9TH SQUADRON

1 CAVALRY DIVISION

Recently I had someone tell me that 'there were no heroes in the Vietnam War' and I disagreed. Maybe we all get so hung up on a Hollywood definition that we've forgotten that heroes are real people, not super men or women, but those walk among us, work with us, raise their families with us, go to church with us; people who for one moment, or in some cases, several significant moments rose above the ordinary to stand out and do the right thing. Teddy ROOSEVELT said, "It's not the critic who counts nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, the credit belongs to the man in the arena . . ."

This column is about former POW Dr. Hal KUSHNER, the 1-9th flight surgeon who was in the 'arena' and proved to be more than just a strong man. He proved to be a hero in the best sense of the word and deserves our respect and our applause. He earned it. The following is a speech he gave at the 1-9th Cavalry Reunion at Ft. Hood, Texas in August, 1999. It is a painful and remarkable account.

"I want you to know that I don't do this often. I was captured 2 December, '67, and returned to American control on 16 March, '73. For those of you good at arithmetic: 1931 days. Thus it has been 32 years since capture and 26 years since my return. I have given a lot of talks, about medicine, about opthamology, even about the D-Day Invasion, as I was privileged to go to Normandy and witness the 50th anniversary of the invasion in June, '44. But not about my captivity, I don't ride in parades; I don't open shopping centers; I don't give interviews and talks about it. I have tried very hard NOT to be a professional PW. My philosophy has always been to look forward, not backward, to consider the future rather than the past. That's a helluva thing to say at a reunion, I guess. In 26 years, I've given only two interviews and two talks. One to my hometown newspaper, one to the Washington Post in '73, and a talk at Ft. Benning in '91 and to the Military Flight Surgeons in '93. I've refused 1,000 invitations to speak about my experiences. But you don't say no to the 1-9th, and you don't say no to your commander. COL Bob NEVINS and COL Pete BOOTH asked me to do this and so I said, 'yes, sir' and prepared the talk. It will probably be my last one."

"I was a 26-year old young doctor, just finished 9 years of education: college at the University of North Carolina, med. school at Medical College of Virginia, a young wife and 3-year old daughter. I interned at the hospital in which I was born, Tripler Army Med Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. While there, I was removed from my internship and spent most of my time doing orthopedic operations on wounded soldiers and Marines. We were getting hundreds of wounded GIs there, and filled the hospital. After the hospital was filled, we created tents on the grounds and continued receiving air evac patients. So I knew what was happening in Vietnam. I decided that I wanted to be a flight surgeon. I had a private pilot's license and was interested in aviation. So after my internship at Tripler, I went to Ft. Rucker and to Pensacola and through the Army and Navy's aviation medicine program and then deployed to Vietnam. While in basic training and my E&E course, they told us that as Doctors we didn't have to worry about being captured. Doctors and nurses, they said, were not PWs, they were detained under the Geneva Convention. If they treated us as PWs, we should show our Geneva Convention cards and leave. It was supposed to be a joke and it was pretty funny at the time.

I arrived in Vietnam in August, '67 and went to An Khe. I was told that the Div. needed two flight surgeons; one to be the Div. flight surgeon at An Khe in the rear and the other to be surgeon for the 1-9th, a unit actively involved with the enemy. I volunteered for the 1-9th. The man before me, CPT Claire SHENEP had been killed and the dispensary was named the Claire SHENEP Memorial Dispensary. Like many flight surgeons, I flew on combat missions in helicopters, enough to have earned three air medals and one of the medics, SSG Jim ZEILER used to warn me, 'Doc, you better be careful. We'll be renaming that dispensary, the K&S Memorial Dispensary.'"

I was captured on 2 December, '67 and held for five and a half years until 16 March, '73. I have never regretted the decision that I made that August to be the 1-9th flight surgeon. Such is the honor and esteem that I hold the squadron. I am proud of the time I was the squadron's flight surgeon."

"On 30 November, '67, I went to Chu Lai with MAJ Steve PORCELLA, WO-1 Giff BEDWORTH and SGT McKECKNEY, the crew chief of our UH-1H. I gave a talk to a troop at Chu Lai on the dangers of night flying. The weather was horrible, rainy and windy, and I asked MAJ PORCELLA, the A/C commander, if we could spend the night and wait out the weather.

He said 'Our mission is not so important but we have to get the A/C back'. I'll never forget the devotion to duty of this young officer; it cost him his life."

"While flying from Chu Lai to LZ Two Bits, I thought we had flown west of Hwy. 1, which would be off course. I asked Steve if we had drifted west. He called the ATC at Duc Pho and asked them to find him. The operator at Duc Pho said that he had turned his radar off at 2100. He said, 'Do you want me to turn it on and find you?'. MAJ PORCELLA replied 'Roj' and that was the last thing he ever said. The next time I knew I was recovering from unconsciousness in a burning helicopter which seemed to be upside down. I tired to unbuckle my seat belt and couldn't use my left arm. I finally managed to get unbuckled and immediately dropped and almost broke my neck. My helmet was plugged into commo and the wire held me as I dropped out of the seat, which was inverted. The helicopter was burning. Poor MAJ PORCELLA was crushed against the instrument panel and either unconscious or dead. BEDWORTH was thrown, still strapped in his seat out of the chopper. His right anklebones were fractured and sticking through the nylon of his boot. SGT MAC was unhurt but thrown clear and unconscious. I tried to free PORCELLA by cutting his seatbelt and moving him. However, I was unable to. The chopper burned up and I suffered burns on my hands and buttocks and had my pants burned off. While trying to free PORCELLA, some of the M-60 rounds cooked off and I took a round through the left shoulder and neck. My left wrist and left collarbone were broken in the crash, and I lost or broke 7 upper teeth."

"Well, after we assessed the situation, we had no food or water, no flares, no first aid kit or survival gear. We had two 38 pistols and 12 rounds, one seriously wounded WO co-pilot, a moderately wounded doctor, and an unhurt crew chief. We thought we were close to Duc Pho and Hwy. 1 and close to friendlies. BEDWORTH and I decided to send MAC for help at first light. We never saw him again."

"Later, 6 years later, COL NEVINS told me that SGT MAC had been found about 10 miles from the crash site, shot and submerged in a rice paddy. So on that night of 30 November, '67 I splinted BEDWORTH's leg with tree branches, made a lean-to from the door of the chopper, and we sat in the rain for three days and nights. We just sat there. We drank rainwater. On the third morning, he died. We could hear choppers hovering over our crash site and I fired most of the rounds from our 38's trying to signal them, but cloud cover was so heavy and the weather so bad, they never found us."

"I took the compass from the burned out helicopter and tried to go down the mountain towards the east and, I believed, friendlies. My glasses were broken or lost in the crash and I

couldn't see well: the trail was slippery and I fell on rocks in a creek bed and cracked a couple of ribs. I had my left arm splintered to my body with my army belt. My pants were in tatters and burned. I had broken teeth and a wound in my shoulder. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything but rainwater for three days. I looked and felt like hell."

"One of the cruel ironies of my life ... you know how we all play the what-if games, what if I hadn't done this or that? ... well, when I finally reached the bottom of the mountain, I estimated 4 hours after first light, the weather cleared and I saw choppers hovering over the top. I knew I couldn't make it up the mountain, and had to take my chances. But, if I had only waited another 4 hours..."

"I started walking up the trail and saw a man working in a rice paddy. He came over and said 'Dia-wi, Bac-si-CPT Doctor'. He took me to a little hootch, sat me down and gave me a can of sweetened condensed milk and a C-ration can, can opener and spoon. This stuff was like pudding and it billowed out of the can and was the best-tasting stuff I ever had. I felt very safe at that point. One minute later, my host led a squad of 14 VC with two women and 12 rifles came upon me. The squad leader said, 'Surrenda no kill'. He put his hands in the air and I couldn't because my left arm was tied to my body. He shot me with an M2 carbine and wounded me again in the neck. After I was apprehended, I showed my captors my Geneva Convention card, white with a red cross. He tore it up. He took my dogtags and medallion which had a St. Christopher's (medal) on one side and a Star of David on the other, which my dad had given me before leaving. They tied me with commo wire in a duck wing position, took my boots and marched me mostly at night for about 30 days. The first day they took me to a cave, stripped my fatigue jacket off my back, tied me to a door and a teenage boy beat me with a bamboo rod. I was told his parents were killed by American bombs. We rested by day, and marched by night. I walked on rice paddy dikes, and couldn't see a thing. They would strike these little homemade lighters and by the sparks they made, see four or five steps. I was always falling off the dikes into the rice paddy water and had to be pulled back up. It was rough. On the way, I saw men, women and kids in tiger cages, and bamboo jails. I was taken to a camp, which must have been a medical facility, as my wound was festering and full of maggots and I was sick. A woman heated up a rifle-cleaning rod and gave me a bamboo stick to bite on. She cauterized my through and through wound with the cleaning rod and I almost passed out with pain. She then dressed the wound with Mercurochrome and gave me two aspirin. I thought, what else can they do to me? I was to find out."

"After walking for about a month through plains, then jungles and mountains, always west, they took me to a camp. I had been expecting a PW camp like a stalag with Hogan's Heroes; barbed wire, search lights, nice guards and Red Cross packages - and a hospital where I could work as a doctor. They took me to a darkened hut with an oriental prisoner who was not American. I didn't know whether he was Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian or Chinese. He spoke no English and was dying of TB. He was emaciated, weak, sick and coughed all day and night. I spent two days there and an English-speaking Vietnamese officer came with a portable tape recorder and asked me to make a statement against the war. I told him that I would rather die than speak against my country. His words, which were unforgettable and if I ever write a book, will be the title. He said, 'You will find that dying is very easy; living, living is the difficult thing'."

"A few days later, in a driving rain, we started the final trek to camp. I was tied again, without boots, and we ascended higher and higher in the mountains. I was weak and asked to stop often and rest. We ate a little rice which the guards cooked and actually needed ropes to traverse some of the steep rocks. Finally, we got to PW camp One. There were four American servicemen there, two from the US and two from Puerto Rico. Three were Marines and one in the Army. These guys looked horrible. They wore black PJs, were scrawny with bad skin and teeth and beards and matted hair. The camp also had about 15 ARVNs who were held separately, across a bamboo fence. The camp was just a row of hootches made of bamboo with elephant grass roofs around a creek, with a hole in the ground for a latrine. This was the first of five camps we lived in in the South - all depressingly similar, although sometimes we had a separate building for a kitchen and sometimes we were able to pipe in water through bamboo pipes from a nearby stream."

"I asked one of the Marines, the man captured longest and the leader, if escape was possible. He told me that he and a Special Forces CPT had tried to escape the year before and the CPT had been beaten to death, while he had been put in stocks for 90 days, having to defecate in his hands and throw it away from him or lie in it. The next day I was called before the camp commander and chastised and yelled at for suggesting escape. My fellow PW then told me never to say anything to him that I didn't want revealed, because the Vietnamese controlled his mind. I threatened to kill him for informing on me. He just smiled and said I would learn."

"Our captors promised us that if we made progress and understood the evils of the war, they would release us. And the next day, they released the two Puerto Ricans and 14 ARVNs

PWs. The people released wore red sashes and gave anti-war speeches. Just before the release, they brought in another 7 American PWs from the 196th Light BDE who were captured in the TET offensive of '68. I managed to write our names, ranks and serial numbers on a piece of paper and slip it to one of the PRs who was released. They transported the information home and in March, '68 our families learned we had been captured alive."

"We were held in a series of jungle camps from January, '68 to February '71. At this time, conditions were so bad and we were doing so poorly, that they decided to move us to North Vietnam. They moved 12 of us. In all, 27 Americans had come through the camp. Five had been released and ten had died. They died of their wounds, disease, malnutrition and starvation. One was shot while trying to escape. All but one died in my arms after a lingering, terrible illness. Five West German nurses in a neutral nursing organization, called the Knights of Malta, similar to our own Red Cross, had been picked up (I always thought by mistake) by the VC in the spring of '69. Three of them died and the other two were taken to North Vietnam in '69 and held until the end of the war."

"The 12 who made it were moved to North Vietnam on foot. The fastest group, of which I was one, made it in 57 days. The slowest group took about 180 days. It was about 900 km. We walked through Laos and Cambodia to the Ho Chi Minh trail and then up the trail across the DMZ until Vinh. At Vinh, we took a train 180 miles to Hanoi in about 18 hours. We traveled with thousands of ARVN PWs who had been captured in Lam Song 719, an ARVN incursion into Laos in '71."

"Once in Hanoi, we stayed in an old French prison called The Citadel or as we said, The Plantation, until Christmas '72 when X-mas bombing destroyed Hanoi. Then we were moved to the Hoa Lo, or Hanoi Hilton for about three months. The peace was signed in January, '73 and I came home on March 16 with the fourth group."

"In the North, we were in a rough jail. There was a bucket in the windowless, cement room used as a latrine. An electric bulb was on 24 hours. We got a piece of bread and a cup of pumpkin soup each day and three cups of hot water. We slept on pallets of wood and wore PJs and sandals and got three tailor-made cigarettes per day. We dry shaved and bathed with a bucket from a well twice per week, got out of the cell to carry our latrine bucket daily. Towards the end, they let us exercise. There were no letters or packages for us from the South, but I understood some of the pilots who had been there awhile got some things. In the summer, it was 120° in the cell and they gave us little bamboo fans. But there were officers and a rank structure and commo done through a tap code on the walls. No one died. It was

hard duty, but not the grim struggle for survival which characterized daily life in the camps in the South. In the North, I knew I would survive. In the South, we often wanted to die. I knew that when they ordered us North, I would make it."

"In the South, each day was a struggle for survival. There were between 3 and 24 PWs at all times. We ate three coffee cups of rice per day. In the rainy season, the ration was cut to two cups. I'm not talking about nice white rice, Uncle Ben's. I'm talking about rice that was red, rotten, and eaten out by bugs and rats, cached for years, shot through with rat feces and weevils. We arose at 4:00, cooked rice on wood ovens made of mud. We couldn't burn a fire in the daytime or at night unless the flames and smoke were hidden, so we had these ovens constructed of mud, which covered the fire and tunnels, which carried the smoke away. We did slave labor during the day, gathering wood, carrying rice, building hootches, or going for manioc, a starchy tuberous plant like a potato. The Vietnamese had chicken and canned food. We never got supplements unless we were close to dying, then maybe some canned sardines or milk. We died from lack of protein and calories. We swelled up with what is called hungry edema and beriberi. We had terrible skin disease, dysentery, and malaria. Our compound was littered with piles of human excrement because people were just too sick or weak to make it to the latrine."

"We slept on one large pallet of bamboo, so the sick vomited and defecated and urinated on the bed and his neighbor. For the first two years, we had no shoes, clothes, mosquito nets or blankets. Later, in late '69, we got sandals, rice sacks for blankets, and a set of clothes. We nursed each other and helped each other, but we also fought and bickered. In a PW situation, the best and the worst come out. Any little flaw transforms itself into a glaring lack. The strong can rule the weak. There is no law and no threat of retribution. I can report to you that the majority of the time, the Americans stuck together, helped each other and the strong helped the weak. But there were exceptions and sometimes the stronger took advantage of the weaker ones. There was no organization, no rank structure. The VC forbid the men from calling me Doc, and made me the latrine orderly to break down rank structure. I was officially forbidden from practicing medicine. But I hoarded medicine, had the men fake malaria attacks and dysentery so we could acquire medicine and keep it until we needed it. Otherwise, it might not come. I tried to advise the men about sanitary conditions, about nutrition and to keep clean, active and eat everything we could; rats, bugs, leaves, etc. We had some old rusty razorblades, and I did minor surgery, lancing boils, removing foreign bodies, etc. with them ... but nothing major."

"At one time, in the summer of '68, I was offered the chance to work in a VC hospital and receive a higher ration. The NVA Political officer, who made the offer, was there to indoctrinate us, said it had been done in WW II. I didn't believe him and didn't want to do it anyway, so I refused and took my chances. Later, upon my return, I learned that American Army doctors in Europe in WW II had indeed worked in hospitals treating German soldiers. But I'm glad now I did what I did."

"We had a 1st Sergeant who had been in Korea and in WW II. He died in the fall of '68 and we were forbidden from calling him 'Top'. The VC broke him fast. I was not allowed to practice medicine unless a man was 30 minutes away from dying, then they came down with their little bottles of medicine and said, 'Cure him!'. At one point, we were all dying of dysentery and I agreed to sign a propaganda statement in return for Chloromycetin, a strong antibiotic, to treat our sick. Most of us were seriously ill, although a few never got sick, maintained their health and their weight. I never figured it out."

"When a man died, we buried him in a bamboo coffin and said some words over his grave and marked it with a pile of rocks. I was forced to sign a death certificate in Vietnamese. I did this 13 times. The worst period was the fall of '68. We lost five men between September and Christmas. Shortly before the end of November, I thought I was going to lose my mind. All of these fine young strong men were dying. It would have been so easy to live, just nutrition, fluids and antibiotics. I knew what to do, but had no means to help them. I was depressed and didn't care whether I lived or died myself. At this time, we were simply starving to death. As an example of how crazy we were, we decided to kill the camp commander's cat. Several of us killed it, and skinned it. We cut off its head and paws and it dressed out to about three pounds. We were preparing to boil it when one of the guards came down and asked us what was going on. We told him we killed a weasel by throwing a rock. The guards raised chickens and were always being attacked by weasels. Well, the guard, who was a Montagnard, an aborigine, found the feet and knew it was the cat. The situation became very serious. The guards and cadre were mustered ... it was about 3 am. The prisoners were lined up and a Marine and I were singled out to be beaten. He was almost beaten to death. I was beaten badly, tied up with commo wire very tightly (I thought my hands would fall off and knew I would never do surgery again) for over a day. I had to bury the cat. And I was disappointed I didn't get to eat it. That's how crazy I was."

"Shortly thereafter, the Marine who had been beaten so badly died. He didn't have to. He simply gave up, like so many. Marty SELIGMAN, a professor of psychology at University of

Pennsylvania has written a book about these feelings called Learned Helplessness and Death. The Marine simply lay on his bamboo bed, refused to eat, wash or get up - and died. So many did this. We tried to force them to eat, and to be active, but nothing worked. It was just too hard. This Marine wavered in and out of coma for about two weeks. It was around Thanksgiving, the end of November. The rains had been monstrous and our compound was a muddy morass littered with piles of feces. David HARKER of Lynchburg, Virginia and I sat up with him all night. He hadn't spoken coherently for over a week. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and looked right at me. He said, 'Mom, Dad ... I love you very much. Box 10, Dubberly, Louisiana.' That was November '68."

We all escaped the camp in the South. Five were released as propaganda gestures. Ten Americans and three Germans died, and twelve Americans and two Germans made it back. I am the only PW who was captured before the end of '67 to survive that camp. I came back March 16, '73 and stayed in the hospital in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania for a month getting fixed up with several operations and then went on convalescent leave. The first thing I did was go to Dubberly, Louisiana and see the Marine's father. His parents had divorced while he was captured. I went to see five of the families of those that died and called the others on the phone."

"It was a terrible experience, but there is some good to come of it. I learned a lot. I learned about the human spirit. I learned about confidence in yourself. I learned about loyalty to your country and its ideals and to your friends and comrades. No task would ever be too hard again. I had renewed respect for what we have and swore to learn my country's history in depth (I have done it) and to try to contribute to my community and set an example for my children and employees."

"I stayed on active duty until '77 when I was honorably discharged and entered the reserve from which I retired as an O-6 in '86. I have a busy medical practice down in Florida and been remarkably successful. I am active in my community in a number of ways and, despite being drenched with Agent Orange a number of times and having some organs removed, have enjoyed great health. Except for some arthritis and prostate trouble, I'm doing great. So, I was lucky ... very lucky and I'm so thankful for that. I'm thankful for my life and I have no bitterness. I feel so fortunate to have survived and flourished when so many braver, stronger and better trained men did not."

Footnote: In the book Why Didn't You Get Me Out, by Frank ANTON (with Tommy DENTON), ANTON a Huey pilot and POW in the camps with KUSHNER wrote, 'KUSHNER, who had suffered as much as anyone in the camps ... performed tremendous feats of courage to keep us going ...'.

Doc Kushner adds poignant meaning of the 1-9th's WE CAN, WE WILL and reminds us all that there are some very real heroes from the Vietnam War who have provided its textbook definition with hard earned dignity and value.

Dr. Hal Kushner is a successful physician practicing in Daytona Beach, Florida. His patients and community know very little about the price he paid for freedom.

God Bless Dr. Hal Kushner!