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*In an exclusive interview with The University of Memphis Magazine, alumnus Roy Hallums recounts his harrowing tale of being held hostage in Iraq for nearly a year.*

## Homecoming

by Eric Smith

The image is indelible, burned into the consciousness of a nation. Grainy video footage, shown on television stations and webcasts everywhere, reveals a bearded and beleaguered man sitting cross-legged while rubbing his hands.

The barrel of a gun is pointed at his head.

"My name is Roy Hallums," the man begins, his voice quivering. "I'm an American national and I have worked with the American forces. I have been arrested by a resistance group in Iraq."



**Roy Hallums**

He goes on to say his life is in danger. He begs for help. Then the video is over.

For most Americans, this is all they know of Hallums, the University of Memphis alumnus who, while working in Baghdad, was kidnapped by armed gunmen in November 2004 and held hostage until rescued by coalition troops in September 2005.

For the man himself, and for the family who spent nearly a year praying and pleading for his release, the video is only a portion — literally a blip on the screen — of the anguish he endured during 311 days of captivity in an underground hell.

### **From Memphis to the Middle East**

Roy Hallums Jr. was born in Arkansas in 1948 and grew up in the Frayser area of north Memphis. After graduating from Frayser High School he enrolled at then-Memphis State University, earning a business degree in 1972.

During a recent visit to campus, Hallums reminisced about his time at the U of M.

He remembered watching students gather near the flagpole in front of the Administration Building to protest Vietnam. He remembered taking 15 hours a semester and spending most of his time studying in the library. He remembered getting special parking privileges closer to his classrooms as a senior.

"It's all good memories," says the soft-spoken and contemplative Hallums, now 58.

Bill Lofton (BBA '72) knew Hallums in high school and college, and they wound up marrying best friends. Lofton, who works for U of M athletics, remembers Hallums as a serious student.

"Roy was a very intelligent, intense person," Lofton says.

After graduation Hallums went to work for the U.S. Navy Supply Corps. He spent 20 years with the Navy, including a stint at the Pentagon. During this time, he and his then-wife Susan had two daughters, Carrie and Amanda.

The Hallumses divorced in 2003 but remained close friends. By then Susan and the girls were living in California, and Roy was living in Saudi Arabia, working as a contractor for that country's navy. In December 2003, after 10 years with the Saudi navy, Hallums took a job with the Saudi Arabian Trading and Construction Co., which provided catering for the Iraqi army.

He ended up in Baghdad — without his family knowing — and even though he lived and worked in the city's Mansour District, which he called the "best part of Baghdad," Hallums understood the dangers that lurked in and around the city as the conflict in Iraq escalated. From bombs exploding nearby to Iraqis shooting their guns in the streets, Hallums was surrounded by chaos.

"I knew it was a dangerous place before I went there," he says. "Everybody who goes there knows this."

### **A fateful day**

To avoid danger, Hallums says he would travel in groups, never alone. He felt safe at his office, which was in a converted two-story house and protected by armed guards. On the afternoon of Nov. 1, 2004, however, his security was breached, his safety shattered, his world changed forever.

It was a typical workday, a Monday, and Hallums was sitting at his desk when he heard a commotion.

"I looked up and there were these four guys who had machine guns,"

he says. "They said, 'Come with us or we'll kill you.' So I went with them."



Hallums panicked as horrific images raced through his mind.

He recalled, specifically, the grisly death of Nicholas Berg, an American who earlier that year was taken hostage and beheaded on videotape for all to see.

But having lived in Baghdad for almost a year, Hallums also knew of insurgents who kidnapped solely for money. Perhaps this was one of

those groups. As his captors carted him away, Hallums wasn't sure if he was doomed to the private indignity of imprisonment or the public infamy of execution.

"You don't know what's going to happen," he says. "You see this stuff on TV, all the beheadings, so you don't know if it's a group like that, or if it's somebody that wants money, or if they're just going to kill you on the spot."

The kidnappers blindfolded him, bound his hands and feet with nylon straps and drove him to a house where they held him for a day before transporting him again. About a week later they drove him to another house. Then another.

"At first they would move me every Friday," Hallums says. "They would throw you in the trunk of a car and drive around for a few hours and then they'd end up at a different house. That was every Friday until the middle of December, and then in December that's when they put me down in the hole."

Before they tossed him in the forsaken place where he would languish for the remainder of his captivity, Hallums' abductors sat him in front of a video camera. The entire world would soon know his fate.

## 'My life is in danger ... '

It took Hallums about 30 minutes to memorize and two minutes to say the words his captors scripted for him. It took two or three takes before they were happy with it.

"You're basically just doing what you're told," Hallums says. "You've got the guy there with a gun to your head, he's saying 'If you don't say this correctly, I'll kill you.' And so you say it."

In the video he shuns help from President Bush and instead pleads for Arab leaders, namely Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, to come to his aid. Americans, especially his friends, knew Hallums wouldn't deliberately disrespect his president and nation. They knew he was under duress.

"You could tell it was killing his soul to defame the United States," Lofton says.

More than anything, it was killing Hallums' soul to imagine his family watching the video, which was released in late January, about a month after it was made.

"What I was thinking is I hate for my daughters to see this," he says, "because it will scare them to death."

It did. For those close to Hallums, the video was heartrending.

"I could tell that he was bruised, that he was being beaten and mistreated," says daughter Carrie, 30, whose last name is now Cooper.

"I saw the pain in his voice and in his eyes, asking for his family's help," says Susan Hallums, 54.

Yet the video also let them know he was probably still alive.

"It gave me hope," Susan says. "It kind of gave me the energy to keep going."

Though Hallums understood the world would be alerted to his situation and would be able to pray for his release or plan for his rescue, there was more to it. His captors could now wait patiently for a response from his family or country.

"You know when you're doing the video that you got a lot more time to go," Hallums says, "that there's not going to be a quick resolution."

### **Tracking time**

Hallums spent most of his time as a hostage in a concrete pit beneath a farmhouse. He says the room, basically the crawl space of a house, was about 7 feet by 9 feet and only 4 feet high. It had a small door in the ceiling, and it was almost always dark.

"They just had one little light in there, like the light in a refrigerator," Hallums says. "When they would bring the food down they would turn the light on. But that was the only time."

Hallums was constantly bound and blindfolded. He got out of his cell once a day to use the bathroom until his captors grew weary of letting him aboveground. So they placed a portable toilet below and made him use that.

His diet consisted of water and rice with lamb or chicken until his captors began leaving for long periods of time and stopped keeping fresh meat around. So they fed him sardines.

"I like sardines, but rice and sardines every day for three months, that gets a little old," he says.

Hallums' captors had taken his clothes and dressed him in a jogging suit. He donned the suit for about three or four months until it reeked so badly that they gave him a new one.

But the brutal conditions went beyond his diet and attire. Every day he bore unpleasantnesses that ranged from repulsive odors to annoying insects to miserable temperatures.

"You could smell the goats and the sheep, and the sand flies would come in," he says. "Since it was underground, in the winter it was kind of damp and sometimes it would cause condensation on the ceiling, [water] dropping in your face all the time.

"In the summer it was really, really hot," he adds. "The temperatures over there were 105, 110 in the summer, and this place had no ventilation, nothing. Once in a while they would have a little electric fan they would sit by the door because it would get so hot. But you were sweaty 24 hours a day."

A small pipe in the ceiling provided the room's only oxygen — and its only link to the outside world. With no television or radio, Hallums counted the days and weeks and months using the broadcasts of religious services he could hear in the distance.

"The Muslim holy day is Friday, and their main service is 11 o'clock," he says. "When they do that there's a loudspeaker system on all the mosques so you can hear the services going on. I could hear that and know it was Friday at 11 o'clock."

Each transmission signaled a victory of sorts, albeit a short-lived one.

"You were glad you got through that week," he says, "but then you start thinking about what's going to happen the next week — will I hear it again next Friday?"

**The \$12 million man**



Confined in that dark, tiny space with no room to stand up and no idea if he would live or die, Hallums faced nonstop psychological torture. Physical torture wasn't routine, but Hallums says his captors would beat him with their fists, belts or pistol barrels when the situation was warranted.

"It was off and on, usually when they were asking questions or wanted to know something, or when they moved me from place to place," he says. "They wanted to know who I worked for and my family's telephone number."

Hallums refused to give that up, because he didn't want his captors harassing his family and demanding ransom money.

"I knew they would say, 'Give us the money or we're going to kill Roy,'" he says.

As it happened, his captors were asking \$12 million for Hallums' release, an exorbitant amount undoubtedly because he was an American. He says he told them his family didn't have that kind of money.

The United States doesn't negotiate with terrorists but does allow private citizens to pay ransoms. So Susan Hallums, who was informed by the FBI of the ransom demand, did what she could to raise funds, even putting her mother's Frayser home on the market and calling it the "Freedom House." But that would have only raised \$40,000.

Meanwhile, Hallums says his captors would frequently toss another prisoner below, usually an Iraqi captured for the same reason — money. Hallums says his fellow hostages would be held for a ransom of \$5,000 to \$50,000, depending on how much the captors thought the family could pay.

The addition of other hostages, up to nine, made the already small and sweltering quarters even worse. They didn't speak English, but Hallums wouldn't have tried conversing even if they did.

"They told us if they heard us talking they'd kill us," Hallums says.

To pass the time, Hallums says he would think about the vacations he hoped to take if he were released, including visits to family in California and Detroit, and longer excursions to Europe.

"Here you are, you're tied up, it's dark 24 hours a day, no news from anything, so I would think about taking these trips," he says.

But in the unbearable blackness, where time slowed to an agonizing crawl, his thoughts often went deeper. With all the energy and hope and courage he could muster, Hallums focused simply on preserving his will to live.

"The whole time," he says, "I was just thinking, 'Get through the day. Go on to tomorrow. Hope you survive tomorrow. Just keep going.'"

### **Keeping the faith**

Like any hostage, Hallums considered escaping, dreamed of busting out and reclaiming his freedom. But they were fleeting thoughts.

He was bound and blindfolded. The door above him was locked. There were four or five armed men in the house. And, he surmised, it was a long way to safety through an area that wouldn't be kind to a lone American looking for a ride. So Hallums, a self-described "good Southern Baptist," used faith to survive this hellhole, praying to God that his life, at the very least, wouldn't come to an excruciating end.

"Every day you pray to get through the day and don't let anything happen," he says, "or if it does happen, let it be quick and not slow."

He also hoped his fellow Americans were praying for his safe return, but he feared being forgotten by a country that so quickly moves on to the next headline.

Back in the states, Cooper launched a Web site ([royhallums.4t.com](http://royhallums.4t.com)) to keep her father's story in the public eye. She and Susan held a candlelight vigil on Roy's 57th birthday, in June, and spoke tirelessly to the media, even the Arabic news channel Al-Jazeera, pleading for Roy's release.

"We just begged for my dad's life," Cooper says.

As for Hallums, he banked on one group in particular not forgetting.

"I knew the [military] people in Iraq would keep looking for me," he says.

Hallums never knew what his captors were devising, whether they were awaiting ransom money, plotting his death or planning to leave him underground to rot. Though none of them spoke much English, and Hallums spoke only a little Arabic, he eventually picked up on clues as to what was happening aboveground.

Near the end of his captivity — although at the time he didn't know it — Hallums received less attention from his captors and he heard them pouring cement over the door, as if they were trying to conceal the cell's entrance.

He also heard increased helicopter activity, which left him with mixed emotions. Hopeful as he was that rescuers were getting close, Hallums suddenly grew more fearful of suffering a prolonged, solitary death.

"It was totally black and you know there's no way out of there," he says. "If they just decided to drive off and leave you, nobody would ever know you were there."

Thankfully, somebody did know.

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# Homecoming

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## 'Are you Roy?'

Hallums says Sept. 7, 2005, started out like any other day: He awoke from a fitful sleep and had sardines for breakfast. He wasn't sure of the time, but he sensed it was morning because of the food delivery. Like usual, he ate, drank some water and lay back down to dream up another vacation.

Little did he know that his wildest dreams were about to come true.

Around lunchtime, he began hearing helicopters. The whirring grew louder, as if they "had landed on the house," he says. Then Hallums heard the sound of people scurrying above him.



"I hoped it was somebody there to rescue me," he says, "but after 311 days you think it's probably not going to happen."

Someone began pounding on the

ceiling door with a sledgehammer. As he listened to the cacophony above, Hallums ripped off his blindfold, and the door crashed down. Dust kicked up and sunlight flooded the room.

"And then this soldier jumps down and he's got his fatigues on and pistols and he's got a machine gun," Hallums says. "He says, 'Are you Roy?' I say, 'Yes.' He says, 'Come on, we're getting out of here.' I say, 'Good.'"

Hallums waited upstairs with his rescuers, who gave him something to drink and told him a helicopter would return shortly. The soldiers searched the house, but the kidnappers had fled. The soldiers told Hallums they honed in on him after a detainee disclosed the location of the farmhouse. Another hostage, an Iraqi, was also rescued.

Fifteen minutes later the helicopter returned, and it whisked Hallums to an Air Force Base, where he received a check-up. Military doctors told him he needed medical attention — he was malnourished and dehydrated and had rashes on his skin — but he was OK to travel.

Under the watchful eye of doctors, Hallums drank as much water as he needed and ate a turkey sandwich as his strength returned — and the reality of his newfound freedom began to sink in.

"I was just sitting there thinking, 'I can't believe this is really over,'" he says. "A miracle. A real miracle."

After being cleared by doctors, Hallums boarded a plane bound for Germany. From there he flew to Chicago. And from there, he boarded the plane that would bring him home, to Memphis, to his family.

### **Home at last**

The Sept. 9 reunion at Memphis International Airport was a joyous one, an early Christmas gift, as Susan calls it. She was waiting on the runway with the couple's daughters, granddaughter Sabrina and other family members.

During his long journey from Baghdad to Memphis, Hallums was yearning for the moment when he could embrace each one of them.

"That was all I was thinking about," he says.

Finally, to the delight — and disbelief — of everyone, Hallums appeared.

"I crumbled when I saw him," Susan says.

By then, the media frenzy was on, but Hallums chose not to speak with reporters and instead issued a statement.

Prior to sitting down with *The University of Memphis Magazine* last spring and the Discovery Channel this summer, Hallums was featured on *60 Minutes* last fall. The show was filmed at The Peabody Hotel and gave the country its first opportunity to hear Hallums' story and see how he was holding up.

Hallums' medical problems are minor but still lingering, like the pain in his shoulders and knees from sleeping on cement for 311 days. He was able to regain the 35 pounds he lost — "too easily," he jokes.

Emotionally, Hallums believes he's OK. He says he doesn't have nightmares when he sees clips of his own chilling story on the news. He still doesn't consider himself claustrophobic. And he's ready to work again.

A few old high school and college friends have contacted Hallums since his return, and though they usually don't ask too many questions about what happened, he says it doesn't bother him if they do.

Hallums isn't entirely sure why he was able to last 10 months as a hostage, especially as people tell him there's no way they would have made it. He credits a military background, at least partially, for his survival. No matter what the reason, Hallums is a living testament to the human spirit, proof that people can endure anything.

"To me, it was just something I had to do and get through," he says.

But Hallums defied the odds. As of press time, and according to numerous reports, 18 known Americans have been taken hostage in Iraq since April 2004. One escaped and five, including Hallums, were rescued or released. The remaining 12 were killed or are still missing.

### **Grateful**

Hallums, who lives in Cordova, outside Memphis, was invited to the White House in October 2005 to visit with President Bush. He says the President was relaxed and laid back, evidenced by the cowboy boots he wore with his suit and the easygoing conversation. The two spoke in the Oval Office for about 30 minutes.

"He seemed interested and concerned," Hallums says. "He knew a lot about [my situation]."

Not even Hallums knows everything about his situation, like the identities of his captors. He knows only that they were Sunni insurgents operating in a menacing area just outside Baghdad called the "Triangle of Death."

Hallums doesn't know much about his rescuers, either, only that the memory of their heroic deed will forever dwell in his mind, in his heart, in his soul.

During the rescue, the soldier who pulled Hallums out handed him an American flag patch. That flag, which Hallums drew from his shirt pocket and flashed during the 60 Minutes interview, represents the liberty given back to

him by those soldiers after a year of being locked away, in fear he would never see his family again.

"They came through for me," Hallums says. "There's no way I could ever repay or thank them."



Hallums instead pays tribute to his rescuers — indeed, to anyone who has fought or is fighting for freedom — by celebrating the things that were once taken from him. Sunrises and sunsets. A warm spring breeze. Reunions with old friends. Phone calls and visits from his daughters and ex-wife. Hugs from his granddaughter and new grandson.

They serve as reminders that nothing should be taken for granted — that each precious moment in life is worth savoring.

"I'm thankful," Hallums says, "for every day."

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