

How I've learned to live with freedom

DANIEL START, former hostage, looks at the hotel room and four-poster bed and declares: "This is just like the Sheraton room we were helicoptered into after being rescued from four months' captivity in the jungle."

However, on that occasion, emaciated and exhausted, Daniel felt the hotel carpet, touched the wood surfaces and played with all the gadgets like a Stone Age man emerging into modernity.

He was rescued a year ago yesterday, after 129 gruelling days of kidnap in one of the most remote, unknown regions on earth: the jungles of Irian Jaya, the Indonesian-ruled half of New Guinea.

Daniel, three other Cambridge University graduates and eight aid workers and members of his research group were tied up by a hundred howling rebel tribesmen wielding bows, spears, guns and machetes and naked except for penis gourds, pig tusks through their noses and painted faces. A gun bullet closely missed hitting Daniel.

Then they were kidnapped by the tribesmen — members of the Free Papua Movement (OPM) fighting for Irian Jaya independence from Indonesia — and marched into the jungle. "They believed, by taking us hostage, our big white chief would be able to give them their freedom."

The hostages endured starvation and ate rats, bats, potatoes and frogs; suffered eight-hour enforced climbs up sheer mountains dropping perilously over jagged rocks and marches over dangerously surging rivers; and withstood life-threatening illnesses when they were four days' walk from the nearest hut. They were told that one captive, pregnant Martha Klein, was carrying the next Messiah.

They captives were kept mostly in guarded huts, "sleeping stacked together like spoons", and moved to 17 different locations. Daniel had only the clothes — "greasy slacks, orange shirt and M&S brogues" — he was wearing. Finally, after two months of Red Cross negotiations had broken down, the army came in with bombs, guns and helicopters. But just minutes before freedom, the hostages witnessed the slaughter of two of their friends, hacked to death.

It is an epic, moving

After four months of captivity in the jungle, Daniel is coming to terms with life again



The Caroline Phillips

Interview

Daniel Start
FORMER HOSTAGE

story of courage and physical and psychological endurance, and one which Daniel has captured in his book, *The Open Cage: The Ordeal of The Irian Jaya Hostages*. So now he has had a year to readjust to civilisation, what has been the impact of his horrifying ordeal?

Daniel, 24, is wearing hiking boots, rucksack and jeans, as if ready for another rigorous expedition. He has the preternaturally high forehead of an egghead, tight curly hair

'It was as if we had been abducted by aliens'

and talks volubly in a self-assured, sometimes condescending, manner.

The day of their release, after the Sheraton Press conference, they were whisked through Jakarta in limousines to the Presidential Hospital. "Nothing seemed to make sense any longer," says Daniel. "It was all so outside our experience of the last six months. So surreal."

They were locked in individual rooms and a nurse told them to rest. He wanted to curl up on the floor in a corner. "It was like being abducted by aliens. I kept wondering 'Now how do I escape from here?' I wanted to speak to my parents and have a pizza."

Three days after their rescue, the Cambridge graduates were flown to Heathrow and met by their parents. Government Minister Jeremy

Hanley and police. "I hadn't slept or eaten properly for a week," recalls Daniel. "I felt exhausted and stressed."

"It was like stepping off the moon. I'd just come from dodging arrows and living in primitive conditions, saw my parents for five minutes, then was rushed to a huge Press conference." That same day, he suffered his first attack of malaria — which he has had twice since.

Then he went to stay with his mother Carolyn, an image consultant, in Cornwall. There he started to come to terms with what had happened. "That's when the healing began, the first process of reintegration and realising one was free. But it was difficult and debilitating doing even simple things like making a phone call or watching television. I didn't have the nervous energy."

"Driving a car, walking along a cliff path or going into a dark house reminded me of the ever-present possibility of a sudden, violent end. There's a great wound from seeing people who are almost members of your family being axed to death and from being a prisoner that long with the constant threat of violence."

HE FELT the need to be alone. His relationship with the other hostages had been surprisingly unfriendly. "We were in an isolated environment and after a few weeks you run out of things to talk about. We certainly didn't become close friends, we're very different people," says Daniel. "I'll always have an affection for them because of what we went through, but we



RELEASE: Daniel, above, with some of his fellow hostages and in a relaxed mood, right

spent a lot of time sitting in solitude and silence with nothing going on except the trees waving in the wind."

Hunger, particularly, had caused tensions in the group. "I was probably one of the worst — I got the hungriest. I was always watching to see if someone had stolen a potato and who was getting the bad one."

Afterwards he found himself full of rage. "I had a lot of misdirected anger and resentment and would think, 'Why did I have to be stuck in that place with those people?' and 'Why didn't that person pull his weight more?'"

But shortly after his return he met the other former captives from Cambridge University, Annette van der Kolk, Bill Oates and Anna McIvor. "We'd always thought about May Week at Cambridge — with its punting, garden parties and May balls — as one of the dates we hoped we'd be back for," says Daniel. "It turned out to be a good way to reintegrate ourselves into being social."

Then, just a month after their return, they went to Buckingham Palace to give Prince Philip an account of their ordeal. It was the day of Trooping the Colour, the area was sealed off and they walked through St James's Park. "Helicopters started circling and there was a huge boom as they fired the cannon. I screamed, 'Get down!' and pulled the others to the ground."

Daniel returned to Cornwall. He was having nightmares and was told to contact his doctor for counselling. Instead he chose to see alternative therapists. "I believe in reincarnation and consider what happened an important part of my life journey and who I've become," he says. "It was

inspiring, a period of growth. I've realised the importance of quiet times and am stronger about living for the moment. I connected with nature because there was nothing else but nature."

But his primary therapy and catharsis came from writing his book, which he found "horrendously gruelling, a penance". He wrote for six months, sometimes 12 hours a day, resting only on Sundays. "I spent most of my time alone in a remote house on the cliffs overlooking the sea. I wasn't that solitary before my hostage experience. But I needed a silent place."

"As I went over the experience, my emotions mirrored it. When I was immersed in a scary, violent part, I became frightened, even when I wasn't writing. When I described starvation, I needed to eat junk food. I felt I had to suffer and go through the feelings again to get back to the depth of feeling that I'd suffered."

RAISED in North London, he attended Highgate school (achieving 4 A's at A level) and did conservation work in Uganda and cycled in Romania during his year out. At Cambridge he read natural sciences, whilst yearning for the nature and spiritual freedom he'd experienced in Uganda. That was what made him organise the expedition in Irian Jaya.

He has just returned from a month in Irian Jaya. "I went for a sense of completion and closure." He saw the Red Cross people, the surviving Javanese team members and families of the murdered Indonesians. He also concluded his scientific report. "We owe it to the people who died to produce something in their memory."



KIDNAPPERS: Members of the Free Papua Movement, who held Daniel and his colleagues for 129 days