

SUN LIFE

MARCH 2017

Military Memories

*West Valley veteran looks
back on wartime experience*

Tax Help • Art Exhibit • Local Entertainment • Financial Information

On the cover



Dwight Sullivan, with his wife, Ada. Mr. Sullivan is a retired Air Force colonel and fighter pilot, who endured 5.5 years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

Photo by **Matt Roy**

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Players present 'Bag Full of Miracles'

The Sun City Players Community Theater presents "A Bag Full of Miracles," a musical written by Tom Northam, who also did the music and lyrics, opening 7 p.m. March 17 at the Mountain View Recreation Center, 9749 N. 107th Ave.

Performances are 2 p.m. Sunday and 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday during the play's first week, then 2 p.m. Sunday and Thursday and 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday for its second week.

Tickets are available at Sun-CityPlayersCommunityTheater.org, in person 10 a.m.-noon Monday-Thursday, March 13-16 and March 20-23 at the Fairway Center, 10600 W. Peoria Ave., and at the door one hour before curtain.



In front are Annette See and Jim McConnell; in back are Dan See, Ginni Summers and Patty Mason.

Local hero recalls military career, captivity in North Vietnam

Story by **Matt Roy**

After an afternoon of tests and treatment at Mayo Clinic in Phoenix, Dwight Sullivan comes home to Sun City West, where amongst the sun-dappled lilac vines of his back patio he sips a tall glass of water and gently grips the hand of Ada, his wife of more than 40 years.

For the retired Air Force colonel and fighter pilot, who endured 5.5 years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, there is little he takes for granted. Coming home is always special.

When the distant screech of an F-35 Lightning II interrupts the conversation, the decorated fighter pilot and Vietnam veteran scans the sky. Does he wish he was piloting that jet high above the West Valley today?

"Oh, Yes," the soft-spoken veteran said with a spreading grin, recalling his military career and the long, sometimes tragic path that eventually led the Sullivans to their Sun City West home.

Growing up on the farm in the 1930s and 1940s, he said he learned one thing for certain by the time he graduated from Corydon High School near his hometown of Chariton, Iowa.

"I knew I didn't want to be a farmer," Mr. Sullivan said.

He enrolled at Simpson College, a small liberal arts school in Indianola, Iowa, where he was working on a business degree when war broke out for the second time during his 20-year life, this time in Korea. He enlisted in the Air Force and entered the Aviation Cadet Program, where he received his commission and navigator wings as a crew member of a B-25 Mitchell bomber in 1954. But by then, the war was over.

He graduated from pilot training school in 1958, before completing numerous tours of duty across America, piloting the F-86 Sabre and F-101 Voodoo fighters across the skies above Illinois, Michigan, Montana, California and Maine.

By the time he landed at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base north of Bangkok in June 1967, he was flying the F-105



Maj. Dwight E. Sullivan poses with his F-105 Thunderchief at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base north of Bangkok, Thailand in June 1967. [Submitted photo]

Thunderchief and had been promoted to major, just in time to join the fray in North Vietnam.

Unlike the fighters he had flown before, which were primarily used for air-to-air combat, the F-105 was a fighter-bomber. Nicknamed "Thud" or "Lead Sled" by its drivers, it was capable of air-to-air combat as well, but was

used largely in Vietnam for dangerous ground attack and bombing missions.

In Vietnam, the newly minted Maj. Sullivan was a wing commander, leading sorties of fighter-bombers on daily and sometimes twice-daily missions over North Vietnam. By travelling over sea and entering the country near its border with China, the sorties avoid-

ed some of the dense anti-aircraft fire around Hanoi.

"So, we would take off in twos and head out over the Gulf of Tonkin," Mr. Sullivan said. "We would join up with tankers heading north and then head back inland on our bombing missions."

It was a relatively safe flight.

"Most of the time, we didn't see much flak," he added.

By October, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and had led more than 70 missions over enemy territory. He was well on his way to completing the 100 sorties required to get back home to his wife and five children in California. But on Oct. 17, 1967, mission number 73 did not go as planned.

"On this particular day, we went in with 16 aircraft to the target. Going in two at a time, they would be dropping their bombs following my lead," Mr. Sullivan said. "Then we would roll out in twos and leave. But I dropped mine and after that didn't get far."

As Mr. Sullivan streaked away from the target in a steeply banking turn, his wing man should have maneuvered beneath his aircraft as they moved

"We weren't going to give them the satisfaction ... We marched out with our heads held high."

— Dwight Sullivan

left. But he instead collided with Mr. Sullivan's aircraft at about 6,000 feet above the ground. Both pilots ejected safely, still near the target they had just bombed and far behind enemy lines.

"It wasn't bad except when I deployed the chute and was coming down. I could see them all waiting for me and they were on me before I hit the ground. I landed in a rice paddy," he explained. "When I bailed out I got down close to the ground and I rolled and said, 'wow, that was a good one.'"

Mr. Sullivan was aware of his coming fate.

"I knew there wouldn't be a rescue. I was too far in. They never did shoot at me, though," he added. "The dog tags were the first thing to go. They just took them from us."

Mr. Sullivan was eventually moved to a prison camp near Hanoi, one of 196 captured servicemen who would

remain there for the rest of war.

Treatment at the camp, which the American inmates named Zoo, was strict and often cruel. They were bound with manacles so tight that movement and blood flow were constricted, causing great pain and atrophy.

"It caused nerve damage and I couldn't rotate my hands sometimes for six months," he said, gesturing with hands outstretched like ragged claws.

Even today, after 50 years, he still feels numbness in his fingertips.

Their captors tortured the prisoners, first in an attempt to garner intelligence, but later for the sole seeming purpose of breaking them down, which they did efficiently, Mr. Sullivan said.

"They loved to torture," he said. "But I didn't know anything about what the next target was and so forth."

The guards demanded polite submission and infractions were dealt with

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harshly. Living two to a cell, inmates were only released from their cramped confines about 15 minutes per day to dump a bucket of water over their heads. Among other games, Mr. Sullivan and his bunkmate would walk in a tight circle, round and round their tiny cell to while away the day and keep their wits.

The POWs sent each other coded messages, some tapping away while others pressed ears tightly to impossibly thick jail cell walls. As they communicated sometimes constantly between the cells, they took care to avoid notice and the severe punishment, which was assured if found out.

"I spent a lot of time down on the floor looking out from the crack beneath the door, watching for the guards' feet to appear," he said.

As the years passed, the cruelty diminished somewhat and life in the camps settled into a routine, if never comfortable, lifestyle. They were rarely fed well, but were consistently provided a diet of mostly rice, which they sifted through to remove grit and pebbles sometimes found in it. Occasionally, they had sweet potatoes. But it would typically be the same thing every day for three or more months at a time.

There were some surprises on the menu, however.

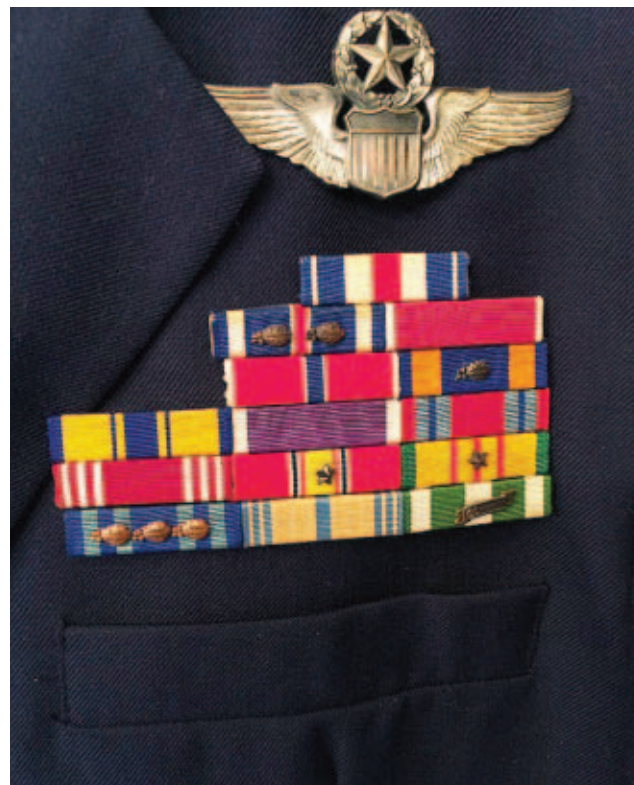
"They cooked us turkey at Thanksgiving and Christmas every year," Mr. Sullivan said.

Over the course of his captivity, only five letters reached him from his wife back home. One of them contained a coded message: "The crocuses you planted in the spring have bloomed early."

With that cryptic horticultural tidbit, Mr. Sullivan learned he had been promoted again, despite his captivity.

"I was promoted from lieutenant colonel to full bird colonel," he said.

In March 1973, after more than five years in enemy hands, the prisoners were taken from Camp Zoo to waiting trucks, which drove them to an airfield. At first glimpse of the idling U.S. Air Force cargo planes, they instantly knew they would finally be going home. But as they moved from the



During his 27-year Air Force career, Col. Dwight E. Sullivan received numerous awards and citations, including two Silver Stars, two Legion of Merit medals, two Bronze Stars, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, seven Air Medals, three Air Force Commendation medals and two Purple Hearts. [Submitted photo/Ada Sullivan]

trucks, they formed up and marched across the tarmac with the disciplined, if weary, step of professional soldiers.

"We weren't going to give them the satisfaction," Mr. Sullivan said with a chuckle. "We marched out with our heads held high."

As he boarded the plane for home, he saluted and called out, "Colonel Sullivan, returning to duty."

He returned stateside weak and worn, but in generally good health. His physical on release showed no problems, apart from a stomach ulcer. But within a year, Mr. Sullivan was divorced from his first wife — it just did not work out. But soon he met the woman who would become the love of his life.

Ada Thompson Vipond, a Minnesota girl whose Air Force pilot first husband had also had been a POW in Vietnam, was widowed and raising her three children alone in Texas. When "Sully" met her at a POW event, it just seemed right.

"We knew all the same friends and we'd both had tragedies in our lives," Mr. Sullivan said. "We met in February. We married in June."

Together, they raised their blended family of eight, with six sons and two daughters, ages six to 16.

Mr. Sullivan

retired from the Air Force in 1978, as a colonel after 27 years of service. During his stint, he was awarded two Silver Stars, two Legion of Merit medals, two Bronze Stars, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, seven Air Medals, three Air Force Commendation medals and two Purple Hearts.

Following his retirement from a second, safer career in 1987 — this time as general manager of a beer distributor — Mr. Sullivan accompanied his wife to England, where they lived for a few years while she worked as a teacher on contract for the Department of Defense.

A decade later, they made their way to Sun City West.

Today, she takes him to frequent medical visits and participates in the Genealogical Society and other clubs. The Sullivans love their community and enjoy frequent visits from family, including 14 grandchildren and a dozen great-grandchildren.

Standing on the back patio, Mr. Sullivan drapes an arm across Ada's shoulder in the fading evening light. She turns her smile up to him, happy at home with her hero.

"He is my rock," she said.