

Kushner, Hal Army

[00:00:17.19] HAL KUSHNER: I was born 30 June 1941, a few months before you. And I was born at the old Tripler Hospital, which was in Hawaii. My dad was a first lieutenant in the Army Air Corps, stationed at Hickam Field. And we were there when the Japanese bombed.

[00:00:35.49] And I was raised after World War II in my dad's hometown and subsequently my hometown, Danville, Virginia, a little town in the Piedmont right on the North Carolina border. And I went to Vietnam in 1967 in August, early August 1967.

[00:01:00.40] My dad was overseas in the Pacific and in Europe during World War II. And I remember the time when he was in Europe, and after 1944 I lived with my grandmother. It was my mother and my oldest brother Bobby, who is now 79, and my mother.

[00:01:19.15] And there was another-- I had a cousin whose husband was also overseas who lived with my grandmother. There were 13 people and four kids in this one bathroom house. I think that wasn't an uncommon thing in World War II when the men were overseas.

[00:01:37.55] And my dad came home in October of 1945. And I went to grammar school and graduated from high school there in 1958. It was a small town. It had tobacco and cotton-- had a cotton mill. And tobacco was the big product.

[00:01:55.26] Our radio station was WBTM, World's Best Tobacco Market. And the cotton mill employed 30,000 people under one roof. It was Dan River Mills. You may have heard of it--

[00:02:07.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:02:07.71] HAL KUSHNER: --and subsequently, gone to China. And the mill is out of business. And tobacco is out of business. And now they pay farmers there not to grow tobacco. So that's where most people make their living. It was a wonderful, small town, wholesome environment.

[00:02:23.59] We danced at the soda shop. We went to movies. I just had a wonderful, wonderful childhood. And when I left high school in 1958, I was sad. I enjoyed going to school every day. And I went to-- subsequently went to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, which was just 58 miles down the road.

[00:02:45.01] And I went to college there. And then I went to medical school in Richmond at MCV, where your lovely wife also went. I was maybe a generation before her. I was class of '66. And that medical school was founded by Stonewall Jackson's doctor's father, Hunter McGuire.

[00:03:06.01] And so while I was in med school, I-- there was a program called the Senior Medical Student Program. In those days, just about every able-bodied male physician was drafted. And I thought-- I had a wife and child. And I thought that it would be a good thing for me.

[00:03:27.49] So when I was a junior in med school, I went up to Fort Meade, Maryland and joined up in the Senior Medical Student Program, which meant that after med school, I got paid for two years-- first, as a second lieutenant, then as a first lieutenant-- then was commissioned to captain upon graduation.

[00:03:44.20] I could intern wherever I wanted, but after the internship, I had a two-year obligation, which I would have had anyway. It was a wonderful program. And I chose to intern in the hospital in which I was born, Tripler in Hawaii, which in those days was a flagship Army hospital-- one of the seven big ones, 650-bed hospital.

[00:04:04.84] So I interned in '66 and '67. And we received a lot of wounded Soldiers and Marines at Tripler. And my internship was interrupted by wounded Soldiers and Marines. And you remember General Krulak was FMF commander. And he used to go out and meet these planes-- these boys were air evac'd from Vietnam.

[00:04:31.39] And they brought them into the hospital. We discharged all of the dependents and all of the people that weren't active duty and put them in Queen's and other hospitals in the islands. And we filled the hospital-- 650 beds with wounded Soldiers and Marines.

[00:04:50.62] We had 34 interns. And when we got them all filled up, we went, hah, let's go up to the officer's club and have a drink, because we had been working day and night, working up these guys that came in. But after we filled the hospital, General Steger, who was the commander of the hospital, said, not so fast. And they put these big tents out on the grounds and admitted about another 200 or 250.

[00:05:13.78] And so I spent the rest of my internship, about seven months, on orthopedics doing the same thing every day-- debridement and delayed closure of wounded Soldiers' and Marines' limb injuries. And the last month of my internship, I said to Colonel Woodard, who was the chief of orthopedics, this is my internship. Can I do something else? And he said, yeah, why don't you go over to the chest service?

[00:05:36.01] So I went over to the chest service for one month, the last month. And I put in and took out chest tubes for a month on chest wounds. And then I went to flight surgery school, Fort Rucker. And then they sent me to Pensacola, too. I went through the Pensacola training. And then I went to Vietnam in August.

[00:05:55.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Of what year?

[00:05:56.89] HAL KUSHNER: '67.

[00:05:57.79] JOE GALLOWAY: '67.

[00:05:58.90] HAL KUSHNER: Yeah, my wife was-- wife at the time was pregnant in July. She got pregnant in July. And my son, who I never met until he was five years old, was born in April of '68 after I had been captured, my son Michael.

[00:06:21.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Your training, especially your internship, prepare you well for Vietnam service?

[00:06:30.39] HAL KUSHNER: Well, it prepared me to be a squadron flight surgeon. But it didn't prepare me for what happened to me. And I don't think there was any preparation. And if there had been, I wouldn't have wanted to have had it. You know, we took-- in flight surgery school, we took this little E & E course for a weekend, escape and evasion.

[00:06:48.69] And I'll never forget the crusty old master sergeant that was training us said, you guys are doctors. And you have a Geneva Convention card. And you will not-- if you get captured, you're not captured. You're not POWs. You will be detained personnel.

[00:07:07.83] And that's by the Geneva Convention. So if you're not happy with your situation, then you leave. And you know, everybody laughed, and it was supposed to be funny at the time. And I never thought any more about it, except when I was captured the first thing they did was tear up my Geneva Convention card. So no, I was not prepared. And there was nothing that could have prepared me for that experience.

[00:07:36.17] HAL KUSHNER: First of all, we-- I went out to San Francisco. And we waited to go to Travis Air Force Base. And there was some snafu so that I was supposed to go on a certain day, and it was like a three-day wait. And I went up to Travis.

[00:07:54.92] And finally, we got on this contract airplane at Travis. And I had on these beautiful starched khakis. I mean, you could cut steel with my khakis. I looked great. My belt buckle was shining. My shoes were polished mirrors. And I got on this plane. And then about every four hours, they threw a chicken dinner at us.

[00:08:14.00] And it landed in Hawaii. And it landed at, I think, Guam. And then we were in Vietnam. And I looked like somebody had thrown me in a washing machine and a dryer. My khakis-- that's the way they looked. And the first thing I remember, these guys got on the airplane.

[00:08:30.44] And they had-- they were armed with automatic weapons. And they escorted us off. It was at Bien Hoa Air Base. That's where we landed. And the doors opened. And there was this terrible smell. That was my first impression was a smell. It was very humid, and that was before I'd moved to Florida. So I wasn't that used to the humidity.

[00:08:56.48] And this fetid smell-- and they marched us to these buses. And they gave us this little talk about, you're going to be very quiet. And you have to be careful. And if the mortar rounds come in, you do this. And you do that. And I went, wow.

[00:09:11.90] You know, I'd been on the airplane for 22 hours. So we went to the replacement depot, the repo depot I guess. They-- I don't know what they called it in Vietnam. And I was there about four or five days. And then I got on a C-130.

[00:09:28.43] And we went up to An Khe. And we met the division-- I met the division surgeon. And he said there were two billets in the 1st Cav Division-- one to be the division flight surgeon and one to be the 1st of the 9th flight surgeon.

[00:09:44.15] So I chose the 1st of the 9th and then later learned that the reason they had a vacancy there was because Captain Karl Shenep of Memphis, Tennessee had been killed in April of '67. This was in August. And so I became the squadron flight surgeon, the mighty 1st of the 9th, which was a unit involved in daily combat, very active unit. Was there at An Khe just a few days, and then we went up to our LZs. We had two LZs.

[00:10:19.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe your initial duties with the 9th Cav.

[00:10:23.94] HAL KUSHNER: I was the squadron flight surgeon. So I was responsible-- you know, I was the battalion surgeon for this aviation battalion, which we called a squadron. We had about 900-- 950 troopers. It was my job to take care of them.

[00:10:40.75] And I had to deal with the aviators and see them. I was responsible for grounding them or letting them fly. I held sick call every day, sometimes twice a day. I had 19 medics. And I had a platoon sergeant. And I had another sergeant, E-6.

[00:11:00.60] I was supposed to have a first lieutenant Medical Service Corps as an XO of the platoon. I was a medical platoon commander, but never had him. And so we would send medics out on missions. And when men were wounded, they would bring them back to the aid station, which was-- we had three aid stations.

[00:11:23.58] We had one at LZ Dog, one at LZ Two Bits, and we had one kind of a semi-permanent Quonset hut at An Khe that had a lot of equipment. We had a field safe, three field safes, where we kept morphine and drugs and things like that. And we had a very elaborate bookkeeping system for checking these things in and out every day.

[00:11:49.89] And most of my medics were wounded or killed. I mean, it was a very active unit-- rotated in and out. So I was also responsible for sanitation. And all flight surgeons are responsible for investigating accidents, aviation accidents.

[00:12:07.81] And that was basically it. I was supposed to know the aviators, you know? I drank with them. I played cards with them. I got to know them. I could tell when they were under a lot of stress. I could ground somebody or give him some rest or not send him out. Or basically that was it. I was the doctor for that unit.

[00:12:30.35] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like?

[00:12:32.81] HAL KUSHNER: Well, when I first got there, I was living in a tent at LZ Two Bits. And two of my medics actually built me this little house out of plywood. And it was sandbagged. And I had this little plywood shack and an Army cot.

[00:12:53.09] And it had electricity in it, because we had traded-- this is kind of interesting-- we traded one gallon of ethanol with somebody else down the road for a 5kw generator and the cement pad that it sat on. And they brought this thing up in a helicopter. I mean, that must have-- and so it wired my aid station, which was a tent and wired my little hooch, which was a plywood shack.

[00:13:22.84] We had a immersion heater, and it was outside. That was basically it. We also had-- I was-- we had an S5, a civic affairs officer. And as part of my duties, I went down to the village, which was Bong Son once a week and held sick call for the villagers and the children. And they would come up. And that was, I thought, a very worthwhile activity.

[00:13:53.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:13:59.40] HAL KUSHNER: Well, I was very close to several of them. And my commander, Colonel Nevins, was a wonderful guy, Bob Nevins. He was the character-- he was the Robert Duvall character in that Apocalypse Now movie. That character was modeled after him.

[00:14:17.10] Colonel Nevins became my lifelong friend-- took care of me when I came back from Vietnam, know his children, knew both of his-- his wife who died and his subsequent wife, who is still alive. I call her every month. She lives in Ottumwa, Iowa. Three years ago he died. And I was honored to be called out to Ottumwa to eulogize him. So it was a lifelong relationship that I had with him, like the relationship you have with General Moore. It was a wonderful, edifying relationship with a wonderful man.

[00:14:51.42] And I had less close relationships with other aviators. But we were good friends. And I've maintained some of those.

[00:15:04.52] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation, off-duty activities?

[00:15:10.16] HAL KUSHNER: I don't recall ever having any off duty activities or recreation. I went to Vung Tau one time with one of my sergeants. And we went out to eat and looked around. But I don't think I had any recreation.

[00:15:23.51] JOE GALLOWAY: No time.

[00:15:24.32] HAL KUSHNER: I played cards-- we played cards there in the field. We had one little story that might be interesting to you. We had this QRF, quick reaction force. We were supposed to-- if we got attacked, I was supposed to grab my helmet and my weapon and run and jump in this bunker with the squadron commander.

[00:15:47.04] So the first time that happened, we had a mortar attack. And I grabbed my helmet and weapon and jumped in this bunker. And I was the only person in there. And it was like mud up to here, and water. And I heard this chirping sound. And I took out my trusty Zippo lighter and struck it.

[00:16:04.83] And there were these rats in this water, swimming around. I said, the hell with this. I got my-- got out of there and went back to my hooch and just kind of--

[00:16:12.05] [LAUGHS]

[00:16:12.30] --snuck down behind the sandbags. Nobody else was in that hole either. So that didn't work well.

[00:16:20.67] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your area of operations where you served?

[00:16:24.36] HAL KUSHNER: II Corps.

[00:16:25.14] JOE GALLOWAY: II Corps.

[00:16:25.80] HAL KUSHNER: Yeah, yeah. We had men-- 1st of the 9th had men from Phan Thiet in the south all the way up to Chu Lai.

[00:16:33.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:16:33.66] HAL KUSHNER: And so I used to fly around and go see them.

[00:16:42.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe the events that led to your capture.

[00:16:47.48] HAL KUSHNER: We were in Chu Lai. We went up to Chu Lai. And I was-- we had some aviators up there. And actually, I was going to give a lecture on the dangers of night flying. And in fact, I did. Talked to them about night flying and about visual things. And they had a MARS station up at Chu Lai. And a couple of people, including me, wanted to hang around after this lecture. We had a UH-1 Hotel model that we had to get back to LZ Two Bits.

[00:17:21.74] The aircraft commander was a major named Steve Porcella from Massachusetts. And we asked Steve if we could stay and make a phone call on the MARS station. And there was a line. There was-- so we had to wait about 15 or 20 minutes. And the weather just got terrible. So the weather was very bad. It was thundering, lightning. And we finished our phone calls. And I said to Steve, why don't we wait out the weather and go back in the morning? And he said to me-- he said, our mission is not so important, but we have to get this aircraft back for operations tomorrow.

[00:17:59.54] So we took off about maybe 8 o'clock at night and the weather was really bad. But I could see the lights of trucks on Highway 1, and we drifted west of the highway. I could tell that. And I talked to Steve on the radio. And I told him that I thought we had drifted west of the highway, which would have been off course. And he called the radar at Duc Pho. And we had a transponder on the helicopter.

[00:18:32.57] And the Duc Pho air traffic control said his-- he had cut his radar off at 9:00, at 2100. And he said, do you want me to cut it on and find you? It has to warm up. I'll never forget this. I was listening to it on the radio. And Steve said, Rog. And that was the last thing that he

ever said. And the next thing I knew I was upside down in a burning helicopter. And the Viet Cong always said they shot us down, but I'm sure we flew into a mountain.

[00:19:02.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Flew into a mountain.

[00:19:03.45] HAL KUSHNER: Flew into the mountain because-- so I regained consciousness and the helicopter was on fire. And I immediately realized that my teeth were broken, all my teeth. I think that was the first thing that I recognized and I couldn't move my left arm. And I didn't know whether I was dead. I was just-- maybe I'm dead. So I said, is anybody alive? I didn't-- I got no answer. And I could see by the firelight, Major Porcella crushed against the console.

[00:19:39.27] And I finally got my-- I freed myself and I had a knife and I was trying to cut his seatbelt. But he was just crushed against it and I could not move him and the helicopter was burning up. And I got burned and I jumped away from the helicopter and it exploded. It absolutely exploded. And by the light of the burning helicopter, I could see the co-pilot, whose name was Giff Bedworth, who was from New Haven, Connecticut-- he was a warrant officer one, very nice young man, from a very nice family.

[00:20:15.39] He was still in his seat. The seat had failed. I mean, the whole seat had gone out through the chin bubble of the aircraft. And he had a open fracture of his left ankle and the bones of his tibia and fibula were sticking through the nylon of his jungle boot. And the crew chief-- his name was McKee-- was-- I didn't know him. I knew Bedworth quite well. The crew chief was from somewhere else and I didn't know him. He was unconscious and he regained consciousness and he wasn't hurt bad. He was sitting in the back with me.

[00:20:53.84] While I was trying to free Major Porcella, the machine-- the M60 started cooking off rounds and several rounds went through my shoulder. And I subsequently realized I had a broken left collarbone and a broken left wrist, and I had lost seven teeth, broken or lost. And I didn't have any of my glasses. They were gone.

[00:21:18.86] So Bedworth was conscious, but in a great deal of pain. I splinted him with tree branches and two Army belts. And we got the door of the helicopter and made a lean-to for him because it was pouring rain. So Bedworth and I decided at first light to send Sergeant McKee for help because we thought we knew where we were. And he left and he never came back. And Colonel Nevins told me six years later that Sergeant McKee was found shot and submerged in a rice paddy 10 miles from the crash site.

[00:21:56.42] So I sat with Bedworth and we just sat there. And it was terrible weather. We sat there for three days and three nights and he died. We had no first aid. We had no nothing. We had two .38 pistols and we had 12 rounds of ammunition in the pistols. And he just got weaker and weaker and it was internal bleeding. I couldn't see any bleeding. And he was very brave. He never complained and we drank the rain. We squeezed out our jackets, our fatigue jackets, and drank rainwater and we drank it off leaves. We had no food.

[00:22:31.97] When he died, I left the site and it was the morning of the third days. And I negotiated down this mountain and I fell a couple of times. I couldn't see. It took me about four hours to get down the mountain. I followed a creek bed. And when I got down the mountain-- and I couldn't see the sun. So I didn't know which direction because the weather was so bad.

[00:22:56.67] So I got down the mountain. I walked about a mile on the flatlands. And I saw this guy working in a rice paddy. And he came up to me and he said, dai uy bac si, dai uy bac si-- captain doctor-- because I had my caduceus and my captain's bars.

[00:23:12.94] And he took me 300 or 400 yards down this path to this little hooch. And he sat me on the porch. And I had my arm splinted to my body with my Army belt because my collarbone was broken. And I was hurt and sick.

[00:23:33.13] And he gave me a can of sweetened condensed milk. And he gave me a plastic C-ration spoon and a C-ration can opener, which I opened. And I started eating this stuff. And then the squad of Viet Cong-- he led them to me. And they came up. And this guy runs in and says, surrender no kill, surrender no kill.

[00:23:58.03] And I put my one arm up. And I couldn't put this arm up because it was tied to my body. And he shot me with an M2. I mean, I recognized that. It was like this great clarity. And shot me right above where the M60 had shot me. And it made a big through and through wound.

[00:24:18.86] So I went tumbling over in the bushes. So then they captured me and tied me with commo wire, and walked me for 30 days, mostly at night. Took my boots. And it was rough. It was very rough.

[00:24:32.93] We were walking on rice paddy dikes at night. And they had these little homemade lighters they could switch these lighters and see a few steps. But I couldn't see anything. I kept falling off into the rice paddy water, and they were pulling me up by the commo wire.

[00:24:50.05] And I told you the first thing the guy did was he went through my wallet, took the Geneva Convention card, and tore it in half. And my father had given me, before I left, a chain with a Star of David on one side and a Saint Christopher's Medal on the other. And they took that, and took my watch.

[00:25:11.11] And I had a Zippo lighter in my pocket that had a sterling silver case that my wife had given me. And they took that. And then just started marching me. And the first day, they took me to this place and tied me to a door and this kid beat me with a bamboo stick. And it was hard. It was very hard.

[00:25:35.12] But the third or fourth day, I was very sick and weak. And I'll never forget this either. I went to this place, and there was a stream there. And this guy started-- this old man started grabbing my fatigue jacket. And I thought he was trying to take it.

[00:25:50.93] And I was holding it, and my hands were tied like this. I was duck-winged like this. And finally, somebody came over and untied me. And he took my jacket. And I thought he was taking it. And he actually washed it, an old man. And he dried it by the fire.

[00:26:07.87] And I had leeches all over me. My pants were burned off. And I had all these leeches. My feet were lacerated. He came over, and he took a cigarette, and burned the leeches off of me. I mean, it was an act of kindness in a lot of cruelty, a sea of cruelty. And it made an impression that I've never forgotten.

[00:26:28.66] I'd like to find that guy now because that was like the one act in six years. You know, it never occurred to me before that I could be captured. It occurred to me that I could be killed. But it never occurred to me that I could be captured. And I went, this can't be happening.

[00:26:45.34] But after a couple of days and the shock thing had worn off, I thought that I would be taken to a POW camp that was like Stalag 17. And there would be a hospital and Red Cross, and I could work, and there would be other Americans, and there would be guard dogs and searchlights. But that's what I thought was going to happen. But that didn't happen.

[00:27:08.05] The first few days when I was being marched, I could hear artillery in the distance. And I really didn't care whether I got hit by it or not. I couldn't care less. I just kept walking.

[00:27:26.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Where were you held captive?

[00:27:29.85] HAL KUSHNER: Well, it took 30 days to get to the camp, during which time about two days I was put in this hole, in a bamboo cage with this small, emaciated, very sick Asian man. I don't know what he was. And he couldn't speak any English. He just coughed the whole time. I thought he had tuberculosis.

[00:27:58.30] So there was two days of that. And then so there was about 28 days of walking, or 27 days of walking. One day they took me to what I thought was a hospital. It was a bunch of caves out in the boonies. And they had hammocks, and sick people lying around, and bandaged people.

[00:28:14.49] My wound was festering. And it was full of maggots. And they gave me-- this nurse, female-- gave me a stick of bamboo to bite on it. And she took a rifle cleaning rod, AK-47 cleaning rod, heated it up in the fire, and cauterized my through and through wound, and gave me one aspirin tablet and put Mercurochrome on my wound. And I hadn't seen Mercurochrome since my mother when-- we don't use that too much anymore.

[00:28:43.47] And I rested another day there after they did that. I mean, I was in no shape to walk. So I was west of Tam Ky. I didn't know where I was, but subsequently I found out through the offices of Bob Destatte, who knows more about POWs and MIAs than anybody in the world, he said I was about 50 miles west of Tam Ky. And we moved our camp five times in the 3 and 1/2 years I was in the jungle, and always within one to two days walking, so probably 10 to 25 or 30 miles, within that area.

[00:29:21.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Within that range of Tam Ky?

[00:29:24.72] HAL KUSHNER: Yeah, Bob Destatte said the Viet Cong-- the NVA called it MR2. That's what they called it.

[00:29:34.08] JOE GALLOWAY: When you got to a more or less permanent situation, besides the moves, what were the facilities?

[00:29:42.72] HAL KUSHNER: There were no facilities.

[00:29:43.51] JOE GALLOWAY: There were none.

[00:29:44.45] HAL KUSHNER: We had a creek nearby. We had a hole in the ground in the back that was a latrine. We had a bunch of hooches made of bamboo that we built. And they had a pallet. We took this bamboo and made a long pallet. And prisoners slept next to each other on the pallet.

[00:30:09.18] We were held in a pen that was surrounded by sharpened bamboo stakes, like pickets. And whenever we left that, we had to ask permission and bow to the guard. We went to get wood, or we would go to get manioc which we'd call komai, the Montagnard term for that. And we carried rice. And we carried stuff for the Vietnamese.

[00:30:35.04] Later they taught us how to build these ovens that were built of mud underground. They were kind of like American Indian ovens. And they had tunnels that carried the smoke away. And the fire was not visible.

[00:30:49.56] And we cooked rice twice a day in those ovens. But the rice was not Uncle Ben's. I mean, it was this raw red mountain rice that had been cached since the Dien Bien Phu days, since the '50s. And it was all eaten through with rat feces, and weevils, and rocks.

[00:31:07.05] And during the good times we got three coffee cups of rice a day. And during the rainy season, we got two. It was cut by a third. And that's why people starved to death. We suffered terrible malnutrition. There were 12-- actually 11 deaths, one before I got there and 10 after I got there, of 22 prisoners.

[00:31:34.29] JOE GALLOWAY: These were American prisoners?

[00:31:35.91] HAL KUSHNER: American prisoners, and five West Germans were captured, mistakenly, I think. They were Caucasian. And they were out having a picnic. They belonged to an organization called the Knights of Malta, which is like American Red Cross. And they were just helping everybody.

[00:31:49.72] And they were just out having a picnic near Da Nang. And they got picked up. And I'm sure the guys that picked them up didn't know what they were. And by the time they got them to our camp, one had already died.

[00:31:59.01] And then another one died very shortly thereafter. And then another one died a month later. Two of them died in my arms. And 10 American prisoners died in my arms, in a period of 3 and 1/2 years.

[00:32:14.82] JOE GALLOWAY: This was mainly from no food, or beatings, or a combination of both?

[00:32:22.86] HAL KUSHNER: Three people died as a result of beatings or being shot. Mostly it was malnutrition, dysentery, protein deficiency, beriberi, disease.

[00:32:36.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you allowed to doctor any of them?

[00:32:39.39] HAL KUSHNER: No, not at all. In fact, when I was captured, the men were forbidden from calling me Doc. We also had a first sergeant, and they were forbidden from calling him Top. He died very quickly. He was captured in March and died in September.

[00:32:55.92] And I was made the latrine orderly of the camp by the camp commander as an attempt at humiliation. And I did practice surreptitiously. I mean, we taught people how to fake symptoms so we could get some medicine, and hide it, and hoard it, and distribute it when we needed it.

[00:33:20.00] And we had some rusty razor blades once in a while, and I would lance boils, and did stuff like that, but mostly not. And so there were no facilities. Later on, we learned how to live better in the jungle. And we constructed water lines from the creek up into our place with bamboo, and the ovens I told you about. But essentially, no facilities.

[00:33:43.86] Never got a letter, never got a package, never got any communication with the outside. There was always a constant attempt at indoctrination. I bet Anton told you about the indoctrination classes and stuff. It was an attempt to use us.

[00:34:01.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, your captors were Viet Cong?

[00:34:05.04] HAL KUSHNER: Well, they said they were Viet Cong. But the camp commander was always NVA. And towards the end, they just kind of merged. The Viet Cong went away. There was no South Vietnam Liberation Front after a while. And that whole thing was just a subterfuge.

[00:34:20.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What was your interaction with the guards?

[00:34:30.34] HAL KUSHNER: Basically, each person has a different personality, the prisoners and the guards. And I didn't have much interaction with many guards. Some were nicer than others. And some were more brutal and cruel than others. But basically, it was just asking permission to do something.

[00:34:46.00] And there was one particular guard named Quong, who was an aborigine, who was a Montagnard. I'll never forget this. I went on a run to get this komai, this yucca.

[00:34:58.69] And I was just exhausted. I could not move. I absolutely could not move. I had this basket on my back. And I could not make another step. And I fell down on the trail. And I couldn't get up and he kept hitting me with his rifle, telling me to get up. And I couldn't get up. And he was a mean bastard anyway.

[00:35:15.19] And I really didn't care at that point what happened to me. And he put the rifle right next to my head, and said he was going to shoot me. And then he moved it like a few inches and discharged the rifle, and dirt went all over me. I thought I was dead for like a second or two. I thought-- I heard this big explosion.

[00:35:34.24] And I thought I was dead. But then I wasn't. But that was my most dramatic interaction with the guards.

[00:35:43.12] And you know the story of when we killed the camp commander's cat. And then the guards beat us up and tortured us.

[00:35:51.28] JOE GALLOWAY: You ate the commander's cat?

[00:35:53.17] HAL KUSHNER: We tried to. We never got to eat it. Between Thanksgiving-- well, between the end of September and November of 1968, which was the hardest time, we had nothing. We were barefoot. We didn't have any blankets or clothes.

[00:36:12.55] We didn't have toothbrushes, or soap, or towels, or any of the things they're supposed to give you. We had nothing.

[00:36:21.13] And five Americans had died. And we were starving. We were absolutely starving.

[00:36:30.22] And the guards had chickens. The guards raised chickens. The weasels were always getting into the guards' chickens.

[00:36:37.69] So one night, 11 or 12 o'clock at night, the camp commander's cat-- he had a cat-- wandered down into our compound. And so this fellow who was a 1st Force Recon Marine, who had been captured a long time-- two years longer than I had-- and myself decided to kill the cat and eat it. We were going to divide it among our 12 prisoners.

[00:37:04.30] So we had a razor blade. And we killed the cat. And I cut his head off and his paws. And it's-- dressed out to about 3 pounds. And we had this carcass of the cat. And we started boiling it in water.

[00:37:19.84] And the guard saw the fire. We weren't supposed to have a fire at that time. So this guard came down. And we told him it was a weasel that had come through the compound, and we had thrown a rock and killed the weasel, and we were cooking it to eat. And he thought that was a riot.

[00:37:34.03] And then he saw one of the paws of the cat, which we thought had been discarded. The head and three of the paws had been discarded. But one paw had not. And he immediately recognized the camp commander's cat.

[00:37:49.03] And so things got very serious. Guards were mustered. They came down with their rifles and the cadre-- it was three or four officers-- came down strapping on their side arms. By this time it was about 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning. They lined us all up. And subsequently, the Marine admitted that he had been the one who had killed the cat, or whose idea it was to kill the cat.

[00:38:15.25] So they pulled him out of the line. And they pulled me out of the line. And they beat him really badly. And they beat me badly. He died two weeks later.

[00:38:27.16] And they tied me up very tightly with the carcass of the cat around my neck, and hung me from the top of a hooch for a couple of days, and then took me down and tied me to a tree for one day. That was my punishment.

[00:38:45.04] And I thought I was going to get to eat the cat. I mean, that's how crazy I was, it was absolutely-- but they made me bury it. And the camp commander said, you Americans think you're so civilized, and you went and killed my pet. And we said, yeah, that's because you starved us to death. And we're dying. But that was all that came of that.

[00:39:12.64] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you get along with the other POWs?

[00:39:16.84] HAL KUSHNER: Well, good. I mean, generally, for the most part, I can report that we got along good. I mean there was a terrible situation. And there was lots of bickering and fighting, but very little fistfights, maybe one or two in 3 and 1/2 years, very little physical. I can report that the strong people helped the weak people most of the time. Sometimes they didn't.

[00:39:39.97] It's a very interesting sociological situation because there is no law. And there was no rank structure recognized. We didn't have organization, like Captain Stratton did in his camp. And most of the time we got along very well.

[00:39:58.34] It was interesting that we had five black guys that were captured at different times. And they came March and April of 1968. And the Vietnamese tried to exploit our racial differences. And they put them-- they segregated them into another hooch, and told them that they were mistreated by their country, and they were going to give them better care.

[00:40:22.07] It didn't work. And within two or three months we were all back together. So that was something positive.

[00:40:30.56] But I got along well with-- I mean, we had arguments and stuff, but nothing serious at all. And we all stood by each other.

[00:40:36.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Was there systematic torture there?

[00:40:39.83] HAL KUSHNER: No, if you broke the rules, there was inappropriate punishment, which could include death.

[00:40:45.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:40:46.31] HAL KUSHNER: One guy tried to escape, four people tried to escape. One fellow was recaptured. And after he was recaptured, he was shot right through the head, executed. They didn't escape an hour. They were captured within an hour. And he was executed.

[00:41:01.59] Another guy was brought back, put in stocks for 30 days, beaten unmercifully, had to defecate in his hands in the stocks, and throw it away from him. It was that kind of thing. There was not systematic torture.

[00:41:17.36] First Sergeant Williams was the first sergeant that I mentioned. They recognized that he might be a potential leader. And the first day he was captured, they-- he was terribly wounded in the hand. They took him up, kept him up all night, two or three days, put a gun to his head. He signed a propaganda statement.

[00:41:36.08] They brought him back. He was just a broken, old man. And he died shortly thereafter. But there was no just systematic gratuitous torture.

[00:41:50.50] JOE GALLOWAY: There were attempts at propaganda--

[00:41:53.92] HAL KUSHNER: Constantly.

[00:41:54.67] JOE GALLOWAY: --constant political education type stuff?

[00:41:57.34] HAL KUSHNER: Constantly. Constantly. We had criticizing meetings, which we made a joke of. We had indoctrination. It was something that nobody was ready for.

[00:42:13.29] JOE GALLOWAY: At some point, they decided to take you north. How did that work?

[00:42:22.86] HAL KUSHNER: I was captured in December 1967. I was the only person to survive the camp who was captured before 1968. There were a bunch of people captured in January. And they survived. But there had been several-- five or six people captured before me. None of them survived.

[00:42:40.62] And in 1971, in February of 1971, there had been a couple of-- there had been one particular close call, where helicopters actually flew over the camp. And we had a couple of episodes where artillery actually came into the camp. And in February, there were 12 living prisoners then. And they decided to take us north.

[00:43:03.81] And they divided us into two groups, 6 and 6, kind of strong and weak. And I was in the stronger group. And we made it-- they actually increased our ration. We got a much better ration.

[00:43:17.91] They gave us sandals. They gave us hammocks. They were made out of parachutes. And they gave us rice.

[00:43:25.65] And we took off in February of '71. And it took our group of six 57 days to walk to Vinh, V-I-N-H, the railroad terminus in North Vietnam. And it was hard. Getting out of those mountains was really hard. My knees were swollen up like volleyballs. And I just didn't think I could make it. I just kept going.

[00:43:49.54] I was probably the weakest of the six. And once we got out of the mountains, we got to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I was told that we went through Cambodia and Laos, which meant we had to go south and then north. And the Ho Chi Minh Trail was very organized. They had steps cut into the hills. You didn't have to use ropes to climb ladders. You just climbed-- it was like climbing a ladder to get up a steep hill.

[00:44:14.61] And they had these holes, caves, where you could hang your hammock, and they cooked rice. They had aid stations. We saw hundreds of people going both ways, saw people pushing these bicycles with small wheels that had big baskets that they could carry supplies, saw guys humping mortar rounds, two mortar rounds, humping it. We saw a whole company, I estimate 150 women, that were smartly marching down the Ho Chi Minh Trail with side arms and everything.

[00:44:46.96] And that was the only time they really let me kind of be a doctor. They'd bring people up to me when we would stop at these way stations, that were sick, and refugees, as well as soldiers, and people like that.

[00:44:59.43] I must tell you that in one of these propaganda courses, they had this fella who was-- Mr. Ho is what his name was. He offered me-- this was in July of '68-- he said that I could go to a hospital and work in a hospital as a doctor, a Vietnamese hospital. And I would be given a higher ration. And he actually told me that American doctors captured in the Battle of the Bulge had done that in German hospitals. I didn't know that.

[00:45:27.51] And I didn't want to do it anyway. So I stayed and took my chances. And I'm glad I did. But I later found out that what he told me about the doctors captured in the Bulge was true, that they put some of them in German army hospitals.

[00:45:43.23] But anyway, so 57 days, we walked up the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Vinh. And at night we were shackled with iron shackles. They put iron handcuffs on us. And when we got to Vinh, they put us on a train.

[00:45:59.79] You are very knowledgeable about the history of the Vietnam War. So you know about Operation Lam Son 719, which is the incursion into Laos.

[00:46:09.33] JOE GALLOWAY: I was on that operation.

[00:46:10.77] HAL KUSHNER: When we got to Vinh, probably were 1000 ARVN prisoners that were at Vinh who had been captured in that operation. And they put us all on a train. And

the train-- I think it's about 150 miles from Vinh to Hanoi. It took 18 hours. Train must have gone like five miles an hour. It was a boxcar.

[00:46:34.80] And the uncertainty of it, I didn't know where I was going. And I didn't know how long it's going to take. But it really took a long time. Nobody ever talked to us.

[00:46:42.58] And when we got to Hanoi, I was met by a Jeep. And they took me, shackled in a Jeep to the Plantation. The other group, the group that Anton was in, was the slower group. It took them 180 days to get up there, Julius Long, and Frank Anton, and some other people were in that group.

[00:47:04.83] So when we got to the Plantation, they put us all-- all the people that came in my group-- in one big room, in the Plantation. And then within a couple of weeks, they moved me out, and moved Anton out with officers. It's the only time they ever segregated us. And then we stayed with officers for the rest of the time, stayed in the Plantation until the Christmas bombing of December '72.

[00:47:30.98] And shortly after the Christmas bombing, they shackled us again, blindfolded us, put us on trucks, rode us around for six hours and then took us to the Hanoi Hilton, which is about three miles away. Of course, we were peeking under our blindfolds. And we could tell it wasn't far.

[00:47:47.18] JOE GALLOWAY: I've heard it said that when you got to the Hanoi Hilton, or when you got to the Plantation, you actually gained weight on the diet that other prisoners--

[00:47:59.45] HAL KUSHNER: I gained weight. That was the only time I ever was weighed as a prisoner. When I got to Plantation, I weighed 44 kilos, which is like 90-some pounds.

[00:48:13.07] And the ration we got-- at the Plantation we got two meals a day, hot water, a little piece of French bread, and this soup we called pumpkin soup. I think it was more like melon soup, rather than pumpkin, had melon in it. Got the same thing. Got three cigarettes a day,

[00:48:29.07] We got to go out twice a week to dry shave and pour water over you from a well. We slept on a bamboo mat on a pallet. I mean it was really a lot easier than the jungle. It was really-- it was a jail. And in the summertime, it was 120 degrees. And it was really hot. And you got skin rash and everything.

[00:48:50.12] And in the wintertime, it was cold and dank. But it was nothing like the jungle. I mean, it really was like the Hilton.

[00:48:58.79] They kind of slowed down on the propaganda stuff up there. We got up there after the real rough stuff. The rope trick and everything had stopped. And we were punished-- if they caught us talking to someone else, they beat us, beat us with a fan belt, or beat us with something.

[00:49:17.09] They used to put me on the cement floor on my knees. You can only do that for a while. It really hurts after a while. But it was nothing like the jungle. And I knew I was going to survive when I got up there.

[00:49:31.28] JOE GALLOWAY: So the torture, such as it was, was more punishment than trying to elicit confessions or something?

[00:49:40.05] HAL KUSHNER: Yeah, they told us we were not entitled to prisoner of war treatment. We were war criminals. They told me that were early on, and to forget about the Geneva Convention and stuff, that we were criminals, and we'd be treated as criminals.

[00:50:00.01] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you hear from home about the war?

[00:50:02.54] HAL KUSHNER: Only the bad news. In 1968, we heard about the assassination of Martin Luther King. We heard about the assassination of Bobby Kennedy.

[00:50:13.78] The moon landing, we never heard about it, but we got a prisoner that was shortly before the thing was supposed to happen on July 20, '69, and he said it was supposed to happen soon. The guy's name was Coy Tinsley from Tennessee.

[00:50:27.79] And we were so ignorant. We were all looking at the moon all the time, thinking maybe they were going to do something up there to show that they had landed.

[00:50:34.99] And when I came back-- we had another prisoner, well, you met him, Jose Anzaldua-- he told us about the moon landing. And the Vietnamese never mentioned that, never mentioned Nixon going to China, never mentioned anything good, just bad.

[00:50:57.35] I got no news from home. I got no letters, no packages, no nothing.

[00:51:00.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Nothing ever?

[00:51:01.06] HAL KUSHNER: No. Couldn't write. No. HAL KUSHNER: I was released 16 March 1973. The peace was signed 21 January. And I'd been up there 5 and 1/2 years. So I could understand quite a bit of Vietnamese.

[00:51:21.07] And I could hear the radio. The guards had these little portable radios. And I could hear the radios. And I thought that I heard there was peace. And I talked to one of the guards. And he wouldn't tell me, but I could tell by his expression that there was going to be peace.

[00:51:33.85] And just a couple of days later, they announced that the peace was signed, that we would be going home. And they increased our ration, and they opened up the whole Hanoi Hilton. Put a volleyball net up there, put ping pong tables up, basketball goals, let us go outside, gave us cards.

[00:51:56.02] And in-- I think it was towards the end of February, I got a Red Cross package. It was after the peace was signed. I'll never forget it, Joe. It had a tablet, a ballpoint pen, a jar of

Mennen skin bracer, a bar of soap, a toothbrush. And it had a book called The Great Rehearsal, which was the story of the writing of the US Constitution by Charles Van Doren. I read the book like five times, because I hadn't had anything to read except propaganda. I got that Red Cross package.

[00:52:33.91] And then we were supposed to be released according to date of capture. And I was supposed to be released in the group before the one I was released in. But there was another prisoner who was schizophrenic, who had really a mental issue. And he also had a hernia that was irreducible. You couldn't put it back. He was a major. Intelligence officer.

[00:52:57.16] And so I went to the camp commander and said, he should go back first. He was supposed to go back in April. And I said, the sick and wounded should go first. And he should go first. The camp commander said, no, he's going so and so. This is the Vietnamese camp commander. So I got in this little argument with him. So he said, you are going to be put back one week. And if you say anything else, you're not going home at all. So I shut up.

[00:53:20.95] And on the 15th of March, they gave us this little suit to wear, a little shirt, pants, shoes, and a little AWOL bag, black AWOL bag. And it had things like Vietnamese cigarettes in it, Vietnamese toothpaste, Vietnamese little souvenirs of my tour.

[00:53:47.92] And a Swedish Red Cross guy came and looked at our cell. That was the day before we were supposed to go home. So on the 16th of March, they put us in a bus. I think there were about 50 of us. And they took us to the Gia Lam Airport, put us in a shed, and they called us-- they told us we were going to go out one by one.

[00:54:11.47] And they called my name. And I went out into this-- it was very sunny. And there was some media people there. There was an American woman there in a little mini skirt. And I hadn't even seen a woman in five years. She had this little mini skirt. And she had the microphone and she was-- like you media people are, right in your face, which she was-- I saw her.

[00:54:33.07] And I saw this beautiful white C-141 with the American flag on the tail section. I hadn't been able to see the flag in 5 and 1/2 years, and USAF in blue, right on the fuselage. And there was a table of Vietnamese, and a big burly Air Force brigadier general.

[00:55:00.85] And the guy had breadth. He had meat on him. He had thickness that we didn't have. And he had real-- he had an overseas cap on.

[00:55:11.35] And he had plump gray hair that had tonic on it. And we were like all straw. Our hair was straw.

[00:55:19.22] So I went out-- he called my name. And I went out and I gave him a salute. And we had been denied that simple expression of military courtesy for 5 and 1/2 years. He saluted me back and shook hands. And then he just hugged me to him. And he said, welcome home, Major Kushner. We're glad to see you, doctor. And there were tears just streaming down his cheeks.

[00:55:45.97] I found out later he was General Russell Ogan. And I've been in touch with his son. He died last year in Florida. He had a very distinguished career as a Thunderbolt pilot in World War II. But he was in charge of this Operation Homecoming.

[00:56:01.54] And then we each had escorts. And this guy came out and took me on the C-141. And they had these real cute flight nurses. I know they picked them. They were tall, all these tall girls, blond, with French twist haircuts. And they were real cute. I'm sure they picked all those girls.

[00:56:17.49] And she said, we have anything you want on this airplane. We have a soda fountain. We have cigarettes. We have cigars. We have anything you want. What do you want?

[00:56:29.78] And I said, I want a Coke with crushed ice. And she gave me this Coke with crushed ice. And they gave each man a file that was individualized. And it told you what happened to your family. And guys lost their parents. And they lost their-- wives left them and all this stuff.

[00:56:46.46] And in my case, I was very fortunate. My parents were still alive. I was still married. I'd had a son. My wife had had a baby in April of 1968. I knew that she was pregnant. But I didn't know whether he was a boy or girl, if he had been born, if he was healthy, or what.

[00:57:04.55] And the first time I met my son was the week before his fifth birthday, Michael. He had his birthday party at Valley Forge Hospital. So that was my release.

[00:57:20.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Was it very difficult readjusting to life as a free man?

[00:57:28.45] HAL KUSHNER: Well, no, it was not. The first I guess six months, I couldn't sleep at all. I was euphoric. I used the time. I mean, it wasn't like I had nightmares or flashbacks. I don't think I've ever had one of those. But I just felt like I was so far behind in everything, in medicine, in my family life.

[00:57:52.33] My hometown, Danville, which you asked me about, was just so wonderful to me. I would go out to my mailbox, and it would be stuffed full of frozen steaks or something with no note or anything. And my hometown gave me a car, had parades for me, was just wonderful. I mean, just wonderful people. 5,000 people came to the airport to meet me when I came home.

[00:58:25.96] My son who I-- my daughter was three when I left and was almost 10 when I came back. And she remembered me. Of course, my son, my father had been a surrogate father for him.

[00:58:40.21] And he-- a couple of weeks after I'd been back, he did something. He was 5. And I spoke harshly to him. I told him not to do something. And he looked at me. And he said, Daddy, I'm not used to you yet. And that made a big impression on me.

[00:58:57.08] And then when-- I was in the hospital in and out of convalescent leave for about three months. And I went out to San Antonio in the end of July. And I took him away from his

grandfather. And he was crying the day that we left. And I said Michael, why are you crying? We're going to a new-- he said why am I crying, you're taking him taking me away from Grandpa Bob. Why am I crying? And he was five.

[00:59:23.93] So in that sense, it was hard to adjust. But I went right back to duty in August. I did a residency in internal medicine. Then I did one in ophthalmology. And the Army was very nice to me, they were great to me.

[00:59:38.91] And I had some domestic issues with my wife, who subsequently resulted in divorce in 1985. We just never could get together again. It was just a different time. And it was sad. But that's just the way it happened.

[00:59:58.88] And so I think I've been very, very fortunate. I had three operations when I came back. I was very sick. I made a complete recovery. I don't have PTSD. I get no disability for that. I have an active practice.

[01:00:17.63] I've never had a nightmare or a flashback. I don't ever talk about my experience, unless somebody asks me like this. And if they ask me, I can talk about it. But I don't bring it up. There are people who know me. They know I was a POW. They've never heard any stories or anything.

[01:00:34.22] I don't like reunions. I don't like to talk about the past. I want to look forward. They say that you start liking them as you get older. But I haven't found that to be true.

[01:00:48.45] I used to go to reunions when Colonel Nevins was alive, just to see him. But I feel a bond with the people that I served with. But that's a part of my life that I would just rather leave back there and look forward.

[01:01:00.53] JOE GALLOWAY: You once told me that you didn't want to let this experience define your life.

[01:01:07.88] HAL KUSHNER: That's true, I don't. So I just feel like I've been very fortunate. I have no bitterness whatsoever. I'm just so fortunate because I know a lot of my colleagues, and brothers, and people from other conflicts, I see drug addiction, and alcohol addiction, and inability to work, and so forth. And I think that I've just been a blessed, blessed guy.

[01:01:33.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you. Thank you for your time.

[01:01:36.08] HAL KUSHNER: You're welcome.

[01:01:36.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you for your service.

[01:01:39.13] HAL KUSHNER: Thank you.

[01:01:45.08] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th anniversary commemoration of the war--

[01:01:50.20] HAL KUSHNER: I have.

[01:01:53.06] JOE GALLOWAY: --and the hope of the organization that we work for to commemorate the war, but mainly to welcome the veterans home--

[01:02:04.64] HAL KUSHNER: Yes.

[01:02:05.45] JOE GALLOWAY: --because a number of them I don't think feel that they were properly recognized or welcomed. What do you think about that project?

[01:02:16.65] HAL KUSHNER: Well, as for myself I was welcomed. And I told you about my hometown. And it was a wonderful homecoming. But I've heard that, that they were denied the welcome that their brothers in arms in other conflicts had. And I think it's very worthwhile.

[01:02:32.15] I went to the 40th anniversary of the return of the POWs out in California in May. And a representative of Secretary of Defense Hagel was there. And he gave each of us a certificate and a little card from him that verbalized what you just said, that was a welcoming home gesture. And I'm very gratified by it.

[01:02:58.15] And I hope that it's not too late. And I hope it's not just a political action because most of the Vietnam vets now are in their 70s like me. But it's long overdue. And I hope it'll be effective. And I hope they'll see it that way.

[01:03:15.70] We have this project in Volusia County, Florida, where I live. It was called Volusia Honor Air. And I think it was started in one of the Rotary Clubs. But the project was to take World War II vets who are in their late 80s and early 90s to Washington to see their World War II Memorial.

[01:03:37.72] I did that three times. I escorted two vets. They were in their late 80s, early 90s. And we took them on a chartered airplane to Washington. And we had lunch with our congressman, John Mica.

[01:03:52.84] And then they had a whole day, police escort, going to the World War II Memorial, going to Arlington, going to the new Air Force monument, Air Force Memorial, and the Iwo Jima Memorial. And I picked up my guys at 3 o'clock in the morning. And we got back at 10 o'clock at night.

[01:04:10.57] And they were in their 80s. And I felt like I was honoring my own father's service, who died in 1978, before The Greatest Generation was written by Tom Brokaw. And so it was a very fulfilling, wonderful experience for me, and I think for these guys too. And I hope that someday that the Vietnam vets will be so honored.

[01:04:34.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Doc. Appreciate it.