

*Querin Herlik —  
Prisoner of War*

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## Querin Herlik — Prisoner of War

Stretched on his back, hands bound behind him, Quin could feel the damp earth all around. The tunnel measured approximately eight foot long, by two foot deep and three feet wide, roughly the size of a coffin. Above him, the ground occasionally crumbled, sprinkling dirt upon his face and clothes. A Vietcong soldier stood guard nearby. Engulfed in the darkness and trapped beneath the suffocating weight on his own breath, the hole closed around him with every exhale. As Quin laid there, thoughts racing, he wondered if he would ever see his wife and children again and prayed that he would make it out of this alive.

Born in 1932 in Wisconsin, Querin “Quin” Herlik grew up in a military family. His father was a field artillery corporal in the Army and spent 14 months in France during World War I. During World War II, he was too old for combat, but still served in the National Guard.

“My father was very, very pro-military and encouraged me as well,” Quin recalls.

Even as a child, Quin was preparing for a life in uniform. He joined the Cub Scouts at age eight, then moved up through the Boy Scouts and even became an Eagle Scout. He also joined the ROTC while attending a Catholic Central High School and later St. Norbert’s College, also a Catholic school.

Quin jokes, “I spent 30 years in the Army, but I put a uniform on in the Cub Scouts at the age seven and finally took it off at age 55 when I got out of the service.”

Upon graduating from college, Quin was commissioned as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the United States Army and was stationed with a field artillery unit in Germany. Quin was engaged at this time and in 1957, his finance, Mary Jo, joined him in Germany. They were soon married and in 1958 Mary Jo gave birth to a son, followed by twin girls 14 months later.

Over the next few years, Quin and Mary Jo relocated to Kansas where Quin learned to fly at the flying club, applied to the flight school and got accepted. Quin would spend the next 17 years flying for the Army, logging more than 4000 hours of flight time; 912 of those hours over Vietnam.

In 1964, Quin began his first tour in Vietnam. He was the operations officer responsible for all of Southern Vietnam with roughly 55 airplanes under his purview. Quin and his team would fly reconnaissance missions, with a South Vietnamese office on board, looking for Vietcong troops. Once spotted, they would relay the coordinates back to ground troops who would fire 105 mm howitzer rounds at the Vietcong forces. At this point in the war, under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, U.S. troops in Vietnam still filled primarily an advisory role to the South Vietnamese forces to help thwart the advances of communism in the country.

In addition to supporting South Vietnamese combat operations, during his first tour in Vietnam, every Sunday Quin would transport priests throughout A Shau Valley for Sunday Mass in a small single engine plane, normally the L19 Birdog. There were three airstrips in the valley at that time and even though they would occasionally take fire from RPGs, and mass might be held at the front end of a jeep, Quin made sure the priests were there to say Sunday Mass for his soldiers.

Quin speaks of his first tour in Vietnam with fondness, remembering that he even had time to frequently visit the pristine beaches along the South China Sea during the “noon hour.”

However, much changed over the course of the next few years. The American War College reports that in 1964, there were only roughly 23,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam. By the time Quin would leave in '65, this number would increase to 184,300 troops. By the time he returned for his second tour of duty in '68, more than 500,000 American troops would be in Vietnam.

When Quin returned for his second tour in 1968, he was 36 years old and had been serving in the Army 13 years. He was then Major Herlik. In the time between his two tours, the atmosphere had changed dramatically. One key landmark still stands out in Quin's mind: A Shau Valley.

"A Shau is where the Marines had themselves surrounded by the Northern Vietnamese and the B52's came and pounded and pounded that area. When I went back in '68 and flew over the A Shau Valley, after they pulled the Marines out of there [...], I could see it from miles away because it looked like the landscape of a moon. It had all been vegetation and jungle, and all that area, it was nothing but – how can I describe it – moonscape. It was just white ground [because] it had been pounded so hard."

A Shau valley was a key location during the Vietnam War. Northern Vietnamese troops used this valley as an entry point into South Vietnam. The valley stretches north to south for 25 miles in the middle of Vietnam, surrounded by mountains on both sides. Due to its strategic location, this was a key battleground throughout much of the war.

In 1968, Quin had a new mission: radio research, better known as radio intercept. He flew with a co-pilot, a Morse code expert and a Vietnamese linguist on each mission. They would pick up Vietcong or Northern Vietnamese radio signals, triangulate the location and then transmit that information back via secure channels for launch attacks.

By 1969, Quin was the Commander of the 146<sup>th</sup> company in Saigon. He had three single engine Otter planes (which could hold up to 14 people) and 23 twin beach airplanes under his command. He was also in charge of 55 officers, which meant he didn't fly as much as he did before. During his first tour, he logged over 700 flight hours; in his second tour, he only recorded around 200 hours. Even with less flight time than his junior officers, Quin risked his life with every flight. At one point, his crew chief reported that Quin's aircraft had 98 bullet holes in it in one year's time. While many of those were narrow escapes, Quin managed to bring the aircraft back to base *most* of the time. His last flight in Vietnam would be the one exception to this when Quin found himself on the wrong end of an air defense shell, struggling to survive.

On February 12, 1969, Quin departed on a routine mission that took him along the Cambodian border with Vietnam. Cambodia held a unique position in the Vietnam War. The ruler of Cambodia, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was a neutralist and wanted to keep his country impartial in the war between the Northern Vietnamese, supported by the Vietcong in Southern Vietnam, and the Southern Vietnamese supported by the Americans. He viewed any incursions across his sovereign borders as hostile. However, a main supply route from Northern Vietnam to Southern Vietnam ran straight through Cambodia and was a key asset to the North Vietnamese. Vietcong soldiers also had camps set up inside Cambodian territory, which Prince Sihanouk continually contested. Due to tensions in the area and increased border violations, in May of 1965, Cambodia severed all remaining diplomatic ties with the United States and Vietnam.

On this day, three personnel were aboard the otter reconnaissance plane with Quin: his co-pilot Chief Warrant Officer (CW02) Laird Osburn, Specialist John Fisher and Specialist Robert Pryor. They had only been on mission thirty minutes when they heard a single "pop" and with that, the plane shuddered and smoke began to fill the cabin.

“We were at 3500 feet when the plane took a hit I think from a 37 millimeter right in the engine. Thank God it was the engine because if it was a foot back or if it was on the wing, I wouldn’t be here,” Quin recalled.

Quin shouted to the crew to get their parachutes on, fearing they would have to jump as flames began to creep inside. As his copilot put out the mayday call to the aircraft controllers back in Saigon, Quin scanned the horizon, looking for a safe place to bring the plane down. He turned the aircraft to the west a bit and spotted a dried out rice paddy. They could still hear shots coming up at them, so Quin put the plane nose down in a tight spiral to land as quickly as possible without further damage. Before touching down, he lifted the nose of the plane up and bounced the main gear along the ground, bouncing again over a small dike, before laying on the breaks and bringing the plane to a stop. Quin knew they weren’t supposed to be in Cambodia, but without any discernable landmarks, he wasn’t sure how close to the border he was flying. Little did he know, he had landed half a mile inside Cambodian territory.

Somewhat safely on the ground, the four men scrambled out of the aircraft. Osburn had minor burns from the fire, but other than that, they remained unscathed. Quin looked around and saw troops coming at them from the northwest and the southwest about 50-60 yards away. His first thoughts were that they had landed in the middle of a firefight and needed to find out who the “friendly” were. When the downed plane started taking hits from a 30 caliber, Quin moved to the other side of the aircraft and saw troops coming in from the other two sides as well. That’s when he realized they were in “deep trouble.”

As they were taking fire, Quin yelled to the other men to get the classified material off the plane. Pryor climbed back into the plane and pulled a parachute bag full of secret and top secret documents to the ground. Only in his 20’s, Pryor was a member of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne and was temporarily filling in with Quin’s crew for the day. This was supposed to be his last mission in Vietnam.

Both enlisted men were armed with M16 rifles and the two officers had .38 caliber pistols. Pryor huddled under the wing of the plane and began firing at enemy troops. Fisher, armed with the other M16, hesitated. Untrained for this type of situation, he was inexperienced with the weapon. In his hesitation, Osburn took the rifle and ammo from Fisher, got down on one knee and began firing. At six foot five, even on his knees, Quin worried that Osburn would be an easy target and yelled for him to get down. While Osburn and Pryor fired the M16s, Fisher, at the direction of Quin, set fire to the classified documents.

Quin shouted for the others to take cover as they heard the deafening booms of incoming RPGs and mortar rounds. Anticipating the plane would be hit soon, he shouted again for them to move away. As they did, one of the rounds hit near the plane, which had been leaking fuel from the two full tanks and everything went up in a roar of flames.

With the plane ablaze and armed only with a pistol, Quin spotted trees nearby and decided to run for it. He hoped to slip away into the jungle and yelled for Fisher to follow him, but as he did, the ground around them lit up with gunfire and Fisher froze, unable to move. Quin dropped to the ground and crawled for the jungle, only to realize once he got there that it wasn’t the jungle after all, but only a small island of trees and he had nowhere to go.

As Quin crept into the patch of trees, two Air Force F-100s flew by. They had heard the crew’s mayday call, but unfortunately had no ordinance left. With no other way to assist, they made low passes over head, and sent the 300-400 Vietcong troops scrambling. On their second pass through, they dropped to 50 feet, which unfortunately drove some of the Vietcong troops directly into the woods where Quin was hiding.

Acting on instinct, Quin lifted his pistol and shot the first Vietnamese soldier that headed toward him. He raced to the other side of the woods and another was approaching. He squeezed the trigger and dropped the man where he stood. The dead man's AK-47 fell to his side, but it was out in the clearing and Quin made the decision not to go after it, knowing that he would be seen if he went into the open.

Quin ran back to the center of the trees, ripped off his rank and dog tags, and buried them along with his wallet. There was no place to hide, so he got down low and concealed himself under bushes. Just as he did, four Vietcong troops all armed with AK47s came down the trail toward him. The first one didn't spot Quin until he was eight to ten feet away. They were right on top of him. Quin's mind raced. Still hiding in the bushes, he locked his pistol on the first man.

"I had my pistol on the first one, but then he looked up and saw me. I said, 'I got you. I could shoot you right in the head.' I said I may have the second guy, but I ain't got number three and I ain't got number four. So I stood up and I took my pistol and I threw it as far as I could and I surrendered to them."

Quin later wrote in his diary that these were the "*longest three seconds in [his] life as [they] pointed weapons at each other.*"

After surrendering, Quin's hands were tied behind him and he was led past the plane and forced into a hole in the ground. Quin recalls that he had to go into the hole head first and then turn sideways to tuck into a slightly larger section. Two guards stood at each end of the hole, firing at aircraft overhead. Little did he know at the time, but this would be the largest, most comfortable hole he would find himself in.

As Quin sat there, A1-E Skyraiders bombed and strafed the crash site, thunderous booms filling the air. Due to the classified nature of the material aboard the aircraft and the fact that the crew was flying with the Vietcong codebook, General Abrams, the Commander in charge of operations in Vietnam from 1968-72, had given the order to destroy the plane. Quin recalls that they didn't care if he and the others were in the plane, that they didn't care about four guys but rather what they cared about was making sure they destroyed the Vietcong codebook.

Crouched in the darkness of his hole, a guard at each side and bombs dropping all around, reality sank in.

"I knew I was in deep trouble. [I thought to myself,] *how the hell did I ever get myself in this jam? What am I doing in the Army? I got a wife and three kids.* I said, 'Lord, if I could get out of here right now, I'd take a minimum wage job for \$40 a week and do something different.'"

As the bombing eventually ceased and daylight turned to dusk, Quin was removed from the hole and led to sit by a fire where he soon saw Fisher and Pryor. None of the men were allowed to speak. They were instructed to be quiet, follow orders and to not try to escape — and they were given cards that stated as such. The cards read:

*ADMONITION TO US AND SATELLITE P.O.W.'S AFTER BEING CAPTURED*

- 1. Don't worry. The S.V.N.N.F.L. [South Viet Nam National Liberation Front] and the L.A.F [Liberation Armed Forces] give lenient and humane treatment to P.O.W.'s. You will not be killed, nor beaten.*
- 2. Follow me, leave this place at once to avoid danger.*
- 3. On the way to the P.O.W. camp, you must severely obey our orders.*
- 4. In the case of American air raid and artillery shelling, you must not run away but follow me to get cover.*

5. *You are not allowed to talk. Interpreters of the P.O.W. camp will talk and answer for you.*

*S.V.N.L.A.F.*

Even with these orders, Quin managed to ask Pryor and Fisher about his friend and copilot Osburn. Pryor told him that that Osburn had taken shrapnel from RPG fire and had not survived. He had seen him lying on the ground with blood on his face, not moving. The gravity of their situation became more real with every passing second. They were at the mercy of the Vietcong soldiers and no one could possibly know what was in store for them.

Back in the Savannah, GA, Mary Jo Herlik was going about her daily routine, unaware that her world was about to change. Standing at the kitchen sink, she looked out into her yard and saw a chaplain and two military officers approaching her house. A sinking feeling in her stomach, she knew why they had come and in an effort to shelter her twin nine year old daughters and ten year old son, Mary Jo met the men on the porch.

With solemn expressions, one of the officers handed Mary Jo a telegram that read:  
*Major Querin E. Herlik is missing. He was last seen as Aircraft Commander on U-1A aircraft on a combat support mission when aircraft was hit by hostile ground fire. Aircraft crashed and burned. Search in progress.*

Quin's eyes fill with tears as he recalls his wife and the pain this caused his family. When talking about his time in Vietnam, the only time Quin gets emotional is when he thinks about how difficult it was for his wife and children, stating that this was much harder on his family than it was on him.

As darkness fell in Vietnam, ropes bound the men's biceps and their arms were pulled backwards in what Quin calls a "chicken wing position." The Vietcong tied the ropes between their shoulder blades and then tied their hands again at the wrists. Another rope connected each man to the person in front of him. Bound like this, the Vietcong forced the men to march.

The men covered 25 miles on the night of the 12<sup>th</sup>, marching east into Vietnam, and then north. They waded through streams and rivers, causing their feet to blister and bleed inside their combat boots. The men grew exhausted as the night progressed and Quin slowed his pace in an effort to foil the Vietcong plans and give the younger soldiers a bit of reprieve from the grueling task. The Vietcong troops yelled at him and threatened to kill him if he didn't hurry up and after a while, he was forced to bring up the rear instead.

As they marched along, the group came upon a remote farmhouse and a woman and her two children came out. The children appeared to be three or four years old. Quin heard the woman call to the troops, "Saigon, Saigon." He believed she hoped the soldiers were South Vietnamese troops, but she was wrong. The soldiers approached the woman and Quin could hear her and her children crying. The Vietcong showed no mercy and shot and killed the family in front of them. Just as quickly and callously, they set fire to her home and marched the Americans away, the cries of the woman and her children now silent as the flames grew orange in the distance.

"These killings got our attention knowing that they might kill us at any time. We knew how fragile our lives were," Quin says with sorrow in his eyes as his thoughts drift back in time.

Throughout the night, the men were allowed to stop for ten minutes to rest once every hour or so. They would be untied from one another and allowed to sit on the ground. During one of these brief moments, Quin attempted to make an escape. South Vietnamese troops had

stumbled upon the group and engaged the Vietcong in a firefight. Seizing the opportunity, Quin decided to make a run for it. He laughs now as he recalls that he only made it 10 or 15 feet before spinning around and falling down. With his arms still pulled behind him in the “chicken wing” position, he couldn’t get any momentum and lost his balance. The Vietcong swarmed him in no time.

“[I] got a couple rifle butts in the back for my attempt,” Quin laughs, a hint of pride in his voice as the memory comes to him.

Before daylight on the first night, the men arrived to a jungle base camp. As they approached the camp, one of the soldier’s flashlights shone across two men sitting on the ground nearby. Before another soldier yelled at him and the light went out, Quin saw two men in flight suits sitting with their hands tied behind them and bags on their heads. Quin never saw these men again and doesn’t know what happened to them. United States Intelligence Agencies later questioned him about these men often, but each time, he had no more information to provide.

According to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, as of May 2017, of 2646 Americans originally reported missing in Vietnam, 1611 remain missing. Forty-nine of these men were missing in Cambodia and of those, seven are listed in an unrecoverable status, meaning that after exhaustive research it is believed that these men died and there is no chance of recovering their remains. Recovery efforts are still actively underway in both Vietnam, Cambodia and neighboring Laos and personnel are stationed there year round in support of this effort. Quin will never know what happened to the men he saw that night, but if they were never accounted for, the United States has not stopped looking.

Now at the base camp, Quin and the others were given a bit of rice and water and they were allowed to rest on canvases on the ground for an hour or so. Physically exhausted, Quin drifted to sleep.

As the sun began to rise on the second day, a Vietcong soldier nudged Quin with the toe of his boot, rousing him. The Americans were told that for their safety, they would have to go into holes during the daytime. With these orders, Quin had to lower himself into one hole and then lie on his back, hands still tied behind him and scoot backwards into a longer hole. Lying on his back, the ground above him was only 18 inches or so from his face. Pryor and Fisher were placed in a hole together nearby. With nothing left to do, Quin lay in the darkness and prayed — praying that he would make it home alive and praying that the Americans wouldn’t drop B-52 bombs on the whole place killing them all.

At some point during the day, Quin was called from his hole and forced to kneel before a Vietcong Major who stretched lazily in a hammock six or seven feet away. As Quin kneeled, a Lieutenant standing next to him translated the Major’s questions in broken English. He wanted to know what Quin’s mission was, what unit he belonged to, what other troops were nearby, what the American’s plans were and more. Per Article 17 of the Geneva Convention, “Every prisoner of war, when questioned on the subject, is bound to give only his surname, first names and rank, date of birth, and army, regimental, personal or serial number, or failing this, equivalent information.” Knowing this, Quin held his ground through the questioning and repeated only his name, rank and service number.

Growing tired of Quin’s defiance, the Major motioned towards the Lieutenant and the Lieutenant tossed him a pistol. Slowly, he emptied the chamber and dropped in a single round, spinning the cylinder closed before passing it back.

The Major told Quin, “I am going to ask you one more time. What unit you are from?”

Without hesitation, Quin repeated that all he had to provide was his name, rank and service number and as he did, the Lieutenant put the gun against his temple and pulled the trigger.

“He held the gun to my head and I heard *click*. [I said to myself] I’m not going to get wasted out here. I’m not playing this game.” With this, Quin began to fabricate stories about his unit and his mission. He told the Major that he was hauling c-rations and barbed wire from Saigon. The Major was eventually content with these answers and sent Quin back to his hole to wait out the daylight.

In the American film *The Deer Hunter* (1978), American soldiers played by Robert DeNiro and Christopher Walken were forced by their Vietnamese captors to play a heart pounding and hard-to-watch game of Russian roulette. This scene met many critical reviews. An associated press reporter, Peter Arnett, who later won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Vietnam War wrote, “In its 20 years of war, there was not a single recorded case of Russian roulette [in Vietnam]... The central metaphor of the movie is simply a bloody lie.” Although Quin did not pull the trigger himself, a single bullet was dropped in the chamber, the gun was put to his head and the trigger was pulled. To Quin, this was inherently a game of Russian roulette.

Later that evening and through the morning of February 14th, the Americans were marched along through the darkness of the jungle. They covered roughly 25 more miles before stopping at daybreak, where they were given a bit of food and returned to holes. The marches were physically punishing, leaving the men weak and exhausted. The ropes cut into their skin and their feet bled. Quin would later write in his diary, “My many ideas of trying to escape were stifled by the blisters on my feet.”

Back in Georgia, a Survivor’s Assistance Officer came to see Mary Jo and provided an update on Quin’s status.

*The secretary of the Army has asked me to inform you that your husband Major Querin E. Herlik was aboard a military aircraft on a military mission in South Vietnam on 12 FEB 1969. The aircraft crashed and burned in Cambodia after being hit by ground fire. Present indications are he may have survived the crash. Since his present whereabouts are not specifically known, he is being carried in a missing status. You will be advised promptly when further information is received. In order to protect any information that might be used to your husband’s detriment, your cooperation is requested in making public only information concerning his name, rank, service number and date of birth. This confirms personal notification made by a representative of the Secretary of the Army.*

It wasn’t much to go on, but the message offered a glimmer of hope that Quin might be alive. Trying to stay strong for her children, Mary Jo clung to this hope.

At three o’clock in the afternoon on February 14<sup>th</sup>, Quin, Pryor and Fisher were summoned from their holes and blindfolded. As they began to walk, Quin could tell that they had left the jungle and were moving through an open field. Always planning his next move, he began to repeatedly trip and fall, claiming that he couldn’t walk with the blindfold on. Finally, the Vietcong grew frustrated with him and removed the covering so he could see. At this point, Quin was able to determine that they were headed west again, presumably back into Cambodia.

After crossing the field, the Americans were taken to a small village where they sat on the steps of a beautiful, abandoned Buddhist temple while villagers came to stare at them. While



Quin and the others were given water, villagers came out and laughed at them and the Vietcong soldiers chased away children with sticks.

45 minutes passed at the temple when a jeep with four Cambodians pulled up. A tall Cambodian Lieutenant approached the Vietcong soldiers and after several minutes of intense arguing, Quin and the others were loaded into the back of the open jeep. The Cambodians sped away, bouncing the men from side to side. With their hands still tied behind their backs, Quin was afraid at times that they would be thrown from the vehicle.

The Cambodians drove for forty five minutes before stopping at a medical dispensary. The men were no longer Vietcong prisoners, but their fate with the Cambodians was still unknown. The eleven Americans detained by the Cambodians in July of 1968 — when their boat drifted off course — were held for five months before being released. There was no way of knowing how long the men would be held and what sort of treatment they would receive; however, soon after stopping, a medic came and doctored the men's feet and gave them a small amount of food and beer. Quin instructed his men to have only one beer apiece as he was concerned they would be questioned later and he did not want the men to divulge too much information. Afterwards, the men were allowed to sleep for three or four hours.

That afternoon, the Cambodians moved Quin, Pryor and Fisher to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. They were transported in the back of a covered Land Rover vehicle...driving for nine to ten hours without stopping. They were taken to a military compound and questioned by military intelligence officers. Afterward, they were moved to a hangar bay and placed under armed guard. There were markings on the wall from the last Americans held there the year before. The place stunk horribly, there was very little light and there was only a hole in the ground for a latrine.

Later the same day, February 14, 1969, a handwritten message from the Department of the Army arrived for Mary Jo. The letter read:

*Unofficial information received that your husband, Major Querin Herlik survived the aircraft crash and is presently in Cambodian custody. Also indication that he was injured in the crash but not severely.*

As Mary Joe read the message, a few teardrops slipped from her eyes and fell onto the paper like drops of rain, puddling in the ink — tear stains that are still visible on the paper more than 48 years later. Her husband was alive...he was injured, but alive. The letter continued:

*Department of Army has received confirmation that one of the other individuals aboard the aircraft who is also injured is presently in a civilian hospital in Phnom Penh, Cambodia where he is receiving proper medical treatment. [Department of Army] is making every effort to obtain information and you will be kept fully informed of all info received.*

As Quin would later learn, his co-pilot Osburn did in fact survive the firefight with the Vietcong. After being hit by shrapnel and knocked unconscious by the butt of a Vietcong soldier's rifle, a Cambodian who witnessed the ordeal had retrieved his body and rushed him to a hospital. After surgery, Osburn insisted to the authorities that there were three more Americans with him. His insistence is believed to be what led to communication between the Vietcong and the Cambodians and the eventual hand over of Quin and the others. Had it not been for Osborn, Quin believes he and the others would have been held for at least four years by the Vietcong (until the ceasefire in 1973 which resulted in the release of 591 POWs during Operation Homecoming), if

they even survived. Soldiers weren't often released during those years and many didn't make it out alive. Of the 591 men released in 1973, only 77 were Army personnel.

The Cambodian authorities did not want to acknowledge that Vietcong troops were present inside their country or that the Vietcong had been the ones to shoot the Americans down. This went against their desire to be seen as neutral and uninvolved in the conflict. With this in mind, the Cambodians reported that the Americans had intentionally invaded their airspace and as a result, the Cambodian Air Force shot them down. The Associated Press in Saigon reported on February 14, 1969 that this "new incident came at a time when the U.S. State Department was studying the possibility of restoring diplomatic relations with Cambodia's chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk." By claiming that the Americans invaded their airspace, this story gave the Cambodians — whom in the past asked for gifts such as dump trucks and tractors in exchange for the release of US military personnel — leverage against the United States.

After enduring their new home in the hangar for three days, Quin complained to a Cambodian officer and told him, "You know we deserve a hell of a lot better than this." His complaints did not fall on deaf ears and a short while later, the men were moved to a small hut built of concrete blocks on the Mekong River. The building had only two rooms and open windows with no screens, but it was immensely better than the hangar bay.

Due to the lack of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cambodia, Australia was the designated authority to handle American affairs in the country. As such, Neil Manton, Assistant to the Australian Ambassador, was allowed to visit Quin and the others frequently, bringing writing materials, supplies and food...even once smuggling in a much-appreciated bottle of Scotch for the detainees. Neil would check on the Americans as often as allowed and would relay information back to the Department of the Army. Neil later wrote a book on his time in Cambodia titled, "Strange Flowers on the Diplomatic Vine, U.S. Detainees in Cambodia." When writing about Quin and his troops, he stated, "These men were indeed lucky, for others in similar situations were never seen again when taken by the Vietcong." They all knew that the situation could have been much worse.

During the initial weeks of their detainment, a Lieutenant continually questioned Quin at the hut and then Osburn at the hospital in attempt to get the full story out of them. Quin insisted that he had been on a resupply mission hauling barbed wire and c-rations, yet Osburn told him that he had been on a reconnaissance mission. The unsuccessful questioning continued for two weeks before the officer finally gave in. As Quin tells it, while questioning Osburn, the Lieutenant said to him, "What the hell kind of *rations* were you hauling anyways?"

To which Osburn responded, taking the cue, "C-rations, of course."

The Lieutenant replied, "Good, I finally broke you two. Now I can go on my leave!"

After getting this "confession" from Osburn, the Cambodians moved him to the hut with Quin, Pryor and Fisher. With the four reunited, they fell into a daily routine waiting — and hoping — for their release. They read books the Australians brought them, played cards, exercised, and wrote in journals. Quin instructed each person to keep a detailed diary so they could provide exact information to the Department of Army and intelligence agencies after being released. These diaries were eventually snuck out in the men's underwear. During this time, the men survived on bread, bananas, and an occasional chicken, which they plucked and cooked on a Bunsen burner type stove that Neil Manton brought to them.

The men were also allowed to write letters, though afterward they realized none of their letters to family members had been delivered as the mail was given back to them later. Quin

personally wrote to President Nixon and also to Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia many times.

On February 28<sup>th</sup>, Quin wrote to Prince Sihanouk and thanked him for the good treatment and asked for the prince to release them. The prince responded to Quin with a letter of his own on March 11<sup>th</sup>. The letter thanked Quin for writing and ended with the statement, "I will give orders for your release when I receive a request to this effect from your President."

President Nixon and Prince Sihanouk exchanged several letters, although President Nixon's initial correspondence was not to the liking of the Cambodian prince. In his book, Neil Manton, highlights coverage by a local French-language newspaper titled "Cambodge" of a press conference held by Prince Sihanouk. In this press conference, Prince Sihanouk's discontent was clear. The article read:

*"(Sihanouk) revealed that there was indeed a letter by President Nixon, a friendly letter that contained nothing special, above all, not a word about the recognition of our frontiers. However this point is essential for us. Talk about subtlety! The Americans asked us not to publish this letter. The question arises then whether the Americans are sincere when they express their friendship towards Cambodia. We want the recognition of our frontiers by the Americans, not their respect, because they have never respected them.*

*Cambodia asks for nothing less. The Americans murder us, commit aggression against us, our attitude remains dignified. We are ready to free the four American soldiers, who are treated less as prisoners than as State guests, on the sole condition that a friendly letter is sent by President Nixon to (Sihanouk). We intend to win this morale battle."*

President Nixon went on to send several letters to Prince Sihanouk and on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March he expressed his "personal thanks for the favorable treatment" of the Americans, and stated: "Such a further gracious gesture, added to the kindness which your Royal Highness [...] has already displayed towards the men, would command the deepest gratitude of their families and friends." A later letter also stated that "[President Nixon ...] looked forward to a further exchange of views in the interest of furthering mutual desire for improved relations between [the] two countries." After additional letters from President Nixon, Prince Sihanouk eventually released Quin, Osburn, Pryor and Fisher into Australian custody on March 11, 1969.

Quin would later have the honor of meeting President Nixon at a Whitehouse party in 1973 after the 591 American POWs were released from the infamous Hanoi Hilton. After Quin introduced himself, President Nixon began talking about Prince Sihanouk and the details of the Americans' release. As Quin recalls the conversation:

Quin said, "Mr. President. I'm the Major who got shot down over there in Cambodia and Sihanouk was hanging on to me and trying to get an apology out of [you]. Do you remember that incident?"

And President Nixon responded, "Do I remember? Of course I remember that little S.O.B. Oh yeah, he was trying to get big stuff out of me, but he didn't get anything."

To which Quin responded, "Thank you, President, for standing your ground."

Coincidentally or not, six days after negotiating the release of Quin and the others, on March 18, 1969, President Nixon ordered the secret bombings of Cambodia, later known as Operation Menu. President Nixon kept these bombings secret from not only the American people, but also from Congress. They were only brought to light after a New York Times reporter broke the story in May of the same year. During Operation Menu, B-52s targeted communist forces and supply routes in Cambodia in an effort to strengthen Southern Vietnamese

Forces as U.S. Forces began to gradually draw down. The Public Broadcast Station reports that 540,000 tons of bombs were dropped in Cambodia, killing anywhere from 150,000 to 500,000 civilians.

Once released to the Australians, Quin and the others began the long journey home. Their story made the front page of newspapers around the world. More than 30 days after his initial capture by the Vietcong, Quin sent a post card to his family that read:

*"Hi Jo & Kids –*

*Your Dad is coming home finally and will beat this for sure. Couldn't be happier.*

*[...]*

*Love, Daddy"*

Against all odds, Quin had survived and he was coming home. They were all coming home.

Quin was later awarded the Silver Star for his bravery and heroic actions. He went on to serve his country for another 16 years, retiring in 1985 as a Colonel after 30 years of service. Currently living in Augusta, GA, at the age of 85, Quin is still involved with veterans and POW programs and is a frequent guest speaker at events. Quin is humble about his time as a prisoner of war, always acknowledging the men held for months or years in worse conditions and always remembering the fallen soldiers who never made it home.

The below photos were provided courtesy of the personal library of Querin Herlik.



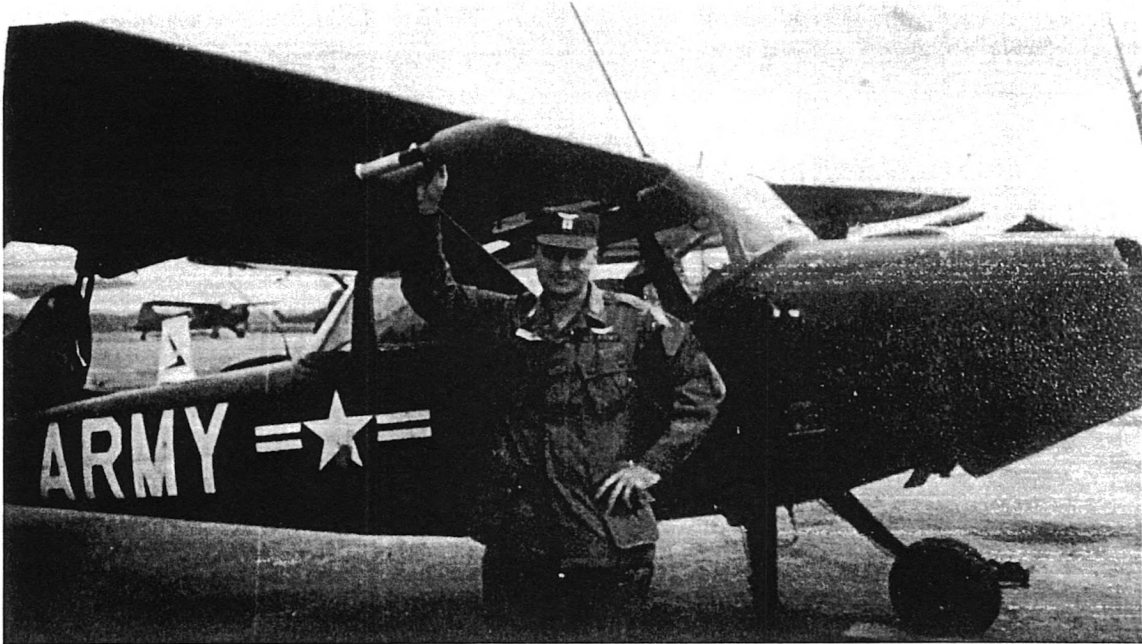
Pilot Herlik at the controls of a U6-A Beaver aircraft.



A Catholic priest preparing to say mass in the A Shau Valley in 1964. Quin often flew priests to this valley on Sunday mornings.



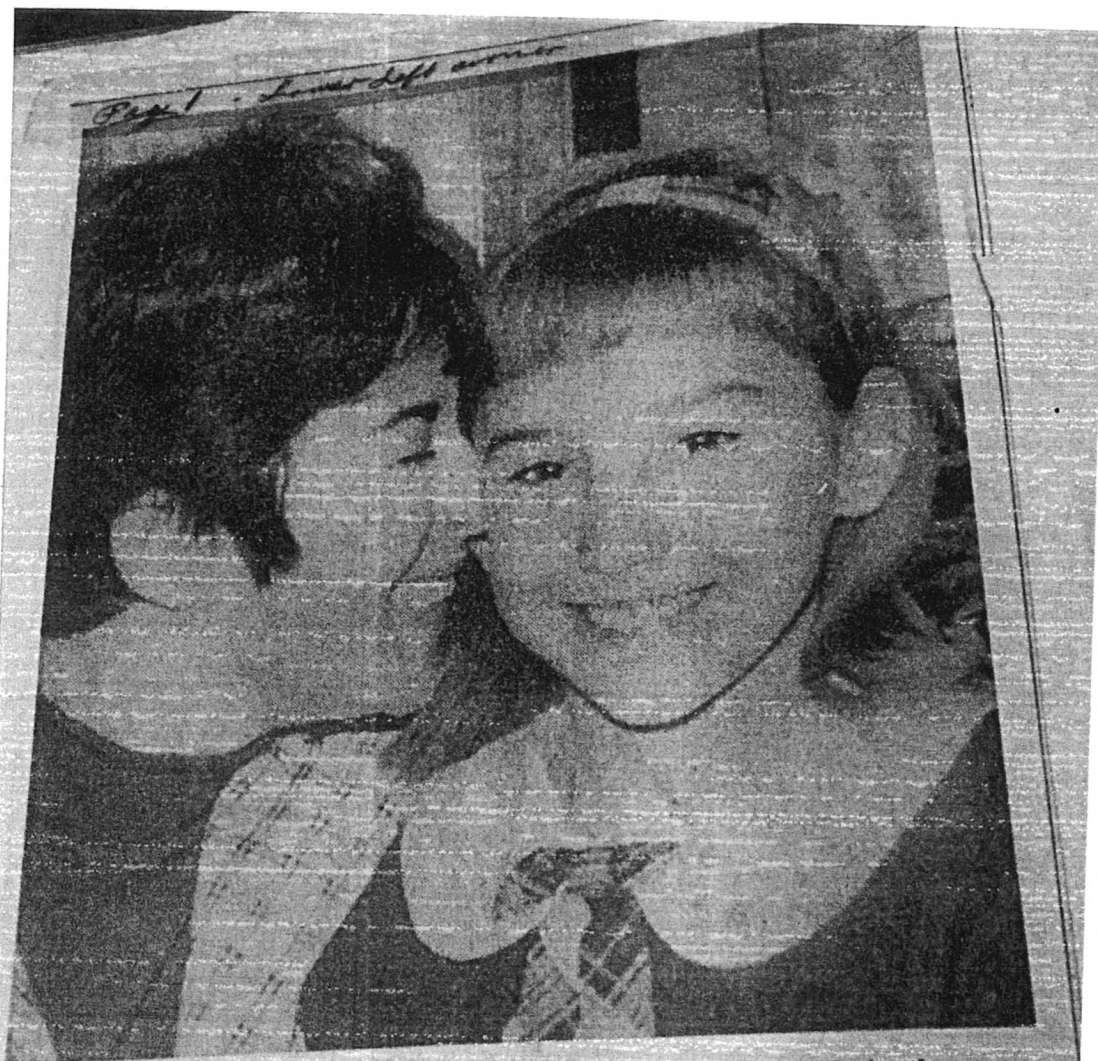
Quin and his crew were shot down in over Vietnam in February 1969 in a UI-A Otter aircraft similar to this one.



Quin standing beside an L-19 reconnaissance airplane armed with 2.75mm rockets used to mark targets for the bombers.



Cambodian photo and Quin and his two sergeants taken shortly after the Vietcong handed them over to Cambodian authorities.



Good News — Mrs. Querin Herlik, whose husband was one of four men released from a Cambodian prison Wednesday, nuzzles her daughter Anna Marie, 9, at their Savannah, Ga., home after talking with him by

telephone. Mrs. Herlik is the former Mary Jo Lemerond of De Pere while her husband is a native of Green Bay. His parents now live in Eagle River.

(AP Wirephoto)

GREEN BAY, WIS., THURSDAY EVENING, MARCH 13, 1969

Published in many newspapers, the above Associated Press photo shows Mary Jo Herlik and her daughter Anna upon hearing the news of Quin's release.





Major General Underwood awarded Quin the Silver Star in Colorado Springs, Colorado in 1969 for his actions against the Vietcong.