

What should have been a tranquil family vacation in the southern Philippines turned into an unending nightmare

Kidnapped by terrorists

BY SUSAN SVRLUGA

1 The nightmares still come sometimes, yanking Kevin
Lunsmann back. He forgets he is safe in his own bedroom,
guitar leaning against the wall, cats curled up asleep. He
forgets his classes at Brookville High School, football games
5 with his friends, all the normal routines of a typical American
kid in Lynchburg, Virginia. In his nightmares, he's back in the
Philippines, hungry and afraid, a prisoner of Islamic terrorists.

A family visit

It was 2011, and Kevin was 14. He and his mother, Gerfa, 10 were visiting family in the southern Philippines, where Gerfa had grown up. She had moved to the United States as a teenager, but she loved to visit her family.

Kevin had spent two weeks snorkelling and swimming, eating food cooked with fresh coconut, teaching his cousins a few words of English, and trying to learn a little Samal, his cousins' language.

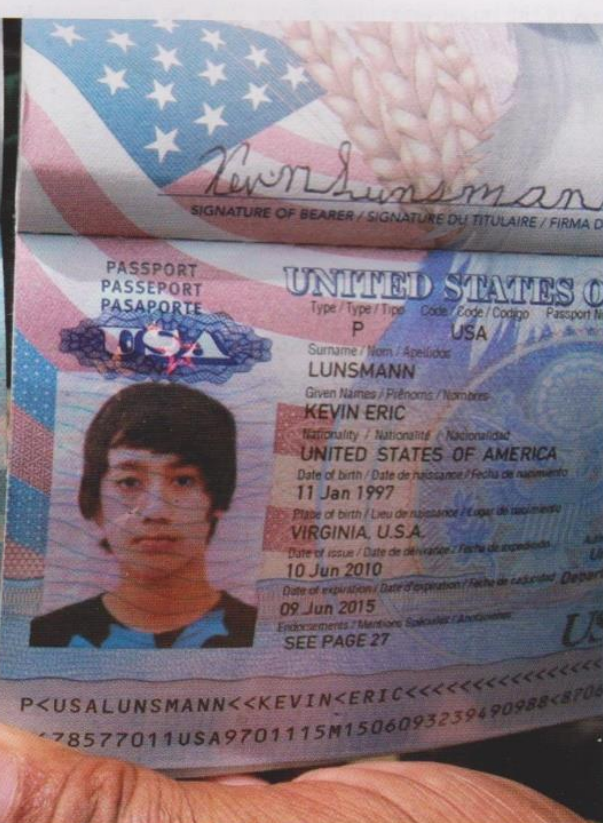
On July 11, he went to bed looking forward to the flight back to the States the next day. It was still dark when Kevin

heard his mother shouting at him to run. She had awoken
20 and had spotted a dozen silhouettes running toward their
hut. Kevin and Gerfa bolted toward the beach but were
stopped by men in camouflage fatigues, holding assault
rifles. The men ordered Gerfa, Kevin, and Kevin's 21-year-
old cousin into a speedboat. The boat pushed through the
25 mangroves and sped off.

Into the jungle

After several hours, a mountainous, densely forested island loomed on the horizon. More uniformed men met them on the beach. Gerfa tried to ask questions, but they didn't speak the same language. When night came, they marched toward the mountains. Kevin was wearing just the shorts he had slept in, and his mom was in her pyjamas. The three hostages walked barefoot, stumbling and falling in the mud, following the men in fatigues, who used machetes to slice a path through the jungle.

They hiked through the night, exhausted, sore. At



midday, they stopped in the midst of a jungle so thick they couldn't see the sun. There was a camp there, sticks holding up tarps, and more men in uniform. A commander who spoke the language Gerfa understands told her his group was fighting for an Islamic state and that she and Kevin would be killed unless her husband paid the ransom: \$100 million. 'Even the Philippine government doesn't have that much money,' Gerfa replied. 'Ten million,' he countered.

Terrifying calls

In Lynchburg, Kevin's dad, Heiko Lunsmann, was at his job as a maintenance man in a nursing home when he got a call from the kidnappers. Heiko could hardly understand the man, and the man could hardly understand Heiko's heavily German-accented English. But Heiko understood this: it was a ransom demand.

From then on, Heiko lived in dread of the calls, terrified he would say the wrong thing and further endanger his wife and son. Some days he would get two or three calls; sometimes days would go by in silence. Sometimes Gerfa would be put on the phone. Sometimes he could hear Kevin and Gerfa crying out in pain.

Weeks went by, and American officials became convinced that Gerfa and Kevin had been seized by the Abu Sayyaf, a Filipino terrorist organisation. The group is known for kidnappings, bombings – including an explosion on a Filipino ferry in 2004 that killed 116 people – and executions.

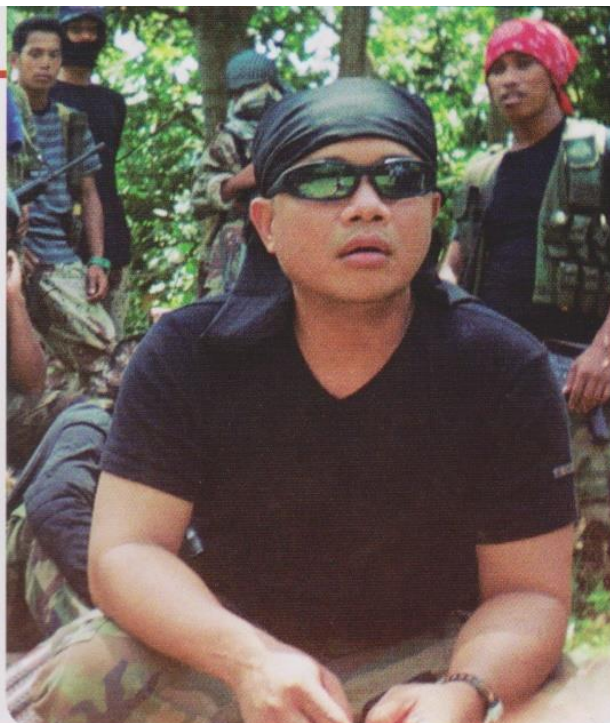
Living in a cage

Deep in the jungle, Kevin was living with his mother and cousin in a makeshift cage made of sticks. Kevin was too tall to stand up inside. At midday, the prisoners were given meagre portions of pancakes or rice soup, and in the evening, one plate of rice for the three of them. Sometimes they didn't know what they were eating, but they were so hungry, they didn't care. They got sick after eating what looked like goat brains or intestines, and something shiny and hard, most likely goat hooves.

Days after a new hostage was dragged into camp, Kevin, Gerfa, and Kevin's cousin were forced to march again. They finally collapsed in a windowless wooden room, the same size as their cage and buzzing with mosquitoes. A week later, they heard heavy gunfire off in the distance. Gerfa, piecing together her captors' words, realised that the firefight had been government soldiers storming the other camp and that the other hostage had been rescued. They had come so close to freedom.

Freedom for one

Two and a half months went by, then one day the terrorists told Gerfa she would be freed. She was forced down the mountain to a river and onto a boat. As they pushed off, she thought they would dump her body in the ocean. But after an hour or two, the boat docked. 'You're free,' the militants said. A ransom had been paid.



Gerfa refused to return home without her son. She stayed in Manila to negotiate with the terrorists. Heiko tried to raise more ransom money. He liquidated the family's assets and withdrew all the money from their retirement accounts. The terrorists said if they didn't receive more money within days, they would cut off Kevin's head.

Alone

After Gerfa left, time slowed for Kevin. The days just seemed longer and longer. And then about a month after his mom had left, the militants took his cousin away. Was he freed? Killed? Kevin had no idea.

One day, when Kevin had been a hostage almost five months, he noticed that there was only one guard nearby. When the guard went upstairs, Kevin crept through the door into the next room. When he heard the guard's footsteps returning, he bolted.

Kevin ran quickly and silently away from the huts, straight to the river, where trees would help hide him. He was shaking with fear, and his legs were rubbery, weak from being confined for so long. In the river, he struggled in the deep, fast current that moved against him. He kept falling, but he never stopped moving.

Night fell and Kevin found an empty hut, in which he hid for a brief rest and then took off again. A few times, he saw people farming, but he stayed away, scared that they might be supporters of the militants.

Toward nightfall the next day, he was spotted by a farmer. Kevin started to run, but the man had a gun. 'What are you doing here?' he demanded. Exhausted and terrified, Kevin told him the truth. He warily followed the man back to his house, where the farmer told him he'd called the police. Could he be trusted? He could just as easily have informed the militants.

Then Kevin heard a helicopter – close this time. Within hours he was on a military base, where he was told his cousin had escaped too. It was wonderful to see Americans after so many months. ●