

A Matter of Life and Death

Task: Read an extract from a novel and then do the multiple choice

Neil Sanders was a prisoner. He had committed a crime while on duty as a soldier and was being taken to prison by an officer, Captain Bilham. As it happened, they were both from Scotland. However, Neil came from the Highlands, while Captain Bilham had been born in Glasgow. Nevertheless, they had agreed to forget their differences as the train journey was long and it would be easier for them both if they didn't argue.

What really helped them get on well was Neil's pocket chess set. They played game after game - probably over a hundred in all - and they were both about the same level. Captain Bilham could remember openings and endings from some of the great games in the history of chess. He had a wonderful memory and liked teaching; he said that was what made him such a good officer.



They started talking together, almost becoming friends. They were on a train crossing Egypt, where the British army was stationed at that period of World War II. When they got to Cairo they would never see each other again. Bilham told Neil that he was being sent there on a special mission, but he wouldn't go into details about it. Neil would be put in prison. He might even be hanged.

As they talked, Captain Bilham started to feel that Neil wasn't a bad person at all - that although Neil had shot and killed a British army officer he shouldn't really be a prisoner. But the circumstances were unusual. The officer had been stupid: he tried to force his men into a situation where they would all be killed. The officer, it seemed, had gone mad. He had even pulled out his gun and threatened to shoot his own men if they refused to approach the enemy. Neil, a sergeant, had seen very clearly that the officer was going to get them all killed. There had been a battle going on; guns had been firing all round them. Neil had shot the officer, saving the lives of the twenty men in this company but perhaps sacrificing his own.

He would probably be hanged for this crime. The court might give him twenty years in prison, but Captain Bilham doubted it. This was wartime, and even though Neil's superior officer had been a complete fool, he had still been an officer.

Suddenly, Captain Bilham felt ill. His face turned white and he started sweating. His hand went to his chest. Neil wondered if he might have heart problems. Captain Bilham asked him to get some white tablets out of his bag, and Neil jumped up to do so. But when he turned round with the small bottle in his hand, he saw that Captain Bilham had stopped breathing. He was half lying on his seat, his eyes still open - but he was obviously dead. Neil's first reaction was to feel sorry for him. Then he began to feel afraid. They would think he had done it!

1 What is suggested about the way people from different parts of Scotland sometimes behave towards each other?

- A They have different ways of behaving.
- B They sometimes argue with each other.
- C They generally play chess.
- D They try to get on.

2 Captain Bilham

A liked explaining things

B used to be a teacher.

C cheated when he played chess by remembering old games.

D won most of the chess games they played.



3 Neil had shot an officer

A who had been behaving irresponsibly.

B because he hadn't wanted to fight

C because the officer had shot at him.

D because he had wanted to be an officer himself.

4 In what way had Neil perhaps sacrificed his own life?

A he had risked being shot by the officer.

B The other men might have shot him.

C he could have been killed in the fighting.

D he might now be executed.



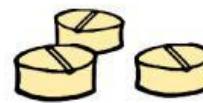
5 Why did Captain Bilham think Neil would be hanged?

A to show that men must always obey officers

B because Neil was afraid to fight.

C because the officer had been a fool.

D because it would be easier than putting him in prison for twenty years.



6 Why did Captain Bilham's hand go to his chest?

A to find his tablets

B because he felt hot

C to unbutton his jacket

D because he felt a pain there



7 How did Neil immediately feel when he realized that Captain Bilham was dead?

A hopeful that he might escape

B pity for him

C worried that he would be blamed

D relieved that he was dead.

8 At the end of the extract, what did Neil think people would assume?

A that he had killed the Captain

B that the Captain had died of a heart attack

C that Neil had stolen the tablets

D that Neil was afraid.