

The Long Road to Freedom

Bud Day escaped from his captors in North Vietnam with nothing on his side but faith and boundless courage.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

On August 26, 1967, Maj. George E. Day punched out of his disabled F-100F some thirty-five miles north of the DMZ in Vietnam, opening a saga of unremitting valor that was to last for more than five years.

If any man could be prepared for the ordeal that lay ahead, it was Bud Day. He had served thirty months in the Pacific with the Marines in World War II. After the war, he earned a doctor's degree in law, joined the National Guard, was called to active duty in 1951, and completed pilot training that year. During the Korean War, he flew two tours in F-84s. Later, while based in England, he bailed out of a burning jet fighter at 300 feet, too low for his parachute to open, landed in trees, and survived. He arrived in Vietnam in early 1967 with a finely trained mind, a wealth of experience in fighters, devout faith in God, and an unshakable devotion to country.

After several weeks of combat flying, Major Day was picked to organize the F-100 "Misty" Forward Air Controllers, known as Commando Sabre. Their operations were in the hot areas north of the DMZ where slow-moving FAC aircraft couldn't survive. Bud Day was on his sixty-seventh mission in the North when Communist guns brought him down.

Day landed in enemy territory with his right arm broken in three places, a badly injured knee, and a damaged eye. He was captured immediately, interrogated under torture despite his injuries, and imprisoned in a bunker until the North Vietnamese could move him to a prison near Hanoi.

Realizing that if he were to escape, it had to be now, before he was behind bars, Bud Day tricked his youthful guards into believing he was unable to move. Shortly after nightfall, he worked free of his bonds, slipped out of the bunker, and began an incredible twelve-day journey toward freedom.

Twice in that nightmarish passage he was caught in the midst of B-52 attacks. On the second night an incoming artillery round threw him into the air, ruptured his eardrums, and left a deep gash in his right leg. Violent nausea and dizziness prevented his traveling for two days after that. It was not until the fifth day that he was able to catch his first meal—a frog, which he ate raw. After that, it was nothing but water, a few berries, and some fruit.

Despite frequent periods of delirium brought on by injuries and lack of food, he reached the Ben Hai River at the north edge of the DMZ and

swam it with the help of a bamboo log. By that time, his bare feet were cut to ribbons and the wound in his leg had become infected. Then came the most agonizing moment of the escape. A US helicopter landed within half a mile of him, but before he could drag himself through the brush it was gone.

Still fighting his way south, Major Day was within two miles of the US Marine base at Con Thien when he was recaptured by two young enemy soldiers who shot him in the left leg and hand. The long, painful trek to Hanoi began for the only American POW to escape and make it south to the DMZ.

During the brutal punishment that followed his recapture, Bud Day's arm was broken again. He arrived at Little Vegas, one of the prisons near Hanoi, completely unable to care for himself, but denied medical treatment. Later he was transferred to The Zoo, "a bad treatment camp," where he was the senior officer. As the months dragged by, he was tortured many times for alleged transgressions by officers under his command. During frequent interrogations, he steadfastly refused to give information that would endanger American aircrews or could have been used by the North Vietnamese for propaganda purposes. Thirty-seven months of his five-and-a-half-year imprisonment was in solitary confinement.

For his long-sustained heroism, Col. George Day, who previously had earned more than sixty decorations, including the Air Force Cross, was awarded the nation's highest decoration, the Medal of Honor.

No words can recreate the horror of the long, calculated attack on mind and body suffered by Bud Day. That he survived with his honor intact and continued to serve his country until retirement from the Air Force in 1977 is testimony to the unconquerable spirit that dwells in the best of men. ■



Col. Bud Day received the Medal of Honor for his heroism as a POW.