

## Long March to Freedom: Tom Hargrove's Own Story of His Kidnapping by Colombian Narco-Guerillas

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## Long March to Freedom: Tom Hargrove's Own Story of His Kidnapping by Colombian Narco-Guerillas

### Abstract

A review of *Long March to Freedom*, by Tom Hargrove.

## Long March to Freedom: Tom Hargrove's Own Story of His Kidnapping by Colombian Narco-Guerillas

Something unexpected happened as Tom Hargrove was driving to work: Narco-guerillas robbed him of 11 months of freedom. These notes are his day-by-day account of being held for ransom in the high mountains of southwestern Colombia. They are so descriptive that the reader is quickly caught up in the boredom, frustration, isolation, and discomfort of his captivity. We share the physical pain and mental anguish, and with Hargrove keep questioning, "When will this end?" "How will it end?" This is an extremely depressing book, for the monotony seems never to end.

This journal does not ordinarily review books such as *Long March to Freedom*, but this is a special case for Hargrove is one of us, a valued colleague and friend. His professional accomplishments have earned ACE's highest awards. We ached with his family when he was kidnapped; we rejoiced when he was set free.

This is a learning book, too, for his unedited notes are a splendid example of reporting and writing excellence under the worst possible conditions. Hargrove wrote on whatever paper was at hand, starting with check blanks stowed in a money belt. His notes, and the paper, pens, and pencils for writing them, were precious possessions, second only to his eye glasses. They served two purposes: to maintain a sense of rationality in an irrational situation, and to be an account of his last days should he die before liberation. He hid these papers inside his jacket, for the guerillas were suspicious of any writing in English.

The irony is that his kidnapping was accidental; Hargrove just happened into a road block set up by rebel militia. His staff card for the Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical was misread. The guerrillas knew nothing of CIAT, but recognized the initials, CIA. They felt lucky; here was a valuable hostage.

They held Hargrove in a series of remote mountain camps, hideaways set up solely as his jails. Captive and guards alike existed in this isolation. All food and supplies were trekked in over long, rough trails. Seldom were there newspapers, magazines, or radio broadcasts, a matter of little concern to the guards — illiterate young people in their teens and early '20s. Hargrove's attempts to communicate with them bring out the feeling of hopelessness so widespread among youth of the third world. They had so little, and their prospects were so bleak, that volunteering for a rebel army was a step up. Ideology was unimportant; they wanted the security of regular meals, a place to sleep, and a sense of belonging.

Hargrove was in solitary confinement for most of those 11 months, often chained to his bed or a post and having nobody to talk with. This indignity was compounded by the social isolation, especially difficult for one who is by nature a compulsive communicator. While his captors encouraged writing letters to family and friends, they had to be in Spanish so they could be censored by guerilla leaders. He was promised the letters would be delivered. They were not.

So complete was this isolation that Hargrove had not the slightest notion of events taking place on the other side of the mountains. Had his wife, Susan, returned to Texas? Was anybody doing anything to set him free? Were sons Geddie and Miles doing well in college? Was his ailing father alive? His guards nurtured these uncertainties, assuring him that freedom would come any day.

*Long March to Freedom* reports only half of this story. CBS-TV's "Sixty Minutes" effectively told the other side, focusing on Susan, Miles, and Geddie as they struggled to keep mental balance while setting up elaborate procedures for negotiating with the guerrilla leaders. Within hours of the kidnapping, a worldwide Friends of Tom e-mail network was up and running. ACE played a part, publicly condemning this outrageous kidnapping of a nonpolitical agriculturist.

Hargrove is the first international staff member of the global network of agricultural research centers to be caught in such a web, though local employees of centers have been held and

even killed. Unfortunately, terrorism is not limited to less-developed countries, for we are experiencing it on some of our university campuses, in our post offices, in fast-food restaurants, and on our highways.

This book is also a tribute to modern publication technology. The dozens of scraps of paper were hand carried to the publishing house, transcribed by thirty typists, assembled in order, and copyedited and proofread. Printed and bound hardcover books were on sale within three months of Hargrove being set free.

There are lessons we can learn from this no-nonsense account of life lived under the worst of conditions. Hargrove is one who believes in and practices writing as a craft. By keeping that skill alive, he maintained himself as a rational being and gave us this terrifying account of what being held hostage is all about.

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