

Colonel Ralph L. Kuster Jr



Born on 19 August 1931 in St. Louis, Missouri Died 30 January 2021. Ralph's father had a steady job as a draftsman at the McDonnell plant in St. Louis, Missouri. When Ralph was old enough to read, his interest was captured by a comic-strip character, Smiling Jack, a daring pilot and a U.S. marshal. Jack flew mostly in the West and landed his biplane in canyons and on top of mountain ridges to get his man. "I always

enjoyed Smiling Jack," Ralph said, sitting at his dining room table in Stillwater, Oklahoma, "I especially was fascinated by the way its creator depicted the airplanes Jack flew, and the way Jack skillfully avoided a rock on landing. After the war began in 1941, they put model airplanes into cereal boxes, and my brothers and I collected a whole series of Army Air Corps and navy airplanes. I couldn't get airplanes out of my head." "When I was fifteen, a friend and I got on our bicycles and cycled ten miles to Wise Airfield, outside of St. Louis. We had eight dollars between us. We asked one pilot after another if he would give us a ride in his airplane. We finally got one pilot to take our money, and he flew us around the airfield for twenty minutes. I enjoyed the ride immensely. From then on, I wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. Ralph wanted to understand what made those machines stay up. Aeronautical engineering was not a real option at the time since there weren't too many aeronautical engineering programs in the country. I eventually went to the Missouri School of Mines in mechanical engineering, but I took all the aero options they offered. In December 1952, when I was about to graduate, I walked past the library.

A big sign out front proclaimed, 'Be tested to become an air force officer and a pilot.' My friend and I happened to have a free hour or two, and I said to him, 'It's not going to cost anything to take the test.' So we both took the test and passed. "When I graduated in January 1953, the air force gave me a ticket to Chanute AFB in Illinois for three more days of testing. The night before I left, we had a big celebration. Then I rode the bus for about a day and a half to get there. At Chanute I was put up in a barracks where the steam pipes were cracking all night long—ka-pow, ka-pow, ka-pow. Nobody got any sleep. The next day, everyone's blood pressure was sky high. The flight surgeon couldn't understand it. He had us lay down on the floor. Then he asked us, 'What is making your blood pressure so high? Is it the nurses walking through here?' "I said, 'It probably is because we didn't get any sleep last night.' "He said, 'OK. Rest.' We got everyone calmed down, and we passed. At the end of all the tests, they assembled us in a room, and an air force captain came in and read off everybody's name but mine. 'You can be a pilot,' he said after calling someone's name. 'You can be a navigator. You qualify for officer.' And so on. At the end I raised my hand and asked, 'What about me?' " 'What's your name?' he said, looking at me quizzically. " 'Kuster,' I said. 'With a K.' " " 'Well,' he replied, 'you can be anything you want.' I didn't know if I passed or failed. I took it as a good sign, and before I left Chanute I was given a pilot-training class and a

starting date in June 1953. I also received a copy of a form letter signed by the secretary of the air force addressed to my local draft board requesting that they give me a deferment until I reported for duty in June. When I got home, I queried Vietnam, 1965 draft board on my deferment for pilot training. I knew they wanted to draft me. Every time I called, they kept telling me that they would take care of me. 'We'll take care of you'—those were their exact words, not to worry about anything. They said that so many times, I began to worry. I was working at McDonnell engineering, sitting at my desk, and I thought, 'What are they trying to tell me?' I spoke to my boss about the situation, and he suggested I go visit the draft board in person to talk to them. I took along the letter signed by the secretary of the air force. "I walked into the draft board office on Friday morning. One of the girls working there escorted me to a sweet-looking little old lady. She had white hair and looked like she belonged on a jar of Smucker's marmalade.

She had the sweetest smile. She assured me immediately that everything was being taken care of and that they had the letter from the secretary of the air force, and she was going to bring my case before the board the following Wednesday. She said, 'I will make sure that they will react honorably toward your request for deferment.' She finished by saying, 'You don't have a thing to worry about.' Then she flashed her beatific smile at me, concluding our conversation. I was about to say goodbye when the phone rang. She picked up the telephone and after listening for about five seconds she yelled into the phone, 'I don't give a damn if you are going to be a doctor in two weeks. If you don't get down to the train station as directed, I'll have the military police haul you out in a jeep with your hands in cuffs.' By then she was screaming at the top of her voice. I had heard people screaming before—that's not what shocked me. What she said to that person was what shocked me—a doctor nonetheless. I walked out of the place dazed. "Across the hall from the draft board was a National Guard office, and I spoke to the recruiting officer. I asked him if they were still giving commissions to engineers with experience. I had quite a bit of experience working at McDonnell. He said, 'I have enough engineers.' Then I asked him, 'How far would you trust the draft board to do the right thing by me?'

"He kind of smiled and said, 'Well, about as far as I can throw this building.' "So I asked him what he thought I should do." "He said, 'I think you should go and talk to the air force recruiters. Their offices are only three blocks from here.' The air force major at the recruiting office listened to my story sympathetically and suggested that I take the air force enlistment test right away. He would then hold my papers and defer my departure from St. Louis until June, when I was to report for pilot training. In the meantime I should go back to work at McDonnell. If the draft-board letter arrived at home—and he told me exactly what it looked like so my mother would recognize it—she would then call me at work, and instead of going home, I would go to Union Station and take a train to San Antonio, Texas. Without me getting a draft notice, it was legal for me to do that. I thought this was the best of all worlds. When I was through with the air force paperwork, they told me to clear the police and the draft board. It was late in the day when I walked back into the draft board office. The young lady who had greeted me in the morning jumped up and said, 'You're back. What's happened?' " 'Well,' I said, 'I enlisted in the

air force.' She got a grave look on her face and ushered me over to the sweet little old lady, who was sitting behind her desk piled high with papers. She had three stacks of paper in front of her, varying in height from a couple of inches to eight inches. She looked at me and said, 'You're back again. What can we do for you now?' I said to her, 'I enlisted in the air force.' She screamed at me, 'You what?' Then she brought her left hand down and whipped the three stacks of paper off her desk. Paper was flying everywhere. The girls sitting at the sides of the office rushed over, trying to catch the papers. Two tried to sit the sweet little old lady down in her chair. Two others grabbed my elbows, and one was yelling in my ear—she had to yell with all that was going on—'What did you do to her?' 'I backed away and said, 'I didn't do anything. I only told her I enlisted in the air force.' The girl let go of me and walked around the little old lady's desk, and I saw her bend over. I pulled the one girl still holding onto my other elbow over in that direction so I could see what was going on. On the floor was a canvas U.S. mail pouch, and she was riffling through it. She pulled an envelope out of the pouch and put it in front of the sweet little old lady, who took the envelope, tore it open, and waved a letter in my face. She screamed, 'This is your draft notice. If you're not in the air force on February 27, we are going to come out with the military police on the 28th and pick you up and take you away in handcuffs.' "She did sign my release, and I was in the air force on February 27, 1953.

By direction of the President, the Purple Heart is awarded to Major Ralph L. Kuster Jr. for wounds received in action against a hostile force on 30 June 1967. The Distinguished Flying Cross and the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th oak leaf clusters thereto are awarded Major Ralph L. Kuster Jr. for extraordinary achievement in aerial combat on 14 March, 8 May, 25 April, 30 June, and 7 July 1967. On the latter date Major Kuster was directed to strike at numerous flak sites surrounding Kep airfield. Undaunted when surrounded by exceptionally heavy ground fire, Major Kuster in a voluntary act of bravery, relentlessly pressed the attack and silenced the hostile guns. On the 30th of June Major Kuster, the element leader in a flight of F-105 aircraft, was directed to strike an intensely defended strategic rail yard. Despite his aircraft having received two direct hits during the attack, he pressed on with selfless disregard of his personal safety and delivered his ordnance on target, even though immediately thereafter he was forced to eject from his crippled aircraft over unfriendly territory. The professional competence, outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed repeatedly by Major Kuster reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force. Major Ralph L. Kuster Jr. distinguished himself by gallantry in military operations against an opposing armed force over North Vietnam on 3 June 1967. On that date Major Kuster was a member of a flight of F-105 Thunderchiefs on a strike against a vital highway bridge Vietnam, 1965 near Hanoi. After penetrating the intense flak and delivering his own bombs on the target, Major Kuster again jeopardized his life by voluntarily attacking and destroying a MiG that was threatening the remainder of the strike force. For Major Kuster's gallantry and devotion to duty the President of the United States has awarded him the Silver Star for his conspicuous gallantry in action. This award signed: General William W. Momyer Commander, 7th Air Force Harold Brown Secretary of the Air Force. Colonel Ralph L. Kuster Jr. Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross (5), Air Medal (9), Purple Heart.