

HERITAGE TODAY



Portraits in Courage

Unbroken Will: The Lance P. Sijan Story

This is not your typical love story. Picture a skeleton of a man. Alone. A skeleton with bits of ragged skin and muscle and a heart that somehow won't stop beating. Captain Lance P Sijan. Ejected from his fighter jet over Laos. November 1967. 46 days and nights with no food. Crawling along, inch by inch. Trying to pull himself home out of hell. A shattered hand, cracked in half, fingers folded back and tied down with filthy strips of what used to be this Airman's flight suit. One leg busted with a double compound fracture and the bones snapped off sharp. Dragging himself along the jungle floor, the flesh rubbed off, his body scraping over the limestone and tree roots. As he passes in and out of consciousness he tries to measure time by the length of his beard and his matted hair. Like I said, this is not your typical love story. Lance P Sijan was unrecognizable. He was 80 pounds and close to death. But he was a million miles away from giving up. He'd been a 220-pound football player at the Air Force Academy. He was a pilot. He was a leader. He lifted others up but he didn't tolerate fools or slackers. He loved art and he sang the lead in a high school musical *The King And I* and he was a good-looking guy and drove a sweet Corvette. He was a boy scout. He was a son. And he was a brother. He was ejected from his aircraft after an ordnance explosion over Laos. 46 days. He waved off a rescue because he didn't want to risk getting anyone else hurt. On the 46th day, Christmas morning, 1967, he was captured by the Viet Cong and

taken to an interrogation camp. Emaciated, hardly breathing, he still managed to overpower a guard and escape but was recaptured and tortured for nine days. The other American prisoners could hear his screams. Sijan gave up nothing. The reason Lance had room for pain was because he made no room for hate. Make no mistake - Lance Sijan had no love in his heart for his captors. He threatened to break their necks even when he was too weak to swallow food or lift his head. He believed in freedom. He believed in his fellow Airmen. There's a difference between faith and hope. Hope is something you cling to. Faith is something strong as nails you can carry into battle. Faith is believing with all you've got. Lance never gave up believing they would escape. His love of country - and of his Airmen - was immeasurable, and unbroken right up to the end. He died January 22nd, 1968. He received the Medal of Honor for evading capture, for heroism above and beyond the call of duty, for living the code of conduct to his last breath. A man's character is revealed in the actions he takes when he knows no one is watching. A man's soul is revealed in the actions he takes when he knows no one is coming. Don't think of this as a horror story of survival that you can't imagine. Think of the things we all share with Lance Sijan. The things we fight for. If he could do what he did... Airman, you can do whatever is in front of you. You are never alone. Because Lance P Sijan left us a legacy of love and leadership. Love of country leads to duty. Love of your fellow Airmen leads to loyalty. Love of freedom leads you onward. Love of family leads you home. Aim high, Airman.