

# Robbie Risner

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When the term *American hero* comes to mind, so does the name *Robbie Risner*. Born into modest circumstances in 1925 in Arkansas, James Robinson Risner enlisted in the US Army Air Forces in 1943. After getting his wings, he was assigned to duty in the Panama Canal Zone and

thus missed the “action” of World War II, eventually passing into the Oklahoma Air Guard in 1946. His subsequent career, however, more than made up for this inauspicious start.

Captain Risner arrived in Korea in May of 1952. Flying F-86s with the 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing, he became an ace by downing five MiGs in less than four months. All told, he shot down eight communist jets before the end of the war. Becoming an ace fighter pilot is a great accomplishment, but Robbie Risner displayed courage and skill that went beyond tactical competence.

On 22 October 1952, he and Joe Logan, his wingman, were screening a group of fighter-bombers close to the Yalu River and ended up penetrating Chinese airspace all the way to Antung. Returning toward the Yalu after a low-level kill, the pair caught flak, and Logan’s jet was shot up badly. Losing fuel and hydraulic fluid, it would not be able to fly the 60 miles to the nearest air-sea rescue point. Sizing up the situation, Risner had Logan shut down his engine while Risner nosed his own F-86 up to the tailpipe and literally pushed the crippled plane through the air at 190 knots! In spite of this heroic effort, Risner’s friend drowned after bailing out of the stricken F-86 and becoming entangled in the parachute lines.

Lieutenant Colonel Risner’s tour in Vietnam took a decidedly different—and longer—turn. Flying F-105s with the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Korat, Thailand, he was leading a strike against North Vietnam’s infamous Thanh Hoa Bridge on 3 April 1965, when fire from anti-



aircraft artillery severely damaged his plane. Risner nursed the stricken “Thud” to a safe landing at Da Nang, but the Thanh Hoa defenses got him during a return visit on 16 September. On that day, Robbie Risner became one of 104 American pilots shot down trying to drop the bridge over the course of the war, a fraternity that includes such company as Jeremiah Denton and James Stockdale.

Risner was a prisoner of war (POW) until 1973, spending four and a half years of that time in solitary confinement. As a POW, he uplifted his brother officers and served as an inspiration and example of leadership. After repatriation he received a promotion to brigadier general. In his own words, “During my imprisonment the things that sustained me to the greatest extent were my faith in God, the American people, my commander in chief, my fellow POWs, and my wonderful wife. I never lost hope, and never did I despair of coming back alive. . . . We came back stronger, better men.”

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## To Learn More . . .

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