

“SIJAN! My Name Is Lance Peter Sijan!”

Lt Col Fred A. Meurer

The colonel, recalling the tragic events of almost nine years earlier, had been talking for more than an hour about the heroic ordeal of Capt Lance Sijan, his cellmate in North Vietnam. Reaching the point in his chronology when Captain Sijan, calling out helplessly for his father, was taken away by his captors to die, Col Bob Craner's voice broke ever so slightly and tears glistened in his eyes. He agreed to a break in the interview.

“Okay, Mom, you can come back in now!”

The voice, coming from a tape recorder that day in early November 1967, gave immense pleasure to Mr. and Mrs. Sylvester Sijan (pronounced sigh-john), just as it had so many times for more than 25 years. It was especially meaningful now, coming from Da Nang AB, Vietnam. Capt Lance Sijan had done his Christmas shopping early and, separated by half a world, was having some mischievous fun with his family.

Sitting in the living room of the comfortable two-story house in Milwaukee this past January, Mrs. Jane Sijan tenderly related the tale of her son's tape. Across the street, snow was crusted on the park that gently slopes into Lake Michigan. Flames danced in the fireplace as Sylvester Sijan busily prepared to show movies of Lance's graduation from the Air Force Academy in 1965.

Everywhere was memorabilia of Lance and his brother, Marc, younger by five years, and his sister, Janine, 13 years Lance's junior. An oil painting bathed in soft neon light on one wall showed Lance in his academy uniform, smiling out into the room.

Along the staircase hung dozens of photos of the Sijans, their children, relatives, and friends. Football pictures of Lance and Marc abounded, for football is a tradition with the Sijans. Lance's Bay View High School team won the city championship in 1959, the first time Bay View had turned the trick since 1936, when Lance's father played on the team.

Family heirlooms, souvenirs from faraway places, and trophies dominated mantels and shelves. The most significant showpiece, however, was enshrined in a glass case. Resplendent with its accompanying baby-blue ribbon dotted with tiny white stars was Capt Lance Sijan's Medal of Honor.

It had been awarded posthumously.

Jane Sijan—attractive and darkhaired, her Irish heritage smiling through—continued her story of the tape from Vietnam.

Lance made us individually leave the room as he described the presents he had gotten for us. He'd say, “Mom, leave the room,” and then he'd tell everybody what he had for me. Then he'd yell for me to come back in, and he'd send someone else out.

Those Christmas presents were not opened that year, nor for several years thereafter. On 9 November 1967 Capt Lance Sijan was shot down over North Vietnam. For years no one at home knew his fate. The box of Christmas presents was added to his personal effects, and not until his body was returned to Milwaukee some seven years later did his family sort through his belongings.

On 4 March 1976 President Gerald R. Ford awarded the Medal of Honor to Captain Sijan for his “extraordinary heroism and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty at the cost of his life. . . .”

R&R in Bangkok, Thailand, had been nostalgic for Lance Sijan. He told his family in a tape from the country once known as Siam that his drama teacher at Bay View High—where Sijan had been president of the Student Government Association and received the Gold Medal Award for outstanding leadership, achievement, and service—would have been impressed.

As a sophomore, according to his mother, Lance had competed against seniors for the lead singing role in the production of “The King and I,” whose setting was Siam. Competition raged for six weeks, consuming Lance's energy and concern.

“One day,” said Mrs. Sijan, “he walked in and said, ‘I'd like to speak to the Queen Mother.’ ” I knew he had the part.

There were 21 children in the cast and Sijan needed one special little princess. He and Marc had always doted over their sister, Janine, even to the point of arguing who would feed her, as an infant, in the middle of the night. Lance asked Janine, then not quite four years old, to be his daughter in the play.

Occasionally, the family listens to a recording of the play, Lance's rich voice sing-talking the role of the Siamese king that Yul Brynner made famous.

Sijan flew his first post-R&R mission on 9 November 1967 in the backseat of an F-4 piloted by Col John W. Armstrong, commander of the 366th Tactical Fighter Squadron. On a bombing pass over North Vietnam near Laos, their aircraft

was hit and exploded. Colonel Armstrong was never heard from again. Captain Sijan, plummeting to the ground after a low-level bailout, suffered a skull fracture, a mangled right hand with three fingers bent backwards to the wrist, and a compound fracture of his left leg, the bone protruding through the lacerated skin.

The ordeal of Lance Sijan—big, strong, tough, handsome, a football player at the Air Force Academy, remembered as a fierce competitor by those who knew him—had begun.

He would live in the North Vietnamese jungle with no food and little water for some 45 days. Virtually immobilized, he would propel himself backwards on his elbows and buttocks toward what he hoped was freedom. He was alone. He would be joined later with two other Americans, and in short, fading in-and-out periods of consciousness and lucidity, would tell them his story.

Now, however, there was hope for Sijan. Aircraft circled and darted overhead, part of a gigantic search and rescue effort launched to recover him and Colonel Armstrong. Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service histories state that 108 aircraft participated the first two days, and 14 more on the third when no additional contact was made with Sijan, known to those above as “AWOL 1.”

Contact had been made earlier, and the answer to the authenticating question, “Who is the greatest football team in the world?” came easily from the Wisconsin native. “The Green Bay Packers,” Sijan replied. In continuing voice contacts, “the survivor was talking louder and faster,” the history notes. “AWOL did not know what happened to the frontseater.”

The rescue force, meanwhile, was taking “ground fire from all directions” and was “worried about all the [friendly] fire hitting the survivor.” Finally, Jolly Green 15, an HH-3E helicopter, picked up a transmission from the ground: “I see you, I see you. Stay where you are, I’m coming to you!”

For 33 minutes, Jolly Green Giant 15 hovered over the jungle, eyes aboard searching the dense foliage below for movement. Bullets began piercing the fuselage, a few at first then more and more. Getting no more voice contact from the ground and under a withering hail of fire, Jolly Green 15 finally left the area.

Rescue efforts the next day and electronic surveillance in the days that followed turned up no more contacts, and the search for “AWOL” was called off.

One A-1E aircraft was shot down in the effort—the pilot was rescued—and several helicopters crewmen were wounded.

“If AWOL,” the report said, “only had some kind of signaling device—mirror, flare, etc.—pick-up would have been successful. The rescue of this survivor was not in the hands of man.”

Much later, a battered Sijan was to ask his American cellmates, “What did I do wrong? Why didn’t I get picked up?” He told them he had lost his survival kit.

On that November day, except for enemy forces all around, Sijan was alone again. Although desperately in need of food, water, and medical attention, he somehow evaded the enemy

and capture as he painfully, day by day, dragged himself along the ground—toward, he hoped, freedom.

But it was not to be.

Former Capt Guy Gruters, who was to be one of Sijan’s cellmates later, told *Airman*:

He said he’d go for two or three days and nights—as long as he possibly could—and then he’d be exhausted and sleep. As soon as he’d wake up he’d start again, always traveling east. You’re talking 45 days now without food, and it was a max effort!

Col Bob Craner, the older cellmate in Hanoi, picked up the story:

“When he couldn’t drag himself anymore and said, ‘This is the end,’ he saw he was on a dirt road. He lay there for a day, maybe, until a truck came along and they picked him up.”

Incredibly, after a month and a half of clawing, clutching, dragging, and hurting, Sijan was found three miles from where he had initially parachuted into the jungle.

Horribly emaciated and with the flesh on his buttocks worn to his hipbones, Lance Sijan still had some fight left.

“He said they took him to a place where they laid him on a mat and gave him some food.” Craner related, “he said he waited until he felt he was getting a little stronger. When there was just one guard there, Sijan beckoned him over. When the guy bent over to see what was the matter, Sijan told me, ‘I just let him have it. Wham!’”

With the guard unconscious from a well-placed karate chop from a wakened left arm and hand, Sijan pulled himself back into the jungle. “He thought he was making it,” Craner said, “but they found him after a couple of hours.”

Once again Sijan had been robbed of precious freedom. Once again he was down, but—as other North Vietnamese were to learn—by no means out.

Sijan’s obsession with freedom had manifested itself much earlier, and rather uniquely, at the Air Force Academy. His arts instructor, Col Carlin J. Kielcheski, remembers Sijan well.

“He had the crusty cadence of a football player, yet he was very sensitive. I was particularly interested in those guys who broke the image of the typical artist.”

Colonel Kielcheski still has the “Humanities 499” paper Sijan submitted with his two-foot wooden sculpture of a female dancer. Sijan wrote:

I feel that the female figure is one of nature’s purest forms. I want this statue to represent the quest for freedom by the lack of any restraining devices or objects. The theme of my sculpture is just that—a quest for freedom, an escape from the complexities of the world around us.

Colonel Kielcheski chuckled, “Here was this bruiser of a football player coming up with these delicate kinds of things. He was not content to do what the other cadets did. He was very persistent and not satisfied with doing just any kind of job. He wanted to do it right and showed real tenacity to stick to a problem.”

Others remember other aspects of Sijan’s character. His roommate for three years, Mike Smith of Denver, said Sijan was “probably the toughest guy mentally I’ve ever met.”

Sijan was a substitute end on the football team, Smith said. Football, he thought, hindered Sijan's academics, and his concern over grades conversely affected his performance and chances for stardom on the gridiron.

He had a lot of things going and tried to keep them all going. He came in from football practice dead tired. He'd sleep for an hour or two after dinner and then study until 1 or 2 in the morning. He knew he had to give up a lot to play football, but he had the determination to do it.

Sijan did give up football his senior year. But one thing he did not sacrifice for studies was the company of young women.

"They found him very attractive, and he had no trouble getting dates," said Smith. "He was a big, handsome guy with a good sense of humor."

Maj Joe Kolek, who roomed with Sijan one semester, agreed. In fact, he said, "it was pretty neat now and then to get Lance's castoffs."

Smith recalls that he and Sijan talked sometimes about the Code of Conduct, which was to test Sijan's character so severely fewer than three years later.

"We found nothing wrong with the Code. We accepted the responsibility of action honorable to our country. It was strictly an extension of Lance's personality. When he accepted something, he accepted it. He did nothing halfway."

"It seemed," Smith said, "that there was always a reservoir of strength he got from his family."

Sylvester Sijan, whose character and physique bear a striking resemblance to a middle-aged Jack Dempsey, owns the Barrel Head Grille in Milwaukee. Built into an inside wall is a mock four-foot-round beer barrel top, a splendid wood-work fashioned by the elder Sijan from an oak table. A wooden shingle on the polished oak bears the engraved inscription, "Tradition."

Sijan's forefathers immigrated from Serbia, a separate country prior to World War I that later became part of Yugoslavia.

"Serbians have been noted for their heroic actions in circumstances where they were outnumbered," Mr. Sijan said. "They were vicious fighters on a one-to-one or a one-to-fifty basis, so they have a history of instinct and drive."

He thinks a mixture of that tradition, his son's love for his home and his competitive spirit spurred him through the odyssey in Vietnam.

"What made Lance do what he did? One thing, for sure. He always wanted to come home, no matter where he was. He was going to come home whether it was in pieces or as a hero."

A person never knows how competitive he really is until he comes up against the ultimate situation. He could have been less courageous; he could have retreated into the ranks of the North Vietnamese and said, "Here I am, take care of me." But he chose to go the other way. He probably never doubted that somehow, somewhere he'd get out.

Lance Sijan had wondered about his ultimate fate even before leaving for Vietnam, according to Mike Smith. In the Air Force at the time and stationed at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, Smith enjoyed a visit from Sijan who was on leave prior to going overseas.

I sensed a foreboding in him and he and I dealt with the issue of not coming back," Smith said. "I remember it distinctly because I talked with my wife about our conversation. I felt he had a premonition that he might not return."

Mrs. Jane Sijan, too, sensed something. In Milwaukee prior to leaving, Lance asked her to sew two extra pockets into his flight suit, and he took great pains coating matches with wax.

"One night he was sitting on his bed," she recalled. "He was sewing razor blades into his undershirts so he would have them if he was ever shot down."

Sijan had been on the ground for 41 days when Col Bob Craner and Capt Guy Gruters took off from Phu Cat AB in their F-100 on 20 December 1967. Col Craner is now in Germany and Gruters is out of the service and living in Tampa.

Pinpointing targets in North Vietnam from the *Misty* forward air control jet fighter, they were hit by ground fire and ejected. Both were captured and brought to a holding point in Vinh, where they were thrust into bamboo cells and chained.

Reaching back into his memory, crowded with recollections of more than five years as a prisoner of war, Craner told the story:

As best as I can recall, it was New Year's Day of 1968 when they brought this guy in at night. The Rodent came into the guy's cell next to mine and began his interrogation. It was clearly audible.

He was on this guy for military information, and the responses I heard indicated he was in very, very bad shape. His voice was very weak. It sounded to me as though he wasn't going to make it.

The Rodent would say, "Your arm, your arm, it is very bad. I am going to twist it unless you tell me." The guy would say, "I'm not going to tell you; it's against the code." Then he would start screaming. The Rodent was obviously twisting his mangled arm.

The whole affair went on for an hour and a half, over and over again, and the guy just wouldn't give in. He'd say, "Wait till I get better, you S.O.B., you're really going to get it." He was giving the Rodent all kinds of lip but no information.

"The Rodent kept laying into him. Finally I heard this guy rasp, "Sijan! My name is Lance Peter Sijan!" That's all he told him.

Guy Gruters, also an Air Force Academy graduate but a year senior to Sijan, was in a cell down the hall and did not know the identity of the third captive. He does recall that "the guy was apparently always trying to push his way out of the bamboo cell, and they'd beat him with a stick to get him back. We could hear the cracks."

After several days, when the North Vietnamese were ready to transport the Americans to Hanoi, Gruters and Craner were taken to Sijan's cell to help him to the truck.

"When I got a look at the poor devil, I retched," said Craner. "He was so thin and every bone in his body was visible. Maybe 20 percent of his body wasn't open sores or open flesh. Both hipbones were exposed where the flesh had been worn away."

Gruters recalled that “he looked like a little guy. But then when we picked him up, I remember commenting to Bob, ‘This is one big sonofagun.’”

While they were moving him, Craner related, “Sijan looked up and said, ‘You’re Guy Gruters, aren’t you?’ Gruters asked him how he knew, and Sijan replied, ‘We were at the Academy together. Don’t you know me? I’m Lance Sijan.’ Guy went into shock. He said, ‘My God, Lance, that’s not you!’”

“I have never had my heart broken like that,” said Gruters, who remembered Sijan as a 220-pound football player at the academy. “He had no muscle left and looked so helpless.”

Craner said Sijan never gave up on the idea of escape in all the days they were together. “In fact, that was one of the first things he mentioned when we first went into his cell at Vinh: ‘How the hell are we going to get out of here? Have you guys figured out how we’re going to take care of these people? Do you think we can steal one of their guns?’”

“He had to struggle to get each word out,” Craner said. “It was very, very intense on his part that the only direction he was planning was escape. That’s all that was on his mind. Even later, he kept dwelling on the fact that he’d made it once and he was going to make it again.”

Craner remembers the Rodent coming up to them and, in a mocking voice, he paraphrased the Rodent’s message:

“Sijan a very difficult man. He struck a guard and injured him. He ran away from us. You must not let him do that anymore.”

“I never questioned the fact that Lance would make it,” said Gruters. “Now that he had help, I thought he’d come back. He had passed his low.”

The grueling truck ride to Hanoi took several days. Sijan—“in and out of consciousness, lucid for 15 seconds sometimes and sometimes an hour, but garbled and incoherent a lot,” according to Craner—told the story of his 45-day ordeal in the jungle while the trio was kept under a canvas cover during the day.

The truck ride over rough roads at night, with the Americans constantly bouncing 18 inches up and down in the back was torture itself. Craner and Gruters took turns struggling to keep an unsecured 55-gallon drum of gasoline from smashing them while the other cradled Sijan between his legs and cushioned his head against the stomach.

“I thought he had died at one point in the trip” said Craner. “I looked at Guy and said, ‘He’s dead.’ Guy started massaging his face and neck trying to bring him around. Nothing.

I sat there holding him for about two hours, and when he just came around. I said, ‘Okay, buddy, my hat’s off to you.’”

Finally reaching Hanoi, the three were put into a cell in “Little Vegas.” Craner described the conditions:

It was dank, with open air, and there was a pool of water on the worn cement floor. It was the first time I suffered from the cold. I was chilled to the bone, always shivering and shaking. Guy and I started getting respiratory problems right away, and I couldn’t imagine what it was doing to Lance. That, I think, accounts ultimately for the fact that he didn’t make it.

“Lance was always as little of a hindrance to us as he could be,” said Gruters. “He could have asked for help any

one of a hundred thousand times, but he never asked for a damned thing! There was no way Bob and I could feel sorry for ourselves.”

Craner said a Vietnamese medic gave Sijan shots of yellow fluid, which he thought were antibiotics. The medic did nothing for Sijan’s open sores and wounds, and when he looked at Sijan’s mangled hand, “he just shook his head.”

The medic later inserted an intravenous tube into Sijan’s arm, but Sijan, fascinated with it in his subconscious haze, pulled it out several times. Thus, Craner and Gruters took turns staying awake with him at night.

“One night,” Craner said, “a guard opened the little the door and looked in, and there was Lance beckoning to the guard. It was the same motion he told me he had made to the guy in the jungle, and I could just see what was going through the back reaches of his mind: ‘If I can that guy close enough’”

Craner remembers that Sijan once asked them to help him exercise so he could build up his strength for another escape attempt. “We got him propped up on his cot and waved his arms around a few times, and that satisfied him. Then he was exhausted. “

At another point, Sijan became lucid enough to ask Craner, “How about going out and getting me a burger and french fries?”

But Sijan’s injuries and now the respiratory problems sapped his strength. “First he could only whisper a word, and then it got down to blinking out letters with his eyes,” said Gruters. “Finally he couldn’t do that anymore, even a yes or no.”

With tears glistening, Bob Craner remembered when it all came to an end. They had been in Hanoi about eight days.

One night Lance started making strangling sounds, and we got him to sit up. Then, for the first time since we’d been together, his voice came through loud and clear. He said, “Oh my God, it’s over,” and then he started yelling for his father. He’d shout, “Dad, Dad where are you? Come here, I need you!”

I knew he was sinking fast. I started beating on the walls, trying to call the guards, hoping they’d take him to a hospital. They came in and took him out. As best as I could figure it was 21 January.

“He had never asked for his dad before,” said Gruters, and that was the first time he’d talked in four or five days. It was the first time I saw him display any emotion. It was absolutely his last strength. It was the last time we saw him.”

A few days later, Craner met the camp commander in the courtyard while returning from a bathhouse and asked him where Sijan was.

“Sijan spend too long in the jungle,” came the reply. “Sijan die.”

Guy Gruters talked some more about Sijan:

“He was a tremendously strong, tough, physical human being. I *never* heard Lance complain. If you had an army of Sijans, you’d have an incredible fighting force.”

Said Craner:

Lance never talked about pain. He’d yell out in pain sometimes, but he’d never dwell on it, like, “Damn, that hurts.”

Lance was so full of drive whenever he was lucid. There was never any question of, "I hurt so much that I'd rather be dead." It was always positive for him, pointed mainly toward escape but always toward the future.

Craner recommended Sijan for the Medal of Honor. Why?

He survived a terrible ordeal, and he survived with the intent, sometime in the future, of picking up the fight. Finally he just succumbed.

There is no way you can instill that kind of performance in an individual. I don't know how many we're turning out like Lance Sijan, but I can't believe there are very many.

In Milwaukee, Sylvester Sijan started to bring up the point, and then he hesitated. He finally did, though, and then he talked about it unabashedly.

I remember one day in January, about the same time that year, driving down the expressway. I was feeling despondent, and I began screaming as loud as I could, things like, "Lance, where are you?" I may have murmured such things to myself before, but I never yelled as loud as I did that day.

He wonders if maybe—just maybe—it may have been at time Lance was calling for him in Hanoi.

"The realization that Lance's final thoughts were what they were makes me feel most humble, most penitent, and yet somehow profoundly honored," he said.

Mr. Sijan still wears a POW bracelet with Lance's name on it. "I just can't take it off," he said, adding that "not too many people realize its significance anymore."

Though Lance was declared missing in action, and though one package they sent to him in Hanoi came back stamped "deceased"—"which jarred me terribly," Mrs. Sijan said—the family never gave up hope.

I'm such an optimist," said Jane Sijan. "I even watched all the prisoners get off the planes on television [in 1973] hoping there had been some mistake."

Lance's body, along with the headstone used to mark his grave in North Vietnam, was returned to the United States in 1974 for interment in Milwaukee (23 other bodies were returned to the US at the same time). At a memorial service in Bay View High School, the family announced the Capt Lance Peter Sijan Memorial Scholarship Fund.

It is a \$500 scholarship presented yearly to a graduate male student best exemplifying Lance's example of the American boy," said Mrs. Sijan. "It will be a lifetime effort on our behalf and will be carried on by our children."

Lance Sijan, US Air Force Academy class of 1965, would be 35 years old now. He is the first academy graduate to be awarded the Medal of Honor. A dormitory at the academy was recently named Sijan Hall in his honor.

"The man represented something," Sylvester Sijan said of his son. "The old cliché that he was a hero and represented guts and determination is true. That's what he really represented. How much of that was really Lance? What he is, what he did, the facts are there."

We'll never adjust to it," Sijan said. "People say, 'It's been a long time ago and you should be okay now,' but it stays with you and well it should."

Lance was always such a pleasure; he was an ideal son, but then all our children are a joy and blessing to us," said Jane Sijan. "It still hurts to talk about it, but I have certainly accepted it. I'm a very patient woman, and I wait for the day our family will all be together again, that's all."

On 4 March 1976 three other former prisoners of war, all living, also received Medals of Honor from President Ford. One of them was Air Force Col George E. "Bud" Day ("All Day's Tomorrows," *Airman*, November 1976). Col Day recently wrote to *Airman*:

Lance was the epitome of dedication, right to death! When people ask about what kind of kids we should start with, the answer is straight, honest kids like him. They will not all stay that way—but by God, that's the minimum to start with.

