



postscript.

A Place of Honor

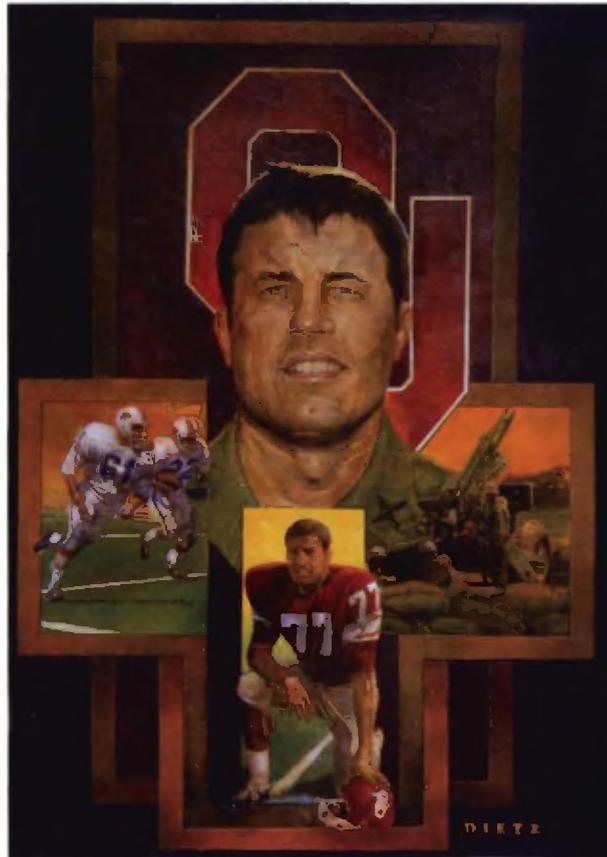
When a soldier processes into Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne, he passes through a building where a No. 77 Oklahoma football jersey hangs prominently on the wall. The soldier may even be assigned to a unit that is named for 1st Lt. James Robert Kalsu, the man who wore such a jersey more than 40 years ago.

Every time an Army ROTC cadet enters the Armory at the University of Oklahoma, he or she passes an impressive portrait of that same man. When Bob Kalsu was not on nearby Owen Field leading the offensive line, he was in this building learning to lead young men into battle. On July 21, 1970, he became the only active professional football player to die in Vietnam.

Kalsu is memorialized in a number of other places. His portrait hangs with the Sooner All Americans in the Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium's Santee Lounge; his image is included in the massive mural at the Barry Switzer Center; his name is engraved on the OU stadium's war memorial, on Army ROTC's Wall of Fame, the Buffalo Bills' Wall of Fame and on "The Wall" in Washington, D.C. A plaque honoring his heroism was presented to the Pro Football Hall of Fame by the Bills organization in 1978, a decade after the former Sooner standout was named the NFL team's Rookie of the Year.

Still, there is something especially moving about the OU ROTC tribute. The painting itself reflects the three arenas where Kalsu was most celebrated—as a Sooner, a Bill and a U.S. Army artillery

officer. Framed below the portrait are all the pages from the very touching July 23, 2001, *Sports Illustrated* cover story chronicling his life. Significantly, the memorial project was initiated by Sooner Battalion cadets, class of 2007, who raised \$20,000,



notably from the OU Letterman's Association and teammates Steve Owens and Charlie Newton.

Kalsu's story is compelling. Recruited from Del City High School, he spent his Sooner career under four different coaches—Bud Wilkinson, Gomer Jones, Jim Mackenzie and Chuck Fairbanks. Gregarious, fun-loving but highly disciplined, he was a model player and cadet, a leader at both. He had an All-American senior year, and that January, after the

Orange Bowl victory over Tennessee, he and Jan Darrow were married.

In May 1968 he received a degree in education and a commission as a second lieutenant but was not immediately called to active duty. Several NFL teams backed away because of his military commitment, but Buffalo made him an eighth-round pick. He broke into the starting lineup a few weeks into the impressive rookie season that would be his last.

Kalsu could have sought the Bills' help in finding a spot in the Army Reserves, as most professional athletes did in those days. But he had given his word to serve, and serve he would. When he left for Vietnam, his daughter, Jill Anne, was 20 months old, and Jan was pregnant with a son, James Robert Kalsu Jr., who would be born two days after his father's death.

Firebase Ripcord, the isolated jungle mountaintop where Kalsu lived his last few weeks, was in the midst of the worst fighting of the war at the time. While giving artillery support to the infantry of the 101st Airborne, Battery A was under constant mortar attack. The *Sports Illustrated* article is replete with testimony to the kind of officer Bob Kalsu was. "A fearless guy, smart, brave and respected by his troops." "His men saw him as one of them, a grunt with a silver bar working the trenches of Ripcord and never complaining." "He had a presence about him." "He was such a nice guy."

Change a few words here and there, and the tributes to a gallant officer could just as well have come from his teammates, remembering a gifted athlete with a promising future, a team leader—and an even better person. —CJB