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***from Tempered Steel:
Colonel James H. Kasler***

Three-war veteran, Korean War jet ace, Vietnam POW, and only three-time recipient of the Air Force Cross

18-year-old tail gunner

At five feet four inches and 135 pounds fully clothed, a teenaged James Kasler joined his bomber crew in Lincoln, Nebraska, and then went down to Alamogordo, New Mexico, to start flight-crew training in B-29s. He didn't care at the time that he was riding in the wrong end of the airplane. The war was on, and he was going to be in it if his training didn't go on forever. Training missions consisted of runs on the practice bombing and gunnery range. The B-29 was far advanced over the B-24 and the B-17. It was faster, flew higher, could fly farther with a heavier bomb load, and featured remote-controlled guns, not hand-held as they had been on the earlier bombers. Back in the tail Jim had two .50 caliber guns. His gun sight had two wheels on it—one on the side and one on the top. The wheel on top swiveled the pair of machine-guns left and right, whereas the side wheel (which had a trigger on it) pivoted them up and down. But the training airplanes still had old Wright Cyclone engines, so an engine or two blew on nearly every mission. Oil poured out of the planes as they limped home.

Kasler encountered no surprises in New Mexico until he finished gunnery training at Las Cruces. There, while waiting to ship overseas for combat, he witnessed a historic event. On July 16 at 5:30 a.m., he was walking to the mess hall in total darkness. Suddenly, the sky flashed as bright as daylight. He had no idea what was happening. Later, he learned he had seen the blast light from the first atomic bomb detonation at Trinity Site. As

he was to discover while flying combat in the Pacific, it would not be the last time he found himself near a historic atomic blast.

From Las Cruces, Kasler's crew was scheduled to travel to Sacramento, California, where they would pick up their B-29: "Twentieth Century Limited." But they had to exercise a bit of resourcefulness to get away as scheduled. Although fighter pilots have a wild reputation, bomber crews have always had some characters as well. The certified character on Jim's crew was Jesse Flores, their engineer, who was supposed to start the engines for flight. Every weekend while they were training at Las Cruces, Flores would get a bottle of Bulldog Gin and a bottle of tequila and drink both bottles himself.

The morning they were due to leave for Sacramento, Flores had been out whooping it up. He returned, became belligerent with his crewmates, and wanted to fight. But Kasler rifled a shot to his jaw, easily cold-cocking him, and the crew carried the unconscious engineer onto their airplane. The navigator knew something about starting the engines, so he got them under way. They headed out over San Francisco that night with Flores still sobering up in the cockpit. Eventually, they landed in Hawaii, then went on to Wake Island, Kwajalein, and Guam, which was central headquarters for 20th Air Force. B-29s were stationed on Guam, Tinian, and Saipan in the Marianas Islands. By far the largest air base in the world at that time was on Tinian, an island about five miles wide by 12 miles long.

Kasler's B-29 carried a crew of eleven. As tail gunner, Kasler had to start the auxiliary power unit in the back and then go down the ladder in the aft section and help pull restraining chocks from the wheels. To keep the correct weight position and balance for takeoff, Kasler sat in the tail. He went up a little chute into the tail gunner's compartment, closed his hatch (which was round like those on a submarine), turned around, pulled down his seat, and sat on it. Jim's small size at the time perfectly suited the compact space, but that wouldn't last very long: by the time he stopped growing, he was more than six feet tall and weighed 185 pounds. Plexiglas surrounded his tail gunner's compartment, which was pressurized and separated from the rest of the crew by 30 or 40 feet. When they no longer needed pressurization after a training mission, Jim could open the hatch and go up into the center section of the plane on the way back home.

Although the B-29 had an altitude advantage over earlier bombers, crews didn't use that advantage very often in the Pacific. B-17s and B-24s headed for Germany were training at 30,000 feet or higher, if they could get up there. But General LeMay, commander of the 21st Bomber Command, had the B-29s flying at 8,000 to 12,000 feet because wind drift made high-altitude bombing ineffective. At first, crews thought the low-altitude patterns would expose them to murderous enemy fire, but Jim discovered that

bombing at low altitudes was much more accurate and not as dangerous in the Pacific as one might think. Although the Japanese had flak, they didn't have as much as allied airmen encountered over Germany. The Japanese Zeros (fighter planes) also weren't as formidable as the Germany's ME-109 because a B-29 typically could outrun them. The United States lost some B-29s to Japanese fighters, but they were usually damaged or straggling airplanes.

Kasler flew six of his seven combat missions to Japan in the Twentieth Century Limited. By way of preparation, the crew ran two practice missions over Marcus Island during July 1945 before they flew regular missions over Japan. The United States' landing forces had bypassed Marcus, so it was still in Japanese hands and remained a threat. In fact, the Japanese shot down another B-29 during Jim's second practice mission.

Kasler's first combat mission was a July 26 raid on Tokuyama. The B-29s circled at a checkpoint over the ocean until their time came up. They staggered each group from 8,000 to 12,000 feet, with a 1,000-foot vertical separation, kept circling, and then ran in one at a time. Back in the tail, Jim looked down and forward, and he could see a horrendous firestorm coming up off Tokuyama. About that time, the searchlight picked up their B-29. Jim felt like the enemy was looking right at him and sensed his remaining moments on the planet might be numbered. It was the only time he felt anxiety—not really fear—going into combat.

When their aircraft hit the thermal wave coming up from the city, it nearly flipped onto its back, wrenching Kasler's hands from his guns and slamming a shoulder rudely against the canopy. Jim thought they'd "had the stroke"—his phrase for a fatal blow—but the pilot was able to recover, get back into their run, and drop their bombs: a mixture of 100-pound demolition and incendiary bombs (white phosphorus). Japanese cities were very susceptible to firebombs because they contained so much paper and wood. The B-29s destroyed far more property and people in those conventional firebomb raids than they did with nuclear weapons at the end of the war.

Although Kasler felt some heightened anticipation before a combat mission, he never feared enemy fire, even as a teenaged gunner. He had an inherent faith that a higher power would protect him but didn't offer any explicit prayers for his safety. Other members of his crew took a more direct approach. For example, both blister gunners on the crew were Roman Catholic. After their first combat mission (and every other one), Jim came out of the tail to discover rosary beads all over the floor. He figured they must have carried several backup sets on each mission and worked them hard while under fire. Although Kasler wasn't a Catholic himself, he was glad for any help the blister gunners could provide him.

Kasler's second and third missions were also to urban areas: Uji-Yamada and Nagaoka. On August 7 his B-29 hit the naval arsenal at Toyakawa. After they had flown two or three missions, Iwo Jima—closer to Japan—opened as a B-29 landing field and refueling site, which meant they could start carrying heavier bomb loads. Jim's B-29 recovered there two or three times while Marines were still fighting Japanese on the island. Jim was utterly amazed at what he saw: American ships sunk in the harbor. Hundreds of them! The Japanese had fought fiercely there and were still fighting on Mount Suribachi, causing the United States Marines the worst casualties in their storied history.

On Kasler's next mission—to the Marifu Railroad Yards on August 14—the Japanese ground gunners shot up their aircraft a bit. Their radio operator for that mission, Stevens, received a Purple Heart for a shrapnel scratch. They started losing fuel and couldn't make it back to Iwo Jima, so they diverted to Okinawa. The Twentieth Century Limited became the first B-29 to land there, even though the runway wasn't quite finished. After they landed, they walked over to the edge of the field where Marines were sitting along the strip up on a hill, eating lunch. Right below, 50 yards away, other Marines were spraying napalm into the caves and firing their weapons. A Marine looked at Kasler's B-29 and said to Jim, "I sure as hell would never fly on that thing." Jim replied, "Hey. It's a lot safer than what you are doing, buddy!" He was grateful to be well above ground, despite the dangers of combat flying.

Kasler believed the tail gunner's job was important and had its exciting moments, but it still wasn't the same as being at the controls, taking an aircraft through its paces. He had begun forming images of himself in the pilot's seat, rolling into bombing runs and taking on the enemy's ace fighters. Then, coming back from one of their raids on Japan, he had a moment that defined his future. He was out of the tail in the right blister gunner's seat, looking out over Saipan as they cruised home, when a P-51 fighter came swooping up and popped right in beside them. The pilot waved at him, then peeled off in a roll. Jim thought, *Now **that's** the way to fly!* From that moment, Jim knew he wanted to be a fighter pilot.

Korean War Ace

Despite early problems with supplies and maintenance, Jim Kasler's squadron alone eventually had one-half of all the aces in Korea. His wing commander, Colonel Harrison Thyng, decided they should have a flight standing alert at dawn every day, ready to intercept MiGs. Jim's flight was one of the first to pull that duty. The flight commander was Casey Colman, and Kasler was an element leader, still needing two MiG kills to become an ace.

On May 15, 1952, Jim's flight set up their aircraft on alert and left Albert Smiley bunked at the ready Quonset hut near the end of the runway. Smiley's job was to man the phone while the others went out to get warm in the rising sun. Eventually, they heard the phone ring several times, and Casey asked if someone was in the hut. Kasler ran in and found Albert leaning on one elbow, lying on a bunk looking at him. Jim demanded, "Why in the hell didn't you answer the phone?" Smiley said, "Oh, I knew someone would."

Kasler snatched up the alert phone, and a voice demanded, "Where the hell have you been? Scramble! Scramble!" Jim hit the klaxon alarm and said to Albert, "I'll fix you when we get on the ground, you SOB." They took off and headed straight for the Yalu River. As they came closer, the ground radar controller kept directing them farther up the river, away from Antung, the huge MiG base in China, just across the Yalu. The controllers told them the MiGs had turned. Then, a few minutes later, the controllers said they had lost radar contact.

Two days earlier Kasler had visited the radar site near Kimpo that was controlling his flight. The controllers told Jim they could pick up MiGs over Antung only above 15,000 feet. With that in mind, Jim broke his element away from Colman's and dived toward Antung. He said, "Albert" into the radio, and when Smiley looked over at him, he punched off his drop tanks to get lighter for combat. Smiley did the same. The rules of engagement didn't allow them to cross the Yalu or to attack the MiG bases, but they found ways to bend those rules while in "hot pursuit." Sometimes, they just ignored the rules.

Kasler and Smiley caught the MiGs just as they were pitching out to land at Antung. Jim dropped his dive brakes and did a "split-S" maneuver to get in behind the lead MiG. At 1,200 feet he opened fire, and the MiG immediately started flying apart. When Jim pulled up on his left wing, the canopy was gone, and the pilot was sitting in a pool of fire. The MiG fell to the right and scorched a wide, fiery trail across the air base.

Next, Kasler looked out to the right and saw a MiG firing at Smiley, who had just torched another one. Smiley was admiring his work so intently that he didn't notice this one on his tail, hosing him with lead. Kasler shouted for him to break as he went after it. The MiG dropped to the deck and flew right down the runway at Antung. The sky around it was black with flak as the ground gunners hammered away at Kasler, but Jim chased it about 50 miles on the deck until they reached the sea.

There, the MiG pilot pulled up sharply into an Immelmann—an aerial maneuver named after WWI German ace Max Immelmann that pulls an aircraft up through a half loop and then rolls it level, thus simultaneously gaining altitude and reversing direction. But Kasler stayed with him and, as the

MiG started down again, scored with another burst. By this time, Jim had closed to within 500 feet as they dived down over the coastal mud flats. Morning haze over the flats made forward visibility impossible, but he could still see straight down. They both were doing about 500 knots in a 60-degree dive when the MiG suddenly splashed into the mud—Jim’s only clue that he was in grave danger of augering into the ground.

The instant Kasler saw mud shoot up around the MiG, he dropped his dive brakes, grabbed the stick with both hands, and pulled back as hard as he could. He kept waiting for the impact, certain that he was going to join his opponent in a muddy tomb. The haze became darker and darker as he neared the mud flats. Kasler grunted aloud, “This is it!” Then, just as suddenly, the F-86 grabbed some air, leveled out, and turned slightly upward. The sky ahead started to lighten, so Jim pulled in his dive brakes and eventually broke into the sunlight at 4,000 feet. He didn’t know exactly how close he had come to the mud, but he estimated it was only ten feet. He flew back to base with splatters of mud on his aircraft—thrown up by the MiG’s impact.

As soon as he saw the sunlight again, Kasler wasn’t thinking about escaping death. Over the radio he said, “Casey, I’m an ace.” Even Smiley was off the hook for not answering the alert phone because Jim was so thrilled about making ace and living to tell about it. Coincidentally, he became the United States’ 15th jet ace for shooting down his 5th MiG-15 on the 15th day of May.

An article that appeared in the July 7, 1952, *Life Magazine* cited Jim as one of the 17 jet air aces from Korea who had become “a new and deadly addition to the ranks of air warriors.” As James Salter said in *Burning the Days*, “Kasler was the nonpareil. . . . He was an obscure lieutenant when he came. He left renowned.”

Testing, Training, and Danger

After Korea, Kasler came home to Indiana for a month’s leave. Then—in July 1952—Jim, Martha, and daughter Suzanne traveled to Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, where he would spend three years. Once in place at Nellis, Kasler encountered a terrifying situation. Flying was a slaughterhouse in those days. Pilots and their families called the base “Nellis cumulus” during 1952 because one often could look toward the range and see huge black clouds of smoke billowing into the air above the airplane crashes that splattered the landscape. Of course, ejection seats kept them from losing as many pilots, but the human cost was staggering—54 fatalities in one year. The threat to Kasler was even keener. Of 18 pilots who lived on Erwin Street (the Kaslers’ location) at Nellis—14 died in crashes.

The crashes and fatalities were particularly tough on spouses.

Whenever a puff of black smoke marked another plane crash, an ominous quiet fell over the housing area. Most women went inside but kept peeking out a window, watching, trying to pretend they were busy, praying a husband hadn't crashed. When they saw the chaplain and the wing commander coming through the housing area, they wrung their hands or bit their nails, and some ran and hid because they didn't know whose house the officers were going to approach. Then, the condolence team moved solemnly to a front door to tell a wife that her husband was dead. Just that quickly, lives were devastated. Some of the women couldn't take the stress, so they simply left, preferring divorce or separation to the daily menace of watching a husband go down in smoke and flames.

The strain extended to other members of the family, as well. On one occasion, Jim's parents came out to visit and were standing in his back yard when an F-86 crashed right on the runway, exploding into a huge fireball. His parents asked, "What's that black smoke up in the valley there?" When Jim told them the cause, they were visibly shaken. Although they knew flying was risky, they hadn't connected the risk so graphically to its typical outcome: charred remains and molten metal.

The deaths got to some pilots, too. After weighing the esprit and thrill of flying against the very real danger of sacrificing themselves in training, they went into other lines of work. For those who remained, close friendships made a single loss everyone's tragedy. One of the fatalities was Billy Dobbs, a close friend of Kasler's who had four credited MiG kills while flying in Jim's squadron during the Korean War.

The rampant crashes had a number of key causes. In general, the early days of jet aviation were risky because equipment, tactics, and pilots were often untried. While Kasler was in Korea, for example, they called one graduating class of pilots "49 Crash." This class had a 75% loss rate—so bad that the surviving remnant was sent back for retraining. Jim's own graduating class of 126 had only 38 still alive and fewer than that flying for the military three years later.

Besides the general risk of jet flying, Nellis and Luke were part of Air Training Command, which was into the "tiger program" in 1952. Their motto was "Every man a tiger," and the policy was killing pilots like slow flies in a cloud of DDT. The Fighter School Commander, Clay Tice, even had the tiger patch with that saying painted on the nose of his personal aircraft, along with "Over 500 MiGs destroyed by Nellis-trained pilots." Anything went—the more rambunctious the better—even though they saw planes spinning into the ground nearly every day.

Pilots also were expected to be combat-ready, no matter what plane they drew. Kasler flew the F-84F and the F-86A, E, F, and H, plus the F-100, B-26, T-33, and F-80. On any one day, he might fly four different air-

craft. In fact, Jim's first flight at Nellis was in an F-80, a type he hadn't flown for a year. His briefing consisted of assigning him an airplane and having the crew chief review how to start the engine. The next day, Jim was attached as number four to a flight going to the gunnery range. As they were ascending after takeoff, a flight of F-86s jumped them and engaged them in a 20-minute dogfight in the Nellis corridor below 5,000 feet. After the fight, they didn't have enough fuel left to go to the range. That sort of low-level, high-risk fighting was commonplace in the tiger program.

Then too, no one thought properly about flying safety in those days. They piled up hours and pushed limits without regard for pilots or machines. For example, Kasler was assigned as a flight instructor at Nellis in the combat crew training squadron. But a pilot needed 750 flying hours to instruct, and Jim had only about 560 or 570 hours. Every day, flight operations gave him an airplane and had him tag along with another flight to the range. During the weekends, he took an F-86, F-84, F-80, or anything else he could find and flew. His squadron commander would say, "Go put twenty hours on this plane this weekend." That is a lot of hours in a jet fighter, especially with no mid-air refueling, which meant plenty of takeoffs and landings to complete six or seven one-hour missions a day. No pilot would do that anymore because fatigue leads to errors and losses.

Jim went on that way for a long time, just plugging along, building up flying hours so he could become an instructor. If he wanted to go to the west coast or back home to see his mother, he could file a flight plan and go. He often took an F-80 and went cruising down the Grand Canyon, sometimes coming closer than he should have to the walls of rock in front of him. Once, he nearly crashed when he flew too far down into the canyon and started back up too late. He kept pulling on the stick and finally had to ease down the flaps to help him just clear the wall. He admits that wasn't too smart, but it did give him a lot of experience and knowledge about what the aircraft could do.

Occasionally, Jim filled in time by flying B-25 bombers to tow targets for other fighter pilots—an unusual bit of cross training that scared the hell out of the B-25 crew chiefs. Of course, Jim wasn't above adding to their fears by getting into the cockpit and saying, "I'm going to start this son-of-a-bitch up and see what it will do." Then he would take the bomber up, tow targets, roar back to the airstrip, pitch up the nose, and land it just like a fighter. As soon as he touched down, Jim could see the crew chief hustling toward him to see what this crazy fighter jock had done to his airplane.

Fortunately, the immense stress caused by the tiger program had begun to dissipate by early 1953. The number of fatalities and airplane losses had become too high to be tolerated. Kasler's commander was fired for "supervisory error"—for failing to control his pilots—and was replaced by General

Roberts. When Roberts came to the base, he talked seriously with every pilot. “Every man a tiger” was a dead program, he said. The Air Force came out with standard operating procedures for flying safety and produced the first flying-safety posters. Yellow, black-edged safety signs appeared on the walls. Commands started handing out error reports to pilots **and** supervisors. Suddenly, supervisors were nailed for what was going on in their squadrons, and many commanders lost their jobs (which they should have, under the circumstances).

As a result of these changes, the accident rate plummeted while training actually improved. Fighter pilots still took chances. They overstressed the airplanes and did all the maneuvers necessary to aerial combat, but they were smarter about it. By the end of 1953, fatalities at Nellis had dropped to 28 (and falling), and the wing was losing far fewer airplanes.

Students assigned to Kasler’s training flight in 1952 quickly discovered he was a tough, no-nonsense instructor, but most were thrilled to be learning from a Korean War jet ace who could give them the “hot skinny.” General Hoyt Sanford (Sandy) Vandenberg, Jr., whose father was the Air Force Chief of Staff during the Korean War, was one of those students, having just graduated from basic pilot training at Williams Air Force Base. Vandenberg always had the feeling he was assigned to Kasler’s flight because the latter was one of the Air Force’s best instructors, but Jim never showed whether he knew Sandy’s father may have influenced the assignment or suggested it made any difference to him. He treated Vandenberg like any other student pilot.

Kasler’s style was laconic but demanding. He said little and never suffered foolish questions. But he also didn’t over-manage students or give them too many details before a flight. Instead, he gave them the basics and then let them go out and practice. When they screwed up, he came down on them hard because he believed a good “ass-chewing” was always preferable to crashing or getting shot down as a result of a foolish error. That’s how the students learned.

Vandenberg was on the receiving end of Kasler’s “direct instruction” during a gunnery mission in F-80s against a banner towed by a B-26 at 12,000 feet. The F-80s carried no drop tanks and had only two of the guns loaded. Each pilot in the flight had a different color of non-drying paint on the tips of their bullets to identify hits on the target banner. They started a firing run at an entry point above the target. Kasler led them up there, then peeled off, reversed direction, and fired on the banner. The student pilots were to follow in turn.

Vandenberg was number four behind a lieutenant colonel who was experienced in propeller planes but unable to get the hang of flying in jet aircraft. On each pass at the target, the man never got into the proper start-

ing position, so Vandenberg kept getting stacked up behind him. Kasler and the number two pilot, "Curly" Reder, went down in good position and made excellent firing passes. But by the time the lieutenant colonel went in, lagging badly behind Reder, he pushed Vandenberg even farther back in the formation. Kasler was becoming more and more upset, unable to believe they could be so far out of position. Of course, he couldn't see everything that was going on at the entry point.

When they landed and debriefed, Kasler tore into Vandenberg about his sloppy flying and poor position. Of course, that upset Sandy because he strongly believed it wasn't his fault. He tried to defend himself, but Jim was so distressed that he leaped up and stalked out of the briefing room. Vandenberg and Reder went off to the officer's club for lunch. After they sat down, Sandy saw Kasler in the cafeteria line and decided he was going to talk to his instructor again. He walked over, stepped into the line with Jim, and said "Lieutenant, I want you to know that there wasn't a damn thing I could do up there on the perch (entry point) because I was following the colonel." For a moment, the silence was deafening, while Sandy thought, *I've just taken on my instructor, which is the same as talking back to God.* Jim just kept pushing his tray along and said without looking up, "I know that. What the hell do you expect me to do about it?"

That honest response, which was typical of Kasler once he had cooled down, made things okay for Vandenberg and became a major turning point in his training. Following the inept flier around in the air remained difficult because he never completed an aerial maneuver. For example, Kasler would bank right into a cloud and then turn inside the cloud to see if the flight could follow. The prop jockey would always shoot right up through the top of the cloud. Yet, after the episode in the officer's club, Sandy was content knowing that Jim knew what the problem was and that it wouldn't affect his own evaluation.

Although Kasler decided he could contend with the old timer's lack of skill, his fuse was very short when he experienced outright incompetence. For example, at Nellis the flights armed their aircraft in front of the tower. One day, Jim's flight pulled into the arming area, where the armorers charged the guns and pulled out the safety streamers. Jim then called for a channel change on the radio, going from ground to tower for taxiing instructions. They all went over to the other channel except the errant lieutenant colonel.

Each flight leader within the squadron had a fish name as a call sign, so Kasler was "Gar," and the flight was "Tiger-Gar Flight." Jim said, "Okay, Gar, check in." On that day, the older pilot was "two," but he didn't respond. Curly Reder was "three" so he said, "Three's here." Vandenberg immediately said, "Four!" They all looked over at two. He had his head in

the cockpit, obviously having missed Jim's instruction, and was on the wrong channel. Jim changed over to the guard channel and said, "Gar two, come up on channel 5." No response. The fellow still wasn't looking around, so he couldn't see that Jim was trying to reach him on the radio. Suddenly, Kasler took off his helmet, jammed it on the control stick, shut down his engine, crawled out of the airplane, and strode into the snack bar in base operations. There the three students sat, with engines running but without a leader. Obviously, Kasler wasn't going to return, so they taxied back to the line contemplating the importance of clear communication and competency for readiness.

New War, New Rules in Vietnam

Until mid-1966, the U.S. Air Force's aerial bombardment of North Vietnam had been restricted to targets of comparatively little importance. These restrictions were the direct result of a notion Secretary of Defense McNamara revealed when he declared: "The targets that are influencing the operations in the South, I submit, are not the power, the oil, the harbor, or the dams. The targets are the roads and the war material being moved over the roads." There were also no-strike areas surrounding Hanoi and Haiphong, thus making a virtual sanctuary of these areas. The North Vietnamese were well aware of this sanctuary and took the utmost advantage of it, especially when positioning strategic war materials.

It became increasingly obvious that destroying targets such as vehicles, roads, small bridges, and river traffic was hardly affecting the Communists' ability to carry the war to the South. In June 1966, Washington decided not only to increase the tempo of air strikes against the North but also to include targets of greater strategic significance. The first of these targets was the great POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) facility located outside Hanoi.

On the afternoon of June 28, Kasler had just returned from a mission and, after his intelligence debriefing, stopped in at the wing command post. The deputy for operations motioned Jim into his office and told him that his squadron had drawn the lead for the strike against the Hanoi POL storage complex. He also said the Wing Commander, Colonel William H. Holt, would lead the mission. Colonel Holt had asked that Kasler finalize the navigation and attack plan and prepare the combat mission folders for the strike. On June 21, when they had first learned of the upcoming strike, they had been directed to identify to Wing Operations the pilots who were to participate—selecting them according to their skill and experience. It was one of the most difficult decisions Kasler ever had to make because he considered every pilot in the squadron qualified and knew how disappointed those not selected would be. Two of his most experienced flight com-

manders, Captain Lewis Shattuck and Captain Norman Wells, helped him plan the mission.

Planning for air-to-ground combat is the most exacting in the Air Force because this kind of combat is the most dangerous, as the casualty records of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam bear out. Moreover, low-level navigation at speeds above 500 knots requires the utmost skill because a one- or two-degree heading error can throw a plane miles wide of the route in just a few minutes. Timing is also essential because each attack element must mesh exactly for an effective mission. Three things are necessary to increase an air-to-ground combat pilot's chances of survival: planning, precisely executing the mission, and luck. Of course, experience and skill in planning and execution can decrease the need for luck.

Kasler's team spent six hours planning, checking, and double-checking every facet of the mission. This was their first detailed study of defenses in the Hanoi area, and they found little in the aerial photographs to comfort them. The enemy's air defenses, formidable from the start, were becoming fiercer each day. By every estimate, Hanoi had the greatest concentration of anti-aircraft weapons ever known. North Vietnam as a whole contained from 7,000 to 10,000 fast-firing anti-aircraft weapons of 37mm or larger caliber. In addition, the Russians had built the Vietnamese a sophisticated radar and communication network to detect and coordinate their SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) and MiG fighters.

Surprise was impossible. For one thing, the Navy's attack fighters were to strike the Haiphong POL complex fifteen minutes before Kasler's time over target. For another, the defenses would certainly be alert in the Hanoi area because aircraft from the 388th Wing would precede their wing's 24 aircraft in the attack.

To an outsider, the intelligence planning room resembles a madhouse in a paper factory. Once the mission leader has laid out the route and attack plan, pilots must prepare their own charts. They cut, glue, and then fold the charts accordion-style. They draw routes down the center of the page and tick off time and distance. Each turn requires another chart because the route line must remain centered for ease of navigation.

By midnight, Kasler and his team were satisfied with their work and headed for their quarters. Usually, a briefing for the day's first mission occurred between 0100 and 0900, but this one was special. Except for a few selected strikes, involving only a few aircraft, the Hanoi raid was the only one scheduled for Kasler's wing on the 29th. Their briefing was scheduled for 0830, with time over target at 1210.

On the morning of the strike, Jim walked into the wing intelligence building at 0810. General George Simler, the deputy for operations of Seventh Air Force, was standing by the door with Colonel Holt. General

Simler looked at Jim and said, “Major Kasler, would you like to lead this mission?” Startled, Jim said, “Yes Sir, I certainly would!” General Simler took from Colonel Holt the combat mission folder Kasler had prepared for Holt the previous day and handed it to Jim. Colonel Holt didn’t look happy. Jim said, “Sorry about that, Colonel.” Apparently, he sounded a bit flippant because Holt muttered something and stalked into the briefing room. Jim hadn’t meant for it to come out the way it sounded. He knew how eager Holt was to lead the mission and was sincerely sorry. Every fighter pilot dreams of leading a mission of this importance, but few get the chance.

As it turned out, all the wing commanders whose units were participating in the Hanoi raid—whether for the strike, top cover, or support—had scheduled themselves to lead their wings. But General Joseph Moore, Commander of Seventh Air Force, issued orders to remove them from the mission. When everyone entered the briefing room, Kasler took the mission commander’s seat. The briefing officer nearly had a heart attack. He kept motioning that Jim was in the wrong chair until Colonel Holt finally gave him the word.

The general briefing preceding a mission is little more than a refresher of items the pilots have already learned and memorized about the route, tactics, and target defenses. Pilots are most interested in the weather and bombing winds in the target area. The weather for the Hanoi area that day was perfect for fighter-bomber operations. It was forecast as clear with light and variable winds to 10,000 feet.

General Simler concluded the briefing with a short talk, in which he emphasized the importance of the Hanoi POL complex to the Vietnamese supply lines. He pointed out that it contained twenty percent of North Vietnam’s petroleum supplies. He also made it clear that under no circumstances, even if hit, was any pilot to jettison bombs into the city of Hanoi.

Kasler’s sister wing, the 388th, (based at Korat, Thailand) was to start the attack on the POL complex with eight aircraft. They planned to approach the Communist capital from the south, low behind the screen of high mountains southwest of the city. At the mountains, they would pop up and then dive in low over Hanoi and strike the target.

Kasler’s wing—the 355th—was to strike from the north. They planned to cross the Red River 100 miles northwest of Hanoi, turn east, and descend to low altitude to avoid the SAMs. They intended to run parallel to and north of Thud Ridge, the 5,000-foot razorback mountain running west to east through the heart of North Vietnam. That ridge had earned its nickname because so many F-105 Thunderchiefs, or Thuds, had been shot down on or near it. The eastern tip of the mountain ends about 25 miles

due north of Hanoi. Kasler's unit planned to screen themselves behind the mountain until they reached the eastern tip, and then turn 90 degrees south toward Hanoi.

The operations order also directed all attacks from the 388th and 355th wings had to be carried out on a south-to-north heading to keep from tossing a hung bomb into the city of Hanoi. Approaching from the north, Kasler had to do a 180-degree pop-up maneuver in order to strike the target as ordered. The attack order meant that every aircraft would be rolling into the bomb run at nearly the same spot, heading in the same direction. This shooting-gallery approach was an anti-aircraft gunner's dream and a fighter pilot's nightmare. To protect civilian populations, however, such orders were commonplace in Vietnam to the very end of the war. Of course, pilots want attacks on divergent headings to confuse the gunners and thus keep them from zeroing in on one predictable spot.

Each aircraft carried eight 750-pound bombs—six on the centerline Multiple Ejector Rack and one on each outboard pylon. In Kasler's final briefing—just before the pilots headed for their aircraft—he had directed split-second delayed fusing for each bomb on the outboard stations. With an instantaneous setting, a near miss with those bombs would still set shrapnel flying among the fuel-storage tanks, thus increasing their chance to destroy the target.

The crew chief greeted Kasler as he stepped from his pickup truck and walked around the aircraft with him on the pre-flight inspection. Jim told him, "If I give you the abort signal after I start the engine, get the ladder back up immediately because I'm heading for the ground spare." He said, "Major Kasler, my assistant and I have spent the last nine hours checking every system on this airplane. You're not going to abort." The crew chief was right, and his confidence came from experience. In fact, most pilots say they have never found more dedicated or experienced airmen than those who worked on their aircraft during the Vietnam War. After Jim started to receive publicity, he always told newsmen his missions began and ended with the crew—he couldn't fly without them. For 91 missions in Vietnam, Kasler had no aborts and only one minor armament problem—a fantastic achievement.

Jim's group started their engines and taxied to the marshaling area at the end of the runway, where the maintenance crews inspected the aircraft and pulled safety pins. They then lined up on the runway and were cleared for takeoff. Their takeoff weight pushed 51,000 pounds—the maximum gross weight for the F-105 Thunderchief. In the hot Thailand summer, taking off this heavy meant a long ground roll and a lift-off speed of 235 knots. Jim breathed a sigh of relief when his landing gear was in the well, not because he was concerned about the heavy takeoff but because 95 percent

of aborts occurred on the ground. Now he was airborne with a perfectly functioning aircraft, leading the biggest mission of the Vietnam War to that date.

As the rest of the flight slid into position, Jim completed a slow turn to the north and contacted his radar site. They gave him a bearing to the refueling tankers, 250 nautical miles to the north. Approaching the tankers, he could see an ominous row of thunderstorms stretched across the horizon to the north. Obviously, the tankers weren't going to be able to maintain their briefed refueling route. Fighters can refuel and even join up in thin cirrus clouds, but heavy cumulus clouds make refueling impossible because of turbulence and poor visibility. They began taking on fuel, but the tankers couldn't maintain their track because of the thunderstorms. Ten minutes before their drop-off time, the tanker lead said he had to turn back because he could not fly around the storms ahead. All the F-105s had refueled, but they weren't able to cycle through again to top off as planned.

Kasler rejoined his flight in close formation, flicked on his radar, and picked his way between the thunderstorm cells. He was 60 miles southeast of his desired point of departure when he left the tankers. His timing had to be exact, so he had selected a prominent river junction in Laos as his starting checkpoint. As luck would have it, Kasler's flight broke out at a small hole in the clouds, directly over the point of departure. He was three minutes ahead of schedule, so he made a 360-degree tight turn to use up time before setting course to the north.

Jim immediately re-entered clouds, and when he next broke out after 20 minutes, he was directly over the Red River northwest of Yen Bai. His Doppler radar was working perfectly, and he was directly on course and time. He turned right and began descending through several layers of clouds. Vietnam north of Thud Ridge was covered with ground fog. He dropped to 300 feet, which was just above the fog bank. At higher altitudes, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) had a nasty way of suddenly popping up through clouds at an unsuspecting pilot, but 300 feet was fairly safe.

Kasler's flight was skimming along the base of Thud Ridge, which towered above them to the right. As they approached its eastern tip, their external fuel tanks showed empty, so Jim ordered them jettisoned. He could hear Lieutenant Colonel James R. Hopkins, leader of the 388th, departing the Hanoi target area, so he asked Hopkins about the weather. Hopkins said, "It's clear in the target area, but MiGs are airborne." Looking far to the east, Jim could see smoke rising from the POL tanks at Haiphong, which the Navy fighters had already struck.

When Jim passed the initial point at the end of Thud Ridge, he called the flight to push it up and started a turn south toward Hanoi. As he turned, the fog bank faded away beneath him and his flight broke into the

clear. At that same instant, flak began bursting around them. Jim glanced to the right toward Phuc Yen airfield and could see the flak guns blinking at them. With Jim's flight running only 300 feet above the ground, the Vietnamese had leveled their heavy 85mm and 100mm guns and were firing almost horizontally. This meant the shells were killing their own people as they struck the ground—reflecting how important the POL plant was to their war effort.

Kasler's flight was running parallel to the northeast railroad that leads into the city of Hanoi. It was North Vietnam's most important supply link with the People's Republic of China, so flak guns of every caliber and description protected it. Ahead, Jim could see two gray smoke columns rising, one on each side of the Hanoi POL field the 388th had just struck. But they hadn't hit a major fuel tank. The sky was dotted with hundreds of white, gray, and black puffs—the remaining traces of flak shells that had been fired at the departing Korat aircraft. Thus, Jim had a good idea of what was awaiting him over the target.

Jim approached slightly left of target, called for afterburner, and began his pull-up. He climbed through 8,000 feet and began a slow turn to the right until he reached his roll-in point near 11,000 feet. He cut his afterburner, dropped dive brakes, and rolled into the bomb run. As he was turning in, he could see three ten-gun, 85mm batteries on the Gia Lam airfield frantically firing at him and his flight. Ignoring them as much as he could, Jim began his bomb run. He could hardly believe his eyes—big, fat fuel tanks filled his view. He pushed his pickle button and made a rolling pullout to the right. When he cleared the smoke, he turned gently to the left around the target complex. The huge fuel tanks were erupting one after another, sending up immense billowing fireballs.

By the time Kasler had circled to the target's southwest corner, each of his flight members had also made the bomb run and rejoined him. The smoke now merged into one huge, boiling, red-and-black pillar—an unbelievable sight. As Jim circled back, he could see flames leaping out of the smoke thousands of feet above him. He swung around to the north toward Phuc Yen airfield. He had seen two MiGs on the end of the runway when they began their dash toward Hanoi and thought they might get a shot if either got into the air. One of the many rules of engagement in Vietnam forbade attacking a MiG unless it were fully airborne. But Jim changed his mind about looking for MiGs when he saw the intensity of the flak bursting around them. He banked his Thunderchief to the south and looked at the ground; so many guns were firing, the valley reminded Jim of a desert city viewed from the air at night. But it was daylight, and those winking "lights" were thousands of shots fired at them in anger.

After Jim crossed south of the Red River, the flak diminished as the gun-

ners apparently switched their attention to the fighter-bombers behind his flight. Jim headed west, searching the roads for targets of opportunity. As he approached Hoa Binh on the Black River, he noticed a new road had been cut up the side of a high plateau that extended east back towards Hanoi. He popped over the rim of the plateau and dropped his nose to investigate. There, directly under his gunsight piper, was a truck. He squeezed the trigger, and 20mm cannon projectiles tore into the truck, setting it on fire. Jim and his flight found 25 trucks on the plateau. They set twelve on fire and damaged at least six others. Apparently, the Vietnamese were floating supplies from China down the Black River on rafts to Hoa Binh, transferring them to trucks, and moving them across the plateau to Hanoi.

As Jim pulled out of one of his strafing passes, he looked back at Hanoi 35 miles to the east. It was a windless day, so the black smoke formed a perfect pillar reaching above 35,000 feet. By now their fuel was running low, forcing them to head for home. They didn't have enough fuel to reach Takhli, so Jim planned a recovery at Ubon if they couldn't get fuel from the airborne tankers. Looking back toward Hanoi again, Jim could still see the smoke column more than 150 miles away. The GCI (ground control intercept) controller found him a KC-135 tanker, so the flight refueled over the Mekong Delta and headed for home.

The Hanoi POL strike was one of the most successful missions of the Vietnam War and a supreme feat of courage, fortitude, and airmanship. The F-105s destroyed more than 90 percent of the complex. It was one of the few targets in North Vietnam that never required a restrike because the Vietnamese abandoned the facility altogether.

Tempering in Hanoi's fiery furnace Shutdown, capture, and torture

On August 8, 1966, 40-year-old James Kasler took off from Takhli Royal Thai Air Base on his 91st mission, including 75 over North Vietnam and 16 over Laos. He was already the stuff of legends. An eighteen-year-old B-29 tail gunner over Japan in WW II, a Korean War jet ace with six MiGs to his official credit, and now—many believed—the premier F-105 attack pilot in Southeast Asia. One of his wingmen had dubbed him “the one-man air force” in a *Time* magazine interview published on that very day.

Kasler's fellow fliers admired him especially for his phenomenal vision and his aggressiveness. He could roll over a target zone and see 20 things other pilots didn't see. His Hoosier voice would come in on the radio, saying, “Did you see the glint off that ack-ack barrel and the two trucks parked in the trees? There's a bunker down there, too.” Then, he would demolish with cannon fire or bombs everything he had seen.

Jim's squadron-mates called him "The Destroyer" because he always expended all ordnance against the enemy on each mission, including 1,029 rounds of 20-millimeter shells from the Gatling gun. It had accounted for many of his flight of four's 219 buildings, 66 barges, 53 railroad cars, 44 trucks, 36 fuel tanks, 28 bridges, and 16 flak sites damaged or destroyed. That was a record-setting performance in air-to-ground combat for the Vietnam War. For the strike he led against Hanoi's POL plant in June 1966, Jim had won the Air Force Cross—the Air Force's highest decoration for valor.

Jim's August 8 mission was against a cluster of warehouses in the Hoang Nhi barracks area. This warehouse target in "Route Package 5," about 55 miles northwest of Hanoi, was heavily defended by an array of anti-aircraft guns. He knew the dangers well: on four previous missions he had limped home with battle damage, including a shell-shattered canopy. Otherwise, the mission didn't seem unusually challenging. They were to evaluate the effectiveness of low-level delivery of ordnance on this strike. The flight of four included Captain Norman Wells, Lieutenant Roger Ayers, Lieutenant Fred Flom, and Major Kasler as mission leader. Things were going well. They came in at 200 feet off the deck and hit the target with cluster bombs. They could see their hits on the supply depot, which were good. So Kasler decided to put the rest of the cluster bombs on another supply area down the river—just a little east of Binh Bay.

When Kasler's flight arrived at the target, a little cumulus cloud was lying right over the target area, so Jim started to turn out. But for some reason the flight seemed to have closed too quickly on Jim, and as he banked up to abort his run, he saw a 37mm projectile go right into the belly of his wingman Fred Flom's aircraft. Flom was only about 200 feet off the ground at the time because it was another intended low-level strike. The belly of his aircraft immediately began smoking, and yellow and red flames were flaring out of it. Jim told Flom to turn out about 240 degrees and head for the Red River. Then, he rolled up over Flom and fell in behind him to take a closer look.

They began climbing to gain a little altitude and had gone only a few miles when Kasler knew Flom's airplane was going to blow up. He had seen these symptoms before in battle-damaged F-105s. Kasler yelled for Flom to eject several times before he finally did. He was doing about 550 knots at 1,000 feet above ground level when his canopy came off. The airplane started to roll to the right. When it reached about 90 degrees from vertical, Flom ejected. The seat had barely cleared the cockpit when his airplane exploded in a fireball. His chute opened immediately, and Kasler saw a chunk of metal fly through the parachute canopy. Jim was only about 1,500 feet behind and could see Flom was unconscious, hanging in

the chute harness. The blast had knocked him out. Unfortunately, he landed limp in his chute, right on a roadway near a village.

The flight circled until Flom landed. Kasler called for a rescue combat air patrol (rescap) and made two passes to keep the heat off Flom and give him a chance to escape, but Jim was low on fuel. By this time he had already jettisoned his drop tanks. He collected his flight and headed south of the Red River to a refueling tanker. Frankly, Jim didn't think recovery was likely north of the Red River and so close to a village.

Kasler's flight had refueled and was ready to go home when they received a call to support Flom's rescap. They flew back to the shoot-down site as quickly as possible. Jim located the spot on the road where Flom had landed, but he wasn't there. Apparently, he had already been captured. Flak began exploding near him, so Kasler headed northwest to get out of it. He saw two guns firing at him—*57mm*, he thought. He broke right to evade the cannon shells but should have gone left because he took solid hits. Still, he had been hit hard before and was able to go on with the mission. He hadn't lost an F-105 in 91 missions and he wasn't about to give up on this one, especially not deep in enemy territory.

Wells and Ayers were with Kasler as he headed south across the Red River. But the cockpit immediately filled with thick smoke, and Jim knew he was in trouble. His first impulse was to blow the canopy to clear the smoke in the cockpit. He had to be able to see. But he couldn't locate the auxiliary canopy jettison handle on the left console, so he used the ejection-seat handle to jettison the canopy. When the canopy blew off, the smoke cleared, but he had other problems. He was about 15 miles south of the Red River and had regained some altitude when his controls started running away from him. The engine was losing power, and the stick was not responding well. He knew the hydraulic system had been hit. Thunderchiefs at that time had not been modified with a backup hydraulic system—nor did they have a system to stabilize flight if hydraulic fluid gushed out. Jim was losing control.

Despite Jim's best efforts, the F-105 rolled uncontrollably toward the ground. It was time to get out while he had a little altitude left. The stick was walking around as he reached for the ejection handles, and it migrated over onto his right thigh and locked there. Jim knew what that would mean when he fired the ejection seat, but he had no choice. When it fired, the stick deflected his right knee into the canopy rail, snapping his right femur just above the knee and splintering it near the hip. The thighbone jammed up through the groin area into his abdomen like a splintered spear and stayed there.

As soon as Kasler came out of the airplane, the pain was horrendous. When his chute opened, he looked down and could see a lump on his

abdomen, waist-high above his G-suit. That was the upper end of his femur. His right leg was hanging with no thighbone to support it. He reached into his survival vest and pulled out his emergency radio to call the other members of his flight, but he was so woozy from pain that he just put the radio back in his vest next to his chest.

Kasler had punched out near 7,000 feet; when he had descended to 1,000 feet, his vision started to clear. He could see he was coming down in an area of large rice fields—in open country. But as bad luck would have it, he drifted and fell in a little wooded area. Had he come down in the open, Ayers and Wells might have kept the Vietnamese off him with their Gatling guns until a rescue helicopter arrived. The A-1 “Sandies” were already enroute because of the rescap called for Fred Flom.

When Kasler landed, his right leg collapsed under him. He wasn’t feeling much by then, until he struck the ground. In his foggy condition he hadn’t released his survival pack, so it remained on his back. He lay on top of his right leg, which was twisted underneath him. Still, he managed to pull back away from the survival kit, unhook all his equipment, and get his leg straightened out in front of him. Then, he pulled out his radio and called Ayers and Wells, the remaining two members of his flight. “Right leg badly broken,” he said. “Alert the rescue team. I’ll come back on the air on the hour.” It was then about 20 minutes to 10:00 in the morning. They were orbiting 2,000 to 3,000 feet above Kasler when he called, and no flak was in the area to bother them. “Rescue team inbound,” they said, adding the Jolly Greens and A-1s had already been dispatched because of Flom’s shoot-down.

Kasler thought he would have a better chance of being rescued if he could drag himself out onto a dike in the rice paddies—into the open. But when he tried, he couldn’t crawl because of the dense underbrush and his shattered right leg, which kept getting tangled up. It was a hindrance—worse than useless. He finally gave up on crawling into the open, deciding instead to stay put and wait for help. He took the .38 revolver out of his survival vest, cocked it, and put it underneath a little bush next to him. *If the Vietnamese are going to start whacking on me,* he thought, *I’ll take some of them with me.*

About twenty minutes passed. It was a few minutes before ten, so Kasler decided to call Captain Wells again. As he picked up his radio, he heard clicking all around him, and he knew the Vietnamese were nearby in the forest. The clicking sounded like bamboo sticks knocked together—signals, apparently. Suddenly, a Vietnamese with a big machete jumped out in front of Jim, right at his feet, with a blood-curdling scream. He was wearing only a loincloth, and he had the machete raised as though he were going to hack Jim to pieces. Jim grabbed for his revolver, but 15 or so other

Vietnamese—men and women—jumped out all around him, grabbed him, and started tearing off his clothes. *Apparently*, Jim thought, *they've never seen a zipper and don't know how to use one*. Instead of untying his boots, they broke the laces to get them off. They ripped off his G-suit, flying suit, and boots, then tore the watch off his arm. He was down to his under shorts, wondering if they were going to strip him naked.

With his clothes off, Kasler could look at his right thigh. The area from his knee to his groin was nearly flat because it lacked bone to support the muscles. Later, Kasler learned the top end of his broken femur was splayed out like fingers on a hand where it jammed into his intestines. Why that didn't sever an artery or some major blood vessel Jim didn't know. If those sharp, splintered bone ends had punctured his intestines, he would have died of peritonitis because the Vietnamese never opened his abdomen to check for punctures. He was extremely lucky on that score—if one can consider it lucky to be captured, nearly crippled for life, and suffering from tremendous pain.

Once the North Vietnamese had moved Kasler to the Hao Lao prison in Hanoi—known to POWs as the “Hanoi Hilton” but translating into English as “the fiery furnace”—they almost immediately advertised that he was a prisoner. They wanted to show the world they had captured the “one-man air force”: the famous Korean-war ace and hot F-105 pilot. Jim's notoriety may have saved his life, but it also led to more suffering and torture because they wanted something from him they could use for propaganda.

A torturer called Fidel and the “Cuban Program”

Near the end of September 1967, Kasler was in his prison cell recuperating from more than 30 straight days of torture, when he first saw a Caucasian torturer the POWs called Fidel because they surmised he was Cuban. Fidel was very husky and handsome. He had relatively dark skin, black hair combed back in a pompadour but with a part, prominent ears, and good teeth. He always wore a shirt with two close-set buttons at the top near the neck. The other buttons were normally spaced. He had several sport shirts but always with those two distinctive, closely spaced buttons at the neck. He wore combat boots and blue cotton trousers with no crease.

Fidel was talking to Lump, the political interrogator in the prison camp. Although the camp had a commander, Lump gave all the orders. He was tall for a Vietnamese (about 5' 8”), but Fidel was taller—a good six feet or more. Fidel certainly looked like a Latin and he spoke vernacular English

with an accent, the way a Cuban would. Kasler had glimpsed him before, but this was his first chance to study him. Lump and Fidel were standing in the street in front of the headquarters building, demonstrating how to use irons, ropes, and other torture devices. They were consulting with political agents from downtown Hanoi, probably talking about the prisoners and what they were going to do.

Fidel was running an experimental torture program. He had come into camp in July 1967 and started pulling people into the interrogation room. Larry Spencer, a Navy officer from Jim's building, went in first. The next day, they moved ten men out of the rooms and put Spencer in charge of them. Fidel started torturing them one at a time, breaking them down, making them see delegations, that sort of thing. Kasler didn't know if the Vietnamese taught him or he taught the Vietnamese, but Kasler suspected the latter. He seemed to be trying new innovations on selected prisoners. Kasler and ten others were to join the program.

The 13-inch incision in Jim's leg had closed most of the way, but the remaining gap kept draining from a persistent infection. He felt very ill and went through a period of fainting spells. The captors had stopped giving him bandages and had taken away his crutches. Although he tried to wash out old bandages to use again, he didn't have enough soap. He tied socks around his leg, trying to contain some of the pus and blood, but the infection worsened. He had to wear his long, red pants—even in the summer—just to keep the mess off his bed. When he did get out to the shower, he turned the pants inside out and scraped off the collected crud.

By mid-November of 1967 Kasler's condition declined further, so the Vietnamese took him to the hospital. They said then that he needed an operation but didn't come to get him ready for one until after the Tet offensive in March, 1968. Six or seven days before they were to take him to the hospital, they started a series of shots that made him horribly nauseous. He also had a burning sensation throughout his body but thought it was just the penicillin working through his depleted veins and arteries.

While giving Kasler the shots, the Vietnamese also were interrogating him. The Professor and Lump tried to get him to fill in the blanks on a paper they had written about U.S. bases in Thailand. Jim knew little about those bases, other than Takhli where he served, except the number designator of a few flying wings. They had had those designators for years, so Jim could tell them nothing of consequence. Yet, he refused to fill out or sign anything.

Lantern Jaw came in, threw the irons down on the floor, and threatened Kasler, but he still refused to do what they asked. The guard put him on his knees, slapped him around a bit, and started putting the irons on him. Kasler didn't feel he could take the ropes and irons after what he had gone

through, so he agreed to fill in the blanks. He wrote the number designators for Takhli and Korat, then told them he didn't know the others—which he didn't. They became angry again and started yelling at him. They bounced him around and put him on his knees. Jim simply repeated that he didn't know the answers to their questions. The Professor and Lump went outside to consult, then sent Jim back to his room.

That afternoon, a usually sadistic guard nicknamed Magoo (for his squint) showed up with a handful of penicillin pills. He tried to instruct Kasler how to take them. Jim thought Magoo might have been saying to take three a day for seven days until the 21 pills were gone, but he was difficult to understand. Jim took seven a day for three days, concerned all the while that Magoo would come back to count the pills and use any miscount as an excuse to pound him. The penicillin cleared Kasler's wound for a time, so the Vietnamese postponed his operation. But Jim's reprieve from infection didn't last long; his leg started draining heavy pus and blood again. Whenever Jim pushed his hand down his leg, the evil mixture boiled out of his wound. It continued month after month.

Kasler was further distressed when his teeth started flaking, probably because the bone infection and poor diet were sapping calcium from his body. The entire enamel fronts of many of his teeth just fell off, and fillings started coming out. Jim was sure cavities would set in and destroy all his teeth. The combination of ill health and physical torture was gradually wearing on his psyche and ability to resist.

One day in June 1968, a guard caught Kasler communicating with someone in the neighboring cell. The prisoners thought they had clearance in the building, but somehow this guard had slipped past them. The Vietnamese took Jim to the interrogator Spot, who slapped him with an open hand and fist. Then Spot said,

"I know you are very sick, and I know about your injured leg. What punishment do you think we should give you?"

Jim said, "That's for you to decide."

Spot hesitated a moment and then said, "You'll go back to your room and remain on your knees."

After Jim spent an hour on his knees, Spot and another interrogator from downtown Hanoi called him back for another quiz. Then they sent him back to his cell and put him on his knees for the rest of the day and night. They gave him a five-minute break every hour—their version of "humane, lenient treatment" because of Jim's condition.

A few days later, they gave Kasler another series of shots, which cleared the drainage from his wound. When the shots stopped, however, the same milky, sweet-smelling drainage returned after a few days. Jim had a fever, began losing interest in food, and fought bouts of dysentery off and

on. Late in June, Spot called Jim into his office. He acted friendly, chatted, gave Jim a cigarette, and asked about Jim's family. Then he said,

"I have noticed the food is getting better."

"That's not true," Jim said. "The food has gotten worse."

"You're getting sugar and fruit," Spot countered.

"Yeah, a couple bananas a year, maybe."

"Food production is up," Spot said. "Things are improving in this camp."

"I don't believe it," Jim said.

"We are celebrating," Spot insisted. "We have shot down our 3,000th enemy airplane."

"You're lucky if you've shot down 700."

"No, our numbers are accurate. The District commanders must go out and place their hands on each wreck to verify it. Also, more prisoners are in camp than ever before. Now my commander wants a man to meet a delegation and appear on television to mark this occasion."

Many delegations came to Hanoi—East Germans, Poles, Russians, Americans—and all wanted to see the prisoners of war. For each group, the Vietnamese tortured the American POWs so the latter would give correct answers to questions that the Vietnamese required from the delegations. The questions were controlled no matter where the delegations came from. The Vietnamese took no chances and trusted no one, not even their own allies. From what Kasler had heard, the Americans who came to Hanoi didn't seem to need much coaching from the Vietnamese. They could hardly wait to get on the "Voice of Vietnam" and echo the latest Communist propaganda. Their broadcasts to American troops (and the POWs) typically called for desertion or refusal to fight.

After his return to the United States, Jim recalled in particular when the Vietnamese broadcast a recording of Dr. Benjamin Spock speaking at an anti-war rally. He could tell Spock was pleased with himself because of the way he was giggling. Spock had hit on a great idea. He wanted each family in the U.S. to adopt one of the boys who was serving time for desertion or draft dodging. They would provide him with money while he was in jail and help him get started when he got out. As Spock explained, this program would encourage other young men to go to jail rather than serve their country. *Now isn't that heart-warming?* Jim thought. *That's just what every loyal American family needs: their own little adopted coward.*

Also, the reports these groups brought back to the United States often distorted the truth about the bombing of civilian targets and dikes in North Vietnam—apparently (Jim believed) because they wanted the North Vietnamese to win and were willing to betray their own country to attain that goal. For these reasons, he was particularly adamant about not meet-

ing delegations because he didn't want to do or say anything that might aid their cause. So, when Spot demanded that he appear on television, Jim said,

"Bullshit. I'm not meeting any goddam delegation."

"You have no choice," said Spot. "You are in our hands now. We have kept you alive, so you owe us this appearance."

"I owe you nothing," Jim said.

Spot kept badgering Kasler to agree to his demands. When Jim wouldn't respond, the interrogator left him with a copy of the *Vietnam Courier* and went out of the room, probably to talk to Lump. That's how Jim found out about Robert Kennedy's assassination—by reading the *Courier*. He wondered how much other important news he had missed since his shoot-down. When Spot came back, he tried again to talk Jim into meeting the delegation, but he refused. Spot put him on his knees for an hour, then asked again. He refused. "Go to your room and roll up your gear," Spot ordered. That wasn't a good sign.

The guards put Jim into the Ho Chi Minh room, a filthy little cell on the back left side of the Auditorium. They didn't do anything to him that day, but on June 29 Spot called him in for a quiz. He had three sets of hand irons of different sizes, leg irons, and a pile of ropes—all the torture paraphernalia. Spot told Jim to sit down, gave him a cigarette, and again tried to talk him into meeting the delegation. Jim refused, adding that Spot could torture him or even drag him in front of the delegation, but he wasn't going to say a goddam word.

This time, Beanpole (also known as Ichabod Crane) administered the torture. He was 5 feet 8 inches or so in height and very thin—hence, his nicknames. After putting Kasler on his knees, Beanpole got behind him and hit him four or five times on the side of the face before he started putting on the irons with the backs of Jim's wrists together and the irons clenched bone tight. Then he put the ropes on above the elbows and started cinching Jim's elbows together. Many of the prisoners couldn't take the pain in their shoulders, but Jim felt pain—excruciating pain—in his wrists.

At first, Kasler managed the ropes and irons, which lasted about 45 minutes. Then, they took them off, slapped Jim around, and asked if he were going to meet the delegation. Jim said, "No," so they put on a different set of irons. After 30 minutes, he passed out from the pain. When he came to, they were taking off the irons. They let him sit for 15 minutes or so, then bashed him around some more and put the irons on again. The pain was even worse. After about 15 minutes, Jim couldn't take further punishment, so he said, "I surrender." Instead of stopping, however, they continued to torture him. They wrapped the rope around his throat and cut off his breathing until he passed out again. When he came to, they were slap-

ping him to wake him up and asking if he still surrendered. Jim said, "Yes," so they finally removed the irons.

They wanted Kasler to write something, but he couldn't use his hands. He sat on a stool for three or four hours before some feeling finally returned. The Vietnamese gave him a copy of questions the delegation was going to ask and the answers he was to give. Questions included where he was captured and by whom. He was supposed to say unarmed women and children captured him. Of course, that wasn't true. He also was supposed to say that he had seen hundreds of prisoners in the camp and that the American bombing had been fruitless because the Vietnamese economy was continuing to increase, with production up on all fronts and fruit, sugar, beer, and lots of extras in the prisoners' diets. They demanded that Jim agree America had sabotaged the Geneva Agreements of 1954 by conducting an illegal, immoral, and unjust war—besides being ineffective, the bombing was costing American lives. They even wanted him to say the American representative in Paris had shown bad faith and was not negotiating. It went on and on like that. Jim knew he couldn't say any of it.

Kasler tried to modify the answers he had to write. Spot kept threatening to put him back in irons, but he finally finished in shaky handwriting. Jim knew it would never pass. They sent him back to his cell, let him stew there a day, then moved him to the Ho Chi Minh room and put him on short rations—less than an inch of soup, a little handful of rice, and sometimes a small piece of bread. The starvation diet had little effect on Jim's appetite: he wasn't interested in food anyway because he was so sick.

On July 2, 1968, Lump called him in for a final briefing. Lump gave Jim a cigarette and asked about his family. He asked if Jim had ever been to Japan and noted that the Japanese were exporting a million dollars worth of equipment to South Vietnam each year. This general nonsense lasted about 45 minutes before Lump got around to the real issue: meeting the delegation. He handed Jim the questions and answers with red-pencil corrections. He had changed many of the answers around so they were much less negative. Then Lump said, "Now you know what you must do."

Jim said, "Like I told your commander, you can torture me and you can drag me in front of the delegation, but I'm not going to say a goddam word."

That upset Lump, but he didn't lose his cool. He took a stack of 8x10 glossy prints out of a desk drawer and started showing them to Kasler. The pictures were of anti-war demonstrations in the States: people marching through San Francisco and Washington, carrying protest signs with slogans such as "Communist Party USA" and "End the War" on them. About the fifth picture Jim looked at, though, showed two elderly gentlemen in American Legion caps standing in the background. Their sign said, "Drop

the bomb.” The Vietnamese hadn’t picked up on that. It gave Jim that little nudge of courage he needed because it made him feel he was not alone. Lump finally gave up and sent him back to his room.

The next morning at six o’clock, the medic came in. Jim was still very ill at the time, but the medic wasn’t there to help him. A medical technician always came in before a torture session to wrap Jim’s leg, so blood and pus wouldn’t spatter on the interrogation room. Spot was in the interrogation room again with the torture paraphernalia laid out. He told Jim he had better change his mind, but Jim refused. Spot sat on a stool and said, “Now, I am going to enjoy this.” Jim had no doubt that Spot did “enjoy” torturing people; he was a genuinely sick person.

To be sure of controlling a prisoner, ten or twelve guards always remained nearby. They put Jim on his knees. Beanpole slapped him repeatedly, then ran him through the ropes and irons for about 45 minutes. The second time, they changed the irons around to increase the pain. Jim was lying there on his left side with his eyes closed as they were putting on the second set of irons. Suddenly, someone said, “Kasler.” Jim looked up, and there was Fidel. He grabbed Jim by the shirt, pulled him up, and started shaking him. “What kind of shit are you trying to pull?” he demanded. His English was good, idiomatic, and laced with obscenities. “Shit” and “motherfucker” were among his favorite expressions.

Fidel supervised the irons this time. About halfway through the session, Jim was lying on his left side, and Fidel was getting exasperated. In retrospect, Jim recognized that Fidel became upset if a prisoner didn’t scream or yell out. Jim never gave them that satisfaction during any of the torture—never uttered a sound. At any rate, Fidel slammed his boot heel into Jim’s chest. The pain shot right out of Jim’s heart all the way down his right arm to his fingertips. Intense pain. Fidel apparently understood how badly he had hurt him with the boot kick because he never did that again. Meanwhile, Fidel was cursing and yelling, “Who do you think you are, you son-of-a-bitch. What are you trying to do?” After about 20 minutes, they took the irons off and placed Jim on a stool by the desk. Fidel sat down behind the desk and started talking to him.

“How many children do you have?” Fidel asked.

“Three.”

“Why are you doing this? Why are you refusing to talk to the delegation?”

“Because I have to.”

“Who knows you’re here in this camp?”

“Nobody.”

“Well, what are you pulling this shit for? You don’t have to go through this. Just go see the delegation. I have the paper here. I can change it

around. We don't have to back you into a corner. We're not going to make you say anything bad. Just go up before the delegation and say a few things. There's nothing wrong with what you are going to say."

"No," said Jim.

"Do you want a glass of water?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to surrender?"

"No."

Fidel turned to one of the guards and said, "Nuoc" (Vietnamese for water). They brought Jim some in the first real glass he had seen in North Vietnam. Fidel pointed a little fan at Jim, then, to cool him off. It was a boiling hot summer, so Jim was soaked with sweat. Fidel gave him a cigarette and left the room while he drank the water. After a while, he came back and started talking again—just shooting the bull. He said, "Okay. I'm gonna get that paper over there, and we're gonna change it around." Jim said, "Forget it. I'm not doing it." So Fidel put him back on his knees. Beanpole repeatedly slapped him and then placed him in irons again.

Irons were always worst for Kasler the third time. He would do anything just to try to throw his mind into concentrating on something besides the torture. He recited the Lord's Prayer, thought about his mother's pies, or remembered something he had done with his children while they were in Germany—picnics or anything—just to try to get through it. He was on his side in a kind of stupor, obviously getting pretty foggy, when Fidel hunkered down next to him.

"Would you like to take a bath?" Fidel asked.

"Yes."

"Are you going to surrender?"

"No."

"Take off the ropes and irons," Fidel said to the guards. Then he told Kasler, "All right. Go over and get your shit, and go take a bath. Change those filthy clothes. You smell like a pig."

Jim was ringing wet with sweat from head to toe. When he started out the door, one of the Vietnamese did too. Fidel grabbed Jim, turned him around, slapped him two or three times, and told him to show respect—to let the Vietnamese go first. Jim retrieved his gear and found himself standing in front of his old room at the Pool Hall, where John Brodak and he had lived for about a year. He went to the bath area but didn't have enough strength to pull the water bucket up out of the well. The bandage had come off his leg, so the pus and blood cascaded down. Fidel came over and pulled the water bucket up for him. He washed off, went to his room, and put on his other set of pajamas.

Again, Kasler's reprieve ended quickly. The guards took him right back

to the interrogation room, where Fidel sat him down and tried to convince him that he should change his answers for the delegation. Jim said he didn't even want to see the paper because he wasn't going to change the answers or go before a delegation. Fidel ordered Jim back on his knees. This time, the guards wired his thumbs together behind his back and put on the irons with the backs of his wrists together. They used nylon webbing to tie his hands together and pulled them up behind his back. Then, they put the ropes under his elbows and started cinching them up toward his head. One guard put his foot on Jim's head and hoisted his elbows above his head. This torture continued for about 45 minutes, after which they hauled Jim back to the table and tried to talk him into cooperating. Jim still said no.

The guards put him back on his knees. He was thoroughly dehydrated, with a big pool of sweat around him, but the brutality continued. After Beanpole slapped him numerous times, Fidel applied very tight irons: the guards took 15 minutes to put them on Jim's wrists while standing on his arm. Now and then, they became exasperated, so they reached up and smashed him in the face. After 45 minutes of torture, they gave up. Because it was about 2:00 in the afternoon, well into their siesta hour, they sent Jim back to his room.

Kasler had just lurched into his room when Lump and a guard the prisoners called Casper arrived. Casper always wore a white jacket and a maroon windbreaker, and he didn't like to get his hands dirty. This time he was in his swimming trunks, so Jim knew he didn't want to soil his clothes while working him over. Lump told him to roll up all his gear and take it out of the room, which Jim did. When he stepped out of the room and set it down, Casper started belting him with his fists. After ten minutes of continual punching, the guards put him in his room on his knees, hands over his head, stretching up as hard as he could. Fifteen minutes later, Jim passed out. When he came to, he tried to crawl to the water jug. They came in and took the water jug away, then put him back on his knees. He passed out again. When he regained consciousness, they put him on his knees a third time but didn't make him stretch toward the ceiling.

About five o'clock, Fidel showed up at Kasler's door and asked how long he had been like that. Jim said, "Since you left." Fidel told him to go over and lie down on his bed, so Jim crawled to it. Ten minutes later the door opened, and Jim struggled to get up, wearing just shorts. But Fidel ordered him to lie face-down on his bed. He started beating Jim across the buttocks with a huge truck fan belt, screaming as he lashed him: "Strike the enemy first, before they have a chance to hit you. Hit them hard." Kasler hadn't seen these words in print, but he certainly recognized them. Fidel was throwing quotes at him from the magazine interview Jim had

done just before he was shot down. Jim counted 36 whacks with the fan belt, which tore his buttocks and upper legs to shreds.

“Are you going to surrender?” Fidel demanded.

“No,” said Jim.

Fidel said, “Stand up, you son-of-a-bitch. Go get your clothes.” After Jim went out and got his clothes, Fidel told him to put on his long, red pajama pants. Then Fidel left.

The guards came to escort Jim across the compound. He was carrying his gear but barely able to walk. About halfway across, he had to sit down and rest. Finally, they dragged him to a room in the Pigsty where he saw Pete Schoeffel, a naval officer. When Kasler saw Pete, he thought he had beaten the torturers and escaped having to meet the delegation because they were giving him a roommate. But he misread the situation. Fidel had already worked Pete over with the fan belt and convinced him to answer the delegation’s questions. Pete was supposed to help persuade Jim to meet them, as well.

Fidel came into the room and said, “All right, Kasler. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Jim had received a cigarette from a guard, so he asked Fidel for a light. That set him off. Fidel smashed him in the face, knocked him down, and started beating him in the ribs. He screamed, “I’ll take care of you, you smart-assed son-of-a-bitch!” Fidel was so angry he ran over and started slapping Pete too. Then he left.

Kasler knew he would be back in the fire the next day. After about 15 minutes, Pete looked at the damage from Fidel’s whipping. Jim’s skin was hanging in shreds, and he was bleeding. Lump opened the peep and said, “Tomorrow, we are going to show you the determination of the Vietnamese people.” Jim thought, *Oh shit. Now I’ve really had the stroke.*

The next day was July 4, 1968. The Vietnamese always made a big thing of America’s Independence Day and gave the prisoners some little goodie. It was good propaganda because the date represented the United States’ overthrow of colonial power—which they considered parallel to their own situation. They passed out cigarettes. Although Jim didn’t expect to get any, they gave him three. Then, they came and told Pete and Jim to go take a bath. Nobody bathed on holidays, so the men figured they were going in for interrogation because Fidel didn’t like to smell them.

The guards told Jim to roll up his belongings and moved him back into the Ho Chi Minh room. Jim was there about half an hour before Fidel called him in for a quiz. Fidel told him to take down his pants and turn around. He looked at Jim, then said, “How much of this shit can you take?” Jim felt like saying, “As much as you’ve got, buddy,” but discretion prevailed. He kept his mouth shut. Fidel called him a stupid masochist and said he should think again about surrendering. But Fidel said he wasn’t

going to punish Jim on a holiday, then sent him back to his room. Later, the guards gave him a beer and a piece of peanut-brittle candy.

The next day, Fidel didn't show up, but at the crack of dawn, Lump arrived. He opened the peep and asked if Kasler surrendered. Jim said, "No." About ten minutes later he was back in the interrogation room with about 30 Vietnamese. They put him on his knees and started beating him, slapping him on the face a hundred times or more. They knew he wasn't going to see the delegation, so they didn't care if they marked him up. They put him through the standard ropes and irons again, then took out the small irons and worked 30 minutes to get them on, lacerating skin and injuring bones the entire time.

By the time the guards got the irons on, the pain was so bad Jim could hardly take it. But there was more. They put the ropes on him and pulled his arms up over his head, then down around his feet. The pain and pressure on his joints were horrible. Jim thought, *I might not make it—at my age, I could have a heart attack from the strain on my system.* He was in ropes and irons for a good 45 minutes, after which the guards kept beating him for at least another half hour. They put him on his knees for the rest of the day, then took all his clothes and the mosquito net out of the room, leaving Jim lying on his bed wearing only his shorts.

That night, they put Kasler in leg irons, made him sit up on his bed, and turned out the lights. The mosquitoes poured in, eager to pounce on Jim's exposed flesh. Every 15 minutes the guards flicked on the light to make sure he wasn't sleeping. When Jim looked down, he saw 50 or more mosquitoes on each foot. With no mosquito netting to stop them, they swarmed over his entire body. Although his hands were swollen and his wrists were torn to shreds, he tried to kill as many mosquitoes as possible as he lay awake all night.

The Vietnamese kept Kasler awake the next day and throughout a second night. The following morning, Fidel was back in camp and called him in for a quiz. He insisted Jim was going before the delegation, but they would do a symbolic torture in front of ten prisoners so Jim could retain his honor. Jim said, "Bullshit. You bring ten POWs in here and I'll never surrender." Fidel cursed. He called Jim stupid and said he was going in front of the delegation even if he had to carry him in. Either that or he was going to beat Jim to death. It was not an idle threat; Fidel probably was responsible for at least one prisoner's death.

That night, Kasler was back in his room with the lights out, on short rations, with very little water, and kept awake—all ways to wear him down. The next morning at six o'clock, the door flew open. It was a whip-wielding guard, Cedric, who made Jim lie face down and struck him about seven times with the fan belt. For three days, every hour from 6:00 in the morn-

ing until 10:00 or 11:00 at night, someone beat him with that fan belt, trying to get him to meet a delegation. Because the Ho Chi Minh room was elevated and had a crack under the door, Jim could see the guards gathering just before the hour, getting ready to whip him. Cedric was there for each whipping. A different guard whacked him three or four times, after which Cedric finished it off. He did it slowly and seemed pleased, typically screaming like Fidel and even using the same phrases.

After five days of continual flaying, Kasler couldn't control his mind anymore. He began to hallucinate, so he knew his body wouldn't take it much longer. On the fifth day, as they were beating him, Jim said, "Okay. I surrender." He didn't want to say it, but his vocal chords seemed to form the words involuntarily, as a reflex against further harm. Yet, they kept on beating him. Once, someone hit him across the small of his back. When his head popped up, the guard slammed it down with his foot, opening a gash above Jim's left eye. They continued the hourly beatings for six or seven more hours.

The guards said the commander didn't believe Kasler when he said he surrendered, so they made him write and sign a letter saying he was willing to do everything to the best of his ability. After that, they kept him in irons but threw the mosquito net back in to him. As soon as he had gotten a good night's sleep, his surrender began to gnaw on him. For several days, what the POWs called "kiddie officer" trainees came around to ask if Jim still surrendered, and he said, "Yes." But about the fourth day Jim answered, "No." Immediately, Cedric and Casper came in with 20 guards, put him on his knees with his hands behind his back, and started slapping his face. After a while, about half the guards left, perhaps because they didn't enjoy watching or because they simply had duties elsewhere. Casper and another man took turns slapping him. When they knocked him down, Cedric beat him all over his body with the fan belt.

The beating continued for three hours. Huge welts rose up everywhere on Kasler's skin. His face was a hard chunk of leather, hanging down below his chin from the swelling. His eyes had nearly swollen shut. They had ruptured his eardrum, and blood was running down the side of his head. Once, he fell against the bed, and Casper kicked him in the ribs. He felt a sharp, vicious pain as a rib broke. He rolled on the floor holding his chest, as they tried to kick him in the same spot. Blood and pus were all over the floor. Then, they jumped on Jim's injured leg, breaking the pin loose and jamming it up into his hip. They had gone berserk, like a pack of mad dogs, but Jim was nearly comatose and could no longer feel the beating.

Suddenly, Kasler heard wrestling in the room—a fight that lasted for some time. Then, the door closed and everyone was gone. Apparently,

other guards had come in and pulled the tormentors away. Jim lay there on the floor for an hour or so, but guards came back and put him on his knees again with his hands in the air until nine o'clock. The broken rib and chest bruises hurt dreadfully. Finally, he just collapsed and, despite the guards' threats, could not make his arms respond. Jim told them, "Go ahead and beat me. I don't give a shit."

They ordered him to go over to his bed, so he crawled there. He had been without water all day long. They put down a piece of paper and told him to write to the camp commander and apologize for surrendering five times and taking it back the sixth. He wrote the note, and they hauled it off. As they were leaving, Jim asked for water, so someone finally brought him a cup.

Kasler decided then that he wouldn't retract his surrender and get beaten for it again. Instead, he would wait until they made him do something and then fight them as well as he could. Several days later, Fidel came back to camp and hauled him into interrogation. Jim hadn't eaten for five days; he couldn't get his teeth open because of the beating. Fidel asked if Jim would surrender, and Jim said, "Yes." He asked what they had been doing to him, so Jim told him. Fidel seemed to disapprove of their treatment, even though he was a brutal devil himself. He probably was worried they would kill Kasler, thus depriving him of a potential asset.

About the middle of July, the guards took Jim out and told him to bathe. They gave him a razor. He hadn't shaved for a long time. His reflection in the water stunned him; he was a sorry sight and figured he had lost nearly every vestige of his humanity. He managed to shave and bathe, noting while there that a case of beer and other bottles rested in the water tank. That night, the Vietnamese had a big going-away party at the Coop (administration building) for the Cubans—Fidel and his buddy Chico. Casper sang throughout the day in a falsetto voice, like a girl. Kasler could hear speeches and catch a few words in English, whenever they were speaking English. Four cars came into the camp, signifying that senior officials were attending.

Jim didn't see Fidel again until a few days later, when he came into the camp and sent Jim to get a bath. Kasler had been on short rations all that time. In one case, a guard handed him soup with a big lump floating in it. Jim lifted the lump to find it was a small dog's head, with ears, eyes, teeth, hair, and everything intact. He put the head aside and ate the soup. The Vietnamese seemed to enjoy putting things in the prisoners' food that they knew nobody would (or could) eat, such as the pup's head or a horse's hoof. They were also fond of chopping up various whole animals with a machete and dumping the pieces in the soup. The prisoners called it "fragged" chicken, dog, or whatever the animal had been because it looked

like a fragmentation grenade had blown it to pieces.

Periodically, a bunch of puppies would run loose in the camp, eating in the dishes and the garbage until they were half grown. The guards entertained themselves by chasing the pups around camp. Eventually, they stoned the pups, broke their back legs, and tortured them to death. Later, Jim learned they had some strange notion that torturing an animal before killing it would improve the flavor of the cooked meat. Jim supposed it was only a small step to the idea that torturing POWs was equally acceptable.

In the interrogation room Fidel said they were moving Kasler to a larger room where he would be more comfortable. He also promised Jim would get out into the sun more and would receive a regular diet, with no more short rations. Jim told him he still surrendered. Fidel talked to Lump and sent Jim back to his room. The next day, Fidel called Jim back for interrogation but seemed in a mellower mood.

“Do you still surrender?” Fidel asked.

“Yes,” said Jim.

“What kind of cigarettes did you smoke before you were shot down?”

“Viceroy’s,” Jim replied. Fidel pulled out a fresh pack of Viceroy’s.

“Take one,” Fidel said. “What type of chewing gum do you like?”

“Beeman’s Juicy Fruit.” Again, Fidel pulled out a pack and threw it on the table.

“We’re going to take care of your leg,” Fidel said, reassuringly.

“Bullshit,” Jim said. “You haven’t done anything for two years and you’re not going to now.” Fidel insisted they would.

When Kasler got up to leave, Fidel told him to take the cigarettes and gum with him. Jim said, “I don’t want them.” Fidel grabbed him by the shirt, shook him, and said, “Take them, or I’m gonna beat the shit out of you right now.” So Jim took them. Fidel ordered him back to his room and told him to roll up his gear because he was moving to Room 11 of the Pigsty.

The next morning, in early August 1968, Fidel opened the peephole to Kasler’s room. When Jim started to get up, Fidel motioned for him to stay down, stared at him for a minute, and then left. It was the last time Jim saw him. Although Kasler would still experience plenty of punishment and deprivation, his personal hell—the Cuban program—was over.

Homecoming, applying lessons, living again

Starting on February 12, 1973, American prisoners of war began leaving North Vietnam in the order of their shoot-downs. Those who had been held the longest started the exodus, except that Army Special Forces Captain Jim Thompson, who had been held captive 9½ years, insisted on

departing on a later plane—after the junior Army men. Otherwise, Everett Alvarez was first, Bob Shumaker was second, and 114 others were in that first plane load. A few sick or injured men went out of order for obvious reasons.

After the first releases, however, there was a pause until March 4, 1973. Even though Kasler had been a prisoner of war 6½ years, he fell just over the cut-off into the later release group. The Vietnamese gave him “going home” clothes: shoes, shirt, and pants. (They had kept his flight suit and later placed it on display at the Hanoi Army Museum, illustrating how much his capture had meant to them.) Anyone who has seen a set of the clothes POWs wore on their last day in Hanoi recognizes just how much weight they had lost and how thin they were, despite the North Vietnamese captors’ efforts to fatten them before their release.

Kasler formed his group military style to leave the Hoa Lo prison, but the Vietnamese protested. Kasler told them, “Go to hell,” and marched the men out to the buses single-file. Thousands of people were standing there watching them, not making a sound. Once on the bus, the POWs rode through Hanoi to Gia Lam Air Field. Despite the torture and ill treatment Jim had received from the Vietnamese, he pitied the people of Hanoi for the way they were living. Many had lean-to shelters laid against building walls as permanent homes. It depressed Jim to see what long years of war and deprivation had done to them.

At Gia Lam the weather ceiling was down to 150 feet. It was gray and overcast. Jim worried that an airplane might not be able to land with such limited visibility. Could they get in to pick up the prisoners? Obviously, so close to freedom, a delay would be very tough to take. Then, suddenly, a gleaming white C-141 popped down through the clouds—*a wonderful, friendly monster*, thought Jim. His eyes filled with tears when he saw the large United States flag painted on the side of its fuselage. He thought, *What a big moment!* The C-141 glided to a stop, and soon they started to board.

President Nixon had set up a state-of-the-art, closed-circuit television system for all families of the POWs, so they could watch the arrivals at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. Kasler’s family gathered in Indianapolis. Because no one knew when the arrival would occur, Jimmy was tasked to watch the television—a test pattern with a tone—until something came on. He was lying on the couch at 3:00 a.m., trying to stay awake, when an image appeared on the television. The plane had already landed, and they were opening the door. He yelled, “Mom! Suzanne! Nan!” Within seconds, all three hit the doorway into the den at the same time. Like something out of a cartoon, they remained suspended there for a moment, unable to get through the doorway, with all eyes riveted on the screen.

Jim had been promoted twice during his POW years, but he didn't know he had made colonel until that day. An American officer met him in Hanoi and said, "Colonel Kasler, you are in charge." Kasler said, "I'm a colonel?" He affirmed, "Yes sir. You have been a colonel since 1969." As a result, when the POWs arrived at Clark, Jim was the spokesman for their release group. He made his way down a steep, yellow-painted ramp, clipped off a brisk salute to the U.S. and Philippine flags held by a color guard, and then exchanged salutes and handshakes with two high-ranking officers and an ambassador. He spoke briefly:

We went to Vietnam to do a job that had to be done, and we were willing to stay until that job was complete.

We wanted to come home, but we wanted to come home with honor. President Nixon has brought us home with honor.

God bless those Americans who supported our President during this long ordeal. We know better than any other citizen has ever known how great it is to be an American. It's good to be home.

Then, calmly, with eyes straight ahead, he walked down a red carpet to board the blue ambulance bus that waited to take him to a battery of physical examinations and medical treatment. Those who followed kept to protocol—they debarked in shutdown order, by date of capture.

Like all other POWs, Kasler spent a few days at the Clark Air Base hospital, which had been elaborately prepared to create an understated, home-like atmosphere. Gaily colored Valentine's Day decorations lined the corridors, along with posters made by schoolchildren at the base that contained such statements as, "Welcome home, we love you" and "Do you laugh inside all over?" Medical examinations were as gentle as possible, and a personal aide helped each prisoner adjust to his surroundings.

When the POWs weren't undergoing examinations, they mostly just ate—casting aside their prison diets of pumpkin soup and banana peel stew for steak and eggs, fried chicken, Cornish game hen, corn on the cob, French fries, and extra helpings of ice cream sundaes. One POW called his fried egg "beautiful," and many downed several sundaes while drinking glass after glass of milk. Navy Commander Richard Stratton told a photographer he had eaten a dozen eggs at one Sunday meal. The men gained an average of more than five pounds during their stay in the hospital; one gained fifteen. Despite problems with his teeth and the effects of his

injuries, Jim held his own at the table.

Once the medical exams were complete, Kasler went through official debriefing, mostly about his treatment in prison. Some news correspondents interviewed him, as well. When they asked if the POWs had been tortured, Jim said, "Absolutely." He also talked in detail about the torture to *Time* magazine's Don Neff, even though the Air Force immediately put a muzzle on any mention of torture or other atrocities. The Air Force's position was that nobody should talk until everyone was out and back to the United States. Major General Daniel "Chappy" James, Jr. told the *Time* reporters that information about mistreatment in the prison camps was off limits in the Philippines. But the reporters kept digging anyway and were poised to break an exclusive story on the following Monday, so the Air Force reversed its position and authorized press conferences with POWs all around the country. Although Air Force leaders were upset with Kasler, he thought the story needed to be told. And it turned out all right. General James told the *Time* reporters, "You guys were right. It's all out now, and we're glad that it is. I don't see how anybody's going to get hurt. We've got them all back home."

After debriefing, the POWs flew to Hawaii for a stopover. They were supposed to land at Travis Air Force Base in San Francisco, where Jim was to meet his brother and his brother's family, but that didn't happen. Instead, they flew on to St. Louis and then to Dayton, Ohio, where Jim's family was waiting for him. Jim had talked to Martha and the children by phone from the Philippines, but Dayton was his first chance to see them.

Kasler spoke briefly when the group landed in St. Louis and again when they arrived at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton on March 8, 1973. Jim was bone tired by that time, and his family was in a staff car across the tarmac, waiting to greet him. His eyes strolled toward them and his voice broke with emotion several times as he delivered a short speech to a crowd of 600; it nearly deserted him completely on the last few words:

We are not bitter men. We are proud men, but no prouder than any loyal American has a right to be.

During our darkest hours in Hanoi, we maintained our faith in our God and our country. This was our strength, and we were not denied.

I want to take this opportunity to thank those millions of Americans who participated in the 1969 letter-writing campaign and those who in other ways brought our deplorable treatment to the attention of the world and forced the North

Vietnamese to improve our conditions. Had it not been for your efforts, many more of us would not have returned today. We are overwhelmed by the concern and the love which has been showered upon us on our return trip. We are so proud to be Americans.

At that point, Martha and the children broke away and sprinted toward Jim, as he ran toward them. The press cameras caught this long-awaited, joyous reunion. Tears welled from Martha's eyes, and Suzanne and Nanette kept repeating: "Oh, daddy! Oh, daddy! Oh, daddy!" Martha had worried about what she would wear and how she would appear to Jim after aging seven years and still showing slight effects of the Bell's palsy that attacked her in 1971. But any anxieties either partner had felt concerning this first meeting immediately melted away. After all, they had changed physically, but neither had changed how they felt about each other, and both recognized that was all they needed to start again.

The legacy of fame

Even today, Kasler is gracious with people who cultivate his fame and commemorate his accomplishments. He answers every one of the several letters he receives each week asking for an autograph, a personal note, or a signed picture. He corresponds with authors who have used some of his exploits in studies of aviation or warfare, often volunteering to review materials for accuracy before publication. Since his return from Hanoi in 1973, various projects and commemorative events—large and small—have occupied Jim's time.

Although many events Kasler attends call for a serious public face, Jim enjoys them and discovers humor wherever he goes. During the fall of 1999, for example, he visited the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. There, he spoke to cadets and attended what turned out to be a "snow bowl" football game at Falcon Stadium. Retired Air Force Colonel Fred Kiley (co-author of *Honor Bound*, the definitive book on Vietnam prisoners of war) arranged for three cadets to escort Jim to the game. Despite severe back pain aggravated by sitting for hours in the icy stadium, Kasler demonstrated his famous Hoosier wit as the group got up to leave in a blinding snowstorm. He fixed the cadets with a determined gaze and said seriously, "Let's save a bus trip. Let's just walk back to the dorms!" He let the cadets squirm a while before telling them, "Oh, hell. I guess we can ride."

In 2000, Kasler was inducted into the Illinois Military Aviation Hall of Fame for his contributions to military aviation in peace and war. The award paid tribute to his service in three wars and his exceptional courage in

Vietnam. But it also recognized his foundational work on the F-100 fighter plane, his achievements in precision aerial gunnery, and his years of instructing young pilots in flying and gunnery tactics.

Despite the wearing down of bone and sinew, as Kasler approaches his 78th birthday, he still has a warrior's walk, with torso erect, shoulders squared back, and piercing eyes that continually survey the scene, as though seeking an adversary on the horizon. When the Gulf War came along in 1991, he truly regretted that he wasn't still in the Air Force. He was the warrior who wanted to go back one more time—to be part of the strategic planning team who would win, and win decisively. He had many thoughts on how to conduct that war, based in part on lessons learned from Vietnam. He was glad another Vietnam veteran, General Norman Schwarzkopf, had the opportunity to lead a successful campaign. Jim has had equally strong opinions about the Balkans, Somalia, Afghanistan, and the more recent war against Saddam Hussein. Today, he remains deeply interested in how the military will operate and progress in an increasingly fractured political landscape.

As General Hoyt Sanford Vandenberg, Jr., observed in a recent interview, Jim Kasler is a paragon of what the fighting airman is all about. He didn't break the sound barrier first or go to the moon and jump up and down. He was just the best at his trade that anyone could be, and he is a complex, esoteric individual whose characteristics all came together when his nation needed him to produce what he did. Indeed, James Kasler is a genuine American hero, and we all must hope the United States has a few like him in the future, when we need them.

About the authors

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Charles L. Byler is a retired English teacher, with 27 years of service in Pennsylvania's public schools. He served in the Air Force as an F-105 weapons loader at Bitburg, Germany, from 1963 to 1966—and under Colonel Kasler's command during the AIRCENT NATO tactical weapons meet at Chaumont, France, in June 1965. Mr. Byler holds an M.Ed. in English from Slippery Rock College, as well as an M.A. in writing from Vermont College of Norwich University. He is the author of several magazine articles and a novel: *After Nam: a Police Story*. He lives in Boyertown, Pennsylvania.