

# ARGUMENTS



## Our other man in Tehran

To those inside, the 'resourceful and resilient' John Sheardown played as big a role in the Canadian caper as ambassador Ken Taylor, writes **ROBERT WRIGHT**.

John Sheardown was a charter member of "the greatest generation," to borrow Tom Brokaw's apt phrase, men and women who came of age during the Great Depression, fought in the Second World War and worked to achieve Western hegemony in the postwar world.

Born in Windsor, Ont., in 1924, Sheardown served in the RCAF during the Second World War. He once broke both legs in a low-level parachute drop over England (for which he was awarded a "caterpillar card," one of his prized possessions). After crawling from the drop zone to a local pub in the dead of night, Sheardown introduced himself to the owner and asked him for a Scotch.

Sheardown's military service extended to the Korean War, after which he joined the Canadian foreign service. In June 1978 he was posted to the Canadian embassy in Tehran, where he served as head of the immigration section. Sheardown arrived just as the revolution that would bring the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power was bursting into full flame. Accompanied by his wife of three years, Zena, he had made his way overland by car from London, England, a 5,000-kilometre journey. The last thousand kilometres of the trip had taken the Sheardowns into Iran via Turkey, through the cities of Tabriz and Rasht, and finally into Tehran. They were struck by the "frenzied" atmosphere in the cities, as Zena later put it, where the various guerrilla forces arrayed against the Shah were fighting to drive him from power. Within weeks of the Sheardowns' arrival, events accelerated at a speed no one — not the CIA or even the Ayatollah himself — had anticipated. By September, the Shah was forced to impose martial law. By February 1979, he was in exile and a triumphant Khomeini was consolidating his Islamic Republic.

The Sheardowns lived in a house in the city's north end that had been lately vacated by the Canadian military attaché. Occasionally they received death threats that appear to have been meant for him.

John's main consular duty was to manage the growing deluge of visa and emigration applications from Iranians hoping to come to Canada. Fifty-five years old, heavy-set, ruddy-faced with a full white beard and moustache, the pipe-smoking Sheardown had a grandfatherly appeal that endeared him to many of his younger colleagues. He exuded the sort of quiet but unyielding resolve that made him a natural leader in a crisis.

Sheardown worked alongside ambassador Ken Taylor, who appreciated having an "unruffled, resourceful and resilient" comrade in such lawless and unpredictable circumstances. "John was a Canadian who not only was brave, heroic and an example of valour in the Canadian military during World War II," says Taylor today, "but then was a model public servant during peacetime."

Roger Lucy, who was then first secretary at the embassy, agrees. "John's mature professionalism, courage and calm demeanour was inspiration to all staff at the Canadian Embassy," says Lucy. "While managing the delicate and complex task of running the visa and immigration programme, he also played a major part in organizing the evacuation of hundreds of Canadians and other foreign nationals

from Iran in the chaotic early months of 1979."

On Nov. 4, 1979, Iranian students loyal to Khomeini stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking 54 diplomats hostage and setting in motion the 444-day Iran Hostage Crisis. John Sheardown knew, possibly as early as the day the U.S. embassy was attacked, that his friend Bob Anders, an American consular official, had not been taken hostage. How he came by this information the unfailingly discreet Sheardown himself never divulged. "He heard it through the grapevine," Zena later recalled, with a smile.

Knowing that Anders might be in need of refuge, John and Zena agreed to open their home to him — regardless of what Canada's official position might be. "We knew the situation, how dire it was," said Zena. "We knew there would be very few people, volunteers, willing to stick their necks out for the Americans. We decided that should he call and ask for help, we would take him in. It was just between the two of us."

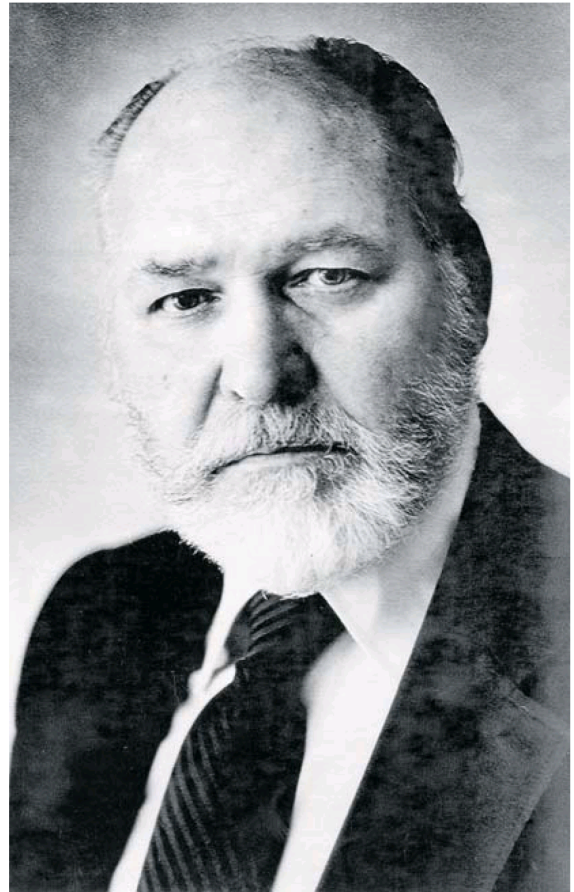
As it happened, Anders' call for help did not come until five days later. He and four other consular officials had been moving stealthily between various British and U.S. residences in the hopes of riding out the crisis. No such luck. With each passing day, they were more at risk of being taken hostage themselves.

John Sheardown received the fateful call from Anders at the Canadian embassy. "Bob advised me that he had other people with him," Sheardown later recalled. "I said, 'Well, we've got lots of room, Bob, bring them along.'"

**No one could have predicted then that the hostage crisis would drag on for months, or that the 'house guests,' as they became known, would have to impose on their Canadian hosts indefinitely.**

Ken Taylor knew nothing of the fugitive Americans until that point but, like the Sheardowns, he did not equivocate. He agreed with John that they — and by extension Canada — should do everything in their power to help. The two men immediately started working out the logistics of bringing the Americans in from the cold. They eliminated the embassy building as a possible refuge — it contained no living quarters and was, in any case, a high-visibility, high-traffic site. Taylor volunteered his ambassador's residence. Knowing that he had Zena's prior approval, John offered his own residence as well. Taylor dashed off a flash cable to Ottawa, where everyone up to and including prime minister Joe Clark agreed that Canada would do whatever it could to aid the fugitive Americans.

The five house guests — Bob Anders, Mark and Cora Lijek, Joe and Kathy Stafford — arrived at the Sheardown residence the morning of Nov. 10, after six anxious nights on the run. There they found John nonchalantly hosing the dust off his front sidewalk. John welcomed Anders warmly. "We were very, very happy to be there," Anders later recalled. Three weeks later the Sheardowns welcomed a sixth fugitive



CHUCK MITCHELL/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Canadian John Sheardown, pictured in 1981, who helped six American diplomats escape from Iran in 1980, died in hospital on Dec. 30, 2012.

diplomat, Lee Schatz, into their home. No one could have predicted then that the hostage crisis would drag on for months, or that the "house guests," as they became known, would have to impose on their Canadian hosts indefinitely. For John and Zena Sheardown, as for Ken and Pat Taylor, sheltering the Americans became a daily subterfuge. Visitors and household staff had to be deceived. Extra groceries had to be smuggled in, and extra reefer smuggled out. The risk to Zena, who did not have diplomatic immunity, was great. "For over two months John, and his wife Zena, sheltered four American diplomats in their home, heedless of the risk to their personal safety," says Roger Lucy. "All the while he continued with his regular duties, at a time when demands on them (were) soaring, and his staff was being reduced."

Not until Jan. 28, 1980, would the six Americans escape Iran, disguised as a Canadian film crew and travelling on genuine Canadian passports. Ken Taylor became instantly famous as the Canadian "Scarlet Pimpernel" but everyone on the inside credited John Sheardown equally. House guest Mark Lijek later observed that Sheardown's "absolutely unconditional welcome" was decisive — far more so than anything that followed, including the CIA "exfiltration" op immortalized in the Hollywood blockbuster *Argo*. "I realize that many others took tremendous risks on our behalf, but it is clear to me from everything Bob has ever said about that call that the genuine and heartfelt 'why didn't you call sooner' was pure John Sheardown. It made all the difference." ("To our disappointment," Lijek has said of *Argo*, "the script seriously minimized the role of the Canadians, and the Sheardowns had been completely written out of the movie. I understood that this was pri-

marily a story about (Tony) Mendez, but I was still unhappy about that decision. To me, the Sheardowns were the least dispensable characters.")

Cora Lijek agrees. "Over the three months we lived with him," she recalls today, "John was like a father as our protector and providing food, shelter, security, contact with the outside world, and even a social life. He brought in trusted friends to expand our family, and he and his wife, Zena, hosted several wonderful dinner parties to take our minds off our situation." Joe and Kathy Stafford, the house guests who were sheltered in the Taylor residence, recall having been "welcomed like family" by the Sheardowns during their occasional covert visits. "They were both generous and gracious to us in every way." As career diplomats, the Staffords recently paid the Sheardowns the highest of compliments. "Their example set the bar for us with respect to how one should behave when others are in need," they said. "We are forever grateful for their courage and generous sacrifice."

John Sheardown died on Dec. 30, 2012, in hospital in Ottawa. By his side, as ever, was Zena, whose devotion to John has never flagged. "I adored him," she says simply.

For his old friends and comrades, especially those who knew him in Tehran, news of John Sheardown's passing has been met with heartfelt sorrow. They have lost a great friend, and Canada has lost a genuine hero.

**Robert Wright** is a professor of history at Trent University in Oshawa. He is the author of *Our Man in Tehran: Ken Taylor, the CIA, and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. He is currently writing a book on the 1995 Quebec referendum for HarperCollins Canada.