

# **Five Years to Freedom: The True Story of a Vietnam POW Study Guide**

**Five Years to Freedom: The True Story of a Vietnam POW by James N. Rowe**

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## Plot Summary

In 1963, Nick Rowe is with a group of Vietnamese soldiers on a routine mission when they encounter Vietcong soldiers. In the fight, Rowe and a fellow soldier are captured. Rowe realizes the seriousness of his situation but is unable to do anything about it immediately. As time passes, Rowe is often weakened and is constantly pushed to declare that the Vietcong are justified in all aspects of the war and that his own countrymen are wrong. Failure to do so continually prompts varying degrees of punishment. For five years his captors work to instill a series of propaganda statements into Rowe's mind and Rowe continues to disbelieve his captors.

Rowe is a military man, having decided to attend West Point because his older brother was killed prior to his own graduation. Rowe is deployed to Vietnam without really knowing all the politics involved. Rowe comes to like many of the Vietnamese people and sometimes helps with distribution of medicine and other activities. After his capture, he becomes bombarded with information that the Vietnamese people as a whole support the Vietcong and that the American prisoners are in danger of being attacked by the general populace. After several years as a prisoner, he is taken on a tour of the region - ostensibly to see the true state of the people. He encounters some people who remember him from his days as a soldier so many years earlier. One risks punishment to touch Rowe on the shoulder and an elderly woman speaks up and questions the reason Rowe appears to be undernourished. Rowe leaves that situation and finds his resolve to remain strong against the pressure to admit to "crimes" against the Vietcong.

Rowe encounters several other prisoners during his time as a POW. Some of those survive and are released. Others die while Rowe watches, helpless to do anything to prevent it. He is held alone during his final months as a prisoner and he finds the situation initially frightening but then finds a new freedom in that he is no longer responsible for anyone else. When Rowe and his captors are fleeing American bombers, he arranges the opportunity to be alone with a single captor then hits the man over the hand to get away so that he can flag down a passing helicopter. His mother's words, when she knows that he is safe, are, "What took you so long?"

Rowe is a strong person and remains so in the face of near-starvation and psychological torment. One of the most serious moments of torment for him comes when American bombers are striking the camp and he comes to fear that he'll die at the hands of his own people.



# Chapter One

## Chapter One Summary and Analysis

The author of the story, James N. Rowe, is stationed at Tan Phu when an effort to coordinate communication between Tan Phu and Camau brings Rocky to Tan Phu. Rowe learns that there's to be an operation. Forces from the camp are to go to Le Coeur to drive out Vietcong forces. Le Coeur is too near Tan Phu to allow the newly-arrived Vietcong to remain. Rowe notes that it's a feasible plan if they can get in and out without meeting additional enemy forces, though they don't know for certain how many enemy forces are in the area. The plan is for one group to attack the hamlet while two other groups set up for an ambush if any escape the main attack.

Rowe notes that there are some flaws in the plan, including the lack of fire support as the groups return. Rocky, an adviser to the Vietnamese, says he will go along despite objections. Rowe is wakened at one o'clock the morning of the operation. They cross rice paddies, learn from a resident that there have been enemy forces along the road recently but get no information regarding the number of forces, and near Le Coeur at 5:15, well behind schedule.

It's almost six o'clock when the ambush group is spotted by a guard. The plan goes wrong immediately and the Vietcong run in the opposite direction from the ambush groups. The groups go into the now apparently deserted village. Rowe and Dan Pitzer split off, leaving Rocky with Lieutenant Tihn. They reconnect, pursue the escaping Vietcong for a while, then turn off back toward camp. On the way, they suddenly come under fire and Rowe is the first to realize that the goal is to keep them pinned down until another group of VC can cut them off so that they have no escape. Tihn realizes it's true and they hurriedly begin to move. A group to the front is cut down as the enemy finds the range. They continue to seek a way out when they learn that reinforcements have been caught in an ambush and won't be coming to their aid. Rowe loses sight of Dan and then sees Rocky fall after being hit by several rounds. Rowe rushes to Rocky and bandages the wounds in an effort to stop the bleeding. Rowe finds that his own gun is inoperative and just as he completes the bandaging, is confronted by VC soldiers carrying an American rifle. He's bound at the wrist and elbow and has time to say good-bye to Rocky as they take him away.

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There is some description of the base camp where Rowe is stationed. The camp is surrounded by territory controlled by the Vietcong so the only way in and out is by chopper, and even that isn't completely safe. The camp consists of thatched huts and supplies, such as concrete, are delegated to helping the Vietnamese. The camp has a large python that serves as a ratter, a dog named Pluto, and chickens.



Rowe gives a brief look at the role of the Americans in the camp and in the operations. He says that they "tag along" unless there's combat in progress though they are consulted often for advice. When Rowe first returns fire, he says that he's cleared to do so because the Vietcong had fired on the Americans first. Another interesting aspect of this relationship is that the Cambodians seem to fully trust the Americans. Rowe sees a Cambodian soldier who has been mortally wounded. The man's eyes light up with hope when he spots Rowe coming toward him. When Rowe only briefly stops over the man and admits that he prays that the man will die before the Vietcong get to him. When Rowe looks back, he sees that the man is standing and attempting to follow Rowe. There's a barrage of rifle fire that takes the man down and Rowe realizes that the man took bullets that would otherwise have struck Rowe.



# Chapter Two

## Chapter Two Summary and Analysis

Rowe arrives in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1961 to find the commander, Lieutenant Colonel Rusty Riggs, is not expecting second lieutenants to fill vacancies on the base. Rowe is joined by several in the same situation and the next morning, after the commander has obviously exhausted his efforts to change the situation, Rowe and the others begin a rigorous regimen of training. As a member of the Special Forces, Rowe is chosen to study Chinese and he spends some time in what he calls the best assignment the Army offers, learning the language while spending a great deal of time on the California beach and learning to parachute. He notes that Riggs stands up for them to others and Rowe decides that being one of Riggs' lieutenants is a good thing despite the demands on them whenever they make any mistake.

When Rowe and his fellow squad members are deployed to Vietnam, they have a layover in Hawaii because the flight crew are suffering from hang overs. The trip continues a day late and arrives in Tan Son Nhut where Rowe watches departing troops head back to the United States in the plane that brought him there. They then fly on to Can Tho to the Beau Geste compound. That night, Rowe has a dream about a battle and wakes to find that they're being barraged with shells. Rowe finds out later that the target was the airstrip and that the barracks had been hit because of its proximity to that target. The airfield is easily repaired but several members of the team are out of commission as Rowe's group goes on to Tan Phu where they are to oversee some construction projects and to offer assistance to the Vietnamese forces there.

They face attacks of varying levels from their arrival but focus on providing medical training and information about sanitation and other issues of health. It's noted that in doing this, some people have their first contact with "modern healthcare." Rowe notes that on nights they show a movie in camp there is almost no fighting and says he believes that at least some members of the audience were VC. He says they are all enamored with films, regardless of the topic.

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Rowe offers a brief look at his family. His mother was born in Poland and married his father there, returning with him to America. They live in McAllen, Texas, and both are very strong in their faith. They lost a daughter before Rowe's birth and Rowe's brother died prior to completing his training at West Point. Though Rowe doesn't give details of how either of his siblings dies, he says that his decision to enter the military is prompted by his brother's death with Rowe setting out to complete what his brother had not.



# Chapter Three

## Chapter Three Summary and Analysis

The story returns to the moments following Rowe's capture. He says that he fears for his life but grows more hopeful when he isn't shot immediately. He is forced to walk by guards with bayonets and encounters Dan who says that he might have a broken ankle. Rowe and the others are fed rice though his hands remain tied. As night approaches, Rowe is still alive though he is marched farther into enemy territory. He is hit in the face by one of his captors but is otherwise unharmed. At one point he is questioned but knows too little Vietnamese to communicate effectively.

They walk until well after dark and stop near some huts. When Rowe is taken inside, he discovers that Rocky is there, that his leg is troubling him but that he is alive and conscious. They are blindfolded for the next part of the trip which is by boat. Rowe, Rocky and Dan are put into a "cage" upon their arrival. The following day, they assess their situation. Rowe's nose is obviously broken and his nostrils clotted with dried blood. Rocky's leg is swollen and he is in need of medical attention. The leader of the guards, a man called Nam, tells them in Vietnamese that they are fortunate they didn't die in battle, and that they are not going to be harmed now that they are his prisoners. Rocky later has a lengthy conversation with Nam who offers up answers he believes Rocky wants to hear and, in exchange, gains information and the understanding that Rocky can understand a great deal of the language.

Rocky is taken away, apparently so that he can't communicate with the others, Rowe has horrible bouts of dysentery, and their captors continue to tell them that they are captives of the Liberation Front and will not be harmed. Then Dan and Rowe are taken to another camp where a photograph of Dan, Rocky and Rowe is taken. Rowe is photographed again while a captor holds him at gunpoint, then posed with Dan at a table where there is a beer and a soda. Rowe and Dan are then returned to their cage where they try to puzzle out the situation. On November 13, Dan and Rowe are moved to another, more established prison camp. They arrive five days later but Rowe notes that it's not much of an improvement over their previous camp.

Dan and Rowe are in a "cage" together and Rocky is held in a storage hut some distance away. They each have a plate, a spoon, a cup and a pair of "gray pajamas." Major Hai commands the camp and Mr. Muoi serves as interpreter though his English is less than adequate. The prisoners, including Rowe, are instructed to write letters home, apparently to "reassure" their families that they are each alive and well, but Rowe and Dan insist that they write a single letter to the Red Cross with instructions to inform the families instead. Another important soldier in the camp, Mr. Ba, refuses. Dan and Rowe persist and write their names, ranks and serial numbers along with date of capture, addressing it to the Red Cross. They're told the letters could not be delivered but that their captors would try again later. Mr. Ba, nicknamed "Plato" by Rowe, later tells them



that the Red Cross is "a tool of the imperialist aggressors." Rowe and Dan are then ordered to fill out forms with information, but again, both refuse.

Dan and Rowe learn that President Kennedy has been assassinated but they don't believe it. In January, Rocky and Dan are taken away, leaving Rowe alone. Rowe's dysentery continues to plague him and a "camp physician" is brought in. The prisoners nickname him Ben and he begins to treat the prisoners for their various ailments. Then Rowe sees Dan at a distance and is heartened that his fellow prisoner is alive. Next, Rowe, Dan and Rocky are subjected to "classes" about Vietnam in an effort to sway them to the belief that the Vietcong are in the right. Rowe continues to refuse to give additional information regarding the military fighting against the Vietcong but admits to being afraid.

One day Rowe hears Rocky talking loudly and learns that he's being moved again. The next morning, Rowe is taken to get his breakfast rather than someone bringing it to him as had been the practice. He is led past the place where Rocky had been held and sees Rocky's belongings, including bloodied pajamas. Rowe believes this means Rocky is dead. He is immediately angry but holds himself in check, having vowed not to strike out unless it would accomplish something. Rowe says that the scene takes on a sense of unreality. Rowe soon finds out that Rocky is actually alive and that eel blood had been used to stage the scene in an effort to make Rowe and Dan more willing to talk.

Plato tells Dan that he's about to be released. While Dan is elated, the day comes and goes without the promised release. Plato is obviously embarrassed and has no explanation other than the Americans hadn't met the "requirements" set by the Liberation Front. There's a renewed effort to control the health of the prisoners. Rowe says that he is gaining weight while Dan is wasting away, even though they are eating the same foods - rice with occasional fish or eel. Then one day they hear an American voice and discover Edward Johnson, Master Sergeant, an American. Using scraps of paper and the occasional pen they manage to take from their captors, Dan and Rowe begin a communication drop with the new prisoner, who is known as John. The anniversary of their capture arrives on October 29, 1964. John, Dan and Rowe are in poor physical condition and Rocky has been separated from them for some time. Rowe notes that the "only bright spot was that we were still alive."

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At one point Rowe is standing in a line of prisoners and an "old crone" rushes at him with an upraised butcher knife. Rowe says that he can do nothing about the situation and stands numbly waiting but one of his captors encounters the woman and soothes her into dropping her attack. Rowe seems uncertain about the level of hatred he should expect to encounter - an attitude that seems to have been true for many who were stationed in Vietnam during this conflict.

There's a commotion one day and Dan and Rowe are summarily ordered back into their "cages" and placed in leg irons. They're told that Rocky was "very bad," and had apparently tried to escape. Though Dan, Rocky and Rowe have very limited





communication lines, they are often treated based on the actions of another. Later, Rowe will hit a guard and be beaten for it, but when Rocky later hits that same guard, he is treated much more harshly. Rowe notes that the lack of communication becomes a serious problem for the prisoners, mainly in that it impacts morale.



# Chapter Four

## Chapter Four Summary and Analysis

The new year arrives and it's discovered that Rowe has been retaining fluids, causing him to look as if he hadn't lost as much weight as Dan. Over the coming days, medicine is given that helps him slough it off though at a terrible physical toll and he suddenly looks emaciated, just like Dan. Then there's a new American prisoner, a man named Dave Davila who has shrapnel in his legs. Davila is refusing to allow Ben to look at his wounds until Rowe tells him that it's the best thing. Muoi is on hand but cannot understand English so can't tell what the two are saying.

One day, the camp is shelled and Rowe finds himself running for his life. He notes that it's frustrating to be so near a rescue and yet unable to flag them down. He is dressed in traditional Vietcong garb and would likely have been shot on sight. For days, the attacks continue during the daylight hours so that Dan and Rowe are moved out early each morning into the dense foliage in the nearby area. The strenuous schedule is difficult for Dan and when the prisoners are then force marched to a new camp, Dan lapses into a comatose state that comes and goes for days. He is unable to eat and is finally allowed to spend a little of the money he had in his possession at the time of the capture for some sweetened milk that helps restore his appetite.

One day, Dan and Rowe are bathing in a canal when they hear Rocky's voice. Later, as they are moving to yet another location, Rowe catches an opportunity to watch Rocky and notes that his hair has turned white. Rowe has the opportunity to speak to Rocky who is grateful. On January 25, 1965, Rowe and the others arrive in a new camp. The soldiers work daily in two shifts and are muddy and tired when they return. In February they arrive at the "Forest of Darkness," or Rung U Minh. The four - Dan, Rowe, Davila and John - are held together in an open-sided hut and Muoi says that together they will get healthier.

The prisoners dub the camp "No-K Corral" because of a high fence that keeps them prisoner. Dave and John are moved out of the camp in March of 1965. Dan eventually finds himself alone in another camp, this time as a punishment for having refused to agree to the rhetoric being taught to the prisoners. He's put to work and finds that it's wonderful, being able to move around the camp. He establishes relationships with several that, though not friendships, save him from total isolation. Then he's called on to write down the lessons he's learned and he almost gives in to writing what they want to hear, feeling that to refuse might prompt a severe punishment. He stands by his beliefs and the work details stop while food rations are reduced to rice two times daily. Rowe's feet are torn to hamburger by constant forced walks, reportedly for his safety from air raids. There's a sudden rush of activity and Rowe sees the guards bring in Dave who had attempted an escape.



In August, Dave and Rowe have completed plans for another escape attempt. They are caught before the night is over and Dave is devastated. When Rowe is asked why they tried to escape, he says it would be better to die trying to gain their freedom than to die of disease and starvation as they are doing. Rowe is brutally restrained for days and given very little water until he gives in and says he'll never again try to escape in return for lenient treatment for both himself and Dave. Rowe finds that he is given more food when he asks, though rice and fish remain the staple of every meal. Then the two rejoin Dan and John. One day they're told they are to listen to a radio broadcast. Rowe is asked to related the details of that broadcast, which is in English, and he relates only a little that he remembers. The guards seem disappointed. The next day they listen again and the first words they hear are that Rocky Versace has been executed. When the guards ask Rowe if he understands what Rocky's death means, Rowe replies that it means he and the other three can expect to be executed at any time since the Front obviously had no problem murdering POWs, and that he is guilty of the same crimes that prompted Rocky's execution. There's an argument as the guards assure Rowe that he and the other three are safe and that their cooperation will mean they soon can go home. The second anniversary of Rowe's capture arrives on October 29, 1965.

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The men find humor wherever they can. They name all their captors for some particular trait or personal resemblance, such as "Plato" and "Moon." They watch a shrew and sometimes laugh aloud at the creature's antics, going so far as to feed him some of their fish to keep the creature coming near. When Davila arrives in the camp, Muoi, speaking Vietnamese, asks Rowe how to say in English, "Do not worry." Rowe tells him to say, "Desist in your perturbation."

At another time, Rowe writes a lengthy "report" on the technicalities of the camp, information being demanded of him. The information is really every piece of information he can recall about hydraulics. The interpreter spends days meticulously looking up the words for this information and presents it to the camp commander without realizing what Rowe has done.

The interest in the health of the prisoners is superficial and self-serving. It seems obvious that the Vietcong who hold Rowe and the others captive do not care for their health other than to obey the dictates of war. An interesting thing is that Rowe is old that the Geneva Convention holds no power in the actions of the Vietcong, but the captors seem to refrain from completely brutalizing the prisoners. It seems likely that the real situation is that the Vietcong are governed by these rules and that they fear disobeying the letter of the law though they want Rowe and the others to believe that they don't care.

Rowe notes that the new setting in which he is given tasks and the guards present the "lessons" on Vietnam and the Communist rule is more subtle than outright punishment and that he comes near to losing his beliefs in the midst of this situation, as much so as when punishment seems imminent. He admits that when he's told to write down what

he's learned, he's tempted to write what he knows they want in order to avoid any further threat of retaliation.



# Chapter Five

## Chapter Five Summary and Analysis

Rowe has another painful and serious attack of fluid buildup. Soon after, they encounter another American prisoner, Tim Barker, a U.S. Army Captain, who has been held for a year and has already given up hope of being released. He is in serious condition and Rowe notes that it would have been difficult for a fully-staffed hospital to save him by the time Rowe meets him. He dies twenty-eight days later.

The schooling continues and Rowe learns that Americans are becoming more involved in the struggle, which makes him wonder what's really happening to prompt this. The next American brought to the camp is Staff Sergeant Ben Wilkes who has been in captivity for a year. He's been treated well to this point, had just arrived in Vietnam when he was captured, and is in better physical condition than any of them. Dave, meanwhile, continues to weaken and has trouble keeping rice down. When it becomes evident that Dave is going to die, Rowe pleads for medicine and food but is told that Dave will have to eat the rice. Dave, on the verge of death, is taken away by boat, presumably to a hospital.

The POWs are moved to another camp. There they find that the leaves from sweet potato vines help break up the monotonous diet. They continue to hear radio broadcasts, including of anti-war demonstrations in the United States. In August, Jim Jackson, a medic with the Special Forces, arrives in the camp as a prisoner. Dan recognizes Jim and they smuggle a note to him that night in his plate of rice. As the prisoners are all encouraged to write confessions to their "crimes," Rowe notes that he won't tell the others what to do but tries to set an example by holding firm to his personal convictions. Jim has news of the true situation of the war.

John and Rowe have bouts of liver failure which prompts some rudimentary medical care. Then Ben becomes listless and Rowe sees the signs of a man who has given up hope. Rowe's pleas for food and medicine are ignored. The prisoners are promised a Christmas celebration and are provided a chicken, cabbage, grease and a French roll along with coffee and sugar. They all eat their fill and are sick the following day. When they are back to their normal diet of what fish they can catch and the rice provided by the guards, Ben stops eating almost completely. The next morning, Rowe is cooking breakfast when he receives word that Ben has died. Rowe tells the guards only after they've cleaned Ben up. The guards take the body away, refusing the request that the prisoners be allowed to bury him.

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The psychological effects of captivity are probably the most difficult to withstand, as evidenced by the efforts the men have to put into this area of their existence. It's noted that the Vietcong continue to try to obey the letter of the law with regard to prisoner



treatment and at one point construct a volleyball net in a swampy area to meet the requirements that the prisoners have activities. Rowe notes that the Vietcong are "enthusiastic" and that the Americans, though physically depleted, fight hard to win - and do. This psychological warfare continues in many ways. Rowe notes that they dress Ben in the best clothes the Vietcong provided for his burial and that they are then ordered to remove than and put him in the ragged clothes so that his captors can have the better clothing back.



# Chapter Six

## Chapter Six Summary and Analysis

The prisoners - Jim, Dan, John and Rowe - are moved again on March 4, 1967, this time to a camp with better construction. When they learn that some Vietcong prisoners are being tried in Saigon, Rowe prays they will be sentenced to prison rather than death so that the Vietcong will not need to execute American prisoners in retaliation. Jim weakens and Rowe knows that he has started the decline to death. It's a relatively slow process with Jim and he rallies slightly. Rowe says that the guards "refuse to accept the fact that adequate food was all that was necessary" to keep the prisoners relatively healthy.

Rowe is told that he and the other prisoners can fish and that any excess they catch will be sold by the guards with the money given to the prisoners to buy whatever extra items they want but are not allowed to buy food because the Vietcong are providing their food. They do buy raw brown sugar because it's cheap as well as black pepper and garlic. Then Rowe is called in to speak to the camp commander who tells Rowe that the other three are being released but that Rowe will "rest here" for the foreseeable future. He's told that even the end of the war will not prompt his release. He's then told that the other three are no longer considered prisoners and that he is not to talk to them. He cooks the final meal for them all and is allowed to spend a little time with them prior to their departure. Using their own slang, Rowe asks them to let his parents know that he is alive and they promise to follow through with a plan devised earlier in which an attack will be launched against the camp as a rescue operation.

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John and Dan are taken on a short trip and they note that the people are angry but that the scenes seem staged for their benefit. It's interesting that the Vietcong go to such great lengths to try to convince the American prisoners on these points when these men are not in a position to influence American or Vietnamese policies at all. It seems that the purpose is only an attempt to spread their propaganda in any way they can.

The prisoners are given little more than rice to eat. The rice is plain and limited in the amount of nutrition being provided. Though they have plenty of this staple and it's supplemented by fish and an occasional snake, the men have trouble eating the monotonous diet. The fact that the food available is unappealing means that the men lose their will to try.



# Chapter Seven

## Chapter Seven Summary and Analysis

Alone, Rowe is initially depressed then somewhat exhilarated that he is to be responsible for no one other than himself. He waits for a rescue attempt but decides it isn't going to come and plans an escape attempt of his own. He makes it about two kilometers and wanders straight into an enemy camp where he's discovered before he can get away. He tells them that he'd been gathering firewood, that he is lost and that he came into the camp in hopes of finding help to return to his own camp. There's no serious punishment because his guards are relieved that he is returned to them.

Rowe is given two baby eagles that he names Herc and Ajax. He struggles to feed them but does so and notes that they provide companionship and are soon hunting on their own, bringing the small game to the kitchen to eat it and providing Rowe some small meals. Some of the guards torment the birds and when one attacks a guard who comes too close to the roost, a bird's wing is clipped and neither will fly. He also has a dog he calls Bounce. A fire threatens the camp and Rowe works hard to help put out flames in their small area.

Rowe is continually pressed to write a statement siding with the National Liberation Front and continues to refuse. As punishment, he's sent to bed without his clothing or his mosquito net and the next nights become a nightmare of pain as he receives thousands of mosquito bites. Rowe is given nets and set lines for fishing and begins catching more than he can eat most days. He receives permission to sell the excess, as he and others had been permitted on an earlier occasion, but is told he can buy only extras with the money, such as sugar and tea. With his first money, he buys more nets and sets, showing his captors capitalism at work. Rowe is watching as the two eagles are near death for lack of food and finally kills one of them to put it out of its misery. He says that he'd been urged to kill and eat the birds and he makes a stew from it but is sick at the thought of eating. He kills the other just as he is leaving the camp for a tour of the area in order to keep it from his captors' torment.

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The camp is bombed over a series of days and Rowe initially sits atop a bunker, silently cheering on the Americans involved in the attack. When bombs are dropped on his camp, he's hit by shrapnel and becomes angry, fearing that the Americans know that he's being held here and that the decision has been made not to attempt a rescue but to wipe out the camp regardless of Rowe's presence.

Rowe has recurring bouts of dysentery that are very serious. When he's ordered to write an appeal for Americans to stop their participation in the war, he gives in, but he changes the order as much as he can. There is immediate approval and he's provided medicine as needed along with the opportunity to help with fishing expeditions so that





he has more fish to supplement his diet. The power of positive and negative reinforcement is evidently weighing on Rowe's mind. When he even considers the need to escape, he is immediately beset with a severe stomach ache and diarrhea though he tries to remain calm.



# Chapter Eight

## Chapter Eight Summary and Analysis

On September 14, Rowe is taken on a tour of the region. He's told to expect animosity from the natives and has been repeatedly told that the National Liberation Front has the full support of the people. What Rowe finds is that the people are not fully supportive and that many are curious about Rowe, having heard lengthy lessons on the evil American aggressors and finding, instead, this ordinary man who is overly skinny and speaks their own language. In a village near Tan Phu, Rowe is recognized from his visits there to offer medical care and other help prior to his capture. There, someone braves punishment to touch Rowe on the shoulder and ask if he is alright. One older woman questions Rowe's captors, asking why Rowe is so skinny when she'd seen him at a much healthier weight, and demanding to know why he looks as if he's not being fed enough. Rowe's captors tell them that Rowe had deserved to die but that he was being treated leniently by the NLF. The answer doesn't seem to satisfy the woman.

Rowe continues to know that he could be released if he will only say what he's being told to say - that the NLF are right in the war effort. He continues to refuse though he believes that to do so means he will remain in prison until he dies. He finds the will to resist unexpectedly in the actions of the Vietnamese people he encounters during the tour of the region. He says that if those people are willing to continue their own resistance, he is also willing.

Rowe knows that there might come a point at which he's released but hates the thought of allowing his captors to hold that power over him. He believes that his escape would eliminate that power and holds to the idea of an escape for that reason as much as because he wants his freedom. Rowe decides again to try an escape and plans to go in a canal boat. When he is some distance from camp, he encounters his own guards and hastily comes up with a cover story, saying that he'd been trying to find better fishing grounds and that he'd set lines along the way. The presence of lines - though someone else's - is enough to plant doubt that Rowe is trying to escape and he is not severely punished for the attempt.

Rowe is told that the lies he told upon his capture - that he is an engineer and has no military training - have been disproved. He occasionally has the opportunity to go through papers in the camp and finds that he is about to be moved to "the Zone" where he would do as commanded or die. He effectively stalls by pretending to be on the verge of writing the answers wanted of him. He again plans escape but is moved before he can put the plan into action.

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Rowe notes that the people living under the NLF rule are living in squalor despite the fact that the Front is touting improved conditions. Rowe says that the people living

under the "enemy rule" are better off than these, and that even those in war zones are not living in such abject poverty. Many of the people who seem to have enough are still lacking food because they are ordered to give up the majority of their crops to help feed the army. Rowe says these people are working harder than they ever had in their lives and that they have less than ever to show for it.



# Chapter Nine

## Chapter Nine Summary and Analysis

Rowe's camp is bombed again and he is very afraid, noting that it seems somehow worse to be on the verge of death at the hands of Americans. The moves continue for days and the Vietcong continue to fight to remain out of harm's way. When Rowe has an opportunity to move one of his captors away from the main group, he does so. When the man crawls through a briar thicket, Rowe reaches out and releases the clip so that it falls from the man's gun. He then hits the man with a club, clubbing him again with his hand and noting the blood coming from the man's nose after the attack. Rowe then goes into a clearing and begins waving his mosquito net - the "whitest" item in his possession. He's spotted by choppers who are continuing to patrol in search of stragglers. At first, there is a plan to shoot him. Then someone decides that he wants to take a Vietnamese prisoner and they go in to retrieve him. Before landing, someone notes Rowe's beard and the drop in and load him quickly onto the chopper.

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Rowe finds an opportunity to use the same kind of psychology on a member of the Vietcong as had been used on him all these years. He correctly predicts the maneuvers a helicopter is going to make during its attacks and earns the interest of one of his captors. The man believes Rowe's statements that their leader is blundering into a mistake that will cost them their lives. Rowe's captor then splits off with Rowe who believes that he has a better chance of escape with only a single guard.



# Chapter Ten

## Chapter Ten Summary and Analysis

Rowe is recognized very soon and given food all the way to their first destination. He says that the men aboard the chopper are kept busy during that initial ride, opening cans of c-rations for Rowe. He says that the fruit cake - the first can offered - is the best food he's ever tasted. He is seen initially by a doctor and then moved to another base where he's examined again and debriefed. He learns that he has been promoted to major during his absence.

Rowe arrives at a hospital and is allowed to talk to his mother and father by phone. His mother's words are, "What took you so long?" The question posed by his mother prompts a flood of emotion, including tears. Chicken and ice cream are part of the first meal he is able to order. He's ill following the rich food. He's soon told that he'll be leaving for home the following day and does so on time. When Rowe is asked by a news reporter if he'd been beaten, he says that he wasn't "mistreated severely" and then says that he can't go into it further because of the possibility of retaliation on other POWs.

Rowe remains on a loose quarantine as the outcome of tests are pending. Rowe arrives at his home and greets his father at the front door. His mother is inside, waiting for his return as she'd done for five years.

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Rowe says that the debriefing is disturbing because it is similar to the questioning by his former captors. Initially, Rowe considers declining to sign a waiver of his rights prior to the debriefing. Then he notes that even if they say something that leads them to court martial him, he would wind up in prison where there would be food everyday and better treatment that he'd received at the hands of his former captors.



# Characters

## James N. Rowe

Author of the story, Rowe is in Vietnam during the height of the conflict between Vietnamese and Vietcong forces. Rowe is stationed at Tan Phu and is known to his fellow soldiers as Nick. From the moment of his capture, Rowe is pressed to make written statements admitting his guilt of "bloody crimes" against the Vietnamese people and of the superiority of the Vietcong over the Americans. There are times when Rowe considers giving in to the demands but remains steady in the face of the pressure. When Rowe is surrounded by fellow Prisoners of War, he assumed a role of leadership, feeling a responsibility and a need to protect them in as much as he is able. When everyone except Rowe is allowed to go home, he makes a determined effort to remain stoic and to make himself strong so that he will be able to take advantage of an opportunity to escape. Rowe trusts in God and notes that his faith remains strong but doesn't wait for God to produce a way. Instead he creates the opportunity conducive to a successful escape. An interesting point about Rowe's character is that he wants badly to be free but desperately wants to accomplish that for himself so that his captors do not have the gift of freedom to give to him.

## Rocky Versace

A graduate of West Point, Rocky serves as an advisor to the Vietnamese. He's twenty-six and has volunteered for a six-month extension to his one-year term as adviser. Rocky is somewhat excitable and wants to go with the Vietnamese, probably farther than is advisable. Rocky is with Rowe when he's captured. Rocky is a strong person though he doesn't realize the wisdom in remaining quiet about some things and almost immediately gives away the fact that he is fluent in multiple languages. Rocky and Rowe are close during their captivity and their captors know this. When Rocky is taken away from Rowe, Rowe fears the worse. When he sees bloodied clothing belonging to Rocky, he initially believes Rocky has been killed and the captors reinforce this idea. Then someone lets it slip that the blood was eel's blood and Rocky is likely alive. Rocky is executed in retaliation after soldiers from the Liberation Front having are executed.

## Tim Barker

A captain in the United States Army, Tim is being held as a prisoner of war and meets Rowe, Dan, Dave and John in Rowe's third year of captivity. He is in very poor condition when he meets up with Rowe and the others, having been held for a year in a camp with Vietnamese prisoners prior to that. Rowe notes that Tim had given up hope and was as good as dead when they met him and that he dies twenty-eight days after their meeting.



## **Dave Davila**

Dave is captured fairly early in Rowe's captivity and he seems to be a fighter early during the captivity. Then Tim Barker arrives on the scene and dies. Dave and Rowe attempt an escape and the failure is devastating to Dave. Rowe notes that it seems as if Tim's death provides Dave the answer he'd been searching for - a way out of the situation. Dave's health begins to fail and it becomes evident that he's going to die. Rowe is told that Dave will be taken to a hospital and though Rowe has little faith in that promise, he realizes that he can't deny Dave whatever minor chance there might be for survival so allows the transfer. The last time Dave is seen, he is in a boat being taken from camp.

## **Ben Wilkes**

A staff sergeant who has been in captivity for about a year when he is taken to the camp where Rowe and several other POWs are being held. It's noted that he is carrying some fat when he arrives in the camp, having been held with Vietnamese prisoners where he had been given better food, including corn and potatoes.

## **Dan Pitzer**

The team medic, Dan is captured at the same time as Rowe. At one point, Rowe notes that Dan has grown emaciated while Rowe has gotten fatter until it's discovered that Rowe has a case of beri-beri. During a particularly grueling travel time, Dan loses consciousness and only Rowe's insistence for better food saves him from death.

## **Edward Johnson**

Known as John, he is a master sergeant who is a prisoner at the same time as Rowe. At one point, John is taken on a tour with Dan to witness the anger of the Vietnamese people against the Americans though John and Dan believe the anger to be staged.

## **Muoi**

The name of one of the prison camp commanders who oversees a great deal of Rowe's time as a prisoner of war. He spouts a great deal of rhetoric.

## **Lieutenant Tinh**

The Vietnamese Special Forces detachment commander who is stationed at Tan Phu. Tinh is with Rowe when the Vietcong overrun them. Tinh is often uncertain of himself and looks to the Americans for help but doesn't do so in time to keep Rowe and the others from being captured in this case.

## **Rowe's Mother**

Rowe's mother is of Polish descent and is a very strong personality. Rowe notes that his mother is very faithful and has had that faith tested through the loss of two children. When Rowe calls home after his release, his mother asks what took him so long. When Rowe arrives home he notes that his mother is waiting, never doubting that he would return, only wondering when.





## Objects/Places

### Tan Phu

Described as an isolated fortress, Tan Phu is in the middle of enemy territory and is manned by Special Forces and where Rowe is stationed.

### Charlie

The name given to the enemy forces.

### Vietnamese

The forces allied with the Americans and Cambodians against the Vietcong.

### Vietcong

The forces pitted against the Americans and Vietnamese.

### Camau

Where Rocky is stationed, this is the camp that is coordinating information with Tan Phu.

### Le Cour

The destination of the operation in which Rocky and Lowe are participating with plans to drive out a newly-established Vietcong post.

### Fort Sill, Oklahoma

Where Lowe goes through training prior to being sent to Vietnam.

### McAllen, Texas

Where Lowe's parents live.



## **Tan Son Nhut**

Where Rowe and his fellow company members land in Vietnam.

## **Can Tho**

The largest city in the Mekong Delta and Rowe's second stop after arriving in Vietnam. This is where the Beau Geste compound is located.

## **Rung U Mihn**

The Forest of Darkness where Dan, Rowe, John and Davila are held together in an open-sided hut.



# Themes

## The Will to Survive

Rowe has a strong will to survive, the same will that is seen in several other prisoners. When Rowe is facing the threat of death because of dysentery and malnourishment, he fears the possibility of death and continues to fight for his survival. This will is so strong that Rowe forces himself to eat rice, day after day, in an effort to fight off the weakening of his body. This will to survive is second only to Rowe's honor and he continues to hold tight to his refusal to admit to "crimes" against the Vietnamese as his captors want. Even then, Rowe continues to seek a way to balance his refusal with what's being asked of him in an effort to live.

An interesting point is that Rowe tries to foster the will to survive in others, sometimes without success. When another of the prisoners has an up-close view of death, he seems to see it as a way out. Rowe never sees that as an option and his will to survive continues to be strong through all the torment and deprivation.

## The Need for Dignity

Rowe and the other prisoners are often seeking ways to retain their dignity in the face of the horrible conditions imposed by their captors. When Ben dies, Rowe notes that Ben had hated the indignity of the diarrhea that had plagued them all and Rowe and others clean him up before telling the guards that Ben had died. They clean him up and dress him in the best clothes he has before allowing the guards to see him. When the prisoners are pitted against the guards in a game of volleyball, both teams fight hard for a win. The desire to win wipes out the fatigue the prisoners feel because the win provides a level of dignity the prisoners desperately need. This need for dignity is also seen in Rowe's desire to escape so that his captors do not have the ability to bestow the release on him as a gift. Rowe desperately wants his freedom but wants to gain it on his own, feeling this to be a more dignified option.

## The Power of Propaganda

Propaganda is vital in the Communist doctrine and the captors who hold Rowe and the other prisoners of war believe heavily in the power of propaganda. This is seen soon after the capture of Rowe and the others when they are posed for photos, probably to be shown as evidence that the prisoners are being treated well. This type of propaganda is repeated often and in varying situations.

An interesting aspect of the use of propaganda is that the captors go to great lengths to ensure that others believe in the stories being handed out. For example, Rowe is allowed to sell any excess fish he can catch and is given the money to spend as he wants. However, he is not allowed to buy food that would have provided vital

nourishment for Rowe and the others because the National Liberation Front provides for the needs of the prisoners. They are allowed to purchase sugar, tea, cookies and other items that represent treats rather than the necessities of life.

# Style

## Perspective

The story is written in first person from a somewhat limited perspective. The account would have been a limited perspective because it is written strictly as a first-person account of an event. However, the story is presented from a point in time after the events and the author has the advantage of additional details that were known to him only after the events. Another aspect of this perspective is that Rowe is presenting the story not as it unfolds to him but looking back on the events. Rowe says that, as they are preparing for the strike against Le Coeur, he feels uneasy about the details. He is worried that there isn't sufficient planning to man the cover fire for the operation's return. He says that he was worried more so than usual. He could have been this worried, but it seems more likely that he's looking back on the operation that went so terribly wrong and, from that perspective, sees that he should have been more insistent on this point. It's left to the reader to determine what aspects of the perspective are true to the moment and what aspects are skewed by time.

## Tone

The tone of the story is one of hope despite the odds though this is marred by the feeling that some of those captured may not survive and the deaths described. The setting is real as are the events which makes the story disturbing to some readers, especially those who have endured similar situations. There are words and phrases peculiar to the setting and time that may be confusing to some readers, though the meanings are generally understood by reading the words into the context of the story. Examples of these words are "hootch," which is the word for hut or dwelling; "pooppapers" which is a fairly general term for paperwork; and "Charlie" which is the term used for the enemy or Vietcong soldiers. The Vietcong are sometimes referred to simply as "VC" or the National Liberation Front, or "NLF." There are also a large number of technical references. Examples are weapons, ammunition, military rank and equipment and tactics. The casual reader may find these overly weighty and even unnecessary but the reader who is reading for depth will find these details add credibility and information to the story.

## Structure

The book is divided into ten chapters of widely varying lengths. Chapter seven is more than fifty pages. Other chapters range around twenty-five to thirty-five pages though the number of pages varies greatly. There seems to be no real reason for the majority of the chapter divisions though it could be that each chapter represents some particular emotional period in the life of Rowe as a prisoner. The story is presented in roughly chronological order with one major exception. Chapter one begins with Rowe in

Vietnam and ends with the moment of his capture. Chapter two drops back to give background information, including his family and his reasons for joining the military. Chapter three returns to the moments after Rowe's capture. The book includes some poetry written by Rowe, both before and after his prison term. The first reads, "Aching, shuddering, violent void; Rending the sheltering velvet; For flesh is weak, too weak for this; Hide screaming, incomprehension of the inevitable; for it is inevitable and it is coming." Rowe notes that he wrote this poem in 1961, two years before his capture. The book also includes a dedication at the beginning which reads, "To Rocky so that others may know. And to Jim, Tad and Joe." Rocky and Jim are each identified in the book and both die, but Joe and Tad are not mentioned.



## Quotes

"Somehow, in the light of what was to come, this mud-floored thatched hut seemed like the ultimate in comfort and convenience. Perhaps this was a reason for the Vietnamese farmer's love for his hut, no matter how poor - it was all relative." Chapter 1, Page 14

"When did this happen? I wondered, looking at a graze wound on my right leg. Small-arms round, not deep, easy Purple Heart, but who the hell wants a Purple Heart?" Chapter 1, Page 52

"Jumping began to fit into its proper place - as a means of infiltrating an area - and just as a commuter takes a train to work, the Special Forces trooper takes a plane and gets out halfway through the ride." Chapter 2, Page 65

"I recalled the chapter in the pamphlet on 'Escape and Evasion' that had said, 'One should attempt to escape as soon after capture as possible, before the enemy can move you into a secure area.' I wished the author had included at least one paragraph on how to do it!" Chapter 3, Page 88

"I knew that there was protection for a prisoner of war that forbade forcing him to make statements to be used as propaganda, forbade physical or mental coercion to create an environment which was so oppressive that a man would violate his beliefs and honor to escape it. But what good was this protection when it wasn't recognized by your captors?" Chapter 4, Page 159

"Cheeta went on to say that the guards had taken great risks in searching for me and only their desire for my safety had caused them to take such risks. I was shocked. How dumb did he think I was?" Chapter 4, Page 201

"The guards conveyed to me the idea that they had all the time in the world and we could stay until we either learned or died. Execution wasn't the only way to go. Disease and malnutrition were our constant companions." Chapter 4, Page 218

"From a physical standpoint he could have whipped the problem, but it was psychological as well and the brief contact with Tim Barker had provided Dave with his answer to escaping the oppressive environment." Chapter 5, Page 228

"I don't believe any of us interpreted it as an opportunity to 'practice our religious beliefs,' because you can't ever stop a man from praying." Chapter 5, Page 250

"You are an aggressor, guilty of bloody crimes against our people, yet the Front has seen fit to spare your life and give you the opportunity to return someday to your family. You must do your share to end this cruel war." Chapter 7, Page 335

"This thought of escaping had shielded me against the temptation to seek release, but I caught myself slipping into the trough of acceptance of the idea that I was going home for certain." Chapter 8, Page 382



"O Lord, please don't let me wake up and be back in the forest. Please don't let this be a dream." Chapter 10, Page 440

"We walked through the door into our living room where Mom waiting; had waited for five years, never questioning if I would come back, but only when." Chapter 10, Page 465





## Topics for Discussion

Describe Roe's family, childhood and his reasons for going into the military. What impact do these things likely have on his time as a prisoner of war?

How is Rowe captured? What does he think of the plan for the operation on which they are embarking? What is the role of the Americans who are present at the time of Rowe's capture? What are the roles of Rowe prior to his capture? Lieutenant Tinh? Rocky Versace? Dan Pitzer?

There are almost immediately some psychological effects on Rowe, Rocky and Dan. What are these psychological tactics? Are they effective? Why or why not?

Describe Rocky's life as a prisoner.

Describe three specific moments of hope during Rowe's captivity. Compare those with three points of hopelessness.

Describe three of the failed escape attempts in which Rowe is involved. Compare that to the final attempt, the one that's successful.

Describe the food that Rowe eats during his time as a prisoner. How does Rowe manage to supplement the diet occasionally? What is the first thing he eats upon his rescue?