

The ordeal in the jungle didn't break him.
Neither did his North Vietnamese captors.

The Courage of Lance Sijan

By John T. Correll

IN THE fall of 1967, traffic was surging on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the lifeline by which North Vietnam sustained the war in the south. The trail ran down the western side of the Annam Mountains, through the Laotian panhandle and Cambodia, into South Vietnam.

Truck convoys departing from the supply hub at Vinh in North Vietnam gained access to the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the Mu Gia and Ban Karai Passes in the mountains. The passes were heavily defended with anti-aircraft artillery.

Traffic on the trail moved mostly at night. During daylight hours, the trucks hid under camouflage or in concealed parking areas in the jungle.

In a renewed effort to interdict the flow of troops and supplies, the Air Force, in November 1967, doubled the number of attack sorties flown against the trail. The targets included not only the truck convoys but also the choke points, like the passes.

Among the units taking part in the intensified operation was the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing, which flew the Air Force's newest fighter, the F-4C. The wing was located at Da Nang, the northernmost of the Air Force's principal bases in Vietnam.

First Lt. Lance Peter Sijan, a 25-year-old pilot from Milwaukee, had been stationed at Da Nang since July.

He graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1965 and went from there to pilot training, F-4 fighter crew training, and survival school. Da Nang was his first duty assignment.

Sijan was flying as a backseat pilot in the F-4C. He was crewed with Lt. Col. John W. Armstrong, commander of the 480th Tactical Fighter Squadron, to which Sijan was assigned. So far, he had flown 66 combat missions. He was looking to upgrade to the front seat of the F-4 before his tour was over.

Sijan was big—6 feet 2 inches, 210 pounds—and athletic. He was an all-city football player during high school in Milwaukee. He had been on the swim and track teams as well. He played two years of varsity football at the Air Force Academy.

There were other sides to Lance Sijan as well. He had been president of the student government association at Bay View High School. He was interested in photography and drama. At the academy, he had demonstrated a flair for sculpture. Photos show him as a good-looking, muscular young man with a friendly smile.

Ban Loboy Ford

On Nov. 9, Armstrong and Sijan briefed for a night attack mission. The target was the Ban Loboy Ford,





Air Force Academy cadet Lance Sijan undergoes survival training. He was big—6 feet 2 inches tall, 210 pounds—and athletic. Though badly injured in a crash, he survived in the jungle and eluded the enemy for more than six weeks.

a river crossing on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, just inside Laos at the Ban Karai Pass.

It was a two-ship flight. The call sign for Armstrong and Sijan was AWOL 01, with the second aircraft, AWOL 02, flying on their wing. It was dark when they took off from Da Nang at 8 p.m.

Central Vietnam is narrow. Not very far inland, the landscape rises to form the Annam Cordillera chain, which divides Vietnam from Laos. The Ban Karai Pass cuts through the mountains close to what was, in 1967, the border between North and South Vietnam.

Over the pass, the F-4s linked up with a forward air controller, who marked the Ban Loboy Ford for them with flares. Each F-4C was carrying six 750-pound bombs. At 8:39 p.m., AWOL 01 rolled in on the target and released the bombs.

Suddenly, the aircraft exploded and was engulfed in a ball of fire. It plunged into the jungle below.

Initial reports attributed the explosion to ground fire, but there is considerable belief now that defective fuzes caused the bombs to detonate prematurely, exploding within 50 feet of the airplane.

Neither AWOL 02 nor the forward air controller saw a parachute, but there was a survivor. AWOL 01 Bravo—Sijan—had gotten out. Armstrong was not heard from again and is presumed to have been killed in action.

Sijan struck the trees and then the granite slope in the darkness. The combination of the explosion, the ejection, and impact with the mountain left him badly injured. He had a compound fracture of his left leg, a skull fracture, and a concussion. His right hand was mangled, with the fingers bent backward. He lay on the mountainside, amid high trees, about three miles northwest of the Ban Loboy Ford.

Aircraft circled above, listening for a signal, but heard nothing. That night and all the next day, Sijan was unconscious or delirious.

A Signal From Sijan

At first light on Nov. 11, however, F-4s from Ubon and F-100s from Phu Cat picked up a signal from Sijan. They made voice contact with him and were soon joined by other aircraft.

Sijan identified himself as AWOL 01 Bravo. One of the pilots asked him several prearranged authentication questions to be sure it was really Sijan and not an English-speaking enemy, using his radio to lure the rescue aircraft into a trap.

One of the questions, chosen by Sijan ahead of time, was, “Who is the greatest football team in the world?” He knew the answer to that: “The Green Bay Packers.”

The search and rescue team assembled rapidly. It included a C-130 airborne command post, code-named Crown, Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters, A-1 Sandy es-

corts, O-2 forward air controllers, F-4s, and F-100s. Sijan had expended his flares early, signaling to the fighter aircraft before the Sandys and the Jolly Greens got there.

The attempt to locate Sijan and get him off the mountain went on all day. Eventually, 108 aircraft were involved in the rescue operation on Nov. 11. Anti-aircraft guns, some of them as large as 37 mm, were firing from all directions. Nine of the rescue aircraft were hit by ground fire, and one, an A-1 Sandy, went down in the jungle.

Sijan was difficult to find in the triple-canopy jungle. The rescuers couldn't see him, and he couldn't see them. They tried homing in on Sijan's beeper signal as well as having him tell them when the aircraft engines sounded loudest. The best chance for success came late in the day when a Jolly Green helicopter got a fix on his approximate location.

Sijan told the Jolly to send down its jungle penetrator cable but not to put a pararescue jumper on the ground, where North Vietnamese Army patrols were moving.

“There's bad guys down here,” Sijan said. “Just drop the penetrator.” Then: “I see you, I see you. Stay where you are, I'm coming to you.” The helicopter dropped the penetrator and hovered for 33 minutes, but could not raise Sijan again on the radio. Finally, with ground fire increasing, the Jolly Green pulled out.

The search and rescue effort resumed the next morning, but there was no further signal from Sijan. The rescue aircraft returned to base.

Sijan was listed as missing in action for the next seven years. He was promoted to captain in 1968, posthumously as it turned out. The Air Force and his family did not learn what had become of him until the prisoners of war returned from North Vietnam in 1973.

Captured

What we know of Sijan after he lost contact with the search and rescue aircraft is from the reports of Robert R. Craner and Guy D. Gruters, with whom Sijan spent three weeks in captivity. Today, Gruters lives in Minister, Ohio, and talks often about Lance Sijan. Craner died in 1980, but he was interviewed extensively in 1977 by now-retired Lt. Col. Fred Meurer for *Airman Magazine*. Meurer



On the night that Lance Sijan disappeared, AWOL 01's target was Ban Loboy Ford, a river crossing on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, just inside Laos at the Ban Karai Pass. North Vietnam sent supplies and troops down the trail to sustain Viet Cong insurgents in the south. To interdict the flow, the Air Force struck convoys and choke points, such as Ban Loboy Ford and the mountain passes. They were heavily defended with anti-aircraft artillery.

ter. He subsisted marginally on ferns, cress leaves, moss, grubs, and insects. He obtained water from the dew, rainfall, and occasionally, a mountain stream.

He could have attracted the attention of the North Vietnamese Army at any time by firing his handgun, but gaining shelter as a prisoner was the last thing Sijan wanted. He was determined not only to survive but also to evade capture.

The North Vietnamese took him to a road camp near the Ban Karai Pass and put him in a bamboo hut with a thatched roof. He lay on a bamboo mat. When he regained consciousness, the shredded remains of his flight suit had been stripped away, and he was dressed in a black cotton shirt and trousers. The left leg of the trousers had been cut away to accommodate his swollen leg.

His captors gave him rice and boiled greens. He drank some water but was not able to eat much. The North Vietnamese did not give him any of their scarce medical supplies.

Several days after he was captured, Sijan noticed a mountain tribesman outside the hut. He took him to be a Montagnard. He had been told in training that if he could make contact with the Montagnards, they might get him into the hands of a US reconnaissance patrol.

Sijan's account of what happened next was later confirmed by "The Rodent," a North Vietnamese officer who talked to Craner and Gruters in Vinh.

made his interview tapes available for this article.

The next 46 days were painstakingly reconstructed by Malcolm McConnell in his book, *Into the Mouth of the Cat* (Norton, 1985). Shortly after dawn on Dec. 25, a North Vietnamese truck convoy—able to move in daylight because of a bombing halt for Christmas—found Sijan lying in the road. He was three miles from where he went down Nov. 9.

Somehow, he had survived and had eluded the enemy for more than six weeks. He had lost his survival kit. His radio batteries had run down. He was intermittently unconscious or delirious and able to move only by crawling.

He had no real food and little wa-



Sijan was flying in the backseat of an F-4C. It was armed with 750-pound bombs, as are these Phantoms. Many now believe AWOL 01 was destroyed by the premature explosion of the bombs, caused by bad fuzes.



USAF launched a massive effort to recover Sijan. Here, four A-1 Sandys escort an HC-130P refueling an HH-3E Jolly Green Giant on a typical rescue mission. In all, some 100 aircraft searched for Sijan. One Sandy was lost.

Sijan waited until a single soldier was left to guard him. He lured the guard close, then overcame him and rendered him unconscious with a left-handed chop to the base of the skull. He tied the guard's shirt around his swollen leg, took his carbine, and crawled into the jungle.

He was recaptured within half a day.

The Bamboo Prison

Maj. Bob Craner and Capt. Guy Gruters, flying an F-100F from the Misty forward air control wing at Phu Cat, were shot down over North Vietnam on Dec. 20.

Craner was paraded around the local villages, where he was put on display. The villagers were allowed to yell at him and hit him with sticks and their fists. He was astounded at the number of trucks he saw, especially on Christmas Day. "They were lined up, bumper to bumper, as far as the eye could see," he said.

Although US intelligence would not realize it until later, the heavy traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in November and December 1967 was part of the buildup for the assault on Khe Sanh, which began Jan. 1, and for the Tet Offensive, which began Jan. 30.

Eventually, Craner and Gruters were brought together again, put on a truck, and taken on Dec. 26 to a holding point in Vinh. It was a North Vietnamese Army facility known variously to POWs as the "Bamboo Prison," "Bao Cao," or "Duc's Camp." The prison

was a wood and frame structure, with dirt floors, bamboo partitions, and small cells on either side of a hallway that ran down the center.

Craner and Gruters were interrogated and tortured by an English-speaking rat-faced officer they called "The Rodent." (All American POWs were tortured, both locally—as Craner, Gruters, and later Sijan, were in Vinh—and with more sophistication in the prisons around Hanoi.)

Lance Sijan was brought into the Bamboo Prison on Jan. 1, 1968. His weight was down to 100 pounds, and he was covered with sores. They put

him in one of the end cells, directly across from Craner. Gruters's cell was on the same side of the hallway as Sijan's, but there was an empty cell between them.

It was night when Sijan arrived, and the prison was unlit, except for the interrogator's flickering lamp. Craner couldn't see him through the partitions, but at a distance of 10 feet, he could hear everything.

The Rodent pressed Sijan for military information. Sijan's voice was weak but determined. "Sijan! My name is Lance Peter Sijan!" He gave his name, rank, and service number, but refused to answer questions, even when The Rodent twisted his injured arm.

"The whole affair went on for an hour-and-a-half, over and over again, and the guy just wouldn't give in," Craner said. "He'd say, 'All right, you son of a bitch, wait till I get better, you're really going to get it,' and giving him all kinds of lip but no information."

Repeated attempts at Vinh to force Sijan to talk did not succeed.

Sijan had a cast on his left leg, reaching from his thigh to his ankle. It had been put on at the Ban Karai Pass, not for medical reasons but to immobilize him. The Rodent told Craner they had found Sijan on the road and given him medical aid, and that Sijan struck and injured a guard and ran away. "You must not let him do this any more," The Rodent said.

Sometimes, Sijan was conscious and clearheaded, sometimes incoherent and



Sijan was held at Hoa Lo prison, the notorious "Hanoi Hilton" where many POWs were tortured. Already badly injured, Sijan developed pneumonia in his cold, wet cell and was frequently delirious. Up until his death, he planned escape.

rambling. Even when he had to struggle to get the words out, he asked, "How are we going to get out of here?" He dwelled on the point that he had escaped once, at the Ban Karai road camp, and could do it again. He did not talk about pain, and when asked, he minimized the importance of it.

After several days, Craner and Gruters were taken to Sijan's cell to help him to a truck that would transport the prisoners to Hanoi.

"We were both tall men," Gruters said. "When we had him upright and saw that he was taller than we were, I said, 'This guy is pretty big.' He had a large frame, but he was just skin and bones."

Sijan looked at Gruters and said, "Aren't you Guy Gruters?"

"I was taken aback, for I could not recognize Lance, even though he had been a squadron mate of mine at the Air Force Academy just three years before this date," Gruters said. "I said, 'Yes,' and then I asked, 'Who are you?' He said, 'Lance.' I said, 'Lance who?' He said, 'Sijan, Lance Sijan.'"

The trip north from Vinh was miserable. The prisoners were shackled and rode in the back of an open truck. They were continuously buffeted by the shifting of two 55-gallon drums, in which the driver carried fuel for the truck. The roads were potholed from bombing and rutted by the monsoon rains. Even when the truck moved at slow speeds, the prisoners and the fuel drums bounced around.

Gruters and Craner screamed at the driver to slow down, at no avail. One of them would cradle Sijan while the other tried to keep the fuel drums from rolling on them. They traveled at night and hid in villages under camouflage during the day.

Once Craner was convinced that Sijan was dead. "Then he stirred," Craner said. "Whenever he was lucid, he was caught up with going ahead—what are we going to do next, how are we going to get out of this situation? He was full of drive."

The Hanoi Hilton

The truck rolled up to Hoa Lo, the downtown prison the POWs called the "Hanoi Hilton," in the middle of the night on Jan. 13.

"We got Lance off the truck," Craner said. "They brought out a wooden pallet used as a stretcher, just four boards nailed together. We carried him into the Hoa Lo com-



Guy Gruters speaks at a 2003 memorial service for Sijan. Gruters, a POW imprisoned with Sijan, helped tell the story of how his cell mate survived and evaded, escaped, and resisted his captors.

plex, and that's where we met 'The Bug,' the most infamous English speaker in Hanoi."

The Bug was short and fat, with a cataract in one eye. As an indication of his specialty, some of the POWs called him "Mr. Blue," after the color of the torture rooms at one of the prison camps.

The Bug took Craner and Gruters to a cistern and told them to wash Sijan. "We did the best we could with cold water," Craner said.

Initially, they were taken to the "New Guy Village" section of the Hanoi Hilton, where the North Vietnamese made a special effort to break the Americans early in their captivity. The prisoners were kept apart except at meal time, twice a day, when Sijan was brought to Craner and Gruters so they could help him eat. It was difficult to get him to take food.

After a few days, the three were put in the "Little Vegas" section of the Hoa Lo in a triple cell with three board bunks. There was standing water on the cement floor, and the cell was cold and dank.

A medic they called "Camp Doctor" came in periodically, wearing a Red Cross armband. Camp Doctor would "look and cluck, walk back out," Craner said. Eventually, he cut the cast off Sijan's leg and gave him shots of a yellow fluid presumed to be an antibiotic. He also set up an intravenous feeding apparatus, but Sijan pulled the needle out at night "when he was

off in space somewhere," Craner said.

Often, though, Sijan was lucid, aware, and focused. "It was always, 'How secure is this place? How are we going to get out of here?' He tried to do some arm exercises so he would be ready to take part in the escape," Craner said.

"He really, really kept the faith, under horrific punishment," Gruters said.

Sijan developed pneumonia Jan. 18 and was removed from the cell on Jan. 21.

He died Jan. 22, but it was awhile before Craner and Gruters knew that. They were transferred to "The Plantation," a smaller prison camp a couple of miles away. Craner encountered The Bug in the courtyard there and asked him about Sijan.

"Sijan spend too long in the jungle," The Bug said. "Sijan die."

When the POWs came home in 1973, Craner nominated Lance Sijan for the Medal of Honor. "He was what the military hopes it can produce in every man but very rarely does," Craner said.

Medal of Honor

Lance Sijan's remains were returned to the United States in 1974, along with the headstone used to mark his grave in Vietnam. He is buried at Arlington Park Cemetery in Milwaukee.

He was awarded the Medal of Honor, posthumously, March 4, 1976.



Lance Sijan was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1976, the only Air Force Academy graduate thus far to be so honored. This memorial, dedicated in 2003, is at Arlington Park Cemetery, in his hometown of Milwaukee.

It was presented to his parents, Sylvester and Jane Sijan, at the White House by President Gerald R. Ford.

“During interrogation, he was severely tortured; however, he did not divulge any information to his captors,” the citation said. “During his intermittent periods of consciousness until his death, he never complained of his physical condition, and, on several occasions, spoke of future escape attempts.”

Also in 1976, Sijan Hall, a new dormitory at the Air Force Academy, was dedicated in Lance Sijan’s memory. A large portrait of Sijan, painted by Maxine McCaffrey, hangs in Sijan Hall.

Lance Sijan is the only Air Force Academy graduate thus far to receive the Medal of Honor, and he is remembered there with special honor. The academy library displays a collection of Sijan memorabilia, including the headstone from Vietnam. It is marked with Sijan’s initials in English and the date of his death.

He is also well remembered in his hometown. Jane and Sylvester Sijan are members of the Air Force Community Council at General Mitchell Airport in Milwaukee, where the 440th Airlift Wing has placed a replica of Sijan’s F-4 at the base entrance and where the dining hall is named after him.

In June 2003, a Lance Sijan memorial was dedicated at the Arlington Park Cemetery. It is a 10-foot marble monument in the shape of a stylized

F-4, pointing straight upward. His parents, his sister, Janine Sijan Rozina, and his brother, Marc Sijan, were joined for the event by a host of dignitaries. Speakers included Lance Sijan’s cell mate from Vietnam, Guy Gruters.

There are other remembrances. There is a Sijan Circle at Langley AFB, Va., a Sijan Street at Whiteman AFB, Mo., and, in Colorado Springs, Colo., home of the academy, the Lance P. Sijan Chapter of the Air Force Association. Air Force ROTC cadets at Boston University have formed the Lance Sijan Squadron of the Arnold Air Society.

The Air Force presents the Lance P. Sijan Award to four people each year for outstanding leadership. This year, the awards were presented at the Pentagon on Sijan’s birthday, April 13. His parents attended, as they have every year except one since 1981, when the awards were first given.

The Code of Conduct

The Code of Conduct for the US armed forces was adopted in 1955 in response to the use of American prisoners for political propaganda in the Korean War, induced “confessions,” and the collaboration with the enemy on the part of some POWs.

It was taught to every member of

the force and covered again in survival training, part of helping those going into combat to know what to expect and how to respond if they are captured. Former POWs have said it gave them something to hold onto during their captivity.

Lance Sijan embodied the Code of Conduct, particularly three articles of it. They read:

Article II: “I will never surrender of my own free will.”

Article III: “If I am captured, I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape.”

Article V: “When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am bound to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.”

The North Vietnamese routinely ignored the Geneva Convention and tortured POWs. In part, they were seeking military information, but equally important were written and oral statements they could broadcast as propaganda to undercut allied morale, buck up the North Vietnamese home front, and feed the anti-American movement around the world.

John McCain is now a US Senator, but in 1967, he was a prisoner in the Hanoi Hilton. He was a naval aviator, shot down over Hanoi on Oct. 26, a few weeks before Lance Sijan’s last mission on Nov. 9.

McCain wrote in *Faith of My Fathers* (Random House, 1999): “I never knew Lance Sijan, but I wish I had. I wish I had had one moment to tell him how much I admired him, how indebted I was to him for showing me, for showing all of us, our duty—for showing us how to be free.

“Few of us ever seriously contemplated escape, and our senior officers never encouraged it. A few brave men tried. All were caught and tortured. Neither did every prisoner refrain from providing information beyond the bare essentials sanctioned by the code. Many of us were terrorized into failure at one time or another. But Captain Sijan wasn’t. He obeyed the code to the letter.” ■

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