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# SECURITY ASSISTANCE PERSPECTIVES

## “He Had No Fear:” The Heroic Life and Death of Colonel Nick Rowe

By

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[As a memorial to a fallen comrade, the following article is reprinted through the courtesy of the *Army Times*, where it originally appeared as a cover story in the issue of 15 May 1989. Copyrighted by Times Journal Publishing Company, Springfield, Virginia.]

Hours after Robert Haskell learned of the ambush assassination of his friend and colleague, Colonel James Nicholas Rowe, in the Philippines, he discovered a prophetic letter tucked among his morning mail.

It was from Rowe, a Vietnam war hero and author, with whom he had worked closely at Fort Bragg, N.C.

The four-page typed letter dated five days before his death April 21 suggests that Rowe not only was keenly aware of a plot by communist forces to kill an American officer, but that he had been marked for death.

“I’m either number two or number three on their list . . . and have taken the actions available to me to make it more difficult for them,” the letter states, according to Haskell, a doctrine project officer at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, who excerpted portions for the *Army Times*.

Haskell and others who knew the 51-year old Rowe said they were saddened, yet not entirely surprised by the early morning attack that left Rowe dead of a gunshot wound to the head as he was being driven to his office at a military compound in suburban Quezon City, near Manila. His driver also was wounded by shrapnel in the attack on the bullet-proof sedan.

“Nick” Rowe’s friends said he was aware of the possible danger even before he left American soil. His first wife, Jane, said she and her two children received a telling package from her former husband shortly before he left for the Philippines last year.

It contained his medals, family Bibles, and his treasured green beret.

“That box of his effects was very definitely his way of telling us he was not coming back,” said Jane Rowe, his wife of 14 years.

Nick Rowe, in his letter to Haskell, described the security precautions he had taken. “I’ve got a hardened vehicle and a trained driver for my official travel in the Manila-Clark-Subic area; an [Armed Forces Philippines] guard in the house 24 hours a day; and a standby security team should a hit go down at home or in the immediate area.”

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Even so, Rowe acknowledged, the communist guerillas would be tough adversaries. They continued to "take out" local military and police officers almost at will, he wrote. "The question is merely one of when will they give the instructions to take out an American in Manila."

"Their targeting instructions are for an officer involved in the counterinsurgency effort" of the Defense Attache's Office and Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group, the letter states. Rowe served as chief of the ground forces division of the Assistance Group, which provides equipment and training for the Philippine armed forces.

Describing the possible murder targets as "ground zero," he added, "It is many things here, but not dull."

In her first interview since the assassination, Rowe's second wife, Susan Rowe, said it would be wrong to fault the Philippine people for the slaying. "It's misdirected to blame the Philippines," she said in a telephone interview from North Carolina, where she went following her husband's funeral. "The Philippines did not kill Nick. Terrorists did, and terrorists do not have nationalities. You're dealing with very desperate individuals."

On the morning of the attack, she said, her husband first breakfasted with their 2-year old son in their Philippines home, and then brought him into the bedroom where she was sleeping. "He said, 'If I'm going to be up, you're going to be up too,'" she recalled. Nick Rowe seemed "very happy" that day. The couple were planning a weekend trip to Clark Air Force Base for a speaking engagement, she said.

Susan Rowe recalled the last words her husband spoke to her that day, "I love you," a statement that was not unusual. He left the house at about 7 a.m., she said, and she was notified of the incident about 7:15 a.m. He husband's death was confirmed soon after.

"What I was told by phone was that he had been hit," she said of the initial notification. "Hit means shot . . . my assumption was that it was not good."

Despite the slaying, she remains confident that her husband had the best security available. "It's close to impossible to completely have armor over every inch of a vehicle," she said. "The bullet that hit Nick came through an area of probably about the bullet's size that did not have hardening on it, a very freak occurrence.

She described the area as near the rear window. All but one of the bullets fragmented upon impact. That single bullet struck her husband in the back of the head.

Even though her husband was on the rebel's hit list, she said, he believed he would survive. The Communist New People's Army General Command, one of at least three communist fronts operating in the Philippines, claimed responsibility for the assassination and threatened further attacks if the U.S. continues to back President Corazon Aquino's fight against a 20-year communist insurgency.

"That particular week, there was an increased security problem, but we lived under a constant threat and so I didn't have any stronger feelings of heightened awareness," she said. "You're aware that you're on the list. That doesn't mean that there's going to be action. There's usually an indication that there will be action taken and there was no stronger message."

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## NO STRANGER TO DANGER

It is ironic that Rowe would die amid such security after five years and two months as a captive in *U Minh*, the so-called "Forest of Darkness" in South Vietnam.

Rowe, who was captured by the Viet Cong during a firefight on October 29, 1963, was subjected to torture, solitary confinement, food deprivation and medical neglect. He witnessed the torturous, starvation deaths of three American prisoners, and lived through the execution of two prisoners of war whom he knew. They, like Rowe, resisted indoctrination efforts.

During that period, Rowe made three escape attempts before managing to break free while his captors were taking him to be executed. The guards were surprised by American helicopter gunships, which stopped short of firing on Rowe after recognizing him by his beard as an American.

In recalling his dramatic escape in his 1971 book, *Five Years to Freedom*, Rowe described his feeling during the nightmarish experience.

"My stomach was spasming and I felt like barfing. Cold sweat covered my face as I curled in the grip of dry heaves, the wave of nausea constricting my throat and cutting off my already short breath. The tingling sensation of abject fear spread throughout my body, robbing me of the ability to move."

He drew on his strong religious convictions to pull him through the ordeal. "O Lord, dear Lord, please don't let me die now. Not Now! It was a plea from the very depths of my being," he wrote.

Jane Rowe, who was introduced to her former husband in April 1969--eight months before they married--said Nick Rowe believed even then that he had a destiny. That destiny, she said was to share his intimate knowledge of psychological warfare with others and fight the spread of communism anywhere in the world.

"He felt that the reason he was allowed to live . . . was to fulfill what he was doing," She said. "He had a mission in life, a very definite mission."

It was this belief, she said, that gave him the strength to continue his work in the Philippines, knowing he was a target. After Vietnam, she said, he came to terms with death.

"He had no fear," she said. "He walked very strong and very tall and he walked with love."

## A MILITARY TRADITION

The youngest of three children, Rowe particularly walked with a love for the military. It started as a boy in McAllen, Texas, a farming community about 140 miles southwest of Corpus Christi and 10 miles from the Mexican border.

Brushes with death haunted Rowe even as a child. His sister, Mary Alice, died before his birth on February 8, 1938. An older brother, Richard, died before graduation at West Point. His passing had a profound impact on young James, who idolized his brother and wanted to follow in his footsteps. At age 6, the youngster was often seen parading about in his brother's West Point uniform.

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His desire to fulfill his brother's dream stayed with him at McAllen High School, where he excelled both as a student and an athlete. He played baseball, basketball, football, and was on the track team.

Ramiro Leal, one of Rowe's schoolmates, now is an assistant principal at McAllen. He recalls Rowe as "a tough little guy" who never gave up. They were teammates on the baseball team, Leal said, recalling one incident in which Rowe demonstrated his tenacity. Rowe, the starting catcher, was steamrolled at home plate by a much larger player attempting to score, Leal said. Rowe somehow managed to hang on to the ball and stay in the game.

Donald L. Enderle, Rowe's chemistry teacher, said Rowe's father, a Realtor and World War I veteran, encouraged his son to become an Army Officer.

"He wanted his oldest son to complete the academy and when he didn't, of course the ball fell to 'Nikki,'" Enderle recalled. Rowe graduated from McAllen in 1956 and entered West Point that fall. He graduated in 1960 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in Field Artillery.

After graduating from the Army's Airborne and Ranger schools at Fort Benning, Georgia, Rowe completed the Field Artillery Officers Basic Course at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

His first assignment in 1961 was with the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Fort Bragg. He studied Mandarin Chinese at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, and graduated in 1962, returning to the 7th Special Forces Group as assistant group adjutant, and later as executive officer of an A Detachment, the basic 12-man fighting organization of the Special Forces.

In 1962, Rowe also graduated from the Army's Unconventional Warfare School at Fort Bragg. He then trained as a military free-fall parachutist before being deployed to South Vietnam in July 1963.

During the time Rowe was held captive, the Army continued to promote him since there was no evidence that he had died. By the time of his rescue on the day of New Year's Eve, 1968, he had been promoted to the rank of major.

Dan Pitzer, a former Vietnam POW who spent four years in captivity with Rowe before his release in 1967, said the two spent many nights pushing each other to hold on. They fantasized about opening a resort called *Casa Del Sol* (House of the Sun), and even went so far as to draw up plans and discuss financing.

"It was a continuous resistance to indoctrination," said Pitzer, who now is a survival and resistance instructor at the center and school. "There were things that Nick Rowe and I talked about during our incarceration that brothers probably wouldn't talk about."

At times, the Viet Cong would take away their mosquito netting and clothing as a form of mental torture. "We'd have to sit there at night fighting mosquitos to the point where you would go totally out of your mind," he said.

Following his rescue, Rowe was given a hero's welcome in the United States. He remained in the Army until 1974, first assigned to the Army General Staff, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, then to the Adjutant General's Office to work on the Army's POW/MIA program, and finally with the Defense Intelligence Agency.

After leaving the Army, Rowe made an unsuccessful bid for the Texas state comptroller's job. Running as a Republican, he lost by 4 percentage points. After that, he wrote two more

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books—*The Judas Squad*, about terrorists who seize a nuclear power plant, and *The Washington Connection*, a book about corruption, co-authored by Robin Moore and Jane Rowe.

## DISENCHANTED, NOT BITTER

First wife Jane Rowe said her former husband never was bitter about the Vietnam War, but became disenchanted with the way it was handled by politicians. That was his underlying motive in trying his hand in politics, she said.

“He wanted to make changes for the military,” she said. “You send an army to win a war, you never send an army to lose. This war was a politicians’ war. While the Army was sent to fight, there were politicians back here in Washington telling them they had no right to be there.”

Rowe returned to active duty in 1981 and was promoted to lieutenant colonel. He returned to Fort Bragg, where he created the Army’s Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape, or SERE, course for those who run a high risk of capture by enemy forces. Rowe incorporated many of the lessons he learned in Vietnam to teach soldiers how to avoid being captured and how to survive in the event they are captured.

“‘Win little victories,’ was one of the things that he talked about,” explained Lt Col Stephen Berti, chief of the mobilization branch at the center and school. Berti was a close friend of Rowe’s and helped him develop the 18-day course. “If you happen to fail, bounce back, start again. Don’t [be] down [on] yourself because maybe you did something wrong. His theory was if you beat a guy long enough, you’ll probably get a lot of things out of him. That old John Wayne thing of ‘Name, rank, and serial number,’ was a farce.”

Jane Rowe said she chose not to follow her husband when he went to Fort Bragg and that led to their eventual divorce. His last assignment at Fort Bragg was battalion commander of the 1st Special Warfare Training Battalion (Airborne) at the center. He assumed his most recent assignment last Spring. [Editor’s note. Prior to reporting to the Philippines, Colonel Rowe attended the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM), graduating in April 1988 after completing the Overseas Course (Class SAM-O-4-88) which prepares U.S. government personnel for overseas security assistance management positions.]

## SKEPTICAL OF PHILIPPINE POLICY

In the letter he sent to Haskell, Rowe appeared skeptical of the current U.S. policy in the Philippines, though he seemed pleased with the overall progress being made.

“A primary factor is that no one seems to believe in our [Low Intensity Conflict] doctrine except us . . . and then not all of us.” he wrote. “A recurring comment that is difficult to answer [is]: So you have a doctrine for [Low Intensity Conflict]. Can you give me an example of where it has been successful?”

Rowe described the insurgency as one of the most complex he ever encountered. “It can still go either way,” he wrote.

“We have the classic left-right-center split, with Cory’s government denied flexibility of action because of the massive foreign debt; the military still struggling to rise out of the quagmire of politicization that occurred under [ousted President Ferdinand] Marcos; the business community slicing out as much profit from the country as it can while the slicing is good; the poor discovering that real poverty began *after* Marcos left; the Marcos loyalists biding their time (both in and out of the military) in preparation for the return of their boss or the coup to avenge his death in exile; the politicians jockeying for position with no thought to the future of the country; and finally, the

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communists . . . the most honest of the bunch because they are open and aboveboard about their intentions to overthrow the government and rule the country.”

## BURIAL IN ARLINGTON

Rowe, promoted to colonel in January 1988, had two daughters by his first marriage: Deborah Caroline, 16, and Christina Nicole, 6, and two sons by his second marriage: Stephen Alexander, 2, and Brian, 5 months.

He was buried May 1 at Arlington National Cemetery on a hillside not far from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, following funeral services attended by about 800 relatives and friends. Those in attendance included Defense Secretary Richard Cheney and Secretary of State James Baker III.

Jane Rowe said she has been able to accept Nick Rowe's death better knowing that he died in the line of duty. “He lived a hero and he died a hero,” she said. “That's the way he wanted it. How many people die doing what they want to do?”

Susan Rowe said one source of comfort for her was meeting Aquino, who entered the political limelight after the assassination of her husband, Benigno.

“She said that she certainly could understand how I felt,” Susan Rowe said. “She was a very sincere wife who had experienced the same problem.”