

HELD HOSTAGE

By hannah bulley Updated: on 09/24/2000

FORT INDIANTOWN GAP - Held hostage by a man I didn't know, disoriented and blinded by the darkness of the stormy night, I waited for help.

Mercury photographer Kevin Hoffman sprawled on the stairs outside the entrance. A casualty. Soaked to the bone, silent.

Plastic tarps flapped inside the pitch-black structure, creating a noise that drowned out all other sound except the steady, pounding of rain through the slats of the roof. We were wet and cold, but we waited, listening.

Suddenly, after what seemed like an eternity, we heard a distant shout and I was pulled through the dark house into a small room with a door at either end. Not knowing from which direction they would come, I listened with a vague sense of dread as the Ches-Mont Emergency Response Team and the North Penn Area Tactical Response Team entered the building.

Tense, shivering with anticipation, the man who held me in front of him as a shield shoved me toward the door. I heard the boots, saw the lights approaching under the doorway and, in an instant, I was thrust into a chaotic explosion of blinding lights, shouts, indistinguishable faces and drawn weapons.

"Get down! Get down! Get down!" the rescuers screamed. I didn't

know where my captor had gone, but the screaming continued. I dropped to the floor in a crouch, hugging my knees.

"Get your hands out where we can see them! Put your hands in the air!"

Were they talking to me? I didn't ask. I put my hands out and felt someone twist my arm behind me, slap a handcuff on my left wrist, just catching my wristbone enough to hurt.

"But I'm the hostage," I thought for a fleeting moment as my other hand was twisted behind me and cuffed. Without ceremony, I was hauled off the slippery wooden floor and onto my feet and led briskly from the building.

My captor, Colleagueville police officer Michael Shirey, had been "neutralized."

The training mission was complete.

Back at the barracks at "the Gap," the team discussed the training scenario at a debriefing session.

What worked? What didn't? And why do they handcuff hostages?

That one was easy. Coming into a violent situation, it's not always easy to know who the "bad guys" are, explained New Hanover Township Police Sgt. Joseph Tomaselli, CMERT tactical team commander.

"We do it for safety's sake, to protect everyone," he said. "It's really standard."

There were differences of opinion, of course, but overall the mission had

been a success, defined as the hostages removed and the team beginning to work as the cohesive unit.

Time for a shower, dinner and some "down-time" before beginning again the next morning.

The dawn was rainless but dense fog turned the training site ghostly as the teams suited up for tactical drills.

A full-size bus was stormed repeatedly until team leaders were satisfied with the results. Disarm the engine. Flash-bangs - non-incendiary devices used to stun suspects inside the bus - were deployed, and the team moved in.

Then they did it again.

Yards away, as the sun broke through the fog and the day heated up to a humid 85 degrees, a captor led a hostage from a building, both covered by a blanket to disguise who was who. Like clockwork the team moved in.

Some rescue attempts worked better than others, so they tried it again. They discussed what worked, tried that once more.

Simulated ammunition left tell-tale splashes of paint on vests, coats. A "bad guy" sported a "scalp wound" where paint had blown through the netting of his helmet.

The gear is heavy and uncomfortable. Sweat-drenched and exhausted, the teams broke for lunch then gathered at the shooting ranges.

As the sun sank, I was a hostage again, the second time in two days.

"Sims" (simulated live ammunition) loaded with paint were in play, and I was suited up for protection. I was assured that team members don't shoot the "hostages" - even if they are reporters.

As the scenario advanced, I heard shots fired and backed away from the door. Negotiations began, but "Ernie," (Lansdale Police Sgt. Dean Miller) who held me hostage, could not be satisfied. He was making them work for it, using me as bait.

I yelled to the disembodied voice I heard on the other side of the barricaded hallway door. "Get him the car, get him whatever he wants! Don't let him hurt me!"

Throughout the next hour and a half, Ernie was repeatedly asked to let me tell the team I was all right. I saw no one. My captor and I knew we were surrounded. There was only one door. On the other side were the guns.

Finally Ernie "got nervous" and began to inch me down the hallway, a human shield again. He pulled away a chair, the mattress and pushed open the door.

Before me: guns, men wearing helmets and face shields that rendered them somewhat sinister. I was pressed between the mattress and my captor, guns pointed at both of us as the man in the hallway kept talking.

I do not scare easily. Still, when I looked into the eyes of a man in a face-concealing helmet, his gun tilted just barely upward toward the ceiling, I felt a shiver of fear. It was easy to imagine the confusion a "real hostage" must feel.

With guns pointed at you from front and back, it's difficult to look at a fully suited SWAT team member and not feel a little intimidated - even knowing he is there to help you.

"When I count to three .. Ernie explained his plan. "Three!" he said in a loud whisper and pushed me into the hallway toward the man in the helmet, a man with intense eyes and a loaded gun.

"Go, go, go!" Shouting and yelling, rushing bodies, commotion everywhere. Propelled through the doorway, I felt an iron grip on my arm and took a good slide across the floor, only to find myself dragged to my feet and toward a source of daylight obscured by my helmet.

"OK, were going to handcuff you, miss, just for precautionary measures. Just for your own safety," a voice said. At least this time they missed my wristbone.

"Any weapons on you?" I was "patted down" as a routine safety check, and someone reached forward and pulled the helmet from my head. I was led, handcuffed, from the building.

"Are you OK? Are you sure you're OK?" men asked me. "Slow down, make sure she doesn't trip."

Within minutes, the teams cleared the scene and gathered again to discuss the outcome before calling it a day.

On the drive home that night, Kevin Hoffman and I discussed the different reactions we had as we participated in the scenarios.

I told him what it was like looking down the hallway into the shielded,

unrecognizable faces of men meant to "save" us, feeling that slight fear.

He bragged about his skills on the shooting range.

After 24 hours of living with and observing the Ches-Mont/North Penn teams' training, we were both glad for the experience of helping them prepare for the next "real thing."

"They might play hard, but they work hard too. It's not a game," said Tomaselli.

Trapped in the dark, rain-soaked room that first night, hearing the pounding boots and the shouting as the lights approached the doorway, my adrenaline shot sky-high. I was glad they were "playing" on my side.