

*The Siege:  
A Six-Day Hostage Crisis and the Daring Special-Forces Operation that  
Shocked the World*

Ben Macintyre

London: Viking, 2024, Epub (Kindle) £12.99

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**W**hat did Mr Macintyre think would be achieved by writing this book? I ask because there have been numerous previous publications that, in one way or another, have already covered the events of 45 years ago. The author makes reference to many of them in his text and bibliography. By this count he's made use of eight books by SAS soldiers who were serving in the regiment at the time – four of whom were actually members of the 'Pagoda' assault team. Then there's the versions by political and policing figures – Margaret Thatcher, Willie Whitelaw, Douglas Hurd and (Metropolitan Police Commissioner) Sir David McNee – who also were integral at some level. That's another four. There is the autobiography of the journalist most associated with the media coverage, the redoubtable Kate Adie. Finally, there has even been an account of their incarceration by two of the hostages themselves – Chris Cramer and Sim Harris.

Of the books from members of the SAS assault team, one of them, by Rusty Firmin, was published more than ten years ago and – one suspects with good reason – is described as 'The definitive inside story of the Iranian Embassy Siege'.<sup>1</sup> If you'll pardon the pun, the subject has truly been done to death. How, then, can *The Siege* add anything? Well it can't, really, can it? And certainly not from the way that people's actions, and what they are purported to have said, are seemingly recounted verbatim. Here's a typical example from the first chapter:

The lead gunman flinched and raised his gun: 'Get back across the room,' he snapped in perfect English. Then, more gently, he added: 'Please do not talk. I think it is best you keep quiet. Yes?' Then he switched to Arabic. 'Is this all the hostages?' he asked.

'Yes, I believe so,' answered the tall gunman beside him, his number two.

The voice of the third came from the hallway. 'Salim, come here.'

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<sup>1</sup> Rusty Firmin and Will Pearson, *Go! Go! Go!: The SAS. The Iranian Embassy Siege. The True Story* (London: Orion, 2010)

There is no ambassador. His office is empty.'

Salim shouted back: 'I am coming, be careful, go back to the top and check all rooms one by one, no shooting . . . no shooting, okay?'

The above – and plenty more throughout the book, time and again – is presented as literal reportage! There are no footnotes and, thus, no way to know the veracity of the source. It seems likely that these 'quotes' have been patched together from interviews with those who were involved. However, this is not clearly stated by Macintyre and – considering his use of quotation marks – it should have been.

MacIntyre has the leading hostage taker, Salim, saying 'I am a rare case. Out of four million people, we are only four thousand university graduates' but does not give any semblance of a source. This would be helpful because, of course, Salim was killed by the SAS in the siege-breaking raid and – unlike the surviving hostages or single surviving terrorist – could not have been interviewed for the book. This is compounded by us being told that Salim purchased a pair of fashionable leather 'sneakers' in the colours of the flag of Arabistan (red-and-white): 'These will bring me luck,' he said. 'I will not take them off the whole time I am in the embassy.' Who on earth did he say that to? I can only conclude that a significant dose of creative licence has been used.

What *The Siege* clearly is, therefore, is an amalgam of fact and fiction - 'faction', if you will. And it strikes me that the book reads more like a screenplay for television, which is perhaps Ben Macintyre's real intent. He's written one mini-series and had an additional four of his previous books adapted for the screen.<sup>2</sup> The idea that this book is intended for television is reinforced by the (albeit brief) appearance of that staple of action shows – some 'gun porn':

Most of the men carried a compact Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun, the regiment's weapon of choice: light, accurate, capable of firing thirteen rounds a second, and reliably lethal. Some had the silenced or the shorter version. Each man had four magazines with thirty rounds of full-metal-jacketed 9 × 19mm parabellum bullets.

There's also a flash of appeal to Little Englanders and their jingoistic fantasies: 'The SAS Special Projects team might have been setting out to repel the invasion of Britain – which, in a way, they were'. At that point, my eyes started to roll into the back of my head – and it was only chapter one!

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<sup>2</sup> See <<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2788226/>>. His 'SAS: Rouge Heroes' for the BBC also stretches credibility because it purports to show events from the Second World War and yet the incidental music features thrashing heavy metal, a genre not invented until the 1970s.

In a Nigel Farage kind of way, MacIntyre can also be annoyingly non-PC. He mentions the chain-smoking that took place inside the building – both by hostages and terrorists – but then dismisses the possibility that this would be medically detrimental to any of the non-smokers by claiming that ‘[T]his was 1980. Passive smoking had not been invented.’ This is chapter five and there were still another fifteen to press on through. Bravely, to save you the bother, I knuckled under.

Granted, some of Macintyre’s research has been meticulous and there are small biographies of all those involved, many containing snippets of interesting information. For example, one of the hostages, the Iranian ‘diplomat’ (and member of the Revolutionary Guard) Abbas Lavasani, was a former ‘friend and contemporary [of current Iranian President] Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’.

However, when he does get it wrong, Macintyre gets it very wrong. Identification by DNA testing was not possible until the mid-80s<sup>3</sup> – the siege occurred in April-May of 1980, remember – but Macintyre has it that, ‘Discreetly, police also sought to obtain a hairbrush, comb, or some other object carrying the [hostage’s] DNA.’ He also claims that, ‘In 1980, the science of genetic mapping was in its infancy’ and that, if there were a massacre within the confines of the Embassy ‘a few scraps of human tissue might be all that remained to identify the dead’. But he’s glaringly wrong again here: the science of ‘genetic mapping’ had been around since the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

I also find it revealing that, for someone who claims to have had direct access to members of the Special Air Service – indeed, boasted in media publicity that this was ‘the first-ever authorised accounts from the soldiers involved’ – throughout the book Macintyre misspells the name of Fijian Staff Sergeant Tom Morrell as ‘Tom Morell’.<sup>5</sup> I was also bemused by the fact that reference is made to ‘a hijacking at Stansted in 1975’, ‘a train hijacking in Holland in 1977’ and ‘the Balcombe Street siege’ in London of 1975 but not to the hostage rescue of Lufthansa Flight 181 at Mogadishu (October 1977). In the former three, the SAS involvement was at best minor but, in the last, Germany’s counter-terrorist unit GSG-9 had relied on the direct assistance of

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Alec Jeffreys discovered DNA genetic fingerprinting at Southampton University in 1984. See the section ‘The Genesis of DNA Testing’ beginning on page 4 of <<https://www.sdap.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/research/criminal/pc15.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the section on the ‘History of genetic mapping’ by Newton E. Morton (of the University of Southampton) beginning on page 1537 of the *Encyclopedia of Genetics, Genomics, Proteomics and Bioinformatics*, edited by Dr. Lynn B. Jorde, Professor Peter Little, Dr. Michael J. Dunn and Professor Shankar Subramaniam (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See <<https://shorturl.at/UYXy6>> or <<https://www.forcesnews.com/services/special-forces/sitrep-first-ever-authorised-accounts-sas-iranian-embassy-raid-shed-light>>.

two SAS members.<sup>6</sup> I was beginning to wonder if Mr Macintyre really had a firm grip of his brief.

Let us also consider how the book presents Middle-Eastern politics – for it is blinkered, at best. We are told that Saddam Hussein '[Incited] rebellion among the Arabs of neighboring Khuzestan [as] an easy and cheap way to undermine the ayatollah and destabilize Iran'; that 'Bands of Iranian Arabs were trained in Iraq, armed, and sent back across the border'; and 'These Arab guerrillas saw themselves as fighters for independence, but they were dependent on Saddam Hussein, pawns cynically manipulated by the Iraqi leader for his own ends.'

But these events are being looked at through a post-Gulf War, post-90s, filter. We get no thought on – no admission of – Western government culpability in it all, cosying up to Saddam Hussein at the time simply because he was our enemy's enemy.

Perhaps the silliest thing about this book is the one major thing that was pushed during the advance publicity: a big 'reveal' about who, ultimately, had been behind the planning of the Embassy Siege. Well, Macintyre is quite the tease, because readers have to wait until chapter 12 to find it. Out of the blue, we are told that one (and only one) of the terrorists – the leader, Salim – knew that it was Abu Nidal but '[n]one of the other gunmen involved had any knowledge that he was the mastermind, acting on behalf of Saddam Hussein'.

Salim had apparently told this to one of the hostages (the Syrian journalist Mustapha Karkouti). It is, therefore, derived from a single source. As I have already noted about quotes attributed to Salim, despite his death during the 'Pagoda' assault, that makes it, like much else in the book, unverifiable.

Lastly, I would like to address how the SAS assault is described in the title of this book. It was an operation 'that shocked the world' and, indeed, it should have – but not, I suspect for the reason Mr Macintyre believes it did. I am referring here to the killing – the over-kill used in the killing – of the terrorists. Make no mistake, I am not excusing the crime those hostage takers had clearly committed. They had, themselves, committed unconscionable murder. The response from the SAS team can also be described as ferocious.

The five terrorists who died were shot an average of 16 times each; and that being the average means that the actual figures were more varied. Only one of them – 'Hassan' – was killed with a single bullet. Another – 'Makki' –

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<sup>6</sup> Those two being Major Alastair Morrison and Sergeant Barry Davies. See, 'Mogadishu Recalled' by Major General Peter Williams CMG OBE at the website of *The Guards Magazine* (Morrison and Davies having originally been, respectively, from the Scots Guards and the Welsh Guards). <[http://guardsmagazine.com/features/Winter2018/04\\_Mogadishu.html](http://guardsmagazine.com/features/Winter2018/04_Mogadishu.html)>.

was shot four times. The remaining three – ‘Salim’, ‘Abbas’ and ‘Faisal’ - were shot 15 times (six of which were to the head), 21 times and (in what Macintyre describes as ‘a long, unbroken, deafening volley’) 39 times.<sup>7</sup> These were shocking deaths, for certain. But of that, Ben Macintyre makes no consideration.

This book is undoubtedly for the popular market – for that is, of course, where the money is. As far as being an actual contribution to the historical analysis of the events, as I referred to at the beginning, it’s getting on for being twenty years too late.

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<sup>7</sup> Regarding Faisal, the coroner at the inquest, Dr. Paul Knapman, is quoted as stating: ‘This man was really peppered.’