

Lance Sijan's Incredible Journey

Alone in enemy territory with no food or water and unable to walk, Capt. Lance Sijan refused to give up.

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ON the night of November 9, 1967, Lt. Col. John Armstrong, Commander of the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing's 480th Squadron based at Danang, rolled his F-4 into a bomb run. The target was Ban Loboy ford on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. In the backseat was twenty-five-year-old Capt. Lance Sijan, flying his fifty-third combat mission.

Colonel Armstrong pickled his six bombs at 2039 hours. Almost immediately, the aircraft was engulfed in a ball of fire as the bombs detonated a few feet below the F-4. Neither the FAC controlling the mission nor Armstrong's wingman saw chutes. But there was one chute. Captain Sijan ejected and was drifting toward a flat-topped, heavily forested karst formation. For Sijan, recollection stopped as the 195-pound Captain crashed into the towering trees.

Sometime the next day, Sijan regained consciousness in a haze of pain. He had suffered a compound fracture of the left leg, a crushed right hand, head injuries, and deep lacerations. Most of his survival gear was gone. He tended the broken leg as best he could, then lapsed again into unconsciousness.

The following morning, a flight of F-4s picked up the sound of Sijan's beeper, and a search-and-rescue operation got under way. Throughout the day, Sijan maintained contact with the rescue force, but several attempted pickups were thwarted

by NVA gunners. At 1700 hours, a Jolly Green chopper made it in directly over Sijan. In a desperate attempt to crawl through tangled vines to the chopper's penetrator, Sijan lost contact with the rescue force. As darkness fell, the SAR operation was called off.

Early the next morning, the search resumed, but Sijan's radio batteries were depleted. Failing to make contact, the SAR team was recalled. Sijan was on his own. If he were to survive, he must make his way down the steep karst to water and an open area where he could warm the radio batteries and call in a chopper. With a crude splint on his shattered leg and only the thumb and forefinger of his right hand functioning, Lance Sijan began the most incredible journey in the history of Air Force survival efforts.

For several days, Sijan, lying on his back, pushed himself over the sharp rocks with his good right leg, a few painful inches at a time. His only source of moisture was dew licked from foliage in the mornings. There were many falls down the steep slope and periods of unconsciousness and delirium. First his clothing became shredded, then the skin on the back of his body, until he was inching along on raw flesh. At last he found water and pressed on, inch by agonizing inch.

Forty-five days after he parachuted into the forest, Lance Sijan saw ahead the open area he had been looking for. He dragged himself over a bank and fell unconscious in the middle of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, three miles from his starting point.

The young Captain regained consciousness in an NVA road camp, his formerly athletic body little more than a skeleton partially covered by transparent skin. He was given some food and water, but no medical attention. In spite of his pitiful condition, his mind focused constantly on escape. When some

strength returned, Lance Sijan overpowered a guard and dragged himself up a trail, only to be recaptured and punished.

Sijan was moved to a temporary prison near Vinh, where he was beaten severely, but refused to give any military information. The guards, who had never seen a human in such ghastly condition, refused to touch him. Sijan was put in the care of Maj. Bob Craner and Capt. Guy Gruters, an F-100 FAC crew who had been shot down near Vinh. The latter had been in Sijan's squadron at the Air Force Academy. In his lucid moments, Sijan gave them the details of his long, painful journey.

Several days later, the three were loaded on an open truck for a three-night trip to Hanoi in the chill monsoon rains. At Hoa Lo Prison, they were put in a damp cell. Sijan, who had contracted pneumonia and was near death, asked his cellmates to prop him up on his pallet so that he could exercise his arms in preparation for escape from that grim, impregnable bastion.

On January 22, 1968, Capt. Lance Sijan died. When the POWs were freed in early 1973, Craner and Gruters recorded the details of his long fight for freedom and his resistance to torture. Later, they were major sources for Malcolm McConnell's book, *Into the Mouth of the Cat*. On March 4, 1976, President Gerald Ford presented the Medal of Honor posthumously to Lance Sijan's parents, and on Memorial Day of that year, a new dormitory at the Air Force Academy was dedicated in his memory.

Lance Sijan's will to survive with honor was an inspiration to other POWs during the dark days of the Vietnam War, as it should be to all of us. He demonstrated, as few have, the almost limitless capacity of the human spirit to triumph over the depredations of fate and the malevolence of lesser men. ■