was to become a major theme park. They had hired a famous comic-strip artist to prepare the concepts of the sets. This gave us some good eyewash to add to a production portfolio.

We decided to repackage our borrowed script by decorating it with the appropriate logo and title markings. The only copy of the script we needed would be carried by me as a prop to be shown to the Iranians in my role as production manager—and only in the event we were questioned at the airport in Tehran.



ROBERT SIDELL AND ASSOCIATES

PRESENT  
A STUDIO SIX PRODUCTION

A COSMIC CONFLAGRATION  
FROM A STORY BY TERESA HARRIS  
COMMENCING PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY  
MARCH 1980

### Argo

Jerome and I then set about picking a name for our movie. We needed something catchy from Eastern culture or mythology. After several tries, we hit on it! During our 10-year association, he had proven to be a

great story and joke teller. He once told a group of us a profane "knock-knock" joke, with the word "Argo" in the punch line.

This became an in-house disguise-team recognition signal and battle cry. We used it to break the tension

that quite often built up when we were working long hours under difficult circumstances preparing for an important operation. Jerome remembered this. He also recalled that the name stemmed from mythology. He looked up the definition of Argo and confirmed it as the name of the ship which Jason and the Argonauts sailed on to rescue the Golden Fleece from the many-headed dragon holding it captive in the sacred garden. Perfect! This precisely described the situation in Iran.

I quickly designed an "Argo" logo, which we used for full-page ads in the trades. The ads proclaimed "Studio Six Productions Presents 'Argo'... A cosmic conflagration... story by Teresa Harris." (Teresa Harris was the alias we selected for our story consultant, which would be used by one of the six awaiting our arrival in Tehran.)

### Calling the Iranian Consulate

On my last day in California, I made our first business call from our studio offices to the Iranian Consulate in San Francisco, using my alias. I said I required a visa and instructions on procedures for obtaining permission for scouting a shooting location in Tehran. My party of eight would be made up of six Canadians, a European, and a Latin American.

The Latin American would be an OTS authentication officer, "Julio," who was posted in Europe. His languages were Spanish, French, and Arabic, and he had considerable exfiltration experience. We had selected OTS-produced documentation for his cover legend as an associate producer representing our production

company's ostensible South American backers. I would travel on an OTS-produced European passport.

The call to the Iranian Consulate was a washout. Officials there suggested that we apply at the nearest Iranian Consulate in our area. This was not surprising because many Iranian diplomats were carried over from the Shah's regime, and most were unsure of their current status and their visa-granting authorities.

I departed on the "redeye special" that night with all the trappings of a Hollywood type, including matchbooks from the Brown Derby Restaurant, where Studio Six Productions had a farewell dinner for me.

### Final Technical Preparations

Back in Washington, the various efforts being mounted against Iran were still going full tilt. Our operations plan for the rescue of the six was being implemented at the working levels of OTS and NE Division, but the plan had not yet been coordinated with and approved by policymakers.

My immediate task was to participate in the final technical preparations for our three cover options. I had collected several exemplars of supporting documentation for our production party that had to be reproduced by the OTS graphics specialists to pad the wallets of our party. The script had to be altered and a presentation portfolio prepared for our production manager.

Joe Missouri, the document specialist who had accompanied me on the initial trip to Ottawa, had remained

behind at that time to negotiate for ancillary documentation to support the ostensible Canadian part of the legend. This had required special authorization from the Canadian Government, which Missouri managed to obtain. This was quite an accomplishment for a young officer.

By this time, Joe had returned to Washington and taken charge of the Argo portfolio. Joe had always been an artist at the typewriter. He took the roles of various members of the production party and fleshed them out in the form of resumes. This clever ploy provided briefing papers for each subject that could be carried in the open in the production manager's portfolio. When completed, this portfolio had everything needed to sell even the most sophisticated investment banker on our movie!

A week after my return from California, the US and Canadian document and disguise packages were ready for the Canadian pouch. The OTS team in Ottawa had also been working on the Canadian documents, applying the finishing touches to the passports. We had 12 Canadian passports and 12 US passports, a redundant capability for both nationalities. The redundant documents were designed for final issuance by the Canadians in Tehran in case Julio or I failed to get in or did not show up at the Canadian Embassy after we arrived. Julio and I would complete the second set of passports in Tehran, giving us last-minute flexibility on site.

A highly detailed set of instructions on the use of the documents and on the final briefing of the subjects was also prepared for easy reference by nonexperts. Airline tickets were enclosed showing around-the-world



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itineraries. Joe and I had found lapel pins and baggage stickers of the Canadian maple leaf for the Canadian package. These were also part of the kit.

A review of the US documents package on the night before we left for Ottawa to load the Canadian pouch revealed a possible embarrassing problem. The Canadians were getting several backstopped Canadian documents. CIA's ability to obtain similar backstopped alias documents was too slow, and we had not been able to obtain internal CIA permission to acquire these for our subjects. The US document packages were going to be terribly outclassed by the Canadians. The only reason for sending US alias documents was to appease one of the policymaking levels participating in the operations planning. The plan was still not finally approved or coordinated in our own government. If our Canadian counterparts took inventory of the documents when we loaded the pouch, we would look silly. This bothered us. As soon as we arrived at the US Embassy in Ottawa the next morning, we made the rounds collecting business cards and other wallet stuffers to fill out our package.

As it turned out, the loading of the "bag" did not include a close examination of our respective document packages, so we were not embarrassed. The subjects themselves would have the final vote when presented with the choice of two passports, three cover stories, and the option of moving out individually or all together. Because my OTS colleague and I ultimately would make the presentation of the choices in Tehran, we could greatly influence their decision.

The Canadian pouch or bag turned out to be the size of a pillowcase, barely big enough for our exfiltration kit of documents and disguise materials. The Canadian couriers apparently had a much easier time than the typical US State Department courier, who usually accompanies several mailbag-sized pouches. The Canadian courier is only allowed one bag, and he keeps this with him at all times. Some of our extra disguise materials had to be left out of the bag to Tehran.

During this last trip to Ottawa, it became clear that the Canadians were losing patience with the Americans. We were not making the final decision on our ops plan. They had made all sorts of concessions without hesitation. What was taking us so long to move? They insisted that the final approval of all plans be accomplished as soon as possible. I promised to send that word back immediately.

### The Green Light

Back at the Embassy, I prepared a long cable outlining every detail of the operation as I envisioned it should be carried out. This was precisely the kind of summary we would send in before launching an exfiltration from a foreign location. It was slightly irregular for me to send this from Ottawa as the plan that the Canadians and I wanted to be approved.

I caught hell for that cable when I returned to Washington, but then I was told it was a fine piece of work. The plan was finally coordinated within two days, and our materials were en route to Tehran.

### Press Probes

A disturbing bit of information known to most of us involved in this operation had come to light weeks before. There were certain members of the news media who had figured out that the fuzzy information being provided to the press by our State Department spokesman in Washington regarding the exact number and identities of the hostages being held in the Embassy compound was a smokescreen designed to hide the fact that six diplomats were still at large in Tehran.

The Canadians were aware that the Washington correspondent of Montreal's *La Presse* had already called on the Canadian Ambassador in Washington to voice his suspicions. The Ambassador asked him to sit on the information until after the exfiltration, promising him an exclusive on the story from the Canadian Government.

Ambassador Taylor's wife had also received a cryptic phone call at their residence in Tehran. The caller did not identify himself, and he asked for one of the six by name. Two of the six were staying with the Taylors, and the call was for one of them, Joseph Stafford. The other four were staying in the residence of Canadian Deputy Chief of Mission John Sheardown. The Canadians saw their situation in Tehran becoming tenuous. They began making discreet arrangements to close down their Embassy before it too was overrun.

### Moving to Europe

The next phase of the operation shifted to Europe. The OTS shop

there had been debriefing travelers, collecting data, and obtaining exemplars of the Iranian visas and entry cachets required for our up-to-date intelligence on Iranian document controls. Julio was gearing up his alias document package. My alias documentation was also being prepared there.

Julio and I planned to link up in Europe for our final launch into Tehran, tentatively set for 23 and 24 January. Both Julio and I planned to apply for Iranian visas separately in European cities. In case neither of us was successful, I had already arranged for a fallback position. One of the CIA officers in Europe had an OTS-issued alias passport he used for operational meetings. We had instructed him to obtain an Iranian visa in this passport very early in our data collection phase so we would have an exemplar. He got the visa. If necessary, I planned to borrow his alias and have a similar alias passport issued to me with a duplicate of his legally obtained visa.

### Visa Applications

On 21 January, Julio left for Geneva, Switzerland, on his alias passport to apply for an Iranian visa. I left Washington on the same day for Europe. I was traveling on my true-name US official documents, but I was hand-carrying the Studio Six portfolio and certain collateral materials to fill out our documents packages.

I arrived in Europe on the morning of 22 January, and Julio returned from his trip that afternoon with his Iranian visa. I still had to obtain a visa in my alias passport. I planned

to drive to Bonn the next day and to apply there. I hoped the Iranians there would issue it in a few hours, as they had for Julio in Geneva.

We received a Flash message from Ottawa that afternoon. Our exfiltration kits had arrived in Tehran, but Ambassador Taylor and one of his aides had reviewed the materials and discovered a mistake! The handwritten Farsi fill-in on the Iranian visas showed a date of issue sometime in the future. The Farsi linguist who had assisted our team in Ottawa has misinterpreted the Farsi calendar.

We fired a message back through Ottawa assuring Taylor this was no problem. The OTS officers could easily alter the mistake when they arrived in Tehran. The fallacy in this was that the mistake was in the set of passports prepared for use by Taylor if we did not arrive for some reason. If this was the case, a follow-up message would be prepared with carefully worded instructions for Taylor on how to correct the mistake.

On 23 January, one of the OTS officers and I went to Bonn. I had my alias documentation and the Studio Six portfolio. I had altered my appearance slightly with a simple disguise. I was also wearing a green turtleneck sweater, which I would continue to wear through the run of the operation.

As we approached the Iranian Embassy in Bonn, I noted that the Embassy of my ostensible country of origin was nearby. If the Iranians chose to do so, it would be perfectly proper for them to send me to my own Embassy for a letter of introduction before the visa was granted. I was dropped off down the block from

the Iranian Embassy, and I walked back to the entrance to the consular section.

A half-dozen visa applicants were sitting in the reception area filling out applications. A handful of young Iranian "Revolutionary Guards" in civilian clothes were standing around scrutinizing everyone. It was then that I realized that I had left the portfolio in the car when I was dropped off. I did have my alias passport and other personal identity documents. I filled out the forms and went to the clerk's window to give them to the consular official.

In response to the official's polite questions, I said, in my best accent, that the purpose of my visit to Tehran was to meet with business associates at the Sheraton Hotel in Tehran; they were flying in from Hong Kong today and were expecting me. I also said that I did not obtain a visa in my own country because I was in Germany on business when I received the telex about the meeting in Tehran. I received my visa in about 15 minutes.

### Presidential OK

Our plan for entry into Iran was for me to leave that evening (23 January), and to arrive the next day at 5 a.m. in Mehrabad. Julio would follow the same itinerary 24 hours later. If anything happened to one of us en route, the other might still get through.

As soon as I got back from Bonn, I sent a Flash to Washington and Ottawa that I was ready. I received approval to launch within the hour. Thirty minutes later, however, I

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received another message from Washington to delay my departure because the President wanted to give final approval and was being briefed at that moment.

Another 30 minutes passed, and I received the Presidential OK in a terse message which said, "President has just approved the Finding. You may proceed on your mission to Tehran. Good luck." In terms of approvals, this case was the ultimate cliffhanger.

**Entering Tehran**

Julio and I had an especially worthwhile chance meeting just before I left for the airport that evening. We had an opportunity to meet with another Agency officer who had been traveling in and out of Tehran in support of the hostage rescue operation. He would ultimately be responsible for creating the inside support mechanism. He had been in the "business" since serving with OSS and parachuting into Europe during World War II. He clearly was a "master of the game," and he gave us some useful insights about the situation at Mehrabad and in Tehran. This strengthened our confidence and gave us a better idea about how to behave.

Julio and I both arrived in Mehrabad at 5 a.m. on 25 January. (I was a day late because of delays caused by bad weather.) Immigration controls were straightforward, and the disembarkation/embarkation form was still being used. The difference I noted this time from my previous experience with Mehrabad immigration was that the immigration officer was a professional in uniform instead of an untrained civilian irregular. The immigration officers had gone into

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 ”

hiding at the beginning of the revolution. It appeared that they had now come back to work.

At entry, unlike my last visit, customs and security personnel were not overly concerned about foreigners. Because of Iran's balance-of-payment problems, they were especially interested in Iranian citizens leaving with valuables like fine Persian rugs or gold. The economic situation had become worse in the last few months, and we could expect the exit controls to be even tighter.

We took a taxi to the Sheraton Hotel and checked in. Our next step was to go to the Swissair office downtown to reconfirm eight airline reservations for Monday morning to Zurich. In an exfiltration operation, it is important to reconfirm your space on the airplane for the day you are supposed to leave. Because it is difficult to bring the subjects to the point where they have the courage to walk into the airport, if they then have to backtrack because their flight did not arrive, had mechanical problems, or their reservations were lost it would be doubly hard for them to get up their nerve next time. We chose Swissair because of its record of efficient and reliable service.

The Swissair office was not open yet. From my earlier trip to Tehran, I knew that the US Embassy was a few

blocks down the street and that the Canadian Embassy also was nearby.

It seemed eerie approaching the US Embassy compound knowing that 53 Americans were being held inside, including one or two CIA officers. Although we knew that our colleagues would have some rough going during their captivity, we also knew that there was nothing we could do to help at the time. We had to keep our attention on the task at hand. The high walls were decorated with propaganda banners and posters celebrating the revolution.

**The Canadian Embassy**

Julio and I began looking for the Canadian Embassy. Our map showed it to be located directly across a narrow side street from the US Embassy. We found the building, but it was the Swedish Embassy.

There was an Iranian guard at the entrance, but he could not understand our questions and was perplexed by our street map. Just then, a young Iranian came along. He spoke to the guard, apparently asking him who were these confused-looking Westerners. He then spoke to Julio in German. The fellow was polite and helpful. He wrote down an address in Farsi, hailed a taxi for us, and gave the address to the taxi driver, who took us a considerable way across town to the Canadian Embassy.

Ambassador Taylor, who had been expecting us to arrive sometime that morning, was waiting upstairs in his outer office. We did not immediately recognize him as the Ambassador. He was a tall, lean, rather young, pleasant individual dressed in Western jeans and a plaid shirt and wearing cowboy boots. He

wore "mod" glasses and had a full salt-and-pepper Afro-style haircut. This improbable-looking diplomat greeted us warmly.

Ken introduced us to his secretary, Laverna, a small, elderly lady who was also pleasant and cheerful. We had a short meeting in Ken's office. He explained that most members of his staff had already quietly departed Tehran. There would be only five Canadians left after his family departed that afternoon. The remaining five, including himself, would depart on Monday for London shortly after the Swissair flight we hoped to board at 7:30 a.m. with the houseguests. Early on Monday, he planned to inform the Foreign Ministry by diplomatic letter that the Canadian Embassy would be closed temporarily.

We described briefly those things we needed to accomplish over the next few days, starting with a meeting with the houseguests so we could brief them on the plan and assess their ability to carry it off. We all agreed the meeting would occur at 5 p.m. at the suburban residence of John Sheardown, the Embassy's second officer, where they had been hiding since November.

At this initial meeting with Ken, we learned that at least two more ambassadors in the local diplomatic corps and some of their staff were also involved in hiding and caring for the six. Ken and these other ambassadors were also visiting regularly with Bruce Laingen, the American chargé, who was under "house protection" in the Foreign Ministry. Laingen, another Embassy staff officer, and the Embassy security officer were to spend the entire crisis living in the rooms of the Foreign Ministry, where they had gone to protest the

demonstrations at the gates of the US Embassy just as it was about to be overrun. Laingen was free to depart Iran any time, but he refused to abandon his colleagues.

We asked and received Ken's permission to send a message to Washington through Ottawa, confirming our arrival in Iran and informing everyone concerned that we planned to meet with the six that evening. We were also introduced to Roger Lucy, who was housesitting with the four Americans who were staying at Sheardown's house. Roger spoke Farsi fluently, and he had been the one who discovered our mistake on the visas. Claude Gauthier was another member of Ken's staff. He was a burly French Canadian responsible for the Embassy's physical security. Claude earned the nickname of "Sledge" during these final days because he was destroying classified communications equipment with a 12-pound sledgehammer. Everyone at the Embassy was friendly and informal; they seemed amused by our business.

When it was time to go to meet the six, Julio and I left with Claude. Ken had left earlier to see his wife off at Mehrabad and to pick up the Staffords, the two houseguests staying with him. We all arrived at the safehouse at about the same time. The house was on the outskirts of town in a well-to-do neighborhood. It was palatial, with a high wall surrounding it.

### Meeting the Six

The six rushed to meet us as we entered the house. They appeared in good spirits and were happy to see us. We spent the first few minutes getting acquainted. The six houseguests

were two young married couples, Joseph and Kathleen Stafford and Mark and Cora Lijek, and two single men, Bob Anders and Lee Schatz. Anders, about 50, had been head of the consular section, and the two couples had worked for him. Schatz was a tall young man who was the agriculture attache. Those from the consulate had escaped out the back door to the street when the militants had been breaking in the front door. Schatz had had an office in a building across the street from the Embassy, and he had gone directly to the Swedish Embassy, where he hid for a week. The Swedish flag was his blanket.

I explained that there were three cover stories and how these were submitted for their consideration. I also explained what had to be accomplished over the next two days and how we would proceed through the airport on Monday. There was considerable discussion about the mechanics of the controls and how we would respond if questioned about our presence in Tehran. Only one exhibited anxiety about the risks involved.

Finally, I instructed them to go to the dining room to discuss among themselves whether they wanted to go in a group or individually and which cover story they preferred. I waited about 15 minutes and then walked in on them. They were debating the questions, and I distracted them by doing a bit of sleight of hand with two sugar cubes. I had used this trick many times to illustrate how to set up a deception operation and to overcome apparent obstacles. It helped to persuade reluctant subjects that they were involved with professionals in the art of deception. The six decided to go as a group, using the Studio Six cover.

## Deception

The six showed us around the safe-house, where four of them had passed nearly three months in a fair amount of comfort. The huge, well-furnished house had a kitchen with enough equipment for a modern restaurant. The Americans had spent a good bit of their time planning and cooking gourmet dinners for themselves and the few outsiders they saw. They also had become masters at the game of Scrabble.

As we were being shown around, one of the other ambassadors and his attache, Richard, arrived. They had visited the houseguests more than once. They wanted to meet the CIA officers who had come to oversee the escape of the six people they had come to know well. Both these men were to prove helpful to us.

When it was time for Julio and me to go back to our hotel, Claude dropped us down the block from the hotel. He would pick us up the next morning to take us to the Canadian Embassy. Saturday is the Holy Day in Iran, but we had to put the finishing touches on the Canadian passports and to file our final plan of action to Ottawa and Washington for approval.

### The Last Arrangements

The next two days moved swiftly. We spent most of Saturday filling in the passports with the appropriate entries, including the Iranian visas issued in Canada. This visa exemplar had been collected only recently for us by a Canadian friend in Ottawa. It was a better fit for the ostensible travel itinerary of the Studio Six team. Their cover legend and airline tickets showed them arriving

in Tehran from Hong Kong at approximately the same hour that Julio and I had arrived from Zurich. Their flight had actually arrived on that day and time, and passengers disembarking would have been processed by the same immigration officers who had processed us. Consequently, the Iranian entry cachets stamped in our passports were prime exemplars for those we entered in the passports of the six.

The worst thing that can happen when making false passport entries is to forge the signature of an immigration officer on an ostensible arrival cachet and then discover that this same individual is about to stamp you out of the country. He would know that he was not at work the day your passport says you arrived. You have to know how all these systems work.

The attache, Richard, was dispatched to the airport to pick up a stack of the disembarkation/embarkation forms from an airline contact. Julio would complete the Farsi notations on enough of these, and each of the six would write in his or her false bi-data and sign in the new aliases. Again, the forms we had received and filled in on arrival were our models.

We had spread out our forgery materials on a table in Ken Taylor's office. He spent most of his day making last-minute arrangements to close the Embassy, sitting nearby listening to our banter about some fine point of making false documents, or consulting with us on some detail of the arrangements for the exfiltration. Claude was wielding his sledgehammer somewhere in the building and burning and shredding classified paper.

On Sunday morning, I completed the long cable outlining the operations plan, and the message was transmitted to Ottawa. One of the details in the plan explained:

*... That the six Canadians from Studio Six had called on the local Canadian Ambassador hoping that they could arrange for an appointment with the Ministry of National Guidance to present their proposal to use the local market for 10 days of shooting "Argo". ... The Canadian Ambassador has advised them to seek a location elsewhere if possible, but has offered one of the Embassy's vacant residences as guest quarters. ... They heeded his advice, and after looking around a few days, have decided to leave Iran. ...*

This provided details which paralleled the true facts. It also gave us the option of bringing the six to the airport on Monday in an Embassy vehicle with an Embassy driver, thereby solving the problem of finding reliable transportation to the airport. Laverna could then also reconfirm the airline reservations, which would be a normal service performed for Canadian guests of the Embassy.

### Amateur Actors

Everything was in good order by Sunday night, when we reconvened at the safehouse. The six houseguests were impressed with their documentation packages, and we were impressed with the transformation of their appearances and personalities. On Friday night, we had given each of them their cover legend as prepared by Joe Missouri in the Studio Six portfolio. We also had provided them

with disguise materials and props that would help fill out their roles.

They had scrounged clothes from one another and restyled their images to look more "Hollywood." Each of them was having great fun playing their part and hamming it up. The most dramatic change was made by the rather distinguished and conservative Bob Anders. Now, his snow-white hair was a "mód" blow dry. He was wearing tight trousers with no pockets and a blue silk shirt unbuttoned down the front with his chest hair cradling a gold chain and medalion. With his topcoat resting across his shoulders like a cape, he made a turn around the room with all the flair of a Hollywood dandy.

The mental attitudes of the six were positive. We began briefing them on the details of their ostensible prior travel and arrival in Iran. They soon seemed to have grasped these details fairly well. We warned them that there was to be a hostile interrogation staged after dinner to test their ability to answer the questions under stress. Roger Lucy volunteered to be the interrogator.

Soon, Ken Taylor arrived with an answer from Ottawa to our cable. Apparently, the policymakers in Ottawa and Washington were pleased with our proposed plan of action. He said the last line of their cable was, "See you later, exfiltrator."

Shortly, the other ambassador arrived with yet another ambassador. The six served a sumptuous seven-course dinner with fine wine, champagne, coffee, and liqueurs. I told them about Jerome and the Argo knock-knock joke. Everyone took up the Argo cry. I also told everyone that they would be tempted to sell the

story to some publisher after the operation was over. I admonished them not to yield to temptation, because Julio and I needed to stay in business to help others in the future. They apparently took this advice seriously.

After dinner, Roger appeared in military fatigues, complete with hat, sunglasses, jackboots, and swagger stick. The interrogations began. The interrogations impressed some of the more overconfident members of the group with the importance of remembering the details of their cover stories and gave them a taste of what could be in store for them at the airport.

During the interrogations, the second ambassador asked me to step into another room. He told me that, during one of the visits the three ambassadors had made to the Foreign Ministry to meet with Bruce Laingen and his aides, the US Embassy security officer had pulled him aside to confide that he was planning his own escape. He had already made one trip outside the building, and he asked for a glass cutter. The ambassador asked my advice about the glass cutter and if he should also give him a gun. I said "yes" to the glass cutter but "no" to the gun. I thanked him for this information, and I told him we would be back in touch on these topics if more information was required.

Before we left at midnight, we made final arrangements for getting to the airport. I would go 30 minutes ahead of the others with Richard, who would pick me up at the hotel at 3 a.m. We would confirm that all was normal at the airport and that Swissair was en route from Zurich. I would clear customs and check in at

the airline counter, where I would wait so the others could see me as they entered the airport as a signal that all was in order. Julio would accompany them to the airport in the Embassy van and lead the way through customs.

### Day of Departure

I was awakened in my dark hotel room the next morning by the telephone ringing next to my bed. It was Richard calling from the lobby. It was 3 a.m., and I should have been up at 2:15 a.m. My watch alarm had gone off, and I must have slept through it. I rushed to get showered and dressed, and I was in the lobby in about 15 minutes.

Mehrabad is like many Middle Eastern or South Asian airports. Although of fairly modern construction, the people who pass through as travelers or hang around to greet or see travelers off make an orderly transit impossible. This was another reason for choosing the 7:30 a.m. Swissair flight. If we arrived at the airport at 5 a.m., the chances were the airport would be less chaotic. Also, the officials manning the controls might still be sleepy, and most of the Revolutionary Guards would still be in their beds. This was the case that morning of 28 January 1980.

### As Smooth as Silk

Richard and I proceeded through the customs check to the Swissair counter. There were few other travelers, and the airport employees were still groggy. The Swissair counterman confirmed that the flight would arrive at 5 a.m. I stood at my prearranged

**Deception**

spot to wait for the rest of our party. Richard went to find the manager of another airline, who was a useful friend to have at the airport. He had already provided the blank embarkation forms. We would have had to collect these ourselves on the way in and had, in fact, picked up several extras, but the manager had given us plenty to cover any mistakes when filling them out. It is rare to have an inside contact at an airport for an exfiltrator.

Soon the others arrived, and Julio led the way through customs. The six had had difficulty putting together a decent collection of luggage and clothing. They appeared to be traveling a bit light for Hollywood types on an around-the-world trip. They seemed bright and eager, however, and they had plastered their luggage with those Canadian maple leaf stickers we had found in Ottawa.

After they had cleared customs and checked in at the airline counter, we all proceeded to the immigration checkpoint. Lee Schatz was so eager that he had gotten way ahead of us and was already clearing immigration with no apparent difficulty. The others began presenting their documents and the yellow embarkation forms. I waited for each to clear in case one got into trouble. I would get involved quickly as the production manager responsible for the well-being of his preproduction crew. I was armed with the Argo portfolio and would overwhelm anyone standing in the way with Hollywood talk. The immigration officer could not have cared less. He stamped each of us out and collected the yellow forms. One yellow form floated off his counter and was some distance away on the floor. When no one was looking, I picked it up and stuck it among

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my papers. It was the form we had forged for Bob Anders.

We were in the departure lounge, and we still had to go through the final security check before we arrived at the waiting area by our gate. The six were wandering around in the gift shops like ordinary tourists. A few of the fatigue-clad Revolutionary Guards were scrutinizing everyone.

Richard appeared with the airline manager. They had been watching us clear through immigration. I shook hands with the manager, and he asked me why we had not booked his airline; he would have arranged for red-carpet treatment. I told him to stand by as we might still need his flight if Swissair had any problem. I noticed the two elderly ladies from the Canadian Embassy starting to arrive in the departure lounge for their flight. Ken Taylor and the men of the Embassy would leave later in the day after we had departed.

**Last-Minute Delay**

The Swissair flight was called for the first time, and we proceeded through the security check into the small glassed-in room by our gate. We were just a short bus ride from the aircraft. Then the PA system announced that the Swissair flight was delayed for departure because of mechanical problems! I reassured our party and walked back through the security checkpoint to find Richard and his friend.

The departure lounge was filling up. Several flights were arriving. I wondered whether I should switch to one of these if Swissair was to be delayed too long.

I found Richard and his friend. They had already spoken to Swissair and learned the mechanical problem was minor. We would not be delayed too long, perhaps an hour. We discussed the options of switching flights, but we decided that that would be too complicated and that it would call unnecessary attention to us. I returned to our gate and reported this to the others.

We were all a bit on edge. The roving guards continued their random interrogations of other travelers. We made small talk and tried not to attract any attention.

After a tense hour, the Swissair flight was called. Everyone was suddenly anxious and excited about the prospect of pulling it off.

**A Great Success**

The bus trip was brief and as we started up the ramp to board the airplane, Bob Anders punched me in the arm and said, "You arranged for everything, didn't you?" He was pointing at the name lettered across the nose of the airplane. The name of our airplane was "Argau," a region in Switzerland. This was a sign that everything was going to be all right. We had to wait until the plane took off and had cleared Iranian airspace before we could give the thumbs up and order Bloody Marys.

By lunchtime, Julio and I were sitting in the Zurich airport restaurant

waiting for our connecting flight to Germany. Some of the six dropped down and kissed the tarmac of the Zurich runway after they came down the ramp. The other passengers viewed this as rather strange behavior.

US State Department representatives met us at the other side of Swiss immigration and customs. The six were whisked away in a van to a mountain lodge. They left Julio and me standing in the parking lot. I loaned one of them my topcoat because it was chilly. It was US Government property; Julio and I had bought European-style clothing, topcoats, and shoes for our trip to Tehran. I never retrieved the topcoat, and I would be admonished by our Budget and Fiscal people when I did my accounting. Just another typical TDY. All part of the job.

### A Lot of Publicity

A few days later, the story hit the streets in Montreal. I was still in Germany when the story came over the Armed Forces radio station. Two days later, I arrived in New York, and at the airport I picked up a copy of *The New York Post* with the headline, "Canada to the Rescue!"

When I boarded the flight in Germany, I was carrying a large tin of Iranian caviar that the Staffords had bought for me in the departure lounge in Mehrabad. I asked the stewardess if she would keep it cold for me. She said, "No, it is either Russian or Iranian, and we don't like either!" The Soviets had invaded Afghanistan in December, and President Carter had withdrawn from the Olympics. The other 53 Americans

were still being held hostage in Tehran.

Chapter 21 of the Pelletier book, *The Canadian Caper*, covered the impact of our success on the world at large:

*To the Embassy staff's heroism was added a typically Canadian touch of modesty. It was important, said Ken Taylor in an interview later, for the Americans to say thank you. . . . They did more than that. They went wild. It was the first good news after three months of national trauma. . . . The maple leaf was flown in Oklahoma City, in Livonia, Michigan, and in a hundred other American towns and cities. Billboards sprang up throughout the American countryside with giant letters that spelled Thank You, Canada. A major US bank bought a full-page ad in The New York Times to commemorate the Canadian deed.*

Jerome took out an ad in his local Burbank paper which said, "Thanks, Canada, we needed that. . . ."

Ken Taylor became an instant hero. He was described as "the Scarlet Pimpernel of diplomacy." He returned to Ottawa, covered in glory. Eventually, he was involved in a whirlwind tour of appearances, some with the six. He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada, received a Congressional Medal from the United States, and was awarded several honorary degrees. He lived his cover all the way.

By the time Studio Six folded several weeks after the rescue, we had 26 scripts, including some potential moneymakers. One was from Steven Spielberg.

### Meeting the President

On 12 March 1980, I accompanied the Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Turner, to his morning meeting with President Carter and National Security Adviser Brezinski. I was to have two and one-half minutes of Turner's meeting with the President. At first, the President was confused about what I had done and thought that I was the "old hand" we had met the night before I went to Iran and who was still in Tehran at that point working on preparations for the military rescue operation. I did have a chance to show the President some of the cover materials used in the operation and to tell him the Argo/Argau story. Because of some indecision about whether the White House photographer should take my picture shaking hands with the President (I was then under cover), I had a total of nine minutes in the Oval Office. Later that day, I was promoted by the director of OTS. In May, Julio and I each received CIA's Intelligence Star award.

### Reunion and Recognition

Later that same month, I invited the six to my farm for the weekend. Jerome came out from Burbank to join us in a secret reunion. The next week, the six and Ken Taylor were honored guests at a game in Yankee Stadium, where they were cheered by 30,000 fans.

In September 1997, after being selected as one of the CIA50 Trailblazers, Agency representatives asked me if I would agree to be interviewed by CBS Evening News about the rescue of the six. I agreed, and the public thus finally learned the true story of the hostage rescue operation.