

The Legacy of Lance Sijan: Getting The Utmost Out Of Your God Given Talents  
To the Class of 1960, Bay View High School, Milwaukee, WI - By Charlie Larson

Lance Sijan received the Medal of Honor, posthumously, from President Gerald Ford in March 1976. The award was presented to his parents, Jane and Sylvester Sijan. Lance became the first graduate of the US Air Force Academy (class of 1965) to receive the Medal of Honor.

Much has been written about the last six weeks of Lance's time on this earth. Little has been written about the previous 25 years. Lance was a kind, sensitive, striving straight-arrow person.

To understand Lance, one has to understand he came from a strong and loving family. The other insight is that he grew up in the Bay View section of Milwaukee right on the shore of Lake Michigan. It was a wonderful place to grow up during the 1950's and '60's. If you remember the TV series "Happy Days" set in Milwaukee, you have a pretty good idea of what life was like in Bay View.

There is one particular characteristic of people who lived in Bay View during that period: They were all straight-arrow people. People didn't "brag on themselves". Anyone who did was frowned upon as someone who had "gone Hollywood" and couldn't be trusted to carry his or her own weight.

The charge of Bay View High School, and one in which it succeeded, was to turn out achieving, unassuming, straight arrow people. The academic focus, reflecting the times of the Space Race, was on Math and Science. There was also a strong focus on extra-curricula activities centering on the football team, the marching band and post-Broadway musicals called "operettas.

Lance was an achiever all his life. He was a Football All City (All Conference) End his senior year. He had the lead in several operettas, including "The King and I" and was president of the Student Government Association. Oh yeah, he was a really good-looking guy and a "Lady's Man."

Many of our Bay View High School friends may remember me as Lance's funny-looking sidekick. A position I am proud to have played. Lance was a great, true and honest friend to me for 20 years.

We were close friends on a daily basis from that warm September morning in 1947 when we met in Kindergarten at Fernwood elementary school until that cold January night in 1960 when we graduated from Bay View High School. We remained close friends, but obviously not on a daily basis through our college years and our respective military training.

I feel compelled to pass along these lessons we can learn from Lance before he and I are once again seeing each other on a daily basis (I hope).

Looking at all the tremendous accomplishments Lance achieved during such a short period of time, we might come to the conclusion that he was extraordinarily gifted intellectually and athletically. The truth is that while Lance was above average in both regards, his accomplishments are far more a testimonial to his dedication and the hard work he put forth to get the utmost from his God given talents.

Lance lived these words from Louis Pasteur:

“Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal. My strength is solely in my tenacity.”

These are the special qualities I remember of Lance: Humility, Tenacity and Sanctity.

Humility: Lance and I served in the Student Government Association together. Lance was elected the President. One day he pulled me into the SGA room, closed the door and said: “There are going to be a lot of people who are trying to impress me because of this position. If you ever see me getting a big head, I want you to puncture it on the spot”. I never had to say anything to him about this.

Tenacity: A bunch of us guys were on the football team at Bay View. Coaches Mierzwa and Elitch had devised this particular exercise with the colorful name of the “Bull Rush” or something like that. Essentially there were two lines of players about 10 yards apart. When one got to the head of the line, they got into their stance, and on the sound of the whistle we would take off trying to flatten the other player. Whenever I saw Lance was going to be my opponent I thought: “God, this is going to hurt”. And it did. Neither of us held back because of being friends.

Lance had flat feet. Really flat feet. He thought this might be a disqualifying physical condition for acceptance into the Air Force Academy. He trained himself to jump higher than anyone else to prove to the admission board that his flat feet didn’t hurt his performance.

This is one of the most valuable lessons I learned from Lance. He always brought his “A” game. Every time. All the time. He made those of us around him bring our “A” game all the time. His example had a profound impact on my life.

Vince Lombardi was once quoted as saying: “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.”

Denis Waitley, Naval Academy graduate, Navy Pilot, Psychologist, Rehabilitation Counselor for Vietnam POW’s and author said in his book Seeds of Greatness that Lombardi was miss-quoted. According to Waitley, what Lombardi really said was:

“Winning isn’t everything. But the will to win is the only thing.”

“The will to win is the only thing.” This defined Lance. And Lance defined this.

Sanctity: It was a cool evening in June 1966 when I picked Lance up at O’Hare airport in Chicago. He was just returning from going through a POW training camp in Washington State. We were going to stay with friends in Lake Geneva that weekend drinking beer and chasing women. How much fun is that for a bunch of 24 year-old guys?

I had never seen Lance so solemn. I let him drive my new muscle car back to Lake Geneva (that’s what buddies are for) and we talked. This was the last serious talk we had alone together.

We talked about the war. He told me his impressions about what it would be like to be a POW. He talked about the sanctity of the Code of Conduct. Lance said: “I can’t be a prisoner and I won’t be held a prisoner.” I sensed he had a strong premonition that he wasn’t going to be picking up that Jaguar in England on his way back from Southeast Asia.

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It was a cold evening in November 1967 where I was living in Chicago at the time. A close friend of ours from Milwaukee called to tell me Lance had not returned from a mission in South East Asia.

I did the only thing a friend from Bay View would do: Grabbed a bottle of brandy and headed for Lake Michigan. At the entrance to Diversey Harbor, east of Lake Shore Drive, there is a statue of an Indian Brave sitting on a horse overlooking Lake Michigan. I had a long talk with the Indian that night trying to make sense of the world, the war and Lance’s predicament. Quite frankly, the horse made the most sense that night.

Lance and I were very close friends from 1947 to 1967. From age 5 to age 25. These were the most formative years of our lives.

The stories of Lance’s heroism at evasion and escape came to the surface when most of the POW’s from the South East Asia Theater were repatriated in 1973. Lance was not among those to come home at that time.

In the spring of 1974 the remains of Lance were recovered and returned to his beloved Bay View High School. Lance was placed in front of the stage in the second floor auditorium, where he had the lead in several plays. US Representative Clement Zablocki, who was instrumental in Lance’s appointment to the US Air Force Academy was one of the speakers, at the end of his speech he recited the pilot’s poem High Flight. Then we all took Lance out to Arlington Cemetery where he finally got a chance to rest.

I don’t believe Lance is really gone, just flying at a much higher altitude. The job of his “ground crew” is to keep him flying. Our job is to make sure that Lance’s legacy is passed on to future generations.

Humility, Tenacity and Sanctity: “The will to win is the only thing”. These are the qualities of Lance that we need to live by on a daily basis. And we need to share Lance’s legacy with anyone we love.

Lance lived the legacy from this quote by President Calvin Coolidge:

“Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

“The will to win is the only thing” does not apply just to the athletic field or the battlefield. The will to win should be an everyday goal. It means we have to bring our “A” game all the time. It means doing our best on the geometry exam. It applies to helping a dedicated civil servant be elected to a local position that can benefit your neighborhood. It means giving back to society.

“The will to win is the only thing,” means utilizing our God given talents to the utmost, just as Lance did.

<http://www.af.mil/news/airman/0196/sijan.htm>

Go to the above web site to find out about Lance’s last six weeks on this earth. Article courtesy of The Airman, a publication for all personnel of the U.S. Air Force.