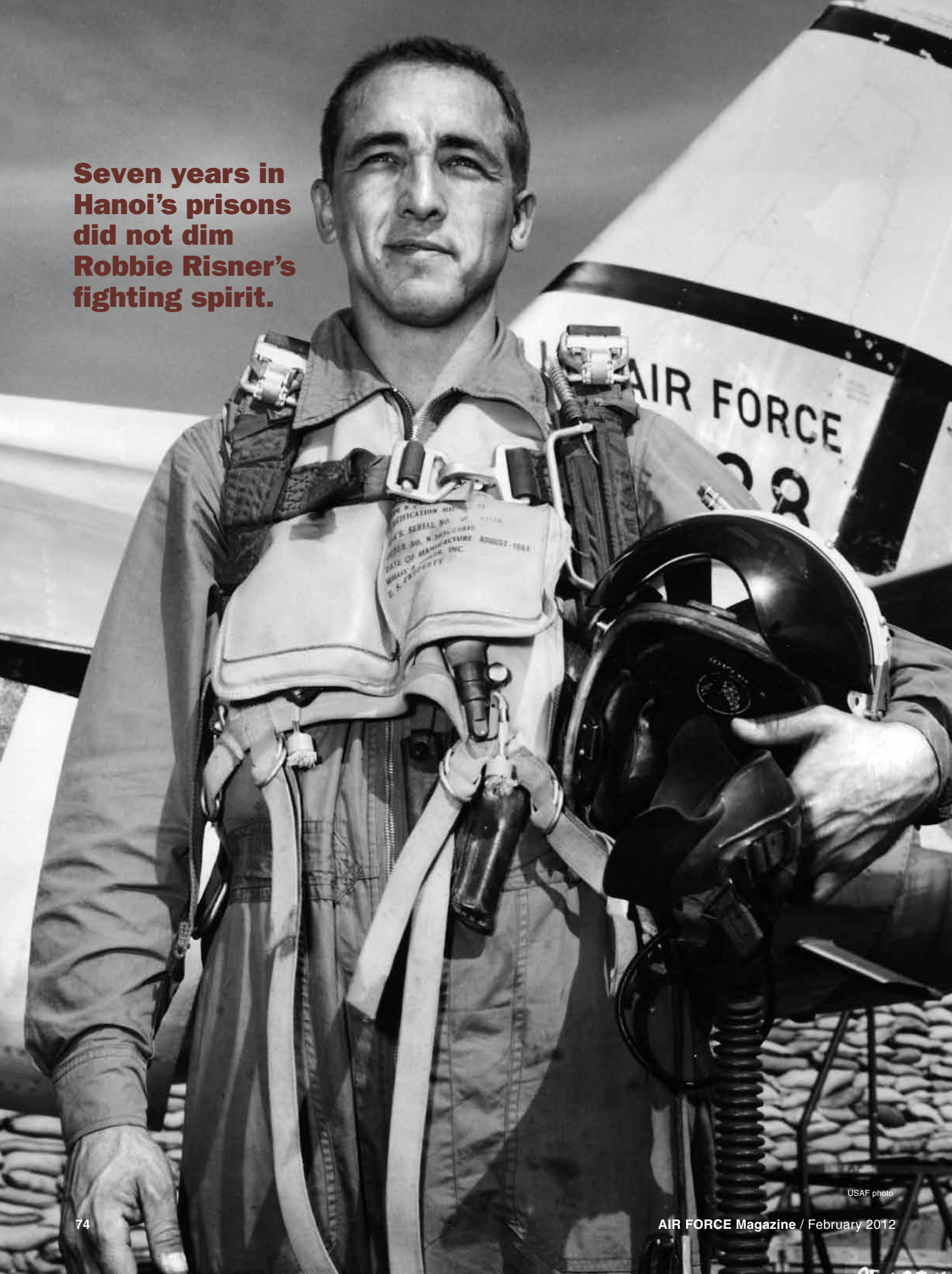


**Seven years in  
Hanoi's prisons  
did not dim  
Robbie Risner's  
fighting spirit.**



USAF photo

# Nine Feet Tall

By John T. Correll

**T**he picture on the *Time* magazine cover for April 23, 1965, was Air Force Lt. Col. Robinson Risner. The cover story, “The Fighting American,” featured 10 US military members in Vietnam, with fighter pilot Risner—a rising star in the Air Force—foremost among them.

“At the time it was a great honor,” Risner said. “But later, in prison, I would have much cause to regret that *Time* had ever heard of me.”

On Sept. 16, Risner was shot down over North Vietnam and captured. The additional bad news was that the North

Vietnamese had seen *Time* magazine and knew who he was. “Some good soul from the United States had sent them the copy,” he said, “and they thought I was much more important than I ever was.”

The magazine article told them not only that Risner was an F-105 squadron commander who had led 18 missions against North Vietnam, but also that he was a Korean War ace, having shot down eight MiGs. It also disclosed details about his family. His captors knew they had an important officer and were determined to break him. “The Vietnamese regarded Robbie as their No. 1 one prized prisoner,” said Col. Gordon Larson, a fellow POW. “Robbie was by far the most abused POW there because of who they thought he was.” All of the POWs were tortured and ill-treated, but Risner got an extra portion.

Risner was a leader among the airmen held by the North Vietnamese, first as senior-ranking officer and then as vice commander of the 4th Allied POW Wing formed in Hoa Lo Prison, the infamous “Hanoi Hilton.” According to Larson, Risner was “the most influential and effective POW there.”

In 1971, after the POWs moved into large open-bay cells in Hanoi, Risner and several of his colleagues organized a church service, a forbidden activity. The North Vietnamese, obsessed with maintaining control, interrupted the service and dragged Risner and the other leaders away for discipline. George E. “Bud” Day jumped on his bed and began to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” All

46 POWs present joined in to express their support.

“I felt like I was nine feet tall and could go bear hunting with a switch,” Risner said later. The moment and his words are recalled by a statue of Risner unveiled at the Air Force Academy in 2001, the gift of Risner’s friend, H. Ross Perot, who had a history of honoring the POWs. The statue, atop a five-foot pedestal, is exactly nine feet high. Some 40 of Risner’s fellow POWs were on hand for the event. The principal speaker was Bud Day, who said, “We knew he was in fact nine feet tall. This is a life-size statue.”

Few American airmen have ever stood taller in the estimation of their colleagues. Risner, now 86 and living in retirement in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, is best known for his courage and leadership as a POW and for his book, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese*.

But that is just part of his story.

## Korean Ace

He was born James Robinson Risner in Mammoth Spring, Ark., on Jan. 16, 1925, but the country doctor who delivered him failed to write down his first name on the birth certificate. He soon became “Robbie” to himself and all others except his mother, who always called him “Jamey.”

He grew up in Tulsa, Okla., and joined the Air Corps as soon as he could, in 1943. He earned his wings and a commission in the Aviation Cadets in May

**Left: Robinson Risner with an F-86 during the Korean War. Risner would be credited with eight MiG kills during that war. Here: The F-105 Risner was flying when he was shot down over North Vietnam. He ejected and became a prisoner of war.**



USAF photo





**The April 23, 1965, cover of Time magazine featuring Risner.**

1944. He applied for combat duty, but was sent instead to Panama, where he flew P-38 and P-39 fighters. He left active duty in 1946, becoming an P-51 (later F-51) pilot with the Oklahoma Air National Guard.

His ANG unit was called up for the Korean War, but was not going to Korea, so Risner applied for and was accepted for photo reconnaissance, in which he had some training. He shipped to Korea, where he flew 10 reconnaissance missions before talking his way into a transfer to the F-86, the Air Force's best fighter at the time. He managed to work around the fact he had broken his arm in an off-duty accident before leaving the States—persuading a doctor to replace the cast with a leather cover, and he flew that way.

Flying with the 336th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron out of Kimp'o, South Korea, he shot down five MiGs and became an ace within a few months. "Korea was probably the high point of my whole career as far as real gratification is concerned," he said later. In all, he flew 108 combat missions in Korea and was credited with destroying eight MiG-15s.

He was also known for another feat of airmanship in Korea. On Sept. 15, 1952, Risner's wingman, 2nd Lt. Joe Logan, was hit by ground fire near the MiG airfield at Antung, China, on the Yalu River. It appeared he would have to bail out over enemy territory. "Joe's aircraft got hit in the belly and began losing fuel," Risner said. "When he

was down to five minutes remaining, I told him to shut down and I would try to push him to Cho Do island, where we had a rescue operation."

Risner carefully placed the upper lip of his air intake in the tailpipe of Logan's F-86. "It stayed sort of locked there as long as we both maintained stable flight, but the turbulence created by Joe's aircraft made stable flight for me very difficult," Risner said. Leaking fuel and hydraulic fluid made it even more difficult.

"If either of us bobbed the least bit, I'd be tossed out of contact," Risner said. The two aircraft lost contact eight times on the way to Cho Do, 60 miles to the south. They made it all the way, "but the nose of my plane was all boogered up," Risner said.

Near the base, Logan bailed out and landed in the water. Tragically, he became entangled in his parachute lines and drowned before the rescuers could reach him. Risner was awarded the Silver Star for the mission.

### **Following Lindbergh**

Risner was promoted to major before he left Korea and was augmented into the regular Air Force in 1953. He kept on flying F-86s, first at Clovis AFB, N.M., and then at Hahn AB, West Germany, where he was the squadron commander. He returned to the States at George AFB, Calif., where he commanded the squadron evaluating the high-altitude air-to-air capabilities of the new F-100, the follow-on fighter to the F-86.

In 1957, he was chosen for the "Spirit of St. Louis II" mission, commemorating the 30th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh's nonstop flight across the Atlantic. In preparation, Risner learned to refuel in flight during practice missions over the California desert.

The aircraft for the commemoration was an F-100F, a two-seat trainer. The lanky Lindbergh, who was 6 foot, 3 inches, declined an invitation to squeeze into the rear cockpit for the long flight. En route from Palmdale, Calif., to his jumping-off point at McGuire AFB, N.J., Risner set a new unof-

ficial coast-to-coast speed record of three hours and 38 minutes.

For the transatlantic flight May 21, Risner flew alone. Roosevelt Field on Long Island, where Lindbergh's flight originated, was closed, so Risner was timed instead from the moment he passed the control tower at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn. He refueled in the air twice, and six hours and 37 minutes later—compared to 33 hours, 30 minutes for Lindbergh—rolled to a stop at Le Bourget Field in Paris at the same spot Lindbergh did in 1927. Risner's F-100F is now on static display at the Air Force Academy prep school in Colorado.

After a year at Air War College and a tour on the staff at US Pacific Command, Risner went to Kadena AB, Okinawa, in 1964 as commander of the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron. A new war was under way in Asia, and Risner was about to become part of it.

### **Shot Down Twice**

The war in Vietnam had not yet broken out in full fury. Although air commandos were flying clandestine combat missions in South Vietnam, US fighters did not deploy to Southeast Asia in strength until after the Tonkin



**Risner waves to the crowd on his return to the States after his release from the notorious Hanoi Hilton in 1973. Risner was imprisoned for seven years.**

Gulf incidents in 1964. In January 1965, Risner led a contingent of seven F-105s from Kadena on a temporary assignment to Da Nang Air Base in South Vietnam.

Risner promptly received a medal and a reprimand for the same mission. As directed, his flight knocked down a bridge at Ban Ken in Laos. Seeing another bridge downstream, Risner dropped it as well. The returning flight was met at Da Nang by Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, Air Force commander in South Vietnam. "We all lined up and he went down and gave us an Air Medal because this was a successful strike," Risner said. "He got to me and said, 'By God, Robbie, what did you hit that other bridge for?' ... He told me not to do that again."

In February, the 67th TFS deployed on temporary duty to Korat Air Base in Thailand. From there, Risner led the first Rolling Thunder air strike against North Vietnam March 2, 1965.

On March 16, he was shot down for the first time. Hit by ground fire while attacking a radar site in North Vietnam, he made it to the Tonkin Gulf, where he ejected and was picked up.

On April 3 and 4, Risner led two strikes against the 540-foot railroad bridge at Thanh Hoa, 70 miles south of Hanoi. Called the "Dragon's Jaw," it was rated the toughest target in North Vietnam. The strikes did not succeed, not because of lack of effort or courage by the aicrews but because the weapons were not good enough. The bridge withstood 871 attacks before smart laser guided bombs finally did the job in 1972.

The target was defended by lethal ground fire and by the first MiG interceptors the Air Force encountered in Vietnam. Risner's own aircraft was hit hard, but he pressed on despite smoke and fumes in the cockpit. For heroism in leading the mission, Risner was brought to Washington, D.C., and awarded the Air Force Cross, the first ever given to a living recipient. At the ceremony, Gen. J. P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, growled, "Now goddammit, Robbie, don't go back out there and get your tail shot off."

In August, the 67th again deployed from Kadena to Korat for temporary duty and Risner flew a mission a day over North Vietnam, often against tough defenses. "During one week, I was hit four missions out of five," he said. He was awarded the Silver Star for several of these early September missions.



**Risner (center) accepts congratulations following the unveiling of the nine-foot-tall statue at the Air Force Academy that honors him and other prisoners of war.**

His luck ran out on Sept. 16, when he was shot down a second time. That morning, he was leading a strike against a SAM site near Thanh Hoa. Flying low, he crossed a small hill and was suddenly hit hard by ground fire. He engaged his afterburner for a surge of power and raced toward the ocean, trailing smoke and fire. His engine quit before he got there, and he bailed out. He was captured by local militia, taken to Hanoi, and delivered to the Hanoi Hilton.

He didn't expect to be there for long because "I had been told that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had passed the word down: 'Do not make any long-range plans and do not start any new buildings. The war will be over by June 1966.'"

Risner would remain a captive for seven years, four months, and 27 days.

#### **POW Leader**

After his capture, Risner was promoted to full colonel with a date of rank of Nov. 8, 1965, but it would be some time before he knew that. Even in his previous grade, though, he was the senior-ranking officer among the POWs and, on their behalf, complained about

the squalid conditions in which they were held. He also established committees and assigned tasks, such as keeping the POW list current.

The Vietnamese did not want any military organization among the prisoners, and they aggressively suppressed attempts to communicate. Risner's activity was one more reason for putting him in his place. When he refused to make the kind of incriminatory statements they demanded, he was kept on bread and water from Oct. 1 through Dec. 15. His legs were seldom out of shackles, and he was in solitary confinement except for periods of torture. In one such session, his shoulder was dislocated.

At last, Risner signed an apology for violating North Vietnamese airspace and bombing North Vietnam. His subsequent direction to other POWs recognized the limits of resistance. "Resist until you are tortured," he said, "but do not take torture to the point where you lose your capability to think and do not take torture to the point where you lose the permanent use of your limbs." Risner was eventually awarded his second Air Force Cross for courage under torture and

establishing an honorable standard that could be followed by others.

Later, others succeeded Risner as senior-ranking officer. The practice for establishing military command among the POWs was to go by rank at the time of shootdown because it was almost impossible to verify promotions and dates of rank after capture. This eventually became a problem.

"New guys were coming in shot down as commanders who had been lieutenants in squadrons with old guys who had been shot down as lieutenant commanders; thus the old guys were now working for their previous wingmen," said Cmdr. James B. Stockdale, the ranking Navy officer.

In 1971, the senior POW, Col. John P. Flynn, made an exception to the shootdown rank policy. He recognized Risner's promotion to colonel and his 1965 date of rank, and named him vice commander of the 4th Allied POW Wing, with Stockdale as his deputy for operations.

The name of the wing referred to the fourth war of the century and recognized that Thai and Vietnamese were also held prisoner.

### Before and After Ho

"Of all the indignities we were forced to undergo, I guess I resented meeting the foreign delegations more than any other," Risner said. "There was something so basically inhuman about appearing before the delegations and being asked how your food was and having to say it was excellent when it was not. Or to questions of your treatment, to lie in front of the cameras and say it was great, when they had literally tortured the stuffings out of you to make you appear."

There were command performances for reporters as well. In 1967, Risner was required to meet with Mary McCarthy, a liberal American writer openly sympathetic with the Viet Cong. "Do not say anything—regardless of what she asks you—do not say anything to disgrace or slander our country," the Vietnamese warned. "If you do, you will suffer for the rest of the time you are here," as if that was different from the regular routine.

McCarthy found Risner unlikeable, "a gaunt, squirrel-faced older man" who "had not changed his cultural spots." She did not notice the scars or other evidence of torture. She spoke enthusiastically of Sen. Eugene McCarthy's chances of winning the

Democratic nomination and presidential election and expressed hope for an early end to the war. "We'd better knock on wood," she said, and knocked three times on the table. Afterward, Risner was in interrogation for hours as the Vietnamese tried to discover what secret signal had been passed with the knocking.

Treatment of POWs changed for the better in the fall of 1969. Part of the reason was public recognition at long last in the United States of the plight of the POWs and the Vietnamese reaction to the unfavorable publicity. Another factor was the death of North Vietnamese strongman Ho Chi Minh.

In 1970, US commandos raided the prison camp at Son Tay. No prisoners were there, having been moved recently, but the operation unnerved the North Vietnamese. They pulled all of the POWs back into the Hanoi Hilton and sent hundreds of civilian Vietnamese convicts elsewhere to make room for them.

The POWs were held in seven large open-bay areas in a section of the prison they called "Camp Unity." The fellowship was wonderful, especially for those like Risner, whose total time in solitary confinement during his captivity added up to more than three years. It was at Camp Unity where the church service and the "nine feet tall" episode occurred.

"I never lost hope, and never did I despair of coming back alive," said Risner, who credits his religious faith with getting him through the ordeal.

### Back in the Saddle

In 1973, the POWs were released by order of shootdown. Risner was No. 27 in the first group freed on Feb. 12. En route from Hanoi to Clark Air Base in the Philippines on the first leg of the journey home, an Air Force doctor told the group they would be on a bland diet for a few days until their stomachs adjusted. Risner told the doctor they had been subsisting on "a lot of pig fat and grease." The doctor said, "If you can digest that, you can eat anything" and changed the menu. That evening at Clark, Risner had steak and three pieces of cake.

Risner was in good physical shape, having exercised for hours a day during captivity. He reported that he was

ready for duty "after three good meals and a good night's rest." The Air Force wanted him to rest and take a special assistant job, but Risner balked.

He persuaded the Air Force to send him instead to qualify for operational flying in the F-4E. "Knowing that I had been in prison and been out of the cockpit for a long time, they didn't expect too much of me," he said. "I didn't have quite the finesse that I had some eight or nine years earlier" but "I had not lost my ability to take off, land, and fly an airplane in formation and to position the airplane where I wanted it," and "the instructors realized right away that I was coming back into my own."

He went to Cannon AFB, N.M., as commander of the 832nd Air Division, was promoted to brigadier general, and reassigned as vice commander of the Air Force Fighter Weapons Center at Nellis AFB, Nev., in 1975, where he was also commander of the Red Flag combat training program. He retired in August 1976.

For several years, Risner was executive director of Texans' War on Drugs and in 1985, President Reagan appointed him an alternate US representative to the 40th session of the United Nations General Assembly. He was constantly on the speaking circuit.

Risner—whose only staff assignment in his long career was the US Pacific Command tour in the 1960s—never lost his fighter pilot perspective. "Risner's last flight in a fighter plane occurred in 1990; he was 65 years old," said military historian John Darrell Sherwood. "A friend sent an F-16 to fly him to a formal dinner at Nellis. Not one to be a mere passenger, Risner convinced the pilot to let him fly the aircraft both ways. After the journey, Risner fondly reflected, 'The F-16 was a tremendous aircraft, but my personal favorite to this day is the F-86.'"

He was chosen six times as a participant in Air University's "Gathering of Eagles" program, where noted airmen talk about their experiences. At a gathering in the 1990s, he met a former Russian MiG-15 ace who had been in Korea about the same time as Risner and wondered if they had ever faced each other in combat.

"No way," Risner said. "You wouldn't be here." ■

---

*John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "Encounters in the Tonkin Gulf," appeared in the January issue.*