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Freed Hostage

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Described as 'Very Hungry'

Doctor Says Anger, Humor Kept Polhill's Mind Sharp

By Marc Fisher
Washington Post Foreign Service

WIESBADEN, West Germany, April 24—Freed hostage Robert Polhill lost 25 pounds and much of his muscle mass during his 39 months of confinement in Lebanon, but stayed sharp by maintaining his sense of humor and his anger at his captors, an Air Force doctor said today.

Polhill continued to eat ravenously on his second day away from the Shiite hostage takers who had fed him irregularly and poorly. He is eating four meals a day and has made special requests for spare ribs, as well as for a pair of decent shoes.

"For a man who is 55, he looks a good deal older," said Col. Kenneth Koskinen, the Air Force surgeon who has been treating Polhill. "The man is just malnourished and very hungry. He's essentially emptying our kitchen."

Koskinen said Polhill "has significant muscle wasting," a result of having been kept from most exercise for such a long time, but is in good spirits. "He was very angry and is still angry. He said it was very difficult to channel that anger."

Despite the uncertainty of his situation, his complete isolation from the outside world and persistently uncomfortable conditions, Polhill never thought he would be killed, U.S. officials here said.

In the past three years, Polhill and his fellow hostages were given reading matter only rarely (he once got a copy of the British magazine the Economist). They had nothing with which to divert themselves other than each other's company and playing cards supplied by their captors.

Today, Polhill spent several hours with State Department debriefers, who were eager to find out about his fellow hostages and about the conditions in which he was kept. He also spent private time with his wife and two sons, who arrived this morning from the United States.

Although Polhill seems clear and levelheaded now—surprisingly so, doctors say—it is still far too early to know if he will suffer from the post-stress syndrome of depression and fatigue that has affected many former hostages. Many effects of a long period of confinement take "several years" to emerge, Koskinen said.

The former accountant, who was a business professor at Beirut University College when he and three other instructors were kidnapped in January 1987 by pro-Palestinian terrorists posing as campus police, will heal physically quite quickly, doctors say. "In three months, you probably won't recognize him," Koskinen said.

Polhill, who came out of captivity knowing nothing about events of the past three years, has peppered the hospital staff with questions. He wanted to know who won the World Series and Super Bowl over the last few years. He had to be told that the Berlin Wall had fallen.



Polhill is joined by sons Brian, 19, left, and Steven, 22.

was going to be speaking with when he was told Sunday that he would have a phone conversation with the president of the United States.

Polhill is said to be deeply concerned about the future of his fellow hostages, especially Alann Steen and Jesse Turner, the Beirut University College instructors still being held, with whom he shared a room for most of his captivity.

In his initial conversations with U.S. officials, Polhill has said that although he and his fellow captives were moved frequently from one location to another, they were always kept together in windowless rooms under constant guard. They never knew whether it was day or night.

U.S. officials here said that Polhill, Steen and Turner were almost certainly kept in various places in Beirut, possibly in a building with other hostages. But officials could not say which other hostages were involved, nor even if they were Americans.

Neither Polhill nor officials here have come up with any explanation of why his captors, the Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine, chose Polhill to set free at this time.

U.S. officials here said that although Polhill has cooperated with State Department debriefers, he has measured his willingness to talk against his fear that giving away details could harm his friends in captivity.

"He is very aware that if he says something negative, it could have a negative impact" on Steen and Turner, Koskinen said.

That is also one reason why Polhill has not spoken to reporters here. Polhill, who is still speaking in the low, thin voice that his captors required, plans to stay in Wiesbaden for several more days.

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