

## NICK ROWE RESCUED IN VIETNAM 31 December 1968

On 31 December 1968, American prisoner of war James “Nick” Rowe was rescued from his Viet Cong (VC) captors in the Mekong Delta. The rescue marked his fourth escape attempt and the end to more than five years of isolation, deprivation, and torture. Rowe documented his experiences in *Five Years to Freedom* and used it to develop programs to assist potential future American POWs.

A native of McAllen, Texas, Nick Rowe graduated from West Point in 1960 and received his commission as a field artillery second lieutenant. After joining Special Forces in 1961, Lieutenant Rowe was assigned to the newly activated 5th Special Forces Group. In July 1963, he deployed to South Vietnam as executive officer and S-2 of the twelve-man Operational Detachment A-23. The detachment advised the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) forces in the VC infested area of Tan Phu, approximately 130 miles southwest of Saigon in the Mekong Delta.



*After being rescued from his VC captors, Nick Rowe arrives at Camau still wearing his black pajamas (Army Special Operations Forces photo)*

On 29 October 1963, Lieutenant Rowe, Capt. Humbert “Roque” Versace, and medic M. Sgt. Daniel L. Pitzer accompanied a 120-man CIDG unit on a routine combat patrol to clear VC soldiers out of

the nearby village of La Coeur. Finding the enemy had recently vacated the village, the CIDG forces pursued and were ambushed. By the time the fighting ended, the three Americans had been captured by the VC.

Rowe endured the next sixty-two months in the U Minh Forest as a POW, subjected to indoctrination, torture, food deprivation, and medical neglect. His first three escape attempts only led to more difficult and inhumane conditions. Meanwhile, his friend and fellow POW Captain Versace was reportedly executed [see [This Week in MI History #8 26 September 1965](#)]. When Sergeant Pitzer was released to American custody in November 1967, Rowe spent the last year of his captivity in total isolation. Although he had successfully hidden his special forces service and officer rank from his captors for years, U.S. antiwar protestors had leaked those details to North Vietnam. Rowe was convinced he would soon be executed.

The morning of 22 December 1968, when B-52s began bombing runs close to the camp in which he was being held, his captors forced him to move. For ten days, they remained mobile, hiding from South Vietnamese infantry and American observation helicopters and hoping not to be hit by the following Cobra gunships. On 31 December, Rowe was able to separate himself and his full-time guard from the rest of the group and then succeeded in disarming and disabling his guard. Although dressed in the same black pajamas worn by his captors, Rowe broke into open ground and waved his white mosquito netting at a passing helicopter. Fortunately, the flight commander, Maj. David E. Thompson of the 7th Squadron, 1st Cavalry Division, suppressed his crew's impulse to shoot on sight and instead landed to capture this surrendering "enemy" soldier. Not until he saw Rowe's beard did he realize he was rescuing an American.

After his return from Vietnam, Rowe transferred to Military Intelligence and graduated from the MI Officer Advance Course in 1971. He worked on Operation HOMECOMING to bring home 591 American POWs from Vietnam. [See [This Week in MI History #224 12 February 1973](#)] After a seven-year break in service, in 1981, then Lt. Col. Rowe was recalled to active duty to help create the Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) Course for personnel serving in duty positions with a high risk of capture. Then after commanding the 1st Special Warfare Training Battalion at the John F. Kennedy Warfare Center and School from 1986–1989, Col. Rowe was assigned as the ground forces director for the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group in the Philippines.

On 21 April 1989, while being driven to work, his vehicle was ambushed, and he was killed by terrorists of the communist New People's Army. Colonel Rowe was posthumously inducted into the MI Hall of Fame in 1989. —[This Week in MI History #269 20 December 2024](#), Lori S. Stewart, USAICoE Command Historian