



Medal of Honor Recipient

Colonel Donald G. Cook

*“Do What Is Right and Just,
No Matter What the Personal Cost”*

By Don Price

Taken prisoner by the Viet Cong on Dec. 31, 1964, Donald Gilbert Cook was the first Marine officer captured in Vietnam and the only Marine in history to earn the Medal of Honor while a prisoner of war (POW).

A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Cook was born into a blue-collar, Irish-Catholic family on Aug. 9, 1934. He attended parochial grade school in the Windsor Terrace neighborhood of Brooklyn and was a choirboy. Cook graduated from Xavier High School in Manhattan where he was an outstanding football lineman earning the nickname: “The Bay-ridge Bomber.”

A deeply religious scholar, he went on to attend St. Michael's College in Burlington, Vt. During his summer breaks, Cook worked as a stevedore at the Brooklyn Naval Shipyard. In his senior year, he met his bride-to-be, Laurette Giroux, a French-Canadian beauty from a prominent Burlington family.

A gifted linguist, Cook was fluent in Latin, German and French by the time he graduated with honors from St. Michael's in 1956. While awaiting the start of Officer Candidates School in January 1957 at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., Cook embarked on an Atlantic voyage as a merchant seaman and then married Laurette on Dec. 1, 1956. Before either of them had turned 30, they had four children.

Commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve on April 1, 1957, Cook remained at Quantico for a year of training. Afterward he was assigned as a communications officer with the First Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, Calif. In his company-grade years that followed, Cook graduated first in his class from the Intelligence Staff Officers' Course at the U.S. Army Intelligence Officers' School, Fort Holabird, Baltimore, in September 1961. He subsequently served in Hawaii

from September 1961 to July 1964 as the officer in charge of an interrogator-translator team, and then as an intelligence officer on the staff of the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific.

Upon completion of that assignment, then-Captain Cook received orders to



Donald Gilbert Cook

Communications Company, Headquarters Battalion, 3dMarDiv on Okinawa, reporting there in August 1964. Now a geographic bachelor, he stayed physically fit and read about Asia. Setting his professional sights on Vietnam, Cook began studying the Vietnamese language and volunteered for duty there in November 1964. Before departing for Saigon, Cook wrote a prescient letter to his four youngsters back in Burlington, explaining why he was going to war. Placing the letter in a briefcase in his bachelor officers' quarters, he mistakenly assumed it would be found if he became a casualty.

After only 18 days in Vietnam, Cook was wounded and captured at the Battle of Binh Gia about 40 miles southeast of Saigon. During the battle, he was shot in the left thigh and passed out from blood loss. While unconscious, he was taken prisoner by the Viet Cong, who dressed

his wound. Meanwhile back on Okinawa, Cook's belongings, including his briefcase with the unread letter inside, were boxed up and shipped to Laurette in Burlington. Busy raising their four children alone, she put the boxes in storage.

The VC held Cook in a number of primitive jungle POW camps. For nearly three years, he led 10 fellow POWs in captivity, always looking out for their health and welfare while complying with the spirit and intent of the U.S. Military Code of Conduct. From the outset of his captivity, Capt Cook did not waver in accepting his leadership responsibilities. Within days, he served notice to his captors that he was the senior POW and, therefore, the legal spokesman for all the Americans held with him.

Cook soon began to assert himself with his fellow POWs by setting forth his policies for their survival. He said they must stick together, help each other, especially the sick and downhearted, and keep a sense of humor. He told his men to boil their drinking water, eat anything remotely resembling food and keep themselves and their bamboo confinement cages as clean as possible. Cook and his men subsisted on a starvation diet of rice and fish. He demanded that the VC provide his men with medicine, vitamin supplements and additional and better food. From time to time, Cook's demands paid off in the form of a pittance of vitamins and medicine, stale loaves of French bread, a few duck eggs and a banana or two, but that was about it.

Unbeknownst to his captors, Cook also continued his study of the Vietnamese language in secret, but never spoke to

COURTESY OF DON PRICE



MC SCOTT B. BOYLE, USN

Above: Sailors man the rail as the guided-missile destroyer USS *Donald Cook* (DDG-75) returns to Naval Station Norfolk following a seven-month deployment. The ship was commissioned Dec. 4, 1998, and her home port is Rota, Spain.

Right: A statue of Col Cook was dedicated at his alma mater, St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vt. The school's other famous Marine alumnus is the current Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Joseph F. Dunford.

Below: Col Cook's family poses for a photo beside his plaque at the dedication of Cook Hall aboard the Presidio of Monterey, Calif., Oct. 17, 2014.



PCF MEDINA KIMLA-10, USMC



COURTESY OF ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE



The President of the United States in the name of The Congress takes pride in presenting the MEDAL OF HONOR posthumously to COLONEL DONALD G. COOK UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while interned as a Prisoner of War by the Viet Cong in the Republic of Vietnam during the period 31 December 1964 to 8 December 1967. Despite the fact that by so doing he knew he would bring about harsher treatment for himself, Colonel Cook (then Captain) Cook established himself as the senior prisoner, even though in actuality he was not. Repeatedly assuming more than his share of the manual labor in order that the other Prisoners of War could improve the state of their health, Colonel Cook willingly and unselfishly put the interests of his comrades before that of his own well-being and, eventually, his life. Giving more needy men his medicine and drug allowance while constantly nursing them, he risked infection from contagious diseases while in a rapidly deteriorating state of health. This unselfish and exemplary conduct, coupled with his refusal to stray even the slightest from the Code of Conduct, earned him the deepest respect from not only his fellow prisoners, but his captors as well. Rather than negotiate for his own release or better treatment, he steadfastly frustrated attempts by the Viet Cong to break his indomitable spirit, and passed this same resolve on to the men whose well-being he so closely associated himself. Knowing his refusals would prevent his release prior to the end of the war, and also knowing his chances for prolonged survival would be small in the event of continued refusal, he chose nevertheless to adhere to a Code of Conduct far above that which could be expected. His personal valor and exceptional spirit of loyalty in the face of almost certain death reflected the highest credit upon Colonel Cook, the Marine Corps, and the United States Naval Service.

them in their native tongue. Cook's fellow POWs said their Marine leader seemed to have an uncanny ability to read their captors' minds and always was one mental step ahead of them, much to the enemy's aggravation.

Cook also was a hard-core resister to the attempts by the VC to indoctrinate him and gain his cooperation. He gave the Viet Cong only "the big four and nothing more": name, rank, service number and date of birth. Cook was so closemouthed, his captors never learned he was a Marine. They believed he was an Army officer. A fellow POW summed up his hard-core resistance in one sentence by saying, "If

Captain Cook thought the Viet Cong were using his feces for fertilizer, he would have stopped crapping."

While hiking on rugged jungle trails from one prison camp to another, Cook sometimes carried the packs of weaker prisoners. One time, on a particularly arduous forced march in torrid weather, an exhausted POW said he could not go on. Cook unburdened the struggling man of his heavy pack, patted his back and said, "You must carry on. If Apostle Paul walked to Rome, you and I can walk to Hanoi if necessary."

With more encouragement from Cook, the man was able to keep up and make

it to the new camp. Upon reaching the camp, Cook led a failed escape attempt. A VC officer then threatened summarily to shoot him. The empty-handed Cook—armed only with his faith without fear—stared the officer in the eye and said, "You can't kill me. Only God can decide when I will die." The flummoxed officer did not squeeze the trigger.

On another occasion, Cook was threatened again with summary execution. He was forced to his knees, and a guard placed the muzzle of a pistol against his forehead. Cook looked up, recognized the pistol and calmly recited its nomenclature: "The automatic pistol, caliber .45, model M1911A1, is a recoil-operated, magazine-fed, self-loading hand weapon" and so on. His unflustered recitation defused the situation, and he was not executed.

After those two scary near-death show-downs, one of Cook's fellow POWs said, "Even if I was armed with only a water pistol, I would gladly follow Captain Cook into hell and back."

Capt Cook was the quintessential leader of men in the fire and forge of captivity. Throughout his captivity, he was always one bullet away from eternity.

After three years of malnourishment, he was a mere husk of his former powerful and vigorous self. The VC reported that Cook died of malaria in the highlands of South Vietnam near the Cambodian border on or about Dec. 8, 1967. In the end, he succumbed to the sting of a female mosquito. He was 33 years old. His remains never have been recovered. While in a missing status, the Marine Corps promoted him, along with his peers, to the terminal grade of colonel.

His legacy can be found in two important national defense entities.

First, a guided missile destroyer is named in his honor. USS *Donald Cook* (DDG-75) is homeported in Rota, Spain. Launched on May 3, 1997, *Cook* continues to serve as one of America's most ready and capable warships. The ship's motto, "Faith Without Fear," epitomizes her namesake's life. Her crew proudly refers to the ship as the "Fearless Warrior." *Cook's* indomitable presence is felt by all hands on board.

She has seen combat in the Persian Gulf, off the Horn of Africa and in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black seas. Her readiness has been tested, and each time she answered the call. *Cook* was the first to come to the aid of USS *Cole* (DDG-67) when she was attacked by terrorists on Oct. 12, 2000. *Cook* helped to start Operation Iraqi Freedom with Tomahawk missile strikes on important command-and-control targets in 2003. Her formidable over-the-horizon presence helped stabilize the



Above: Cook Hall is a 110,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility, using the latest energy- and water-conservation technologies. One of the most environmentally friendly structures on the campus of the DLIFLC at Monterey, Calif., it houses 100 high-tech language instruction classrooms for military students from all the services.

Below: Army COL Paul W. Fellingner Jr., garrison commander for the Presidio of Monterey; Rep. Sam Farr of California; and Thomas Cook, one of Col Cook's sons, cut the ribbon at the dedication of Cook Hall aboard the Presidio on Oct. 17, 2014.



crisis in Crimea caused by an increasingly aggressive Russian military in 2014.

Currently, *Cook* is the first of four U.S. Navy forward-deployed destroyers permanently serving in Europe. She was selected from an elite group of *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers with unique weapons capabilities, and her "Fearless Warrior" attitude certainly plays a pivotal role in her selection for this prestigious honor. Her mission is to protect NATO nations from attack by ballistic missiles. She has steamed more than 20,000 nautical miles

without a gap in coverage, providing a protective shield over our friends and allies. She has flown the American flag through 16 foreign ports, displaying a firm commitment to peace and stability in the region.

In April 1980, Donald Cook's two daughters decided to go through their father's stored boxes from Okinawa. More than 15 years after Cook wrote his final letter to his children and put it in his briefcase, the girls read his guidance to them. It reads in part: "Do what is right

and just, no matter what the personal cost. Love God and man above all else. Don't judge yourself by others, but others by yourself. Life to me is so simple. There is life, death, and eternity. If we can't save our souls, what good is anything else? This guides and will continue to guide all my actions."

Cook's righteous words of advice to his children, "Do what is right and just, no matter what the personal cost," are engraved on a heavy brass plaque bolted to the bulkhead adjacent to the serving line in the galley aboard USS *Donald Cook*. The plaque is shiny because the crew constantly rubs it for good luck when passing through the line to get their daily rations. It is a firm tradition for every *Cook* sailor to be familiar with Col Cook's story and be able to speak knowledgeably at a moment's notice about his courage.

Col Cook's legacy was recently expanded when a new academic building was dedicated to his memory at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), Presidio of Monterey, Calif. Col Cook had studied Mandarin Chinese for 47 weeks at what was then called Army Language School, graduating in May 1961 and finishing third in his class.

Standing four stories high, Cook Hall has 110,000 square feet of space, housing 100 classrooms, multipurpose training areas, staff and faculty offices, test control areas, conference rooms and an auditorium. It is the largest building on the Monterey Peninsula and the only one to have a rainwater-storage cistern beneath it. At a cost of \$40 million, the building is environmentally friendly and is equipped with the latest state-of-the-art technological education and training equipment. Military students from all services are taught French, Russian, German, Hebrew, Spanish, Portuguese and Serbian-Croatian in Cook Hall.

Cook Hall was dedicated on Oct. 17, 2014, and although Laurette Cook had passed away the previous year, the four Cook children, Christopher, Karen, Victoria and Thomas, attended the dedication ceremony. Christopher said, "My father's career in the Marine Corps really began here in Monterey. It has come full circle. This building pays tribute to his memory in a magnificent way."

Author's bio: Col Donald L. Price, USMC (Ret) earned the Silver Star, three Bronze Stars and the Purple Heart in Vietnam. His book, "The First Marine Captured in Vietnam: A Biography of Donald G. Cook," is available from THE MARINE SHOP.

