

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

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Congressional Testimony
House Oversight and Government Reform Committee
May 8, 2013

The following is the transcript of Gregory Hicks' testimony, delivered May 8, 2013 before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, chaired by Darrell Issa (R-CA), regarding the events of Sept. 11, 2012, in Libya. Hicks served as Deputy Chief of Mission and was at Embassy Tripoli on the night of the attacks. Ambassador Stevens was at the annex run by the CIA in Benghazi.

HICKS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I remember September 11, 2012, it was a routine day at our embassy, and until we saw the news about Cairo. And I remember sending a text message to Ambassador Stevens saying, "Chris, are you aware of what's going on in Cairo?" And he said no. So I told him that the embassy -- in another text - that the embassy had been stormed, and they were trying to tear down our flag. And he said, "Thanks very much." And, you know, then I went on with business. Closed [for] the day, and I went back to my villa and was relaxing, watching a television show that I particularly like, and at 9:45 p.m. -- and all times will be Libyan times, a six-hour time difference -- the RSO [Regional Security Officer] John Martinec ran into my villa yelling, "Greg! Greg! The consulate's under attack."

And I stood up and reached for my phone because I had an inkling or thought that perhaps the Ambassador had tried to call me to relay the same message. And I found two missed calls on the phone, one from the ambassador's phone and one from a phone number I didn't recognize. And I punched the phone number I didn't recognize, and I got the Ambassador on the other end. And he said, "Greg, we're under attack." And I was walking out of the villa, on my way to the Tactical Operations Center, because I knew we would all have to gather there to mobilize or try to mobilize a response. And it was also a bad cell phone night in Tripoli. Connections were weak. And I said, "OK," and the line cut.

As I walked to the Tactical Operations Center, I tried to reach back on both of the numbers, the unknown number and the Ambassador's personal number and got no response. When I got to the Tactical Operations Center, I told people that the Ambassador -- that I had just talked to the Ambassador and what he said. At the time, John Martinec was on the phone with Alec Henderson in Benghazi, the RSO there, and I asked one of our DS [the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security] agents who -- what number did I reach Ambassador Stevens on.

And he said, ``Oh, that's Scott Wickland's telephone. Scott Wickland was Ambassador Steven's agent in charge, his personal escort for that night, and was with him in the villa during the attack. So I asked -- when John Martinec got off the telephone, I asked him what was going on. And he said that the consulate had been breached, and there were at least 20 hostile individuals armed in the -- in the compound at the time. So I next called the annex chief to ask him if he was in touch with the Benghazi annex to activate our emergency response plan.

REP. DARRELL ISSA: "Please explain the annex chief so that people that don't know as much would understand that. No, go ahead, please."

HICKS: "OK, thank you. And he said that he had been in touch with the annex in Benghazi, and they said they were mobilizing a response team there to go to our facility and provide reinforcements and to repel the attack.

With that knowledge, I called the Operations Center at the State Department, at approximately 10 p.m. to report the attack and what we were doing to respond to it. The next thing I did was to begin calling the senior officials in the government of Libya that I knew at the time. And so, I dialed first the President Magariaf's chief of staff and reported the attack and asked for immediate assistance from the government of Libya to assist our folks in Benghazi. I followed that up with a call to the Prime Minister's chief of staff to make the same request and then to the MFA, America's director. MFA is Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The defense attaché was, at the same time, calling the leadership of Libya's military with the same purpose, to ask them for assistance.

Once that was done, I called again to Washington to report that these actions had been commenced. Over the night we -- over that night, that is basically how our team operated. I was talking to the government of Libya, reporting to the State Department through the Operations Center, and also staying in touch with the annex chief about what was going on.

Let me step back one minute, if I could, and say that I also discussed with the annex chief about mobilizing a Tripoli response team, and we agreed that we would move forward with chartering a plane from Tripoli to fly a response team to Benghazi to provide additional reinforcements. The defense attaché was also reporting through his chain of command, back to AFRICOM and to the joint staff here in Washington about what was going on in the country. David McFarland, our political section chief, had just returned from Benghazi, where he had been our principal officer for the previous 10 days. And so he jumped into this picture by reaching out to his contacts in Benghazi and trying to get them, at the local level there, to respond to the attack. And he also was in touch with our local employee there, as well -- excuse me if I check my notes here.

This is a long -- the attack unfolded in four phases or the night unfolded in four phases. The first phase was the attack on our consulate. This story is well known, I think. The Benghazi response -- the consulate was invaded, Villa C where the Ambassador and Sean Smith and Scott Wickland were hiding in the safe area, was set on fire. The

attackers also went into another building. They were unable to enter the tactical operations center in Benghazi, because of improvements to that facility that had been made.

Scott attempted to lead the Ambassador and Sean Smith out of the burning building. He managed to make it out. He tried repeatedly to go back in to try to rescue Sean and the Ambassador but had to stop due to exposure to smoke. The response team from the annex in Benghazi, six individuals, drove the attackers out of our compound, and secured it temporarily. There have been estimates as high as 60 attackers were in the compound at one particular time. There were repeated attempts by all of the RSOs and by the response team from the annex to go into the burning building and recover -- try to save Sean and the Ambassador. They found Sean's body and pulled it out but he was no longer responsive. They did not find the Ambassador.

I spoke with a medical officer, one of our medical officers after the attack and the heroism of these individuals in repeatedly going into a petroleum-based fire cannot be understated. Petroleum -- according to our regional medical officer, petroleum-based fires emit enormous amounts of cyanide gas. They told me one full breath of that would incapacitate and kill a person if exposed to it.

It was noticed that a second wave of attackers was coming to attack the facility. And our teams evacuated, five RSOs and Sean Smith in one vehicle that suffered heavy fire, but they managed to break through and get to the annex, and in the annex team also withdrew from the facility and the second wave of attackers took it over.

After the second phase of the evening occurs, the timing is about 11:30 or so. The second phase commences after the teams have returned to the annex, and they suffer for about an hour and a half probing attacks from terrorists. They are able to repulse them and then they desist at about 1:30 in the morning.

The Tripoli response team departs at about midnight and arrives at about 1:15 in Benghazi. If I may step back again to Tripoli and what's going on there at this point. At about 10:45 or 11:00 we confer, and I asked the defense attaché who had been talking about AFRICOM and with the joint staff, "Is anything coming? Will they be sending us any help? Is there something out there?" And he answered that the nearest help was in Aviano [air force base in northern Italy], the nearest -- where there were fighter planes. He said that it would take two to three hours for them to get onsite, but that there also were no tankers available for them to refuel. And I said, "Thank you very much," and we went on with our work.

Phase III begins with news that the Ambassador's body has been recovered and David McFarland, if I recall correctly, is the individual who began to receive that news from his contacts in Benghazi. We began to hear also that the Ambassador has been taken to a hospital. We don't know initially which hospital it is, but through David's reports we learned that it is in a hospital which is controlled by Ansar Sharia, the group that Twitter feeds had identified as leading the attack on the consulate.

We're getting this information as the Tripoli response team arrives in Benghazi at the airport. Both our annex chief and the annex chief in Benghazi and our defense attaché are on the phone during this period trying to get the Libyan government to send vehicles and military and/or security assets to the airport to assist our response team. At this point, this response team looks like it may be a hostage rescue team, that we're going to need to send them to try to save the Ambassador who is in a hospital that is, as far as we know, under enemy control.

Our contacts with the government in Tripoli are telling us that the Ambassador is in a safe place, but they imply that he is with us in the annex in Benghazi, and we keep telling them no, he is not with us. We do not have his -- we do not have him.

About 12:30 at the same time that we see the Twitter feeds that are asserting that Ansar Sharia is responsible for the attack, we also see a call for an attack on the embassy in Tripoli. And so we had always thought that we were under threat, that we now have to take care of ourselves and we began planning to evacuate our facility. When I say our facility, I mean the State Department residential compound in Tripoli, and to consolidate all of our personnel at the annex in Tripoli. We have about 55 diplomatic personnel in the two annexes.

On that night if I may go back, I would just like to point out that with Ambassador Stevens and Sean Smith in Benghazi there are five Diplomatic Security agents -- assistant Regional Security Officers. With us in our residential compound in Tripoli, we have the RSO John Martinek, three assistant Regional Security Officers protecting 28 diplomatic personnel. In addition, we also have four special forces personnel who are part of the training mission.

During the night, I am in touch with Washington keeping them posted of what's happening in Tripoli and to the best of my knowledge what I am being told in Benghazi. I think at about 2 a.m., Secretary of State Clinton called me along with her senior staff were all on the phone, and she asked me what was going on. And I briefed her on developments. Most of the conversation was about the search for Ambassador Stevens. It was also about what we were going to do with our personnel in Benghazi, and I told her that we would need to evacuate, and she said that was the right thing to do.

At about 3 a.m. I received a call from the Prime Minister of Libya. I think it is the saddest phone call I have ever had in my life. He told me that Ambassador Stevens had passed away. I immediately telephoned Washington that news afterwards, and began accelerating our effort to withdraw from the Villas compound and move to the annex.

Our team responded with amazing discipline and courage in Tripoli in organizing withdrawal. I have vivid memories of that. I think the most telling, though, was of our communications staff dismantling our communications equipment to take with us to the annex and destroying the classified communications capability. Our office manager, Amber Pickens, was everywhere that night just throwing herself into some task that had

to be done. First she was taking a log of what we were doing. Then she was loading magazines, carrying ammunition to our vehicles, and then she was smashing hard drives with an axe. Allen Greenfield, our management officer, was a whirlwind of activity organizing the vehicles -- lining them up, finding the drivers, making sure everybody was getting the things that they would need for the coming days. John Martinek was a mountain of moral support, particularly to the guys who were in Benghazi, just on the phone talking them through the whole ordeal. David McFarland on the phone constantly all the time talking to his contacts in Benghazi, urging them to help. Lieutenant Colonel Phillips and Lieutenant Colonel Arnt and Lieutenant Colonel Gibson -- mountains of strength. I'm still in awe of them. They asked me, in one of the phone calls, when were you going to move to the annex, and I said, "We'll move at dawn," because none of our people had great experience driving the armored Suburbans that we were going to have to use.

Our local staff drove for us as part of our security procedures. They of course were not there that night, and we would have to go through checkpoints, militia checkpoints on the way to the annex to get there, and I didn't want our people to be going through those checkpoints, because I didn't know what to expect from the militias.

And so we moved at dawn. We arrived at the annex, at least my group I think at about 4:45 perhaps, maybe 5 a.m., and a few minutes later came the word of the mortar attack. If I could return to Benghazi a little bit and talk through Tripoli. I am sorry if I bounce back and forth.

The Tripoli team basically had to stay at the Benghazi airport because they had no transport and no escort from the Libyans. After the announcement of Chris' passing, military-escorted vehicles arrived at the airport. So the decision was made for them to go to the annex. Before I got the call from the Prime Minister, we'd received several phone calls on the phone that had been with the Ambassador saying that 'we know where the Ambassador is, please, you can come get him.' And our local staff engaged on those phone calls admirably, asking very, very good, outstanding, even open-ended questions about where was he, trying to discern whether he was alive, whether they even had the Ambassador, whether that person was with the Ambassador, send a picture, could we talk to the Ambassador?

Because we knew separately from David that the Ambassador was in a hospital that we believe was under Ansar Sharia's call, we suspected that we were being bated into a trap, and so we did not want to go send our people into an ambush. And we didn't. We sent them to the annex.

Shortly after we arrived at the annex the mortars came in. The first was long. It landed actually among the Libyans that escorted our people. They took casualties for us that night. The next was short, the next three landed on the roof killing Glen [Doherty] and Tyrone [Woods], and severely wounded David. They didn't know whether any more mortars were going to come in. The accuracy was terribly precise. The call was the next one is coming through the roof, maybe if it hit -- two of the guys from team Tripoli

climbed up on the roof and carried Glen's body and Tyrone's body down. One guy, Mark Si, full combat gear, climbed up there, strapped David -- a large man -- to his back, carried him down a ladder and saved him.

In Tripoli, the defense attaché had persuaded the Libyans to fly their C-130 to Benghazi and wanted to airlift -- since we had consolidated at the annex, and the Libyan government had now provided us with external security around our facilities -- we wanted to send further reinforcements to Benghazi. We determined that Lieutenant Gibson and his team of special forces troops should go. The people in Benghazi had been fighting all night. They were tired. They were exhausted.

We wanted to make sure the airport was secure for their withdrawal. As Colonel Gibson and his three personnel were getting in the cars, he stopped. And he called them off and me that he had not been authorized to go. The vehicles had to go because the flight needed to go to Benghazi. Lieutenant Colonel Gibson was furious. I had told him to go bring our people home. That's what he wanted to do -- paid me a very nice compliment. I won't repeat it here.

So the plane went. I think it landed in Benghazi around 7:30. The other thing that we did was -- I want to mention Jackie Lavesk's name in this hearing. She was our nurse. We initially thought that she should go to Benghazi. One of the special forces with Lieutenant Colonel Gibson's team was our last military-trained medic available. He had a broken foot in a cast. I still remember him walking -- walking to go and get in the car with his machine gun, carrying a machine gun on his shoulder. Jackie, I refused to allow her to go to Benghazi, because I knew we had wounded coming back. I knew David was severely wounded. And I knew others were wounded as well. And Jackie had just made terrific contacts with a hospital in town. And so, we sent her to that hospital to start mobilizing their E.R. teams and their doctors to receive our wounded.

So when the charter flight arrived in Tripoli, we had ambulances at the airport waiting. Their doctors were ready and waiting for our wounded to come in, to be brought in to the operating room. And they certainly saved David Owen's leg. And they may have very well have saved his life. And they treated our other wounded as well, as if they were their own.

End of testimony