

## Horrors of a Viet Cong Camp

# POWs Who Chose to

Phoenixville, Pa.

An Army doctor held prisoner 5½ years by the Viet Cong yesterday described conditions of physical and mental horror that led some American POWs to just give up and decide to die.

"I am the only man captured prior to 1968 who survived the camp at Quang Nom (in South Vietnam)," said Major Floyd H. Kushner at a crowded hospital news conference here. "The only one. All the rest are dead."

The stocky, 31-year-old officer, whose wife Valerie won national recognition in seconding Senator George McGovern's presidential nomination, said ten of the 27 Americans held in his camp in the central highlands died in his arms because the Viet Cong denied them food and medicine.

Speaking of the mental anguish, he said that two of the men died because it was too hard to live. "They both told me, 'Doc, I can't hack it any more. It's just too hard to live.'"

"They just lay down in bed and within a matter of weeks they were dead," said Kushner. He said he and other prisoners tried to plead with them and even slapped them to get them mad in hopes of inspiring some motivation to live. "But nothing worked," he said.

Kushner said when he was captured in November, 1967, he was taken to a camp, held in solitary confinement and eventually approached by a Viet Cong with a tape recorder for an anti-war statement.

"I told him I would rather die than make an anti-war statement and he told me: 'Dying is easy. Living is difficult. Those were the most profound words I have ever heard. Living is the difficult thing.'"

Kushner made some anti-war statements while he was a prisoner and he said yesterday he would not repudiate them. He also said he intended to remain in the Army.

He was the only doctor imprisoned as a POW during

the Vietnam war. Yesterday, he gave an almost unbroken 45-minute recitation of the conditions of filth and sickness that took the lives of his fellow prisoners at Quang Nom. The overall death rate of American prisoners in the south was 45 per cent, he said, far worse than any Japanese World War II prison camp he had ever heard of.

He told of men forced to sleep ten and 12 to a bed while the sick and dying vomited and defecated among them, of living barefoot and virtually without clothes in a compound littered with excrement from men too tortured by disease and starvation to clean it up.

He told of the mental regression of prisoners reduced to huddling in the fetal position "sucking their thumbs and calling for mama," and of another prisoner who "sat on his bed with a blanket over his head for two years" in an effort to mechanically block out a world of deprivation and death.

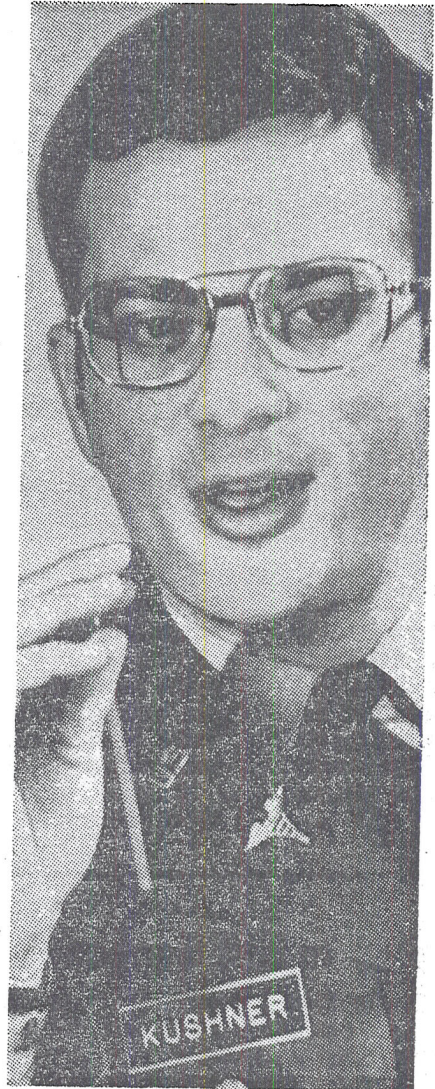
Kushner told his story as he prepared to leave Valley Forge General Hospital where he has been undergoing observation and minor medical treatment since March 19. His wife, whose antiwar political efforts he praised as "a tribute to our remarkable relationship," was home in Danville with

the couple's children.

Kushner said the typical POW in his camp lost 40 to 50 per cent of his normal weight, shook and burned with malaria much of the time, defecated 30 to 100 times a day because of acute and chronic dysentery, bled at the gums from scurvy and suffered intense pain from a swollen liver, spleen and scrotum associated with acute malnutrition.

The basic meal, he said, was about three cupfuls of "red, rotten, moldy rice" per day, the rice peppered with sand, rocks, vermin and rat feces from being hidden a long time in the jungle.

*'I recall very, very vividly ten or 11 POWs lying on a crowded bamboo bed in the jungles of Quang Nom, screaming and asking God or someone to take their life...'*



AP Wirephoto

Army Major Floyd Kushner



In addition, he said, the prisoners were covered with boils and tormented by a skin disease neither he nor any dermatologist he has talked with has ever heard of.

"It was characterized by a pustular eruption . . . all over the body," he said. "It was so bad for eight months, I couldn't move my fingers more than 10 degrees.

"It was also characterized by a tremendous itching . . . I can't overemphasize the

# Die

effect this disease had on us both mentally and physically.

"I recall very, very vividly ten or 11 POWs lying on a crowded bamboo bed in the jungles of Quang Nom, screaming and asking God or someone to take their life so the itching would stop."

In that condition, he said, the prisoners were forced to work at building bamboo huts, planting rice and carrying 100-pound sacks over mountain trails barefoot.

Captured after a helicopter crash on a mountainside in the central highlands, Kushner was held in Quang Nom camp until February, 1971, when he and 11 other prisoners were marched up the Ho Chi Minh trail to Hanoi.

"We've heard a lot about North Vietnam in the last few days on television" Kushner said with evident bitterness. "I've heard about solitary confinement and I've heard about being put in cells and I've heard about poor food.

"I want to tell you I was damned glad to get to North Vietnam. I thought it was splendid . . . it was so easy being in jail and getting a couple of meals of bread and soup a day . . . I could have survived there for 50 years—but in South Vietnam I couldn't."

In a two-page statement on which he declined further comment, Kushner acknowledged that he made a series of anti-war broadcasts while held in North Vietnam.

"While the act of making these statements was not voluntary and the result of various and complicated pressures coupled with a mental attitude eventuating from 3½ years of harsh mistreatment in South Vietnam," Kushner said, "I do not repudiate their content.

"The theme of all the broadcasts was the same —

the war should be ended because of its deleterious effects on the United States and the armed forces, two entities I love beyond description. It is because of a profound love of country that I deplored the drain on our physical, moral and financial resources . . ."

Kushner said his captors in North Vietnam also used the anti-war activities and statements of his wife as tools to pressure him into making statements.

But he was eloquent in defense of his wife, saying he considered her work "a tribute to our wonderful relationship."

"The first night I saw her, I drank a toast to her. As a matter of fact, I drank about 30 toasts to her. And while I could still talk, I told her that her devotion, her loyalty and her love were my sustenance. She is perhaps the major reason that I survived when so many stronger and better trained men did not."

*Washington Post Service*