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Halting a Slow Fade to History

By MATTHEW L. WALD



WASHINGTON — Thirty-three years after the event, Hollywood has turned its attention to an episode that traumatized the United States for months: the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran. But it has focused on what one participant called “a footnote”: the escape of 6 embassy personnel, not the 52 Americans who spent 14 months in captivity.

The off-center focus of the movie “Argo,” which opened on Friday, turns out to be fine with many of the former hostages, because their day in the limelight (or more properly, their 444 days) is on the edge of memory now, or, for younger Americans, too long ago to be part of any memory at all. And they are mostly happy to be remembered, even as the backdrop for someone else’s story.

The sense of time passing hit David M. Roeder, a retired Air Force colonel, a few years ago when he and some fellow former hostages were testifying about their experience before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. A representative from Iowa, he recalled, “said there is no one he respects more than us, and he still remembers it because he was still in grade school when it happened.”

The former hostages consider it a trifle odd that “Argo” is based on the tale of six embassy staff members who eluded Iranians, posing as students, who took over the embassy on Nov. 4, 1979. The six spent weeks in hiding, sheltered by Canadian diplomats, until they slipped out of the country, 3 months into the 14-month crisis.

The six were greeted at the White House by President Jimmy Carter, and their return was a rare bright spot during a grim time when the nation worried that the hostages would be tried as spies and executed. The larger episode is still a sore point in American history, perhaps not something many people would pay money to see recreated.

“Our little story is a footnote,” said Robert Anders, the informal leader of the six, whom the movie calls “houseguests.” (They were not held hostage.) “But it had more adventure,” he added. Perhaps not quite as much adventure as in the Hollywood version, but adventure nonetheless, he and others said.

Mr. Anders, played in the movie by Tate Donovan, reflected on this as he sat on a bench near the candy stand at a special screening at a Regal Cinemas multiplex here last week. Out on the red carpet Ben Affleck, the director and star, and John Goodman and others conducted interviews.

“It made me feel a little guilty,” said Mr. Anders, now 87. “The real hostages were the real heroes.”

But the houseguests needn’t feel guilty, several of the hostages said. Alan B. Golacinski, the embassy’s security officer, was invited to the Los Angeles premiere and the Washington screening but decided not to go because, he said, it was their moment in the spotlight.

“Let’s let these people have their time,” he said. And a movie about the 444 days, he said, would not supply Hollywood-type excitement. “It would be the National Geographic channel,” he said.

Barry Rosen, another former hostage, had a different perspective. He said the crisis, from November 1979 to January 1981, was no more than “a point of departure” for the movie, which he called a version of “Mission: Impossible.” Mr. Rosen, who has begun work on a documentary himself, added, “If people use this to understand the hostage crisis, then they know nothing about the hostage crisis.”

In any case, Mr. Affleck said the escape made a good story, and so did the C.I.A.’s ruse, that the six were Canadians scouting locations for a movie. As retold in “Argo,” the C.I.A. set up a fake movie company as part of the cover story given to Iranian officials. And a movie about a movie, or even a fake movie, is an easy sell, Mr. Affleck said.

“Maybe it speaks to the narcissism of Hollywood,” he said.

Rodney V. Sickmann, who was a Marine sergeant guard at the embassy, found out by happenstance that “Argo” was in production and was invited to visit the Los Angeles set. Mr. Sickmann said he had some trepidation about how his story as a hostage would be told, but was pleased that Ryan Ahern, who plays him in the opening scenes, as the embassy is stormed, is better-looking than he is. On the set Mr. Sickmann received a standing ovation from the cast, Mr. Affleck said, and Mr. Sickmann’s 21-year-old son, Spencer, an aspiring actor, was given a bit part. (He plays a messenger inside the C.I.A. office.)

“They got him all dressed up in 1979 clothes,” Mr. Sickmann said. “It was kind of eerie to be brought back into that timeline.”

The movie captures a lot of the small details of the period: the sideburns, the cigarettes, the aviator glasses, the black-and-white TV screens, the cigarettes, Ted Koppel and David Brinkley as youthful-looking news stars and, of course, the cigarettes.

It also has lots of gritty detail about things that did not actually happen, like a trip by a solo C.I.A. officer (he had accomplices), assignments as movie crew members as cover identities (the C.I.A. offered a variety of covers) and brave but passive Canadian Embassy workers. (They turned out to provide lots of help, according to the participants.) But almost no one seems to mind, mostly because the film tells the story at all.

The hostages want to stay in the news, because for two decades they have been trying to collect damages from Iran, to be paid from money frozen in American bank accounts by President Carter in 1979, and their options are narrowing. They won a civil case by default, but then a judge ruled in 2002 that they could not collect damages, and this year the Supreme Court turned down their last appeal.

The State Department has argued that damages are forbidden under the Algiers Accords, the agreement that freed the hostages, and that if the courts interfered, it would become more difficult for the executive branch to conduct foreign policy. So now the hostages are asking Congress to change the law.

Their request comes at a time of new appreciation for the hazards of the Foreign Service, as demonstrated by the September attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya. But, increasingly, the hostages live in a country that views their ordeal as history.

Kathryn Koob, another former hostage, said she spoke often to school groups about her experience, and that “Argo” was valuable because it would draw more questions. But, she said, “the kids, they don’t have the in-depth knowledge about it, and many of them are going to have to ask their grandparents about it, as opposed to their parents.”

With the passage of time, the hostages themselves are disappearing. Phillip R. Ward of Culpeper, Va., who was 40 when he was seized, died on Oct. 11.

Ms. Koob and some other former hostages said they would like to see the film to know a bit more about the escape. When it happened, of course, they were incommunicado; some learned about it only when they were released in January 1981.

But the hostages have limited hopes of seeing a movie about themselves. Their return was a moment of national catharsis but something short of victory. As the elder Mr. Sickmann put it: "Hollywood likes happy endings. Our side of the story isn't really happy."