

“Let No Sacrifice be in Vain”

Memorial Day 2023

By Jan P. Johnson, Brig Gen(Ret) USAF/ANG

(Presented at Auburn Lake Trails, Cool, CA)

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being with us here today.

My name is Jan Johnson. My wife Marisela and I have lived here since 2016, and we are privileged to be part of this amazing community. It is my honor to be the Air Force presenter at today's commemoration.

Just so that you know a bit of my background, I served from 1964-1995. 31 years, of which 4 were on active duty and 27 in the Air National Guard, where I flew fighter aircraft, including the F-86, F-104, and A-7 Corsair, and when I retired was the Commanding General of the Puerto Rico ANG. As you know, Puerto Rico has been a part of the United States since 1898-125 years now. The last airplane that I flew was the F-16. Most of our work involved areas such as drug interdiction with our tactical radar squadron, and mutual training with the Air Forces of Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil and Chile as well as the defense of the Panama Canal. With the A-7 aircraft we also performed a Maritime Attack role, assisting the Navies of our nation and of our allies. We worked closely with the Royal Navy while they were enroute to the Falklands War.

The Air Force, as the youngest of the services, had its roots in the Army since 1907 as part of the Signal Corps. It was not until 1947 that it was designated as a separate service. My father enlisted in the US Army Air Forces in 1944 and earned his wings in 1945, never imagining that his first born would follow his steps 20 years later. Unfortunately, he lost his life in an aircraft accident 6 weeks after I enlisted.

The Air Force, including the Air National Guard, has served in every major conflict since its establishment. Korea, Cuba in the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Berlin, Vietnam, Desert Storm and all conflicts in the global war on terror in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Somalia.

Let's stop for a moment in Vietnam and the reason for today's remembrance of those lost in combat. Today is a day that all Americans should take a moment and realize that Memorial Day is a day of both grief and celebration, reflecting on the tragic loss of life and recounting the courageousness of our loved ones service. This year marks the 50th year commemoration of the Vietnam War. 2.7 Americans served in Vietnam. 58,281 paid the ultimate sacrifice. I would like to tell you about one of these heroes that gave his life so that you and I could be here today.

LANCE PETER SIJAN was my classmate and good friend while attending Undergraduate Pilot Training in Laredo, Texas. At 220 lbs. he was a key football player and a recent graduate of the United States Air Force Academy. When we graduated from flight school in August 1966, Lance was assigned to fly F4C fighters in Vietnam. In November 1967 his 52nd combat mission was against a target in Laos. When they rolled in on their target, as soon as their bombs were released, a malfunctioning fuse caused an immediate premature detonation, and blew up the F4.

Lance managed to eject but was probably rendered unconscious as he made no radio contact until the next day. He had sustained a fractured skull, a broken left leg, and a mangled right hand. Rescue forces were immediately deployed but the enemy was waiting for them, and they suffered heavy anti-aircraft fire damaging 20 aircraft and one A-1 Sky Raider was lost, whose pilot was rescued. Refusing to put others in danger Lance insisted on crawling to the jungle penetrator that had been dropped from the Jolly Green Helicopter, opposing the lowering of a pararescue crewman that could find him and help him to safety. After 33 minutes of painful hovering, Lance did not make it to the penetrator so the mission was called off. There was no further radio contact after that. Even so, over 100 sorties were flown in search of Lance to no avail.

In addition to his medical condition, he was without food, without a survival kit and had very little water. In spite of this Lance was able to evade enemy forces for 46 days, only being able to move by sliding on his buttocks and back. Realizing his condition and need for medical help he crawled onto a truck route on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and allowed himself to be captured by the North Vietnamese Army on Christmas Day 1967. One-week later Lance

incapacitated a guard and escaped back to the jungle but was quickly recaptured.

He was then taken to Vinh, North Vietnam, and placed with two other POW's, Major Craner and Captain Gruters. It is because of them that we know Lance's story. Although he was under terrible pain from his wounds, the brutal beatings and torture, he would only disclose his name, rank and serial number in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Because of his failing body, exhaustion, malnutrition and disease, he was transported to Hanoi with his two cellmates. Lance contracted pneumonia and died in the infamous POW prison known as the Hanoi Hilton on January 22, 1968.

His remains were repatriated in 1974 and he received the Medal of Honor in 1976 from President Ford. He was the first Air Force Academy Graduate to do so, and there is a building named after him there now.

Lance was an all American, all or nothing guy. He loved life and loved what he did. It is because of him that I can stand here today, without going through the suffering and pain that he gladly took on for us all.

Following tradition, on Memorial Day the Flag is briskly raised to the top of the staff and then solemnly lowered to half-staff until noon. That position reminds us of the more than one million women and men who have given their lives in service to our nation. At noon, their memory is raised by the living who resolve not to let their sacrifice be in vain, but to rise up in their stead and continue the fight for liberty.

It is upon each of us to use the gifts secured by those who have given their all. Today we reflect and share the experiences of our fallen loved ones, but tomorrow we must act. We must carry their sacrifice within our hearts and honor them by building a brighter future for all. While today is typically spent recalling the valor of those men and women who have died in combat, we must never forget the quiet professionals who have served our nation and our people in peacetime as well.

We also honor the families of those lost, for you bear a burden that only you can comprehend. We recognize that each one of us deals differently with our grief, and we are grateful for the support that you gave your soldier, so that they could carry out the mission of protecting the rest of us.

In closing I quote the last lines of the Gettysburg Address by President Abraham Lincoln: "That these dead should not have died in vain-that this nation under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Thank you again for inviting me to be a part of this. May God Bless those deployed in harm's way for the safety and freedom of our nation. May God bless our nation in these very difficult times. May God bless each of you.

— Jan P. Johnson, Brig. Gen. (Ret), USAF/ANG