

Hostage crisis appears to be nearing an end

NORRISTOWN, Pa. (CNS) — The family of freed American hostage Joseph James Cicippio celebrated his release Dec. 2, as family members prepared to fly to Germany to meet him.

Cicippio, 61, was reunited with his Lebanese-born wife in Syria Dec. 2. He was abducted Sept. 12, 1986, while en route to his job as acting controller at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon.

The drama surrounding Cicippio was followed one day later by the release of American Alann Steen, who was freed by Shiite Muslim extremists after five years of captivity in Lebanon. Steen looked thin and pale during a brief news conference Dec. 3 at the Syrian Foreign Ministry.

As the *Catholic Courier* was going to press Tuesday afternoon, Dec. 3, speculation was growing that the last American captive, former Batavia resident Terry Anderson, would soon walk free as well. The Reuters news agency reported on Tuesday that Anderson would be released on Dec. 4.

Asked about Anderson, Steen said one of his captors said he would be out "in about a week." Steen and Anderson had been kidnapped by separate Lebanese groups.

The Beirut office of Iran's official news agency said Anderson, 44, who was kidnapped in March 1985, could be freed by the end of the week. He is

held by an Iranian-allied Shiite group called Islamic Jihad.

Two German hostages were still in the hands of pro-Iranian kidnapers, but they were also expected to be released within a week. Seven other Westerners have been released since August.

Cicippio's brother, Thomas, told reporters Dec. 2 that he couldn't wait to see his brother.

"The first thing I will do is give him a hug, of course, and I definitely will want to take a good look at him," Thomas Cicippio told reporters Dec. 2 from his home in Norristown, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia.

He said he had learned of his brother's release through a 4 a.m. telephone call from the State Department.

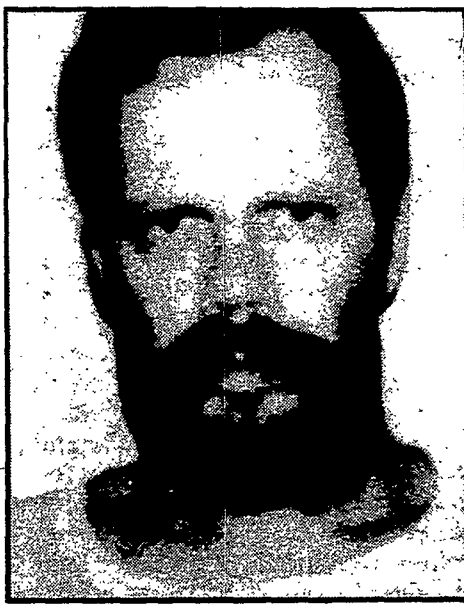
"Thanksgiving certainly did come on Monday this year," he said.

In Paris, a French television cameraman who was held hostage with Cicippio for nine months said the American read the Koran every day and that his Islamic faith helped him through the ordeal.

Raised a Catholic, Cicippio converted to Islam prior to his 1985 marriage to Elham Ghandour, 34, who is his second wife.

During their captivity together, Cicippio clung to his faith, according to cameraman Jean-Louis Normandin.

"It was strange," Normandin told a



AP/Wide World Photos
This photo of Batavia native Terry Anderson, chief Middle East correspondent for the Associated Press, was released in 1988.

French television network. "He was very Catholic and was very much in agreement with himself within Islam."

Joseph Cicippio's former Catholic parish in Norristown, St. Paul's, has included him and the other hostages in its prayers every week, according to Thomas Cicippio.

Without fail, Thomas Cicippio, 67, has marked each day Americans have been held against their will in Lebanon

with lawn signs bearing the name of each U.S. hostage and his days in captivity.

To mark his brother's release, Thomas Cicippio nailed up a tag reading "Free at last" to his brother's sign.

With his wife and his brother's sons David and Eric, Thomas Cicippio was preparing to leave Dec. 2 for Germany to reunite with the former hostage.

David Cicippio said that at a news conference televised from Damascus, Syria, his father looked very thin and fragile.

"I was happy I finally got a chance to see him, but at the same time I was a little disheartened by his appearance," he said. Upon his release, Joseph Cicippio told reporters in Damascus he had undergone stomach surgery two months ago.

Cicippio's reunion with his family will be shadowed by several deaths that occurred during his captivity.

Just over a year ago, the eldest of his seven children, Joseph Jr., died of a heart attack at age 35; a sister and two in-laws died soon after his abduction.

Another sister, Helen Fazio, has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer and in June was given two months to live. She said she defied the odds out of determination to see her brother again.

Contains information from the Associated Press.



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