

# Anger Kept Mike Going...

By Jerry E. Rosenthal and  
Alexanderina Shuler

"Anger kept me going," Michael Dennis Bengé says in telling how he survived more than five grueling years of captivity by the Communists in Vietnam. "I hold no animosity towards the Vietnamese people who kept me prisoner," he says. "I was just angry about the whole system and I decided I wasn't going to let it get the best of me. You know the expression, 'Illigitimas non carborundum?' Well, that was my motto."

Mike, a bachelor, returned to Washington March 8 in the second group of POWs to be released by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The plucky, slightly-built AID advisor, however, came back to more than his family and freedom. He received the Award for Heroism, which had been waiting for him since 1968, the year he was captured. Administrator Hannah presented the honor Tuesday, March 20.

The crew-cut, 37-year-old native of Oregon was captured by the North Vietnamese Army in the village of Ban Me Thout, Darlac Province, during the Tet offensive January 31, 1968. From that time until his release two weeks ago, Mike survived an ordeal that included walking more than 600 miles barefooted, suffering malaria, beriberi, blindness, loss of hair and partial paralysis. He underwent solitary confinement for long periods of time.

At the time of his capture Mike was working with the Montagnards - "mountain people". He had started working with them in 1963 when he joined the International Voluntary Services. He joined AID in 1965. He became proficient both in Vietnamese and Rhade, a dialect of the Montagnards.

"There were eight others with me at my home the night of January 30, watching the firecrackers and celebration of Tet," Mike recalls. "We had always thought how easy it would be for the enemy to mingle with the jubilant crowds and have an attack in full force before we would know what was happening."

That is exactly what did happen. He knew the noise was no innocent celebration when a mortar shell landed in his yard. At about 8:30 a.m. the next day the firing ceased for a time and people began drifting toward Mike's house from the less-protected missionary settlements.

Mike, concerned about what he affectionately and protectively calls "his people" - Americans, Vietnamese and Montagnards in Darlac Province, the area for which he was responsible as AID development advisor - jumped into his International Scout and sought to check how the five American officials and 28 others under his supervision had fared.

"I stopped at the nurses quarters and asked for volunteers to help me with the wounded," Mike said. "One of the nurses came with me. We went to the missionary compound and picked up wounded and brought them to the hospital. Then, I visited the orphanage to see what had happened there. I proceeded to check with the provincial governor and was told there was only sporadic firing now. However, when I saw an enemy tank I knew that it wasn't over by any means."

"I went to the mission compound where there were four IVS and 12 missionaries. I knew a number had been killed and wounded. I found out later seven had been massacred. "In the village a Montagnard chief, dressed in ceremonial robes to 'welcome' the Communists as liberators - which the enemy commanded the villagers to do - came out to wave me off. 'All is well here, go away,' he shouted."

Only when it was too late, Mike realized that the chieftain was trying to warn him he was in danger. And so he was. Mike, a few minutes later, noticed "unfriendly and unfamiliar faces," and turned his Scout around. Too late. Armed North Vietnamese soldiers rose out of a ditch and surrounded him.

"They had a mortar and automatic weapons," he said. "I had to give myself up or be killed. Marked Man "Was a marked man for a long time," Mike adds. "I was well known throughout the area by everyone, including the enemy. And I traveled around extensively, staying in the villages for several nights at a time. It was no real surprise when I was picked up - it was long overdue."

His actions, however, had saved lives. It was for this that Mike received AID's Award for Heroism which was approved by former Administrator William Gaud in October, 1968. The award was given to Mike, who, "without regard for his own personal safety, distinguished himself by his heroic actions to insure the safety of American civilians and missionaries during the Viet Cong Tet offensive on January 30, 1968."

Mike's work also has been recognized by the South Vietnamese Government. Two high-level awards wait for him having been sent to his parents' beef-cattle and wheat ranch in Oregon.

At first, when captured, Mike said, he was kept in a cage about eight feet square for about a month. He was interrogated. "I was coerced quite extensively," he said. "I tried to hide the fact that I was fluent in Vietnamese and Rhade, but later they found out."

Then he was marched through South Vietnam to several camps for the next eight months. "The enemy made us walk to show us off as 'soft Americans who ride autos and planes all the time'."

Two missionaries from Ban Me Thout - Henry F. Blood, a linguist working in a program to put one of the Montagnard dialects into written form, and Betty Olsen, who worked in the leprosarium - were captured with Mike. Both died within the year. Mr. Blood died in July of 1968 of malnutrition and pneumonia. Miss Olsen died in September shortly after they had been marched into Cambodia. According to Mike, she also was denied medical treatment for malnutrition and amoebic dysentery.

Before her death, however, she helped Mike survive a 35-day attack of malaria. "I was blind for awhile in that time," Mike said. He added that he was not given any medical attention until near the end of his illness. "We were fed only rice, salt and manioc at this time," Mike said. Occasionally, one of the guards would shoot an Asian deer and we would have some meat. Or we would catch a lizard."

In Cambodia, Mike said, "they would march us 10 to 12 hours a day along the trail about 30 miles inside the border from Vietnam. This, remember, was in 1969, nearly a year and a half before the military incursion into that country. We saw a steady stream of enemy military personnel and equipment going in both directions. It was a continuous stream."

Mike said he was manacled at night. His legs became swollen; his feet blistered. "I lost feeling in my arms; my hair turned completely white."

From Cambodia, Mike said, the prisoners were marched up the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos, arriving at a camp outside Hanoi in North Vietnam December 26, 1969. He estimated he had been marched 600 miles. In the camp near Hanoi, Mike was kept in solitary confinement one year. Later, he was in solitary intermittently. His black-painted cement-block cell had no openings for light or air, but there were holes in the floor - for the rats. "Sometimes, there were seven or eight rats in the room with me," he said. Flies also were a problem. "I remember killing 120 in a few hours."

Mike recounted one of the few times he was given medical attention. "The North Vietnamese medical doctor was going to show some other people how to give an intravenous injection. It took him an hour to squeeze out a few drops. Finally, he called for a bowl, poured the injection into it and told me to drink it."

When transferred to the center of Hanoi proper, Mike said, the food improved. "We were fed twice a day then, each time receiving a loaf of bread, a bowl of rice and some greens, pumpkin or cabbage."

He said, however, he was never allowed to write nor did he ever receive a letter or a package during the five years of captivity. "Last October, when the negotiations for the cease-fire started," he said, "the North Vietnamese started to fatten us up with a heavy starch diet. But when the negotiations broke down, we went back to the old diet."

The long imprisonment increased his faith. He wears around his neck a small cross he carved from bamboo while in captivity. "I was never a particularly religious person, but when you're in a situation such as I was you get to thinking that someone must be looking out after you. Symbolic of my faith and also as a sign of defiance - it bugged the hell out of the enemy - I made the cross."

"One of the things the North Vietnamese dislike most, in my opinion," Mike explains, "is religion."

"Only God..." "Once, when they threatened to kill me, I shook my head no, and told them only God could take my life. They looked at me like I was crazy and after that they more or less left me alone."

"One of the things I was able to do," Mike says of his five-year incarceration, "was to think about our aid program. I was always so busy on the job I never had a chance to think about how we could do it better. During captivity, I had plenty of time."

"The way to help people in the developing countries," he believes, "is through understanding and by having a thorough knowledge of them. Also, recognition and respect for their history, culture and way of life."

One friend who was an infantry officer stationed in Vietnam while Mike was there, says Mike "had a devotion toward the country and the people in it. I envied (his) ability and freedom to get to know the people." He notes Mike's thorough ability in the Vietnamese language.

Anthropologist Gerald C. Hickey, who was Mike's roommate the night before he was captured, calls Mike "an eastern Oregon farm boy who came out to Vietnam in the early 1960s and fell under the spell of the highland people. He was what the Special Forces called a Montagnard freak."

Mike has a special affection for the Montagnards. He was the adopted son of Y Bham Nie and his wife, a great honor of the highlanders' society. Among Mike's personal possessions much of which was lost after his capture, were dozens of thin metal-rod bracelets given by the Montagnards as a token of love, respect, devotion and friendship. When his long-time friend Robert Meyers, who worked as a State Department officer in Laos, met him to escort him home from the Philippines, Mr. Meyers slipped a Montagnard bracelet on Mike's wrist.

A Special Fraternity "It's a special kind of fraternity," Mike explains. At the Bethesda hospital, Mike is undergoing what he calls "a \$1,000 checkup."

"Early test results for tuberculosis are negative. I'm being treated for parasites and tropical diseases and the doctors are checking what may be a spleen problem, but I'm feeling good."

Mike speaks with a slight speech impediment. "I had it licked before my capture," he says. "But it came back with the pressure during imprisonment."

Despite this, Mike addressed a crowd of several hundred persons who gathered at Andrews Air Force Base to welcome home the 19 POW's who had been flown direct from Clark Field in the Philippines by way of Hickam Field, Hawaii. Mike was the only civilian in the group, and the last to disembark from the C-141 four-engine jet. After being greeted by Robert H. Nooter, Assistant Administrator for Supporting Assistance, and high-ranking military officers, he walked to the microphone.

"You don't know how much it means to all of us," he said in a voice that broke several times, "to once again be back in the free world. I wish to thank everyone for all the support that we have had since our capture. And for all the wonderful support and the reception and the care that we have had since our release."

"None of us will rest or be happy until the rest of our fellow Americans, POWs, and any other personnel who were with us in Vietnam are all released. God Bless All "Once again I wish to thank everyone for all the wonderful welcome. God bless all of you." The crowd, many of whom were children, cheered and waved their signs, as they had for each of the military POWs who had come off ahead of Mike. But they were silent for some

of the men who could not stand erect or salute smartly. An Army sergeant was wheeled down the ramp in a wheelchair. Another, Army Sergeant Gail M. Kerns of West Virginia was determined he would walk, although a head wound that had left him partially paralyzed made it difficult.

Sergeant Kerns laboriously limped down the ramp, painfully saluted each of the military party, and shook hands with Mr. Nooter. Then, two nurses came to his aid. But as they helped him walk from the plane, he paused and slowly let himself kneel to the ground and kissed the pavement. The welcomers, many with tears in their eyes, had not uttered a sound until this point. Now, they raised a loud cheer.

"Gail was imprisoned with me and we got to be good friends," Mike explained later in an interview. "When we were in the same camp I tried to work with him - in physical therapy. But the enemy would not allow it even after repeated requests. I was separated from him and rejoined him just before release. He's quite a great guy."

At a press conference, Mike, in telling of his relationship with Sergeant Kerns, nearly broke down, his voice filled with emotion.

Mike said he also was prevented from helping other prisoners.

At Andrews, after his brief but eloquent statement, he strode from the microphone across the apron to a helicopter that was to fly him to Bethesda and reunion with his mother and father, sister and niece. His walk, however, was interrupted by a greeting from Douglas K. Ramsey, the State Department Foreign Service officer assigned to AID who had come home just 10 days earlier after seven years as a POW. Mike also was met by an old friend, Don Brewster, who had worked with Mike when he was with the IVS and again after joining AID in 1965. Mr. Brewster is an AID officer presently assigned to the White House.

Waiting at the hospital for the helicopter were Mike's family, Mr. and Mrs. Terrel Bengé, of Heppner, Ore.; his sister, Mrs. Joan Hughes, and niece, Terry.

They call him "Butch", and recalled his years of growing up in Heppner. Mike was born in Denver, Colo., in 1935, and raised in Ione, Ore. He attended local schools there, graduating from Ione High School in 1953. He attended Oregon State University in Corvallis, Ore., for two years before joining the U.S. Marine Corps on January 11, 1956. He left the Marines in April 1959, and returned to Oregon State and graduated with a bachelor's degree in mechanical technology and agricultural engineering.

During his college years, Mike participated as a bull rider in rodeos. His father recalls that Mike liked to travel around with the rodeos, and although "he wasn't all that good at it," Mr. Bengé says, "Mike enjoyed riding for recreation."

Following graduation, Mike worked for Northwest Aviation in California prior to joining the International Voluntary Service in 1963.

Farm Boy "Butch is a farm boy," Mrs. Terrel Bengé says of her son, Mike. "He has a strong constitution and an understanding of life that is close to the soil. If anyone could come through he could. He lived that world's way of life, he ate and slept with the people, he loved them."

"He has a good head and a sense of humor and I'm certain that helped him survive."

"We never gave up" the Bengés say. "Rumors reached us from many sources. The Montagnards would pass word to someone who would write us he had been seen."

And as if to convince an observer, Mrs. Bengé showed an up-to-date driver's license for Mike, paid-up insurance premiums, a check book, charge cards.

From around the country came cards, notes and letters from friends and strangers, keeping the flame of hope burning strong. "Many letters came from young people, children, who had a POW bracelet with Mike's name on it," Mrs. Bengé says. "They wanted to know all about him and asked for a picture. And they expressed 'neir hope and faith.'"

The Bengé family's hometown - Heppner, Ore., population, 1,850, is located in Morrow County, population 3,400. "Within two hours of the time we found out about Mike's name on the first list of POWs to be returned, the entire county also knew," Mrs. Hughes says. "The place is in an uproar, just gone wild. Everyone knew Mike and so it's a very special thing - his homecoming - to all of them."

Before his capture, Mike's family and the entire town of Heppner for that matter, was involved in his work.

"We set up clothes collections in the schools and churches," Mr. Bengé recalls. "Mike's mother would spread the clothes out all over the basement floor and mend them before we sent them off to Vietnam."

Mike used the clothing in his self-established food-for-work program. "If one of my people wanted a shirt or a dress, they would have to learn how to plant a vegetable garden or improve animal husbandry methods," Mike says. "But they never got something for nothing."

Then there were the wood carving tools sent from Heppner to Ban Me Thout. George Beauchamp, another AID colleague who served with Mike in Vietnam, and now in the Office of Foreign Disaster Relief Coordination, recalls Mike's souvenir making project.

"Mike got the Montagnards to make spears, bracelets, rings and miniature bamboo toy houses, and helped them start a souvenir shop. I'd send him auto springs from wrecked vehicles for the mountain tribes to use in their projects."

"Mike was devoted to those people. They in turn respected and trusted him completely," Mr. Beauchamp says.

Thus, Mike's job ran 'round the clock and involved scores of people including some on the other side of the world. The moment Mike walked out of the helicopter that brought him from Andrews to Bethesda, the Bengés breathed a long sigh of relief.

"We of course saw him walk off the plane in the Philippines," Mrs. Bengé says. "He had a big grin on his face. But it was nice to watch from the hospital window and know that he would be upstairs with us in just a few minutes."

Catching Up Since arriving in Washington, Mike has been trying to catch up on what has happened in the five years he has been out of touch by reading the World Book "Yearbooks."

"But I find it hard to concentrate," he says. "I keep remembering more names of people I want to find and keep thinking of more things that need getting done if I'm to get back to work."

Also, he has had visits from VIP's - Senator and Mrs. Bob Packwood (R-Ore.) for example - and from many old friends now located in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, as well as news conferences and interviews.

Among his projects and plans is a return to school for an advanced degree in community development. "And I want to go back to South Vietnam and continue my work there with the minorities," he says. He also has a book "completely written in my mind" on his experiences as a POW. "It's all ready to go into the typewriter."

On each of the trays of food brought to his room in the tower of the hospital, the nurses have placed a single carnation. Mike isn't always hungry, but he does keep the flowers.

"After all the death and destruction," he says, "I want to have living things around me."

Mike is rapidly adjusting to life back in the States. He notes the mini skirts, long hair and new styles.

His 15-year old niece, Terry comments: "He asked us to bring his corduroy suits and some colored shirts, and he had the nurses at Clark go pick out some wide ties for him."

"He's with it all!" (The above story was taken from "Front Lines", the AID newspaper, dated Mar. 22)

## Forage Seminar Due Apr. 14

Production and the utilization of forage crops within Columbia Basin Counties will be subjects of a seminar in Hermiston on April 16, reports Harold E. Kerr, county Extension Agent. The all-day program will be held in Thompson Hall on the Umatilla County fairgrounds beginning at 9:30 a.m.

According to Kerr, the seminar has been planned and arranged in cooperation with the Columbia Basin Research and Extension Advisory Committee under chairmanship of Lowell Saylor, Echo rancher.

Six staff members from Oregon State University departments of soils, farm crops, animal science and agricultural economics will appear on the program. Discussion will cover considerations common throughout the Columbia Basin area, reaching all the way from irrigation development on representative soil types to the utilization of various crops through livestock.

Crop potentials and rotation requirements of developing irrigated lands have important implications to the agricultural production pattern of the entire Columbia Basin, Kerr said.

This first seminar will deal with the overall perspective, and will be followed later by similar type programs and field tours which will focus upon specific components of the big picture.

No advance registration to the seminar is required and all interested persons are encouraged to attend, the agent said.

Further information may be obtained through the chairman and members of the Research and Extension Advisory Committee or through Extension offices in Morrow, Gilliam and Umatilla Counties.

## AWARDS



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### WHAT'S COOKIN'?

- Turkey Casserole**
- 2 cups cubed cooked turkey
  - 1/4 cup butter or margarine
  - 2 tsp chopped onion
  - 1/4 cup flour
  - 3 cups milk
  - 3/4 cup grated sharp cheddar cheese
  - 1 1/2 cups cooked noodles
  - 1 Tsp salt
  - 1/8 tsp pepper
- Melt butter, add onion and cook until clear. Blend in flour, add milk and cook over low heat, stirring constantly until thickened. Add cheese, noodles, seasoning and turkey. Pour into baking dish. Bake 30 minutes in 350 degree oven. Serves 6.

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## Mental Health

**SOME LAWS YOU SHOULD KNOW**  
David E. Mitchum,  
Mental Health Director

If you ever find yourself in custody for alleged mental illness or wake up in a mental hospital you might want to know your rights and what you can expect. A large part of the Oregon Revised Statutes either directly or indirectly deal with mental illness. Chapter 426 is entirely devoted to the "mentally ill and sexually dangerous." Here are some facts you might find of some importance.

Two persons can start the commitment proceedings by notifying the court in writing and under oath that a resident of the county is mentally ill. A person alleged to be mentally ill can have an attorney and if necessary, one can be appointed by the court, to be paid for by the county.

The doctors who examine a person must not be related to the person, plus, one can ask the court for another doctor's opinion. Prior to commitment, the mentally ill person can be released in the custody of a relative or a friend if he is not dangerous to himself or others. Mentally ill persons not charged with a crime are not to be confined in a jail if there is a safe, humane place suitable for comfortable confinement prior to hospitalization. The Mental Health Division of the State of Oregon can decide which hospital a person goes to after they have been committed.

Although a person can be admitted on an emergency basis temporarily, he cannot be hospitalized more than fifteen days if the commitment proceedings are not completed, and the superintendent of the hospital can refuse admission if he feels the person is not in immediate need of hospitalization. Within forty-eight hours after the emergency admission, the person is to be examined. If he volunteers for admission he will not be committed. If he does not volunteer and the examining physicians feel the person needs hospitalization, commitment proceedings are started.

"No person voluntarily admitted to any state hospital shall be detained there in more than seventy-two hours after (the person) has given notice in writing of his desire to be discharged," according to the law.

A person adjudged to be mentally ill may be required to pay for his hospitalization if financially able to do so. "Commitment to state hospitals does not mean incompetency. Within what the hospital superintendent deems important for a mentally ill person's "medical welfare," the hospitalized patient has a right to communicate by sealed mail outside and inside of the hospital. He has a right to receive visitors. He has a right to exercise all of the civil rights accorded to anyone who has not been admitted to a hospital, including, but not limited to, buying and selling property and voting. Any individual committed under these laws is also entitled to a writ of habeas corpus.

These are just a few items from the law. I hope you will study the law further if this interests you. These laws are very modern. They protect you. The day a person could be railroaded into a mental hospital for life is a thing of the past.

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