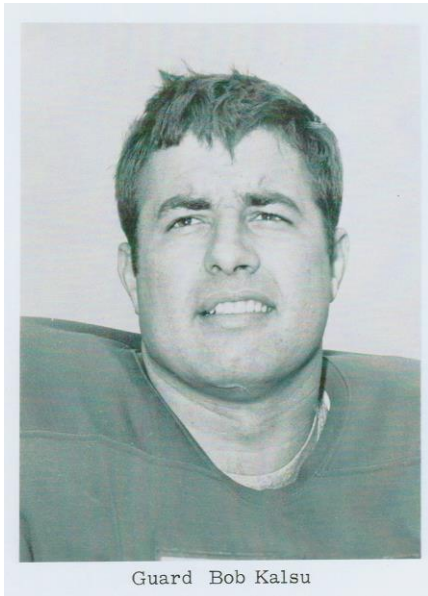


Robert Kalsu

This article was written by Patrick Gallivan

On Tuesday afternoon, July 21, 1970, Bob Kalsu sat in his bunker at Firebase Ripcord near the A Shau Valley in Vietnam. Kalsu should have been starting his second training camp with the Buffalo Bills. He had been named the team's Rookie of the Year after the 1968 season. He earned a starting role that first season and was honored as the team's top rookie even though many rookies started that season for the injury riddled team. He came to Buffalo after he wrapped up a stellar career at the University of Oklahoma. He was an All-American tackle his senior year and his coach said he was the best tackle in Sooners history. Kalsu was the perfect captain of the 1967 Oklahoma Sooners football team. He was an overachiever leading a team full of overachievers to a 10-1 record and a victory over Tennessee in the Orange Bowl.



Pro scouts were watching and liked the potential of the young man from Oklahoma. Reportedly, the Dallas Cowboys and Denver Broncos were interested but were concerned about Kalsu's ROTC obligation. The Buffalo Bills drafted Kalsu in the eighth round as an offensive lineman. The Bills liked what they saw when they scouted him. He stood six-foot-three and weighed 235 pounds, which was a similar build to the Bills' two starting guards, Billy Shaw and Joe O'Donnell. Shaw had turned thirty so Kalsu was viewed as his potential replacement. When O'Donnell injured his knee, Kalsu started in his place. He was one of six rookies to start the opening day game of the 1968 season against the Boston Patriots.



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When he came to Buffalo, there was no guarantee that he would even make the team. He played offensive tackle in college and would be attempting to change positions and move up a level to professional football. Billy Shaw liked what he saw in the young lineman right away. “Bob has a lot of talent,” said Shaw, who would be enshrined into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999. “He had real good feet, and he was strong, good on sweeps. In those days, we had only one backup and he was Joe [O’Donnell’s] and my backup. Our forte was foot speed and Bob was right there with us. He really fit in with how we played, with a lot of running, a lot of sweeps, a lot of traps.”¹ Bills leadership liked what they saw, too. Bob Kalsu “has a good future in pro football,” said Bob Lustig, Bill’s general manager at the time. “He not only had the talent, but he also had the smarts. He didn’t make the same mistake twice.”² The March following that successful season, Kalsu reported for military training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Friends had encouraged him to seek a deferment since he was a married man with a young family. “He was recently married and had a pregnant wife, but when he got his papers, he said he gave his word that he would serve,” said his son, Bob Kalsu, Jr. “He was no different from anybody else going over there, and he kept his word. I think that speaks volumes about the kind of man he was.”³

“I made a commitment to my county,” said Kalsu, at the time. “Just because I play football shouldn’t make any difference.”⁴

By November 1969, Kalsu was in Vietnam. He rarely spoke of his gridiron adventures to his fellow soldiers. He wanted to be just one of the guys. Even though he was an officer and could reasonably stay in his bunker, he joined the troops in lugging the 97-pound artillery rounds up the hill after they were delivered by helicopters. He was stationed at Firebase Ripcord. The space the Americans occupied on that hilltop was about the size of two football fields. It housed two artillery batteries that provided fire support for the infantrymen of the 101st Airborne Division. The area featured the supply routes that branched off the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos towards the coastal lowlands around Hue. The Americans were outnumbered ten to one, according to intelligence estimates.

“He was one of the very few officers completely at ease with the enlisted men, and they with him,” said one enlisted soldier in Keith Nolan’s book *Ripcord*. “Kalsu used to help us haul ammunition,” recalled another soldier. “For an officer, that was unheard of. A lot of the section chiefs didn’t even hump ammo.”⁵

“He was like one of the guys, easy-going and not standoffish,” said Thomas Militello, who served with Kalsu on Ripcord. “He wasn’t the kind of officer guys got mad at.”⁶

Kalsu genuinely cared for the soldiers in the unit. One night, a soldier new to the unit was nervous about his security guard duty assignment. Instead of staying safe in the bunker, Bob Kalsu came out to the guard post to talk with an enlisted man pulling guard duty on Fire Support Base Ripcord. To pass the time, the two men talked about family and life back home. Kalsu



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wanted the young soldier to feel better and worry less about the issues they both faced on that hilltop in Southeast Asia.⁷

On July 1, the North Vietnamese Army began to attack Ripcord. For the next twenty-two days, the enemy was relentless with their mortar attacks. The United States saw Ripcord as a helicopter lifeline to move supplies and personnel to the front line. Ripcord was ideally positioned to interrupt the North Vietnamese supply lines. As the battles intensified, Ripcord took as many as 600 rounds of enemy mortar and artillery fire daily. As the salvos broke, Kalsu came out of the bunker to talk with the other soldiers. He held in his hand a letter from his wife. The letter announced the arrival date of the addition to his family. “I remember the joy on his face as he read the letter to me,” recalled Private First-Class Nick Fotias. “He said, ‘My wife’s having our baby today.’”⁸

Just then an 82-mm mortar round landed at the feet of the two men. The blast blew them off their feet. “I remember this tremendous noise and darkness,” he said. “And being blown off my feet and flying through the door of the bunker and landing at the bottom of the steps, six feet down, and this tremendous weight crushing me. I couldn’t see. I couldn’t hear. I had dirt in my eyes, and my eyes were tearing. I rubbed them, and then I could see again. I pushed off this weight that was on top of me, and I realized it was Bob.”⁹

By the time the Army abandoned the base in late July, one of every three members of the Second Battalion had been killed or wounded.¹⁰ Kalsu was one of sixty-one American soldiers who did not come home alive from Ripcord. Another 345 were wounded.¹¹

According to Thomas Militello, who served with Kalsu on the hilltop base, the officer was attempting to warn his troops to take cover. A radio call informed Kalsu that a helicopter had been hit and was coming in for an emergency landing. Kalsu knew the sight and sound of it would bring a rain of fire from the North Vietnamese. He came outside to alert them to take cover.¹²

“He was always in control of things, but he didn’t need to be mean and real aggressive to have that control,” said Corporal Mike Renner in an NFL Films Feature on Kalsu. “He had a lot of respect. I liked him and there were a lot of officers I didn’t like. But, Lieutenant Kalsu was a different guy.”¹³

That genuineness is one of the first things that attracted his future wife to Bob Kalsu. Bob and Jan met on a blind date set up by Ron Winfrey in mid-October 1966. Winfrey was a lineman who attended high school with Jan Darrow and was then a teammate of Bob’s at Oklahoma. Jan attended Central State College in Edmond, Oklahoma which was about forty miles from the University of Oklahoma in Norman. They felt like they had a lot in common. Both had been raised Catholic and their faith was important to them. Jan immediately loved Bob’s laugh and



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outgoing personality. “Bob had a hearty laugh that you recognized right away,” Jan recalled. “It’s been almost 40 years . . . I can still hear it.”¹⁴ She also liked that he was a gentle man despite his size and the fact he played a very physical game.

Although Bob was an only child and Jan was third of nine kids, Bob felt at home with her large family right away. I finally have some brothers, he told Jan. Bob said he loved kids and wanted to have a bunch after they were married. Twenty-six days after the Orange Bowl victory, the two were married. After their Galveston, Texas honeymoon, Bob learned that the Buffalo Bills had drafted him.

In May 1970, Jan met Bob in Hawaii for a week of rest and relaxation. Jan was seven months pregnant at the time. After the short vacation, Bob flew back to Vietnam and Jan returned to Oklahoma. They would never see each other again. Upon his return to Vietnam, battles intensified around the hilltop. On July 21, Lieutenant Bob Kalsu was killed. He was twenty-five years old. Two days later, at 12:45 am at St. Anthony Hospital in Oklahoma City, Jan Kalsu gave birth to an eight-pound, 15 ½ ounce boy. She named him after her husband.

The only benefit of surviving a poor 1968 season came with the first pick in the 1969 draft. O. J. Simpson came to the Bills after a heralded collegiate career at the University of Southern California, where he set numerous rushing records in route to a Heisman Trophy. Everyone expected him to continue to run wild in professional football. That task might have been much different with Bob Kalsu playing in front of him.

In 2000, the Buffalo Bills honored Kalsu, the only active NFL player to die in the Vietnam War, with induction to the team’s Wall of Fame. Eight years later, Ralph Wilson Jr., owner and president of the Bills, attended a ceremony in Kalsu’s honor at the Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. “Bob’s sacrifice in Vietnam stamps him, as everything else he did, as a very special human being,” said Wilson. “We are honored to have known him and are delighted his memory will be preserved in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.”¹⁵ Wilson presented a plaque that hangs at the Hall of Fame today. The last sentence of the plaque reads, “No one will ever know how great a football player Bob might have been, but we know how great a man he was to give up his life for his country.”¹⁶



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End Notes:

¹ William Nack. *My Turf*. Page 256.

² William Nack. *My Turf*. Page 256.

³ Mack Spencer. (Tupelo, MS) *Daily Journal*. "Kalsu Honors Grid Star." April 8, 2005.

⁴ Jeff Snook. "*Then Bud said to Barry, who told Bob...*" Page 227.

⁵ Keith Nolan. *Ripcord: Screaming Eagles Under Siege, Vietnam 1970*. Page 344.

⁶ Donn Esmonde. *The Buffalo News*. "Kalsu Fieldhouse Would Be a Fitting Way to Honor a Real Hero." May 17, 1999.

⁷ Carson James Cunningham. *Fallen Stars*. Page 153.

⁸ William Nack. *Sports Illustrated*. "A Name on the Wall." July 23, 2001.

⁹ William Nack. *Sports Illustrated*. "A Name on the Wall." July 23, 2001.

¹⁰ Donn Esmonde. *The Buffalo News*. "Kalsu Fieldhouse Would Be a Fitting Way to Honor a Real Hero." May 17, 1999.

¹¹ Donn Esmonde. *The Buffalo News*. "Kalsu Fieldhouse Would Be a Fitting Way to Honor a Real Hero." May 17, 1999.

¹² Donn Esmonde. *The Buffalo News*. "Kalsu Fieldhouse Would Be a Fitting Way to Honor a Real Hero." May 17, 1999.

¹³ NFL Films. "Remembering Bob Kalsu." 1999.

¹⁴ Jeff Snook. "*Then Bud Said to Barry, Who Told Bob . . .*" Page 224.

¹⁵ Dave Sittler. *The Oklahoman*. "Tribute to Kalsu Is Long Overdue at OU." May 21, 1993.

¹⁶ Todd Anton & Bill Nowlin. *When Football Goes to War*. Page 82.