

Sijan, by McCain

Sen. John S. McCain, Arizona Republican, is perhaps the nation's best-known POW. In 1998, the former Vietnam War Navy pilot gave the keynote speech dedicating the National Prisoner of War Museum at Andersonville, Ga. McCain had spent more than five years in confinement in Hanoi, where he was tortured repeatedly. On this occasion, though, McCain spoke movingly of another POW who stood first in the senator's hall of heroes. The story of USAF Capt. Lance P. Sijan, Medal of Honor, is well-known. Still, McCain—because it was McCain—told the Sijan story with special force and eloquence.

A long time ago, I lived for a time in the company of heroes—men who endured great hardships, but who refused to lose faith in their God, their country, and their comrades.

I am a witness to a thousand acts of compassion, sacrifice, and endurance. But of all the men whose dignity humbles me, one name is revered among all others.

I never knew Lance Sijan, but I wish I had.

I wish I would have 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.

I lived alone once in a room next door to men who had once lived with Lance Sijan. He was gone before I heard of him, but the men who had lived with him told me his story.

Air Force Capt. Lance Sijan was shot down near Vinh, North Vietnam, on Nov. 9, 1967. For a day and a half, he lay semiconscious on the ground, grievously injured with a compound fracture of his left leg, a brain concussion, and a fractured skull.

He made radio contact with rescue aircraft, but they were unable to locate him in the dense jungle. On Nov. 11, they abandoned the search.

Crawling on the jungle floor at night, Lance fell into a sinkhole, injuring himself further.

For six weeks, he evaded capture. On Christmas Day, starved, racked with pain, he passed out on a dirt road, where a few hours later the North Vietnamese found him.

The Code of Conduct for American prisoners of war requires every prisoner to evade capture, and when captured, to seize opportunities for escape. It instructs prisoners to resist giving the enemy any military information beyond name, rank, and serial number.

Lance Sijan obeyed the code to the letter.

A short time after he was captured, he overpowered an armed guard and managed to escape. Recaptured several hours later, he was tortured for information but refused to provide anything beyond what the code allowed.

By the time he reached prison in Hanoi, he was close to death. Over six feet tall, he weighed less than 100 pounds when he was placed in a cell with two other Americans, Bob Craner and Guy Gruters.



Naval aviator John McCain (left) in mid-1960s. First Lt. Lance Sijan (right) on an F-4 ladder.



“Dedication Remarks”

Sen. John S. McCain (R-Ariz.)
National Prisoner of War Museum
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He lived there nearly a month. In and out of consciousness, often delirious, he would push on the walls and scratch the floor searching vainly for a way out.

When he was lucid, and not consumed with pain, he would quiz his cellmates about the camp's security and talk with them about escaping again.

Interrogated repeatedly, he refused to say anything. He was savagely beaten for his silence, kicked repeatedly, and struck with a bamboo club.

His cellmates heard him scream profanities at his guards, and then after hours of torture, they heard him say in a weak voice: “I’m not going to tell you anything. I can’t talk to you. It’s against the code.”

His cellmates tried to comfort him during his last hours. Working in shifts timed to the tolling of a nearby church bell, they cradled his head in their ... laps, talked quietly [to] him of his courage and faith, and told him to hang on.

Occasionally he would shake off his delirium and joke with his friends about his circumstances.

Finally, near the end, the guards came for him. Lance knew that they were taking him away to die.

And as they placed him on a stretcher, he said to his friends, “It’s over. It’s over.”

A few days later, the camp commander told Bob Craner what he knew already, that his friend was dead. And Bob, a good man and tough resistor himself, resolved to spread the legend of Lance Sijan throughout the prisons of Hanoi so that his fellow Americans could draw strength from the example of a man who would not yield his humanity no matter how terrible the consequences.

A few weeks later, when I was moved to the cell next to Bob’s, he told me the story of Lance Sijan: a free man from a free country, who kept his dignity to the last moment of his life.

When you leave here today, think of Lance Sijan, and carry his dignity with you. Keep his memory alive, confident in your faith that almighty God blessed him, and gave him the strength to prevail over his enemies.

Though they took his life, they could not take his dignity. Lance Sijan prevailed. ★