

Valor in Three Wars

By extraordinary heroism in combat and as a POW, Col. James H. Kasler earned a distinction shared with no other airman.

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THE Air Force Cross was created by Congress in 1960 as the equivalent of the Army's Distinguished Service Cross and the Navy Cross. It ranks just below the Medal of Honor as an award for extraordinary heroism in combat. Of the hundreds of thousands of aircrew members who flew against the enemy in Southeast Asia between 1960 and 1973, fewer than 300 officers and airmen earned the AFC. A mere handful was awarded that prestigious medal twice, but only one man—Col. James H. Kasler—has the distinction of winning the Air Force Cross three times.

Colonel Kasler's Air Force service spanning thirty-one years and three wars is a story of sustained valor. During World War II, he flew missions over Japan as a nineteen-year-old B-29 tail gunner. Following the war and college, Jim Kasler completed pilot training in 1951 and embarked on a career in tactical fighters that ended only with his retirement as Vice Commander of the F-111-equipped 366th Tactical Fighter Wing on May 1, 1975.

Less than a year after he pinned on his wings, Jim Kasler joined the renowned 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing in Korea. During the next eight months, flying with some of the top fighter veterans of World War II, the newly minted pilot logged 100 combat missions, earned the Silver Star and three DFCs, and shot down six MiGs to become one of USAF's few jet aces.

His next fourteen years in the fighter business netted Kasler more than 4,000 hours of fighter time at bases in the States, Canada, Italy,

and Germany. In February 1966, he reported to the 355th Tac Fighter Wing at Takhli Air Base, Thailand, as Operations Officer of the 354th Squadron. On June 29, then-Major Kasler earned his first Air Force Cross as F-105 mission commander of a perfect strike on the heavily defended Hanoi petroleum storage complex.

Five weeks later, for his ninety-first mission in Southeast Asia, Kasler was awarded a second AFC as leader of a formation that was evaluating low-level delivery against a priority target. When his wingman was hit and ejected, Major Kasler located the downed pilot, flew cover at low altitude until his fuel was almost gone, hit a tanker, and returned to direct rescue operations. Flying at treetop level in an attempt to relocate his wingman, Kasler's F-105 was disabled by ground fire. He ejected, was captured, and spent the next six and a half years as a POW, singled out for special attention by his captors.

Jim Kasler's third AFC was awarded for his almost inconceivable resistance to abuse by the North Vietnamese. In his first three and a half years as a POW, he was tortured dozens of times—continually from August 15 to September 20, 1967, during his captors' unsuccessful attempt to find the leaders of POW resistance. For all those days, his arms were clamped tightly

behind his back, and he was subjected repeatedly to the rope torture, resulting in severe injuries. In June and July of the following year, Colonel Kasler was again brutally abused in a failed attempt to force him to meet with visiting delegations who were sympathetic to the North and to appear before TV and news cameras. His extraordinary heroism and strength of character were an inspiration to his fellow POWs, none of whom was—or could have been—fully prepared for the inhuman treatment to which many were subjected, especially in the early years of the POW ordeal.

Readers of this column may have concluded that heroism has no common denominator of causation. In a few isolated instances, valor—never to be repeated—may have been motivated only by self-preservation. Men like Jim Kasler who faced determined and skillful enemies many times had to overcome that most basic of human instincts on virtually every mission. The motivation behind their victories over the survival instinct is another matter. It may have been personal pride, professionalism, *esprit de corps*, belief in a cause, patriotism, or any combination of those attitudes. Each man can speak only for himself on that score.

But it took a particular kind of valor to withstand torture, deprivation, solitude, and psychological incursions month after month, year after year, with no end in sight. It also demanded a belief in something more important than one's own life. The bravest suffered the most.

Tradition—the memory of great things done together in the past—also inspired and will continue to inspire airmen in combat and in resistance to barbarism if we again face an uncivilized foe. Col. Jim Kasler, through his heroism in the air and his unshakable determination never to yield to attacks on body and mind, is one of those in whom the Air Force tradition of valor resides. ■



Col. James H. Kasler—thrice winner of the Air Force Cross.