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DANIEL RYE INTERVIEW
JIM: THE JAMES FOLEY STORY
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Daniel Rye
Photojournalist
(Date)
Interviewed by Brian ???
Total Running Time: 35 minutes and 40 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Kunhardt Film Foundation

The following video contains graphic descriptions of difficult situations.

Viewer discretion is advised.

BRIAN:

Can you introduce yourself? Tell us your name and your profession.

DANIEL RYE:

My name is Daniel Rye and I'm a Danish photojournalist.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Daniel Rye

Photojournalist

Jim: The James Foley Story

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DANIEL RYE:

I work basically on humanitarian issues, in all sorts, as a photographer.

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BRIAN:

What made you get into photojournalism?

DANIEL RYE:

I started as a gymnast and while I spent all my time in, in gym gymnastic like in gyms all around the world doing gymnastic. When I didn't do gymnastic and I started to take pictures and slowly it's, it started to evolve into a profession in some, at some sort. So that's why I, I started.

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BRIAN:

What were some of your projects that you covered throughout the years of your career?

DANIEL RYE:

I worked, I worked for a Danish photojournalist as an assistant, and he brought me, he introduced me into these, yeah, to the world of working in, in conflict zone. And I continue, I went to Russia to do a small project, and, and then I started in, in the south of Turkey to, to work with the, with all the refugees.

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And, and then I decided to go inside Syria to, to make a story about all the about the people before they come become refugees, when, when, and why do they actually flee the country? That was why I went into Syria. At the time when I went into Syria and, and also when James and Jim, he, when Jim, he went into Syria, there was not much media coverage of the conflict, not in Denmark.

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And, you know, we heard a lot about the issue in them, when when everything evolved in the Syrian revolution. But after a few years, you know, people start to forget the, the conflict, even though it, it was still a very big issue. So one of the reason why I, I went there was to, to-

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-remind people what was still going on, because the media tends to go the same places, you know, and suddenly when a conflict is not sexy anymore, all the, all the, the big world media goes away, and some people stays there to continue covering it. And, and that was, I believe that was why Jim was there, was to remind people what was still going on.

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What happened in Syria and, and what is what started as like a revolution where, where, you know, all the students and all the people around Syria started to rise up against the regime. You know, suddenly, I guess that people started, you know, the whole situation turned into something that a normal, normal people don't, didn't want to be a part of anymore.

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Which means that a lot of people who actually started the revolution had to flee away. And in the end, there was just these Islamist groups and, and criminals left. And I think that that's the, the Baku that at least I got caught in, was what's the change from, from, from, from the Syrian revolution being a, a very, a very beautiful rise up against the regime in,-

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-into being, you know, fight between warlords and Islamic groups, et cetera. So it becomes a, a very, yeah, everybody for themselves and not, not a population against the regime. Everybody has their own interest. So I believe that was, that was what everything turned into. And, and James was the first one getting caught together with, with John. John and James was taken together. They were kidnapped together. So they have been together for ever since day one.

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And, and we knew that other people have been taken before, but but also released shortly after. So of course, you know, there is a risk and there was a risk in Syria, but I don't think that anybody knew that the risk would be, you know, the consequence. It could be that, that...

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BRIAN:

Tell us a little bit, a little bit about how you were when you, the day that you were taken and what that was like, and paint a picture of that day.

DANIEL RYE:

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I started my project in the small town, five kilometers away from the Turkish border, the small town called ASAs. And, I only planned to be inside Syria for, for two days. I wanted to get in there and, you know, kind of test my, my fixer and the people that I was using, try to get some, establish some contact that I could, so I could have some contacts on the ground to continue my research.

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So basically, my first trip was much more like a research trip than it was an actual, you know, it was actually working. And, and, yeah, I had one day of, of work when I walked around this small quiet town. This, yeah, it was may spring.

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So the weather started to be very better, and people seemed happy and relaxed, and everything was pretty much calmed down. And we visited some locations everywhere. We went back to, to the house where my, my driver, he, he used to live now he lived in Turkey at the time, but he had a abandoned flat in, in Naas, and we slept there, me, him, and, and my, and my, fixer.

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And, we woke up the next morning, very early. My plan was to, to work. I wanted to, to, to meet the Syrian mor routine and meet people in the market or whatever they, whatever they were doing. And, and yeah, basically we walked down the street and down and try, tried to meet some of the local on the street.

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And, and we were told to, to go and, and, and speak to, to some guys, in the area. And, and my Arabic is very pure and, is very poor. And, I, yeah, and I,

yeah, I trusted my fixer, and we went there to, to speak to them, to make sure that it was okay that we, that we filmed in that area, or were taking pictures.

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So we worked as journalists, and she made sure that no worried and everything is fine. They're good guys. They've been helping us a lot. Yeah. Et cetera, et cetera. And, and we went in there, to speak to them. And after one hour of, of an interrogation kind of thing, very, very calmly were sitting and so fast, they were offering tea, everything was calm, quiet, even though I knew that something was strange, something was wrong.

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And then they just asked me to stand up. And so I, I stood up and they took off my glasses and, and they just don't worry. Then this is just a procedure. And they gave me a blindfold on and handcuffed my hands on my back and followed me down the basement. And when we came down, into the basement, I was put on a mattress, and then everything started, basically.

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So for me I knew it was dangerous. I, I spent a lot of money and on, in like, covering myself, like kidnapping insurance and, and rescuing insurance and stuff. I knew there was a risk, and I knew I was, I was new in the game. I, I knew that I was, you know, I knew that that, that that's, that I didn't have the same, what do you call it?

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I didn't have the same, routine. I didn't have the same, as a, you know, as a very, like, like an old, like an old journalist who have been covering the same

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in many years. They, they know temperature of the area. You know, I, I knew that I had to, to, to learn on this.

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So I, I really tried to cover myself, but in some way, I, I got caught up in this political, vacuum, vacuum that there was appearing in, in this area. And, and I was taken by ra, as far as I know. And yeah, that was how everything began. So, you know, a quiet Sunday, beautiful spring morning become, became a, a nightmare for me.

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BRIAN:

That first 24 hours, like, what is that? Like, what, what was kind of going through your head?

DANIEL RYE:

The first, the first 24 hours for me was, was, was strange. You know, the first, the first two, three hours was, was very confusing. At some point I thought, okay, this could take two weeks. They could take one week, it could take two days.

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You know, I've heard a lot of other stories, read stories about people who have ended up in the same situation and, you know, everything between three, four days and one and a half month they would be released again. And, and I knew that I had an insurance, etc. So I knew that somebody was

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working on my case if, if it turned out to be worse than it was. And, you know, I I, I didn't really think that much.

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I didn't really, my fa- my first thought was, okay, the only thing I can do now is to be patient. The only thing I can do now is to just stop thinking about everything, because I cannot do anything about anything. But they put me back in the car and I was basically sitting right next to my, my driver. I could hear him. He was sitting right next to me. He was crying a lot.

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I was shocked, like in completely shocked. I didn't know what to believe. I didn't know what not to believe. You know, things just happens and you're just completely out of your mind. If they do just small things, you will be completely out of your mind and, and afraid that, that, that will, like why are they doing this? Why are they doing this? Why are they doing this? But slowly when time goes, you, you start to see which thing they're doing again and again. And you get used to, and you get good at being a hostage.

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BRIAN:

When was the first time that you, that you encountered Jim?

DANIEL RYE:

I was put together with the other hostages, and they told me that there was a guy named, named Jim, and there was a guy named John, but they were kept

in a, at another place they didn't know, but they saw them. And, and one day when I think we were sitting like seven guys together,-

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-we were taken to the toilets, into the bathroom, and James and John was standing in, in the same toilet. You know, there was, I don't know if they were supposed to, the guards were supposed to take them back to their cell, and then we could come in and they just forgot to take James and John back. But, but they, suddenly we came into the cell and, and, and-

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-at that point I was very, very traumatized by, by, by the torture that I witnessed the first, the first three weeks of my detention. And so I was just like in the background, not saying anything. And I looked at these two guys, you know, standing there. And I don't remember that much. I, I remember, I remember John being, like John seem said like,-

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-"Hey, Daniel, life, you know, Hey, nice to meet you, " You know, "Heard a lot about you," or something. He said something that, you know, why did you say that? But he was just, I think both of them was like very happy to see that they were in the same prison as we were. I think they were afraid that they were probably in another, like that they were not a part of our group. So both, both of them was very happy to see us. And James was standing a little bit in the background and just saying, hello, hello, hello.

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And I don't, maybe we, we were there for like one minute, one and a half minute, and, and they were taken back to their cell. At that time, I think we

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were, yeah, we were like 10 guys or so together. This is a completely another prison. We were moved a few times, and, and they came in and first of all, I thought that, I thought that they was giving us, that the guards were giving us mattresses because suddenly they came,-

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-like we had to, to sit faces to the walls. So, but I could see like under my arms, I could see like, I could see, some mattresses was moved in and, and there came some guys in, in like a traditional, Syrian clothes. And I, and I thought, okay, this is just guard coming in with, with like mattresses for us. We have been asking to, to get something to sleep on, because we only had a few blankets.

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And then they closed the door again, the big metal door. And, and I looked up and there, you know, there was three mattresses and staining three guys in like traditional Muslim clothes. And, and that was James and John and, and this other guy. And I was like, holy. And everybody was like, yay, welcome, welcome, welcome. You know, it's three new friends. The 10 of us already got each other on the nerves, so it was nice to have somebody else to talk to.

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And finally, we saw James and John for real, and they were part of, of, of our, our situation, because I think all of us was afraid that, that they would have another destiny or something. And the fact that they were put together with us meant that at some point we would probably have the same, you know, destiny or the same.

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There was already, there were already starting to go some negotiation with some, some negotiation was already started for, for, for, for some of us. My, the negotiation that happened for me in the beginning, failed. You know, we were, we were taken from [???] and over to Islamic State as far as I know.

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And, and then my negotiation collapsed, and they tried to start something again. So some of, some of us, already knew that what they wanted to do with us, and the fact that James and John came into our room meant that hopefully they also had the same destiny. You know, it's just about money. And it was really like both for James and John, they were really, really happy to be a part of the group because they were afraid that they had another destiny.

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And so that make everybody like calm down in, in a way, made everybody much more relaxed.

BRIAN:

When Jim and John and this other guy come into the room, how do you start to kind of create a community of, of, what, what is that, what is that like?

DANIEL RYE:

And both James and John are very calm guys. They don't speak up unless they are asked to, unless they have something to say.

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They're very cool guys. So they, they really managed to, to affect the group in a very, very good way. And, and for myself personally, you know, I, I needed

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somebody to lean against. As you know, I was very, very broke. I was really broken down after my first three weeks and, and it was difficult for me to, to get up again and to, to start to believe in myself and, and to start to, to gain strength, both physically and mentally.

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But, but when James and John came in, I, I started to use them as guys that I could come to if I had a question or if I, if I was angry about something. So I didn't speak that much to Jim in the first, the first weeks, we were put together. And the same with John. John was very calm and, and, and leaned back, during all this, yeah, during this time.

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But slowly, slowly me and slowly I started to get along with James, because James is, you know, we, we, we were all very different, in there, but I, I could see myself in James in some way, you know.

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So one of my jobs in, in, in the, in the prison became to be this, you know, this gymnastic instructor in a way. And there was period of time in the prison where we, where we was not, interrupted by the guards very often. We were in the basement, we had our toilet in the, in, in one of the, the, in one of the prisons. And we had our own toilet, so we didn't have to go to the toilet very often.

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So we were only interrupted when, when they gave us food or when, when, they just came to bother us, you know? But, but we had a lot of time for ourselves and, and that meant that we could get a routine. So the routine was

that, that I, I did some gymnastic lessons, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday I did gymnastic lessons and, and Steven, he did yoga every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and Sunday we were off.

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So that was a part of our routine, you know, Steven and I, we, we, we had something to, to, to give the other guys. And, and I started to, I tried to, you know, I, I have big great experience as being a gymnastics teacher, and I used to have students, very, very high level students, and, and trying to have a, to teach, a group of war correspondents and more journalists and d workers successor around gymnastics is, it's, is really, is really something.

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They're much more intellectuals than they are, like sportsman. So that was very, very interesting. And, and especially James, you know, he, he, he has a strong body, but he's not that good at, at coordinating and controlling this bacon and strong body. So it was really, really interesting to, to try to, to teach James to, to do, to, to do a role on the floor or do, a head stay or whatever.

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We tried at that moment, we were given very, very little to eat, very little to eat. And, I don't know, like maybe five, 600 calories a day, I don't know. But we were very little, so it was really, really starving and, and we couldn't do much gymnastic every day. And then we would be very tired, you know, and. And, and I remember that, I remember one time when, when I,-

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-when we need to have this, when we was supposed to have this gymnastic lesson, and, James, he came up and he was, he was ready, you know, ready to

do anything. Everything is, I, I'm really good. And, and then we started slowly, it was maybe only 20 minutes of, or 25 minutes, this lesson, but we did the first two, two tricks.

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And, and then he, he couldn't really do it. It was, it was too difficult for him. So he came up to me, Hey, I'm, I'm, I'm really, I'm really tired, you know, I, I didn't get much to eat, so I, I think I will sit down and, and get up a little bit to eat. And then he sat down and the car and I said, it's fine by me. So he sat down on the carpet and he took a quarter piece of bread and three olives. He ate that. And, and then he came back. Now I have the energy to continue and that's perfect.

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James was perfect. So, so he continued and he tried as best as he could. And that was, and, and then, you know, I remember five, like three months after that, we looked back to this situation and, and, and we laughed our asses off because of Jim that couldn't use his body. And then he ate a quarter piece of bread and three olives, and then he was the strongest guy in the universe, you know.

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It was just so far away from, from a normal world as you can get, you know, this, we always had a lot of fun by, by, you know, being held captive for one year or like this long time, you, you, the whole, like, what's normal for you and what's, what's the normal, you know, changes completely,-

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-you know, it's, of course it's normal to shit in a bucket or it's normal not to get anything to eat on. Of course, you know, it's normal to lay on, on the, on the concrete floor and, and doesn't have any rights or whatever, you know, of course that's normal. You know, they've been like this for the last year. So we really developed into be some really, really, really strangest people. Some of the other prisoners was, was much better to, to,-

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-like, they didn't mind the food issue as much, but, but for James and I was, that was something important for us, you know? And I don't know, all of us has different issues, to deal with. And, and for, for James and for me especially, it was, it was the food issue. So we, we developed a way of, of, of killing the time.

BRIAN:

Just talk about some of those things that he brought to, brought to the table and in the group.

DANIEL RYE:

When you're sitting 19 people in one room, there's not room for everybody to speak.

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There's not space for everybody to speak. So whenever you're speaking, you, you better have something to say, or else you're basically wasting the other guy's time or you're just creating a lot of noise. And, and James was very good at, at speaking, when he had something to say. He was very good at that. And

he didn't just, you know, he wasn't very loud and he wasn't, he didn't react very much.

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Sometimes he, he actually, he was too patient. And we were like, come on, do say or do something, you know? And he was like, yeah, something. He was very, very, very calm, which made it very, it was very, very nice to be in the same room with him because he gave other people, you know, he meant he managed to make the room bigger in a way, by being small himself.

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BRIAN:

I was wanting to see if we could fill in some of the blanks about the, the captors, I guess specifically the Beatles. Cause it seems like they were the most, the most present amongst everything, everybody on.

DANIEL RYE:

Yeah. But I think especially for James and John, they were the most present ones.

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Because I, first time I saw the Beatles was, I was actually pretty late in the, this was around September, I guess that was the first time I saw them. And then we only saw 'em a few times, like not that much. So they were not our everyday, guards. Like, like in the beginning of James and John's captivity, the Beatles was their, their everyday guards.

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And so there's no doubt that the Beatles for James and John the Beatles means very, very different, different things from, from, from me. For instance. You know, they were hard from, to me, like they were very, they were very tough towards me also and the rest of the guys.

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But no matter what they meant freedom for me because they were the one negotiating with me. But, James and John were destroyed by the Beatles in the beginning. And, and then they came back and they were not the, they were not, they were not any, they, they were not any sign of, of, of freedom for them.

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So what the Beatles is for them and what it is for me is, is very different things, I guess. So it's difficult to explain, but one thing is you all that they are very, very, they, they really managed to be very scary. They, they were very scary the way that they did, et cetera, et cetera. They were really, really good at it, at what they did, really good at being scary and being, being tough.

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They, they beated the shit out of, James and I like, I think it's called a Charlie horse, when you put your knee into the legs of a person. And they did that to, to me and James, why we had to say, sit in stress position, you know, with Bend the legs, arm over our heads.

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I don't know how many they gave us, but it just continued. And it was, it never tried anything that hurt so much in my entire life. And it just continued. I was, I laid down crying, stand up and stand up again. They kicked again. And

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they did that to me and James, the rest of the guys, they didn't touch that much. So it's, it's, and it was strange because they're intriguing us over.

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Okay, yeah, of course they've been roughing us up, but this was like really damaging, like really damaging, and it could really damage our legs, like, for, for life. And then they, they just left. And I was just laying back, you know, maybe I had 20 Charlie horses on each leg, and I could, I was just laying, I couldn't be in my own body of pure pain.

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And I knew that James got exactly the same, treatment in the other corner of the room. And I, and I was just laying there crying and didn't know what to do. I couldn't lay anywhere. I couldn't, it's just, it hurt so much. So John and David, I think, came over to me and started trying to, to make it better. And, and James and the other co going off the room, he,-

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-I knew he got exactly the same treatment as me, but I couldn't hear it. Like, he didn't, he didn't scream as much as I did. He didn't make the same noises as I and I as I did. He just, he just, I don't know if he kept it inside or how he did it, but only a few minutes after they left he, James, he kind of looked up and asked me if I was okay.

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And at that time, I was still crying. I was like, shut up, James. I, I remember I said, shut up James. You know, you know, don't ask me if I'm okay. You know, don't, don't worry about me. You don't worry about yourself. No, I'm, I'm, I'm fine. No, you're not. James, you, you legs, I'm very bad right now.

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And, and one of the other guards came in and asked us if we want to go to the toilet or if we, because he had hurt all things. So he just made sure that sometimes when you get beat it up so badly, you, you can, you shit your pants or something. We just wanted to make sure if anyone was needed to go to the toilet and, And neither James or I could go to the toilet at that time, we couldn't walk. But yeah, we just laid there for like a few hours until the pain started to disappear a bit.

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BRIAN:

Can you tell us the story of that, your letter with Jim?

DANIEL RYE:

When people started to get released, we decided to send out letters with the person who was released, or the group that was released or whatever. And in the beginning it was just small, small messages to the family saying, you know,-

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-say that I loved them or whatever, and thinking about them, et cetera. But as the group became smaller and smaller, the Brits and Americans, they started to realize that our chances of getting a message out or sending anything to our, to our families, it, it, it can be the last opportunity to do that.

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And, I know that, John and Steve and Peter sent it out letters with some of the other guys, like well written letters. They managed to smuggle them out in, in handwritten pieces, I think, or at least memorized. And, but James, he didn't, he didn't wanna bother in near was during that for him.

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And, and I remember one day that I saw that John and James had been talking for some times in the corner as they used to do, sometimes, very rarely, but sometimes they had these conversations in the corners. And, and after that, John, he came over to me. James, you want to ask you something? Okay. Okay. So okay. Came over to James, and James was like, and I, what up James? And he's like, oh, just, just if, if, if you want to carry out a message or something.

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You know, he was very, he said it fa- he said it fast, like, like, he didn't wanna bother me, you know, trying to do something. And I was like, shut up James. You know, no matter what you want to, to, you know, I would give me a letter and I would take it out even if I have to shove it off my ass or whatever. And then there was a period while we were memorizing the letter where he started to get some hope again, you know, again, was up and down always.

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And when I got released, and I think I, I think the day after my release, the same night as I land in Denmark, a very good friend of, of, of me and, and the Foley family asked me to call Diane and John and tell them the letter as much as I could before I would forget it.

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And I did. So I, I told, I told him everything that, that I could remember and, and James and everything about this letter. When I told the Foley family this, this letter, they, their reaction was so grateful and so powerful that I actually felt that I did something.

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I, I felt that I, I actually meant something, you know? That, that I was, that, yeah, that I could do something that I did, that I changed something in a way. And every time I, I ha I, I feel bad inside my head, I can tell myself, yeah, but then you did a few good things, you know, and all these things are very important for me to kind of accept the fact that, that we are, I left somebody behind. Yeah.

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