Army Aviation Hall of Fame 2001 Induction

Dr. (COL) Hal Kushner (Ret.) volunteered to be flight surgeon of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division. As flight surgeons should, he flew numerous combat missions with Cav pilots. On Nov. 30, 1967, on a night flight in a driving rain storm, the helicopter crashed. Recovering consciousness in the burning, inverted helicopter, he freed himself despite a broken left wrist and collarbone and seven broken teeth. While trying to free the pilot, he was hit in the neck and shoulders by exploding ammunition and his hands and buttocks were burned. The pilot was dead, he copilot, mortally injured in the crash, died the third day, the crew chief was sent for help and was later found shot by the enemy. He then left the crash site and was fed by a peasant who later turned him over to an enemy squad. He was shot in the neck because he was unable to lift his splinted broken arm when ordered to surrender. Thus began the tortuous hell of five and a half years as the only medical doctor captured in the Vietnam War.

Tied and beaten, wounded and sick and without boots, he trekked through the mountains. He was held in a series of jungle camps for over three years. In 1971, with the other survivors, he walked 900 kilometers to Vinh; was loaded on a train of cattle cars with thousands of South Vietnamese prisoners and moved the final 180 kilometers to Hanoi.

Conditions in Hanoi's jails were bad, but better than in the jungle camps, where prisoners suffered from jungle diseases and starvation. Twelve of the 27 U.S. prisoners died; some because it was too hard to live. They slept on a large pallet of bamboo where the sick vomited, defecated and urinated on the common bed and other prisoners.

Kushner was offered a better life working in a hospital; he refused. He was forbidden to practice medicine, but at great personal risk found ways to alleviate suffering and save lives. A fellow prisoner, Frank Anton, said: "Kushner never quit; attempting always to motivate us to keep fighting, keep trying." Another, David Harker, said: "Dr. Kushner never lost his will to practice

medicine. In the end he would simply hold dying prisoners in his arms and saw them through to the other side."

Kushner said: "It was a terrible experience but some good came from it. I learned about the human spirit. I learned about loyalty to your country and its ideals - to put your friends and comrades first."