

The Strength of



Photo courtesy of Bud and Doris Day

Day in 1974 at Eglin AFB, Fla.

Despite his injuries, he escaped from North Vietnam, evaded capture for 12 days, and almost made it back to a US base.

Bud Day

By John T. Correll

Early afternoon, Aug. 26, 1967, Phu Cat AB, South Vietnam. The two pilots who would be flying that day as Misty 31 were already buckling into their F-100F when the courier airplane landed.

A flight-line vehicle met the courier, then drove straight to Misty 31. An airman got out and handed a recently developed reconnaissance photo to the senior pilot, Maj. George E. “Bud” Day.

Bud Day was commander of the Misty FACs, who flew forward air control missions in risky parts of North Vietnam. Their job was to find and mark the targets for strike aircraft. The Mistys had been in existence for less than three months. Day was the first commander.

The photo showed an SA-2 missile site with a radar van and three surface-to-air missiles. It was in a fruit orchard west of Fingers Lake, a familiar landmark near the Demilitarized Zone.

Seventh Air Force wanted Misty to take a close look at the site and direct an air strike against it as soon as possible. The SAMs were a serious threat not only to fighters operating in that area but also to B-52s, which were bombing along the DMZ. A photo interpreter gave Day all of the details intelligence had.

Day was the backseat pilot for Misty 31. The frontseater was Capt. Corwin Kippenham, a former O-1 FAC on his checkout mission as a Misty. It was Day’s 65th sortie into North Vietnam. It was also going to be his last. When Day took off from Phu Cat on Aug.

26, he would be gone for more than five years.

Third War

Vietnam was the third war for Bud Day. In 1942, he dropped out of high school in Sioux City, Iowa, joined the Marine Corps, and served in the Pacific until the end of World War II. He came back, finished high school, graduated from college, attended the University of South Dakota Law School, and was admitted to the South Dakota bar in 1949. He married his childhood sweetheart, Doris Sorensen, who he called the “Viking” because of her Norwegian looks.

Then, as always, the military had a strong appeal for him. He was in the Army Reserve after the war, then transferred to the Air National Guard and received a direct appointment as a second lieutenant. He was called to active duty with the Air Force in 1951 and went to pilot training. During the Korean War, he served two tours in the Far East as an F-84 pilot.

Day remained in the Air Force, and, in the years that followed, he spent lots of time in the cockpit. He logged more than 5,000 flying hours, 4,500 of them in fighters. That included two tours in the supersonic F-100.

Counting his time as a marine in World War II, Day would have had 20 years of service in 1968 and planned to retire then. First, though, he volunteered for a year in Vietnam.

In April 1967, Day was assigned to Tuy Hoa Air Base in South Vietnam, flying F-100s, but he didn’t stay there long. Small, propeller-driven O-1s had been flying as forward air control

aircraft in the area just north of the DMZ, but surface-to-air missiles were making it too hazardous for them to continue. The Air Force decided to try jet aircraft as “Fast FACs.”

The F-4 Phantom was considered for the job, but the F-100F was chosen instead. This two-seat version of the F-100 fighter was picked, Day said, “mainly because it was cheaper, had longer legs, and a better view of the ground.”

The Fast FACs were organized as Det. 1 of the 416th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Phu Cat. On June 25, 1967, Bud Day, with his long experience in F-100s, was sent to command the new unit, which started with 16 pilots and four airplanes. Day loved the call sign Misty because that was the name of his favorite song. The Fast FACs soon became known as Mistys as well.

The mission was described as “difficult and dangerous,” which naturally attracted a host of fighter pilot volunteers. Typically, the Mistys flew “three-cycle” missions over North Vietnam, refueling in the air twice, which allowed them to go into the battle area three times.

Misty Down

From Phu Cat, it took Bud Day and “Kip” Kippenham about 30 minutes to reach North Vietnam. The SAM site was easier to see in a reconnaissance photo than it would be from a moving airplane.

They knew approximately where it was, though, and came in from the east on a high-speed, low-level pass. They drew small-arms fire, but they did not see the target. With the North Vietnamese gunners alerted and primed, Misty 31

did not make another pass immediately. Instead, Day and Kippenham worked a strike west of Dong Hoi, refueled from a tanker over Thailand, and then returned to Fingers Lake, approaching from the south.

This time, Kippenham saw the SAM site, but it saw them, too. As they were rolling out, the aft section of the aircraft was hit hard by a round from a 37 mm gun. Misty 31 lost hydraulics, and the stick locked. Day took control of the aircraft, but he was unable to get the nose up. Both Kippenham and Day punched out.

Day landed in some trees. His right arm was broken in three places, and he had injuries to his knee and to one of his eyes. He tried to report his situation on his survival radio, but was unable to get through.

Other aircraft had seen his parachute, though, and a Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopter had picked up a signal from his chute beeper.

Before it got there, a boy stepped out of the trees. He had an old rifle, which he pointed at Day. He snatched Day's watch off his wrist and yelled for his friends, who came running and took Day's boots and knife.

The Jolly Green pulled close enough for Day to see a man standing in the open door, holding a rifle. He did not know that it was Kippenham, who had been picked up. Had the helicopter turned right, the crew would have seen Day and his young captors, and,



Day was a veteran of World War II (as a marine) and Korea, where he flew F-84s. When he took command of the Misty unit, he had nearly 20 years of service and was about ready to retire. Here, Day poses beside a T-33 jet trainer.

almost certainly, the boys would have run. However, it turned left, and Day was a prisoner.

He was in the hands of the local militia, not the North Vietnamese Army. He was beaten and kicked by villagers, and his guards beat him with rifle butts as they marched him from town to town for several days. At one camp, a "medic" misset his broken arm and put a cast on it.

On Aug. 30, he was tortured for the first time, hung upside down by his feet for most of a day. As he swung there, the broken bones in his arm ground against each other. Eventually, the rope stretched enough for his head, and then his shoulders, to touch the ground.

Escape

On Sept. 2, Day was being held in a village about 18 miles above the DMZ and he was thinking about escape. He figured that if he could get away, he could ford the Ben Hai River, which runs between North and South Vietnam, and make it back to friendly territory.

The guards were inattentive. They did not believe Day could get very far in his condition, especially without his boots. To further lull them, he pretended his injuries were worse than they actually were.

He untied himself, stole a canteen full of water, and headed south. His bare feet were soon shredded by rocks and undergrowth, and he fell several times, aggravating his broken arm. On the third day, he was sleeping when a bomb exploded nearby, rupturing his eardrum and driving shrapnel into his leg.

He had almost nothing to eat except for some purplish berries and unfamiliar citrus-type fruit. On two occasions, he caught frogs, which he ate raw. "The palm trees were full of rain water that



Day had a law degree and more than 5,000 hours of flying time; some 4,500 of them in fighters. His time with the Misty FACs was his second tour in F-100s. Above, Day and an F-104 Starfighter, one of many types he flew.

The Misty FACs

The Misty FACs were one of the legendary units of the Vietnam War. In all, there were only 155 of them. Reflecting the danger of their mission, 34 Mistys were shot down in combat, and two of them were shot down twice. Two of them—Merrill A. McPeak, Misty 94, and Ronald R. Fogleman, Misty 86—went on to become Chiefs of Staff of the US Air Force. McPeak was the last commander of the Mistys at Phu Cat, before operations were moved to Tuy Hoa in April 1969. The Misty program was terminated in May 1970. Alumni also include Richard G. Rutan, Misty 40, who later made the first nonstop, unrefueled flight around the world, and Donald W. Shepperd, Misty 34, who became director of the Air National Guard.

Misty 1, of course, is Bud Day.

I ran into the canteen,” he said. “I drank a lot of it.”

Several times, he saw Vietnamese soldiers and civilians close by, but they did not see him. On the eighth night, he reached the Ben Hai and floated across with the aid of some bamboo logs. He covered himself with branches. A sentry was momentarily curious but apparently decided it was only driftwood in the river.

On what Day believes to have been the 10th day after his escape, he was trying to attract the attention of an O-1 aircraft overhead. He got the attention of a Viet Cong patrol instead. Day ran, and the VC shot him in the left thigh and left hand.

He had been two miles from the US Marine Corps camp at Con Thien when he was recaptured.

Bloody Shoe March

With his new injuries, Day was in no condition to walk. Viet Cong porters, working in shifts, carried him north in a sling between two bamboo poles. His captors were waiting on the other side of the river, and this time, it was North Vietnamese Army regulars with good uniforms and AK-47 rifles.

At the camp where he had escaped, the guards took turns beating and kicking him before forcing him to walk to Vinh. He got his boots back, minus the laces. The boots were strapped at the ankles with wire, and as he walked along, they collected pebbles and debris, which chewed up his ankles. Day calls it “the bloody shoe march.”

At Vinh, Day got his first “professional” interrogation and torture from the “Rodent,” a rat-faced official who many POWs encountered on their way north. The Rodent wanted military information, which Day refused to give him.

The “V”—as Day and the other POWs called the North Vietnamese—looped a rope under his armpits and tied it to a rafter. They stood Day on a chair, then pulled it out from under him. The rope

stopped his fall with a savage jolt as he took the full impact in his armpits.

He swung there for about two hours. “The rope cut a scar that remains clearly visible even today,” Day said. Then one of the guards twisted Day’s right arm in the cast. His wrist broke with a snap. The Rodent threatened to have Day’s left arm broken as well. His left hand, where he had been shot during recapture, was already unusable, with the fingers curled back into a claw.

Day made up a lot of false information and gave it to the V, and the torture stopped for a while. Neither then or later did he disclose the Misty mission or operations. Nor did he tell the V he was a lawyer, which would have added a special dimension to any compromising statements he made—if they had been able to induce him to make any.

The V took Day to Hanoi by truck, getting there in about three days. They stopped occasionally along the way

to allow villagers to see him and beat him.

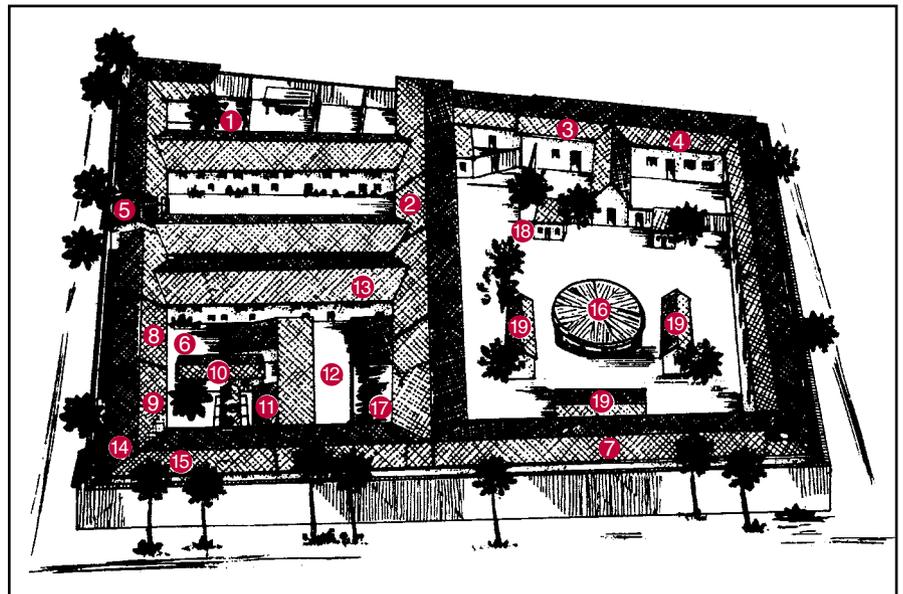
Hanoi Hilton

It was early morning when the truck carrying Bud Day pulled up at Hoa Lo prison in the middle of Hanoi. It was a forbidding structure, built by the French at the turn of the century. The stone walls were 14 feet tall, with broken glass along the top. In Vietnamese, the name meant “Fiery Furnace,” but the POWs called it the “Hanoi Hilton.” None of them ever escaped from there.

The Hilton had only one entrance, and, just inside, on the left, was “New Guy Village,” the torture center for new arrivals. The mission was to intimidate them right away.

With the exception of those who cooperated with the V, most of the POWs were tortured. There were basically three kinds of torture—kneeling, ropes, and beating—each of which had numerous variations.

Kneeling on bare concrete was painful, especially when prisoners were kept on their knees for hours, but that was just the beginning. The V torturers used ropes in several ways. The prisoner might be suspended from an overhead beam, as happened to Day in Vinh. Ropes might also be used to pull a prisoner’s shoulder blades as close together as possible behind his back. This worked especially well with the guard’s boot in the prisoner’s back. Beatings were done with fists.



Hoa Lo prison—the infamous “Hanoi Hilton”—was one of a number of sites where Day was imprisoned and tortured. (1) New Guy Village; (2) Heartbreak Hotel; (3) Mayo; (4) cell block; (5) Main Gate; (6) Little Vegas Area; (7) Camp Unity Area; (8) Stardust; (9) Desert Inn; (10) Riviera; (11) Golden Nugget; (12) Stock Yard; (13) Kitchen; (14) Mint; (15) Thunderbird; (16) bath area; (17) Coal Yard; (18) Medic Shack; (19) Quiz Room.

The Broken Promise

In 1995, Bud Day went for medical care to Eglin AFB, Fla., where he had received treatment before, but this time, he was turned away. He was over 65, and the new rules said he should rely on Medicare instead.

He was outraged. The government had promised military retirees medical care for life, and now they had been shifted to another system, requiring fees to be paid. It did not provide full coverage and obliged veterans to buy a health care supplement to avoid large out-of-pocket expenses.

Day filed suit on behalf of a group of military veterans in 1996. The government admitted that lifetime medical care had been promised, but that the promise had been made without legal authority. Besides, the government argued, limits had been set in 1956 on its obligation. For retirees who entered service after that, health care was made conditional on availability of staff and space in military hospitals.

Day and his colleagues, who eventually incorporated as Class Act Group, pursued the case for the older retirees. Retirees joined the cause in large numbers. In 2001, a federal court agreed that the government had indeed broken its promise, but that ruling was overturned in 2002 by the US Court of Appeals. In June 2003, the US Supreme Court declined further consideration of the case.

With the prospects for a class action lawsuit cut off by the Supreme Court's decision, Day and the Class Act Group have redirected their efforts toward legislative solutions. Their program now includes retirees who entered service after 1956, considering that military literature, as late as the 1990s, continued to promise lifetime medical care.

A new health care system, Tricare for Life, has resolved many of the problems that retirees had with Medicare alone. The program enacted by Congress responded to proposals by Class Act, and the pressure of Bud Day's challenge was influential in shaping the outcome. It covers all retirees, not just the older ones. Day says that Tricare for Life "is truly a much better program than we had before," but Class Act wants Congress to waive the cost of Medicare Part B payments for retirees and their spouses.

"Injuries were a bonus for the torturers," Day said. Twisting or pulling on a broken bone caused excruciating pain, which the V found useful. The chief torturer at New Guy Village was the "Bug," who was known to have killed at least five Americans. He had two assistants, "Straps and Bars" and "Jake." As the torturers worked, a typewriter clicked away routinely across the hall, the clerk oblivious to the screaming.

Tortured for the names of other pilots in his unit, Day finally gave the V the names of Doc Savage, Charles Lindbergh, and Billy Mitchell.

Before long, Day was moved into another section of the prison, which the POWs called "Little Vegas." Among the features there were audio speakers, over which the V played and replayed statements from American liberals and antiwar US Senators. They also piped in confessions and propaganda statements from prisoners who collaborated with them.

When the cast was cut off Day's right arm, his hand flopped around uselessly. He could not help himself with his left hand, either. His weight had fallen to about 100 pounds. Another prisoner, Air Force Maj. Norris M. Overly, was assigned to take care of him.

Day and Overly were moved to another POW camp, the "Plantation," a few miles away. The reason, apparently, was so Overly could also care for another

incapacitated POW: Navy Lt. Cmdr. John S. McCain III, shot down and captured on Oct. 26, 1967. (McCain's father, Adm. John S. McCain Jr., became the head of US Pacific Command nine months later.)

The V hoped to cultivate or exploit McCain. As POW camps went, the Plantation was a showplace, the residence of a former French mayor of Hanoi. Con-

At right, Day on his release, March 14, 1973. The information he gave up under torture was pure fantasy; he "confessed" that Charles Lindbergh was a fellow Misty. Day says this photo illustrates how torture aged him "20 years in five years."

ditions were better and treatment was not as harsh. High-ranking Vietnamese came to see McCain and talk to him, but he wasn't cutting any deals.

Nearly all of the POWs tried to hold to the Code of Conduct for US armed forces, which said they should give their name, rank, service number, and date of birth, and nothing else. Some POWs—Bud Day and John McCain among them—were known as "hard resisters," who took severe torture before telling the V anything. A few of the POWs made no effort to resist and thus obtained special privileges.

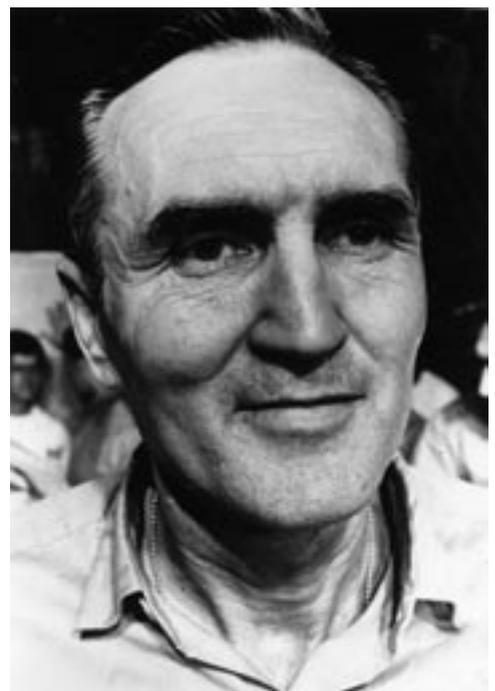
In February 1968, Overly was released to go home early, and Day and McCain looked after each other. Day's arm had come out of the cast misshapen and ulcerated. His hand was out of alignment with his arm. The bones were not joined. The V were not interested.

McCain wrapped Day's arm in bamboo and rags and squeezed the bones together. About a month later, the bones joined. Years afterward, doctors in the United States expressed the opinion that McCain ought to get a degree in practical orthopedic surgery.

At the Plantation, Day and McCain learned the tap code the POWs used for communicating with each other. Tapping was an offense punishable by torture if a POW was caught at it.

Punishment Camp

On April 28, 1968, Day was transferred to the "Zoo" in the southwestern





Day is reunited with his wife, Doris, in 1973. He did not appear on the initial, "complete" lists of POWs that North Vietnam provided to the US. Doris had to work hard to get his status acknowledged and bring him home.

suburbs of Hanoi. It was a "punishment camp" for hard resisters. POWs were tortured for information, to induce "confessions," as punishment for infractions, or just because the V felt like torturing them.

Day sustained a notable beating, lasting several hours, on June 11. Two guards, known as "Dum-Dum" and "Neat," beat him until their hands were sore, then called in a third guard to take over. After that, Day had new and continuous problems with his vision.

Like his fellow POWs, Day had special contempt for American liberals who visited North Vietnam and spoke well of the V and for those back in the United States who denied that the POWs were being tortured. Day later learned that CBS News had reported on nine occasions that the Hanoi regime was treating the POWs well.

In 1969, Day said later, "I was beaten with a car fan belt three times a day for three months straight." It began with two guards, working in relays, working him over with a 30-inch length of fan belt. That afternoon, a second team took over. The V struck Day in the face, breaking one tooth and chipping another.

He finally gave them a "confession," full of obviously false details. He told them about a "Transportation Committee" that was lining up trucks for transport out of Hanoi. He said there was also a "Pass and Identification Committee" making credentials for the POWs to use. Maybe the V believed it, maybe they didn't.

In a subsequent round of torture, the

V used a stick instead of a fan belt. The wounds from the previous torture, crusted over with scabs, broke open and bled under the new beatings.

After Ho Chi Minh died on Sept. 2, 1969, treatment of the POWs improved dramatically. The beatings were fewer and less severe. Day believes that the relentless torture up to then had been the result of Ho's "personal policies."

In June 1970, Day was blindfolded and taken back to the Hanoi Hilton, where conditions were much better. In November, the US attempt to rescue POWs at Son Tay spooked the V, who moved all of the prisoners to Hanoi. (See

"The Son Tay Raid," November 1995, p. 64.) The Hilton was overcrowded, but, for the POWs, the pleasure of seeing so many other Americans more than made up for the discomfort.

For awhile, about 45 POWs were housed in "Room Seven," a large room, 25 feet by 70, off the back courtyard of the Hilton in the area known as Camp Unity or "No OK Corral."

The prisoners decided to organize a church service. It had just gotten under way when the Bug and his thugs barged in and ordered that it be stopped. The program went on, and, that evening, the thugs returned to pull Air Force Lt. Col. Robinson Risner and several other POWs out of the room.

Bud Day began singing "The Star-Spangled Banner." The entire camp, less the collaborators, joined in. For the next two hours, the POWs sang patriotic songs to protest the removal of their colleagues. The V did not interfere further.

There is no telling what fate the V had in mind for the troublesome Bud Day. His name was not on the supposedly "complete" roster given to US representatives at the Paris peace talks in December 1970. However, Norris Overly had brought back a note to Day's wife—the Viking—when Overly was repatriated in 1968. She and the US government complained loudly about the absence of Day's name from the roster.

Days, Months, Years

Before long, conditions tightened up again. A POW who had not experienced the hard repression of the earlier years



Fellow POW (now US Senator) John McCain (left) and Day visit South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu in 1974. McCain, who took care of Day in Hanoi, called him "one of the greatest men I have ever had the honor to know."



President Gerald Ford presents the Medal of Honor to Day in a 1976 White House ceremony. Day believes the Linebacker II bombing campaign, ordered by Richard Nixon, led to his release. At Day's request, Nixon re-presented the medal in 1977.

shouted an obscene insult to Ho Chi Minh. It was a pointless confrontation but enough to set off a new wave of repression.

One result was that some of the hard resisters—a category that always seemed to include Bud Day—went to punishment camps, even though they had no part in the shouted insults.

In March 1971, Day was sent to a camp called “Skid Row,” five miles southwest of Hanoi. The cells there were small, but he got one to himself. He was kept in solitary 99 percent of the time at Skid Row. It was not a new experience. During Day’s total of 67 months in captivity, 38 months were in solitary.

There was also torture, but it was less severe than before.

Later in 1971, Day was moved to the “Heartbreak Hotel” section of the Hanoi Hilton, where the rooms were considerably smaller than in Little Vegas. Five POWs were kept in a tiny room, 36 feet square. They slept two on the concrete slab “beds,” two under the slabs, and one on the floor in between.

It was not a matter of more space not being available. Several large rooms nearby were empty. The V just wanted to do it that way.

After several weeks, Day was returned to Skid Row. The punishment camp seemed a relief after Heartbreak Hotel. Then it was back to the Hilton again, the No OK Corral section this time.

Among the diversions the POWs created for themselves were Wednesday and Saturday Night at the Movies.

Anybody who could remember a movie told it to the others in as much detail as they could. John McCain was one of the star tellers.

The big break came with the Linebacker II attack on Dec. 18, 1972. The POWs were elated as the bombs fell on Hanoi. High-ranking V suddenly started visiting the Hilton. It had become the safest place in the city.

Return With Honor

On Jan. 27, 1973, the V announced the Paris protocols to the prisoners, and the POWs knew they were going home. They were released in increments, beginning Feb. 12. Day’s “Freedom Day” was March 14.

Air Force C-141s picked up the POWs at Gia Lam airfield in Hanoi and flew them to Clark Air Base in the Philippines for debriefing and medical evaluation. Day had two infected teeth pulled and he was fitted for eyeglasses. He also talked with the Viking on the telephone. His reunion with her and their four children came a few days later at March AFB, Calif.

Day had been promoted twice while he was in captivity. He was now a colonel. He spent a year in medical rehabilitation and had to obtain 13 waivers to get back on flying status. He went to upgrade training in the F-4 and was assigned as vice commander

of the 33rd Tactical Fighter Wing at Eglin AFB, Fla.

One of his big disappointments was that there was to be no punishment for the collaborators who had cooperated with the V and denounced their country and their fellow prisoners. The government decided it was better to let them go quietly.

In 1974, Day, McCain, and others returned to Vietnam to be honored and decorated by the South Vietnamese government.

Day was awarded the Medal of Honor, presented by President Ford on March 6, 1976. At Day’s request, it was re-presented in 1977 by former President Nixon, who had ordered the Linebacker II strikes in 1972 that Day believed had led to his release.

Day was—and is—the Air Force’s most highly decorated officer. He holds almost 70 military decorations, of which more than 50 are for combat. In addition to the Medal of Honor, they include the Air Force Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Silver Star. He wears 12 campaign battle stars.

He retired from the Air Force in 1976 and was admitted to the Florida bar in 1977. He has been practicing law in Fort Walton Beach ever since.

More honors keep coming his way. In 1997, the new Survival School building at Fairchild AFB, Wash., was named for Day, whose escape in Vietnam was the longest survival by any graduate of the school. The Col. George E. Day Parkway opened in 2001 in Sikeston, Mo. In 2002, his hometown Sioux City airport was named Col. Bud Day Field.

Bud Day told his own story in gripping detail in *Return With Honor* (Champlin Museum Press, 1989), which has long been out of print. Most of it is repeated, with additional information and more photos, in Day’s *Duty, Honor, Country*, published by American Hero Press in 2002.

“I don’t know how many American prisoners of war were heroes,” said Day’s friend and fellow POW John McCain, now a US Senator, “but I know that Bud Day was one. In my life, I have never known anyone who better exemplifies the cardinal American virtues: compassion, guts, determination, resourcefulness, and intelligence. Bud Day is one of the greatest men I have ever had the honor to know.” ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, “The Ho Chi Minh Trail,” appeared in the November issue.