

LEADING with HONOR



Leadership Lessons from the Hanoi Hilton



Lee Ellis

Foreword by Senator John McCain

LEADING with HONOR

Leadership Lessons from the Hanoi Hilton

“... Lee uses gripping stories from the POW camps to engage the reader and teach invaluable principles of leadership. I highly recommend this book for developing leaders at all levels in any organization, military or civilian.”

Gen William R. Looney III, USAF (Ret)

“At the intersection of principles and character lives the virtue of honor, and I have never seen it more clearly than staring through the hole of a POW cell with Col Lee Ellis’s eyes. This is not just a good leadership book, or even a career changer. It is a life changer.”

Rusty Gordon

Chairman and Co-founder, SpeedTracs, Former CEO, Knowlagent,
Chairman of the Ambassador Leadership Program, serial entrepreneur

“Of the dozens of books I’ve read on ‘leadership,’ I’ve never read one which so grabbed me and captivated my attention from beginning to end - the way a great novel does, making you almost sad to finish.”

Bob Littell

Chief NetWeaver

“WOW! Col (Ret) Lee Ellis has given us a true gift - real solutions to today’s leadership issues against a backdrop of real human survival in Prisoner of War status. This wonderful book is a must read for all who aspire to any leadership job! An absolute ‘page turner’ and tribute to our warriors of a by-gone era, with lessons for today.”

Lt Gen William A. Lord, USAF

“*Leading with Honor* is an introspective read, offering character and leadership parallels from prisoner of war (POW) camps to today’s challenging business environment. This book is a must read, authored by a unique individual who continues to give back to those he so courageously served and protected - the leaders of today and tomorrow.”

Ed Day

President and CEO, Mississippi Power Company

“In the crowded world of books on leadership, Lee Ellis’s unique contribution, *Leading with Honor*, far exceeds anything I’ve seen, and its storytelling style woven into strong, practical wisdom makes it hard to put down.”

Archie B. Carroll, PhD Director, Nonprofit Management & Community Service Program and
Professor of Management Emeritus, Terry College of Business
University of Georgia

“A great read on integrity, character, and leadership. Lee captures the essence of what it takes to provide strong leadership, as well as followership, in some of the most difficult conditions ever faced by our military men.”

R. E. “Gene” Smith Past President and Chairman of the Board, Air Force Association POW 2
Oct 67—14 Mar 73

“In these pages, Lee Ellis shares extraordinary stories of courage, resiliency, honor, and humility from which we can learn about transformative leadership and apply these insights to today’s workplace.”

**Michael Montelongo SVP & Chief Administrative Officer, On-site Service Solutions Sodexo
North America**

“Our culture desperately needs to hear his inspiring story, and even more so these fourteen lessons on leading with honor. I wholeheartedly recommend it!”

Howard Dayton Founder, Compass—*finances God’s way*

“A wonderful book! Leadership advice obtained and forged from the burning fire of captivity and adversity at the Hanoi Hilton. This book offers great wisdom and advice about leadership.”

COL Jim Coy, (Ret) Author, The Eagles Series books: *Prisoners of Hope* and *A Gathering of Eagles*

“This book is a truly outstanding explanation of what we POWs witnessed, describing great examples, naming names and incidents that had such a spectacular effect on our morale and survival. I will use Lee’s book as a standard from now on in relating to everyone I know the leadership lessons learned in North Vietnam!”

Guy D. Gruters USAF POW 20 Dec 67—14 Mar 73

“Lee has used these lessons with us as our team has evolved over the past several years. His leadership and facilitation have helped us to grow as leaders individually as well as become a strong team.”

**Carol Burrell
President and CEO, Northeast Georgia Health Systems**

“The leadership lessons Lee Ellis imparts in this compelling work do much to inform all of us who lead in these challenging times.”

**John R. Lough, Ed.D Manager, Professional Development Programs, The BB&T Banking
School, BB&T University**

“Lee’s remarkable journey and ability to take what would for most be considered a dark time, and turn it into an opportunity to teach leadership is a genuine gift. Transforming prison life experiences to leadership learning surpasses others’ attempts to write on leadership.”

Bob Pedersen Chief Visionary & Storyteller, Goodwill North Central Wisconsin

“In *Leading with Honor*, Lee Ellis shows us that the principles of leadership he experienced during some of the most difficult situations as a POW are applicable to leaders everywhere. Lee’s candid narrative is compelling, giving us an appreciation for the importance of leading with honor and courage, even in the face of the most difficult adversity.”

**Ralph de la Vega President and CEO, AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets Author of
*Obstacles Welcome: Turn Adversity into Advantage in Business and Life***

“Lee’s painful and humorous stories touch deeply, reminding us of the sacrifices that POW leaders made to serve our nation with honor. From those dry bones, he brings life and light through case studies and stories from today’s workplace, showing us how authentic leaders in every generation lean into the pain to do the right thing.”

LEADING with HONOR

★
Leadership Lessons from the Hanoi Hilton

Lee Ellis



All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites mentioned as references or sources for further information may have changed or no longer be available since this book was published.

Published by FreedomStar Media

Drawings from *Prisoner of War: Six years in Hanoi* by John M. McGrath, LCDR U.S. Navy, Copyright © 1975 U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland. Reprinted by Permission of Naval Institute Press

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission
All rights reserved worldwide.

Cover Design: Mighty 8th Media

Interior Art and Layout Design: Marshall Still - Still Graphics

Content Editor: Michael Dowling

Copy Editor: Valerie Dyke

To purchase this book for trade distribution, go to FreedomStarMedia.com

FreedomStar Media

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-9838793-1-2

Ebook Edition

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by Senator John McCain

Introduction

LEADING YOURSELF

- 1 Know Yourself
- 2 Guard Your Character
- 3 Stay Positive
- 4 Confront Your Doubts and Fears
- 5 Fight to Win
- 6 Bounce Back

LEADING OTHERS

- 7 Clarify and Build Your Culture
- 8 Over-Communicate the Message
- 9 Develop Your People
- 10 Balance Mission and People
- 11 Build Cohesive Teams
- 12 Exploit Creativity
- 13 Treasure Your Trials and Celebrate Your Successes
- 14 Free the Captives

Epilogue

Summary of Lessons: Foot Stompers

Appendix

Acknowledgements

Index

About the author

FOREWORD

Lee Ellis and I share a bond that goes back to our experience in the POW camps of North Vietnam. He was captured eleven days after me, and we occupied neighboring cells in the Hanoi Hilton for eighteen months of our captivity. When the peace agreements were signed, we paced the open compound at the Plantation Camp together, waiting for our release date. We have been friends ever since.

In *Leading with Honor* Lee draws from the POW experience, including some of his own personal story, to illustrate the crucial impact of leadership on the success of an organization. His writings highlight lessons and principles that can be applied to every leadership situation.

Lee also addresses the role of honor in leadership. Unfortunately, we don't hear much about honor in discussions of civilian leadership, but our businesses, government institutions, and charitable organizations desperately need to conduct that conversation. Leading with honor is about putting service to others ahead of self-interests. It means keeping your word and your commitments. It means serving sacrificially in a way that upholds the values that historically have made our nation great, our people proud, and our families strong.

My friend Lee Ellis presents these lessons in an exciting and practical way. *Leading with Honor* is a book that can have a positive influence on the development of every leader. Thank Lee for bringing this conversation to the forefront of our national discussion.

John McCauley
United States Senator
POW 1967-1973

INTRODUCTION

Our culture desperately needs courageous servant leaders—men and women who have clear vision and strong character, who instill confidence and inspire excellence, who don't fold under pressure, compromise on principle, or practice deception. In short, we need leaders who are committed to *leading with honor*.

I had the privilege of serving under such exemplary leaders for sixty-four months, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. I had no choice about the long hours. We were locked up together as prisoners of war in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” prison system.

The American leaders in the North Vietnamese POW camps were some of the most highly qualified and best trained officers we've ever sent to war. These men suffered torture and deprivation of the worst kind for six, seven, and even eight years, yet they courageously kept on leading.

When they were beaten down, they didn't conceal their shortcomings or wallow in self-pity. They picked themselves up and continued to lead with inspirational courage and unselfish devotion. There's nothing quite like the crucible of a POW camp for revealing authenticity. When you're enduring hunger and humiliation, punctuated by frequent threats of torture and even death, pretenses get stripped away fast. You are completely vulnerable; transparency is the only option. You come face-to-face with doubts and fears you never knew you had.

Although I'll tell you some of my story, a more important goal is to tell you about the leaders I saw in action. They are my heroes. I commend them to you as role models. We wholeheartedly followed these leaders because we respected and trusted them. They were brave, unselfish, and genuine.

In the Hanoi Hilton I learned that leading with honor is about doing the right thing, even when it entails personal sacrifice. More often than not, doing the right things—accepting responsibility, fulfilling your duty, telling the truth, and remaining faithful to your word—the most difficult thing to do, but it's also the thing that brings long-term success. Shortcuts may work for the moment, but almost everything of lasting value comes at a price. For the POW leaders in the Hanoi system, that price was very high indeed.

I've made many speeches over the years since the war. Often people come up afterward and say, “I could never have done what you did.” I sense that behind that comment they're really asking themselves, “Could I do that? Do I have what it takes to survive a POW experience with honor?”

In this book I pose a deeper and more helpful question: “Do you have what it takes to lead with honor where you are now—with your team, your family, your community, and your country?” I've written this book to help you answer that question, hopefully with a resounding yes! If you lead from a strong foundation, you will succeed in any battle that comes your way.

A POW camp—one of the most intense and stressful environments imaginable—provides an excellent vehicle for identifying and validating basic principles for leading with honor. The fourteen lessons that follow come from that crucible; they have been further refined through

Finding Leaders Worth Emulating

In times of tremendous challenges and tumultuous changes, one thing remains constant: the importance of the leader. Think about it. Who's responsible for building the culture of the organization? Who ultimately must attract the talent, communicate the vision, foster teamwork, and set the standards? Who must provide the inspiration necessary for the organization to overcome obstacles, navigate through uncertainty, and accomplish the mission? The answer, of course, is the leader.

Leaders have another equally important responsibility: to develop new leaders. Effective leadership is typically *caught* more than *taught*. That means successful leaders must serve as role models for aspiring leaders.

Unfortunately, some people did not have good leaders to emulate early in their careers and most caught some poor habits along the way. Compelling stories about outstanding leaders can help fill the gap. From these stories we can gain freedom from the past and vision for the future. We can learn what it means to lead with honor, and we can develop the tools and the mindsets we need to do it.

In these pages I'll share accounts of leaders who served as my role models. As you read about them, I think you'll see why they had such a significant influence on me. And more importantly, I think you'll learn from them too.

Embarking On a Mission

Since being set free from captivity in North Vietnam, my evolving mission has been to help free leaders from the shackles that prevent them from becoming the best they can be. In many years as a leadership consultant, I have assessed, coached, and trained hundreds of men and women in myriad professions and levels of responsibility. They have included executives of Fortune 500 companies and top leaders in the health care industry, entrepreneurs and educators, politicians and physicians, and plant supervisors and pastors. Although most were already moderately to very successful, they were committed to continuous growth and development.

This book is for men and women who want to elevate their influence and effectiveness to the next level. Does that include you? Do you want to unleash more of your leadership potential? Would you like people to wholeheartedly follow you because you have earned their trust and respect, not simply because you have authority over them? Would you like your character to speak louder than your commands?

If your answer is yes, I have good news for you. To experience the power of leading with honor, you don't need to become a POW or endure a similar trial. Through honest self-assessment and the application of the principles outlined in this book, you can become a more successful leader. I know that to be true, because for many years I have personally grappled with and applied these principles, and I've helped others do the same.

Becoming a Warrior

But be forewarned: becoming a better leader is not easy. First, your ego will sting a bit when you realize that you have not arrived and still have room to grow. Second, changing some of your attitudes, behaviors, and habits can be difficult, even painful. In a very real sense, you must become a warrior. You must go to war with your ego, your dogmatic opinions, and some of your old ways of doing things—the practices that really don't work.

There is a price to pay if you want to lead with honor. One of the most famous epic dramas of our time—*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*—describes the cost this way:

There is no freedom without sacrifice.

There is no victory without loss.

There is no glory without suffering.

What are you willing to sacrifice to gain your freedom from the hindrances that are holding you back? What are you willing to lose or give up to enjoy the victory of greater leadership success? I encourage you to put forth the effort and lean into the pain. Even a moderate investment will yield big results.

Planning Your Flight

If you're ready to embark on this mission, allow me to give you our flight plan. The first part of this book is about leading yourself. My aim is to help you dig beneath the surface to gain a better understanding of what you value, where you want to go, and what you are willing to sacrifice to get there. We'll examine a few key concepts like self-knowledge, character, attitude, courage, determination, and resiliency.

The second part of the book is about leading others. That's where we talk about the vital leadership issues of organizational culture, communication, accountability, continuous growth, balancing mission and people, teamwork, innovation, and celebration.

In each chapter I'll use stories from the POW camps, including some of my personal experiences, as a springboard for highlighting leadership principles and examples. At the end of each chapter, I've provided personal coaching designed to help you apply these principles. If you would like to print out an expanded version of these coaching questions for your use in writing your responses, visit LeadingWithHonor.com.

In flight school when an instructor stomped a foot, or simply said, "This is a foot stomper," we knew we'd better pay attention, because what followed was likely to appear on the test. In this book I've included a "Foot Stomper" at the end of each chapter summarizing the chapter's key point. It's intended to help you succeed on the leadership tests in your life.

Gaining Freedom

When I was released from captivity in North Vietnam, it was as though a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Now, as a consultant and coach, I have the joy and privilege of helping leaders throw off the weights of counterproductive behaviors and self-defeating

mindsets, so they can lead with greater courage, conviction, purpose, and passion.

I hope this book will help you gain similar freedom, so you can, more than ever, *lead with honor.*

Lee Ellis

LEADING YOURSELF



Chapter 1

KNOW YOURSELF



*“This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”*

William Shakespeare, Hamlet1, iii

November 7, 1967, 4:00 p.m.—Captain Ken Fisher and I rolled into a dive-bomb pass on our F-4C Phantom jet. As we swooped downward, our bird with turned-up wingtips, elevated tail, and deafening roar must have resembled a high-tech version of a prehistoric pterodactyl.¹

Tracers from the North Vietnamese antiaircraft artillery flashed by our canopy like giant Roman candles, their explosions encircling us with ominous puffs of gray and black smoke, each representing hundreds of shards of shrapnel designed to mortally wound our beautiful beast. It was combat as it has been for thousands of years, just updated with the latest technology.

Our mission was to destroy the guns that protected the Quang Khe ferry near Route 1A, the main thoroughfare for transporting war materials to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As our jet plunged toward the artillery positions at five hundred miles an hour, the earth enlarged on our windscreen as if we were adjusting the zoom of a telephoto lens. It was an eyeball-to-eyeball stare-down with the enemy, with each side expecting the other to die. When you face enemy fire, you are at the point of the sword. Ken and I had been around long enough to know that the sword of combat cuts both ways; we had lost three close friends in similar situations in the prior two months.

We released our heavy payload of bombs, and our lightened plane lurched upward. Suddenly, an explosion rocked our aircraft. A terrifying sound, like marbles in a blender, alerted me that the metal of our expensive flying machine was ripping apart. The cockpit was still intact, but it was rapidly filling with smoke. The control stick was frozen full aft right, and we were tumbling end over end through the sky.

Just before bomb release we had been at six thousand feet, descending rapidly in a steep dive. Now, on fire and out of control, there was only one option: eject. But that was impossible! I was upside down floating out of my seat with my head pushed against the top of the canopy. If I ejected while we were in negative Gs², I could suffer severe injury, even death. But time was running out; at our rate of descent, we would soon be out of the envelope for safe ejection.

Suddenly the cockpit flipped again, and I felt pressure in my seat: positive Gs! It was now or never. I sat upright and pulled the ejection handle. An explosive charge fired, blowing

away the canopy. Still strapped in my seat, I was blasted free of the aircraft—like a carnivorous stunt artist shot from a cannon—at an acceleration force eighteen times the force of gravity.

Now, if this expensive, one-time-use Martin-Baker ejection system was going to save my life, it would have to flawlessly execute a remarkably complex series of events. A half-second later, the man-seat separator worked as advertised, firing a blast of compressed air to open the lap-belt connecting pin, freeing me from the heavy seat and triggering the appropriately named “butt snapper”—a folded nylon belt under my seat that mechanically snapped tight, thrusting me into space. As the ejection seat moved away, the attached lanyard pulled out the D-Ring, deploying my parachute. The F-4 Phantom’s marvelously engineered James Bond-like escape system had snatched me from the jaws of death in less than two seconds.

But much like Bond’s adventures, escape from one danger only brought another. I had been ejected from the womb of the F-4 into a very unfriendly world. Hanging in the parachute without my shell of protection, I felt exposed and vulnerable. Gunfire cracked below and bullets whizzed by me. Instinctively, I followed the procedures ingrained by regular refresher training since entering flight school: *Check for a fully open chute. Activate the emergency beeper. Decide on deploying the life raft. Pick a spot to land and steer your parachute. Prepare for the parachute-landing fall (PLF).*

To the west, the landscape was dotted with foliage-covered karsts, which rose like giant green cones several hundred feet into the air. Snaking among these majestic limestone formations, like a silver ribbon, flowed the Song Gianh River. To the east, the river broadened as it encountered the flat terrain of the delta, until it emptied into the azure waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, now shimmering in the late afternoon sun. This pastoral scene and the gentle sounds of the wind rustling through the canopy of my parachute for an instant made me forget my danger, but I was soon jarred back to reality by the crack of gunfire and the jabber of alien voices below.

Situational awareness dictated that my best opportunity to escape was to steer the chute to reach the river. We were only a couple of miles from the gulf. If I could make it to the river, there might be a chance of evading capture long enough to be picked up by a rescue boat or helicopter. I pulled on the risers and steered, but there was insufficient altitude to glide that distance. Fortunately, I was not far from the coast, so the terrain beneath my feet was relatively flat. Picking a spot about two hundred yards north of the river, I executed the PLF: boots hit the ground first; then roll to spread the energy of deceleration sequentially over legs, thighs, hips, shoulders, and upper back. No sprains, nothing broken—the sergeants had trained us well.

I scampered into a waist-deep bomb crater about ten feet from where I had landed, pulled the quick-release clamps to disconnect myself from the deflating parachute, and grabbed my radio: “This is Buckshot 2 Bravo. I’m on the ground, but they’re closing in. Start strafing three hundred meters north of the river. I’m heading south.” But help didn’t come. With enemy soldiers almost upon me, the Misty FAC (forward air controller) coordinating rescue efforts from overhead, wisely decided that it was too dangerous to strafe.

In a life-and-death crisis, some people talk about seeing their entire life flash before their eyes, but that was not my case. The scene that kept breaking into my consciousness during the parachute descent, and then when I was on the ground, was from the Korean War movie *The Bridges at Toko Ri*. In the movie, William Holden and Mickey Rooney play two Naval Aviators

who get shot down behind enemy lines and take up a defensive position in a ditch. Surrounded by North Korean communists, they are eventually killed in a shoot-out.⁴ Now I was in a similar situation, hunkering down in a bomb crater as enemy soldiers closed in. Would I suffer a similar fate? How weird it was that in the midst of the chaos of a real war, scenes from a war movie kept flitting in and out of my mind. I was determined to write a different script for my story.

In less than sixty seconds, the militia troops formed a semi-circle about thirty yards away and began moving toward me. Survival instructors had taught us that the best chance of escape is immediately after capture, because frontline soldiers are typically the least trained in handling prisoners. Deciding to try a bluff, I drew my .38-caliber, six-shot revolver (Smith and Wesson Combat Masterpiece), which was loaded with two rounds of tracer and three of regular ball ammo. Could these “rookies” be scared off? I would challenge them and find out.

The first three stepped out from the chest-high bushes and pointed their rifles at me. I raised my revolver, motioned for them to get back, and then fired a tracer round over their heads. Without flinching, they shouldered their rifles and pointed them at me. Why they didn't cut me down right then, I'll never know. I can only assume God had other plans for my life.

One of the militiamen pulled out a pamphlet. I recognized it as a “pointee talkee,” a tool the Vietnamese military had devised that showed drawings of American pilots being captured along with Vietnamese phonetics for English commands. Referring to his booklet, he began to shout, “Handsjuh! Handsjuh! Shurrenda no die! Shurrenda no die!”

Aviators have a number of expressions for being in deep trouble. One of the nicer ones is “out of airspeed and ideas.” That precisely described my situation. To avoid the fate of the pilots in the movie at Toko Ri, my only option was to surrender. I tossed aside my pistol and raised my hands, not knowing what to expect. Immediately my captors grabbed me and began tugging at my survival vest, anti-G-suit, and flight suit—my last vestiges of protection.

Removing this specialized equipment was a learned skill, and these young militiamen, who were not familiar with zippers, resembled a pack of dogs attempting to skin a raccoon. The scene surely would have been a winner on *America's Funniest Videos*, but at the time there was nothing funny about it. I was experiencing a pilot's worst nightmare: shot down and captured in the territory of the enemy you've been bombing.

The zipper struggle was short-lived; they gave up and cut the outer layers away. Then one of them figured out how to work the main zipper, and they removed the flight suit without more damage. They next took my boots, leaving me stripped of everything except my olive-drab jockey shorts. Now I really felt naked and exposed—physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Up until the time of surrender, I had operated like a computer: calculating and processing at nanosecond speed. My training “programs” had translated into almost flawless execution, credit to the “military way” and those who did the training. Now, out of control and with no power, this cool, somewhat cocky fighter pilot felt all alone and very scared.

Captured and in enemy hands—what lay in store? Would I be tortured? Killed? The shock of my predicament made the whole affair seem like a dream. I knew this was happening to me, but I also felt like an observer, as if participating in an out-of-body experience. Unfortunately, this nightmare was real, and I would need to adopt a new mindset—a new

game face—to fight a different kind of battle, a battle of minds and wills.

IT IS WITH DEEP PERSONAL CONCERN THAT I OFFICIALLY INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON, 1ST LIEUTENANT LEON F. ELLIS, JR., IS REPORTED MISSING IN NORTH VIETNAM ON 7 NOVEMBER 1967. HE WAS A PILOT ON AN F-4C AIRCRAFT ON AN OPERATIONAL MISSION. HIS AIRCRAFT WAS LAST SEEN TO ROLL IN ON TARGET. SHORTLY THEREAFTER A LARGE FIREBALL WAS SEEN WHERE HIS AIRCRAFT PREVIOUSLY WAS LOCATED. THE FIREBALL DESCENDED TO THE GROUND AND IMPACTED. THE CREW WAS NOT SEEN TO BAIL OUT BUT, HOWEVER, VOICE CONTACT WAS ESTABLISHED WITH YOUR SON ON GROUND. RESCUE OPERATIONS ARE IN PROGRESS. LIEUTENANT ELLIS MAY HAVE BEEN CAPTURED. FOR HIS WELFARE IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT IN REPLY TO QUESTIONS OTHER THAN YOUR IMMEDIATE FAMILY YOU GIVE ONLY HIS NAME, GRADE, SERIAL NUMBER AND DATE OF BIRTH. THIS IS THE INFORMATION HE MUST PROVIDE IF CAPTURED. PLEASE BE ASSURED WHEN NEW INFORMATION IS RECEIVED IT WILL BE FURNISHED YOU IMMEDIATELY. A REPRESENTATIVE FROM DOBBINS AIR FORCE BASE WILL CONTACT YOU WITHIN 48 HOURS TO ASSIST IN ANY WAY POSSIBLE. IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS YOU MAY CALL MY PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE AT AREA CODE 512-652-3505. PLEASE ACCEPT MY SINCERE SYMPATHY DURING THIS PERIOD OF ANXIETY.

BRIGADIER GENERAL GEORGE E. MCCORD
MILITARY PERSONNEL CENTER
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Telegram delivered by the USAF casualty notification officer

LESSON: KNOW YOURSELF

Near-death experiences are no fun, but they do at least cause you to stop and examine your life's priorities. Not immediately, of course; in the midst of the crisis, your only priority is survival. But later, after things calm down and the adrenaline rush subsides, you think about your family and how grateful you are to be alive. Regrets also pop into your mind—perhaps even a bit of guilt or shame—about things in your past you wish you had or hadn't done. A lot of stuff that a few hours ago seemed so important gets pushed to the background.

In the day-to-day busyness of life, we tend to forget that we're merely passing through this world, temporary passengers on a planet we call Earth as it hurtles through this vast space we call the Universe. We expend a lot of effort trying to take control of our daily lives, and we should. An out-of-control life is of no value to anyone. But when control is suddenly lost, or

minds are freed to focus on the bigger picture, and our priorities tend to get reshuffled.

Clarify Your Priorities

Fortunately, you don't need to wait until you've lost control or experienced a life-threatening crisis before you start reexamining your priorities. You can pause right now and assess whether you're living in alignment with your passion, purpose, and personality.

At the time of my capture, I was just a typical single 24-year-old exuberant pilot who had largely ignored such weighty issues. Partly because of my solid spiritual upbringing, however, I believed deeply that my life was guided toward a divine purpose. I also was passionate about my work. Since the age of five, I had felt destined to fly and to be some type of warrior. My choice of a military career as a fighter pilot was also well aligned with several of my innate personality strengths: *bold, take charge, adventurous, and challenge-driven*.

After my capture, I definitely had doubts and fears about what the next hours and days might bring, but there were no second thoughts. I had known the risks, I had made my choices, and I was committed to my cause. In short, I was authentically living "on purpose." That clarity helped me to stand firm to my values of duty, honor, and country in the days, months, and years ahead.

Connect with Your Purpose and Passion

A sense of purpose fueled by passion is essential for true success. It's fine to set your sights on any number of worthwhile goals, such as attaining a certain position of influence or making enough money for a comfortable retirement. But all of these achievements will be hollow if they don't align with an overall purpose that holds up under life-and-death scrutiny.

Clarity of purpose sharpens focus, lifts confidence, and promotes fulfillment. Unfortunately, many people are not living on purpose. Either they don't know how to uncover their purpose, or they lack the motivation to search for it. No wonder they lack energy and zest!

Hugh Massie, one of my strategic business partners, didn't stop searching until he discovered his purpose. Hugh was working for a world-renowned consulting company as a successful CPA in Singapore and Thailand when he felt drawn to educate people on finance. He moved back home to Sydney, Australia, and started his own financial services business. It was successful, but within a few years he realized that he had a more specific calling: to teach people how their natural personality responses, such as fear and risk-taking, influence their financial decisions.

That quest led Hugh to the United States, where he became a partner in the work that his company was doing in the field of human behavior. Shortly thereafter, he moved to Atlanta and launched Financial DNA Resources, which is now recognized as a pioneer in the field of behavioral finance. Although Hugh is intelligent and diligent, his success in great part is due to his relentless focus on gaining clarity about his purpose.

Success is not necessarily related to money. I've worked with two executives who led successful business careers to assume key management positions with not-for-profit

organizations. Both of these leaders made courageous moves in mid-life to realign their careers with their big-picture priorities.

Another of my coaching clients transitioned in mid-life in the opposite direction. “My passion is to grow business revenues and people,” he told me, “and I’m stagnating here in this not-for-profit organization.” Soon thereafter, he benefited himself and others by moving to a career in business that was more aligned with his temperament and desires at that stage of life.

Capitalize on Your Personality Strengths

When I first began conducting leadership training in corporations, a young man came to me at the break and asked somewhat sheepishly, “What are the best personality traits for leadership?” Intuitively, I suspected what he really wanted to know was, “Do I have the right traits to be a leader?” That question comes up in some fashion almost everywhere I go, regardless of the age of the group or the size of the organization. Recently it emerged in a training session with executives and senior leaders of a Fortune 500 company.

To illustrate different styles of leadership, I had asked this large audience to physically group themselves in the four corners of the room according to their strongest personality trait. When one participant tried to join the “highly dominant” group, he was good naturedly rejected by the other members. Somewhat disappointed, this man then joined a different group that better matched his key trait. In our debriefing after the exercise, he commented, “It’s true that I don’t fit with that ‘dominant’ group, but I’ve always wanted to be like them.”

“Your honesty and vulnerability are admirable,” I told him, “and it’s not wrong for you to adapt your behaviors from time to time to be more effective in specific situations. But it is a mistake to deny your natural strengths and try to reinvent yourself to be like others. Great leaders come in a wide variety of styles and traits. The best traits for you are your innate traits, the ones you already have. You will be the best leader when you are authentic. So, be yourself.⁵ The more you try to imitate others and ‘pose’ as someone you are not, the more difficulties you will have.” This man was well respected, and the people in the room knew each other well enough to establish this kind of trust. After that experience, I’m confident he became a more authentic and effective leader.

Critical moments can be catalysts for constructive change, but I urge you not to wait for a life-and-death situation or another type of crisis before you begin to think about who you are and where you’re going. Take the time now to ensure that your personal and career choices are aligned with your purpose, passion, and personality.

Living authentically enables you to wholeheartedly pursue your goals. Your energy will be greater because your focus is clearer, and your commitment will be deeper because your ownership is stronger. Instead of “doing so you can be,” focus on “being so you can do.” The more comfortable you are being yourself, the more productive and successful you will be.⁶



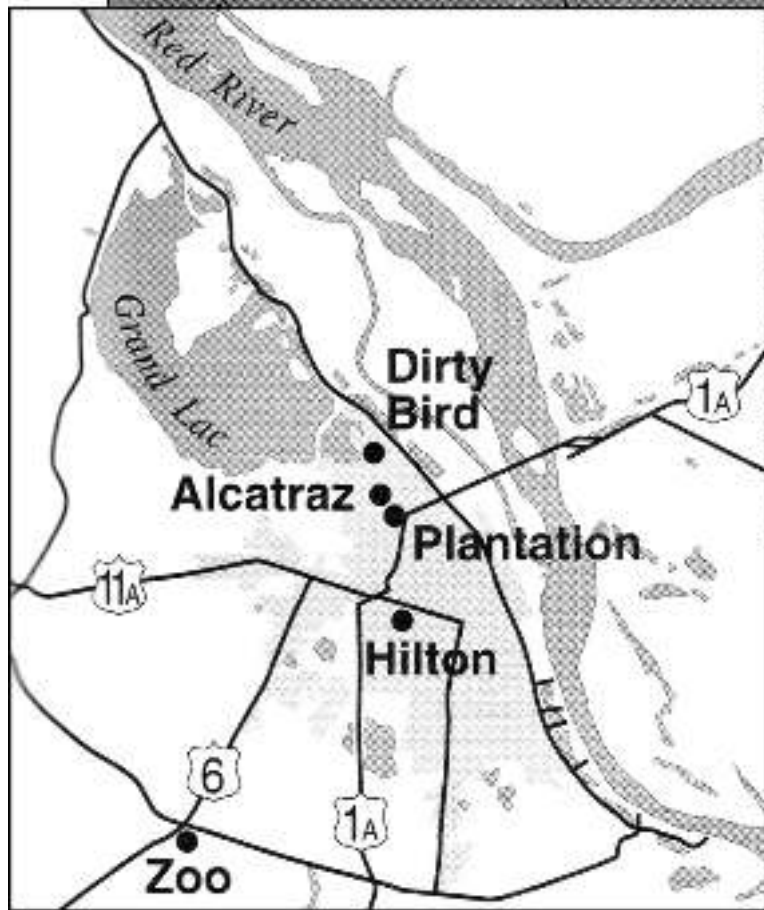
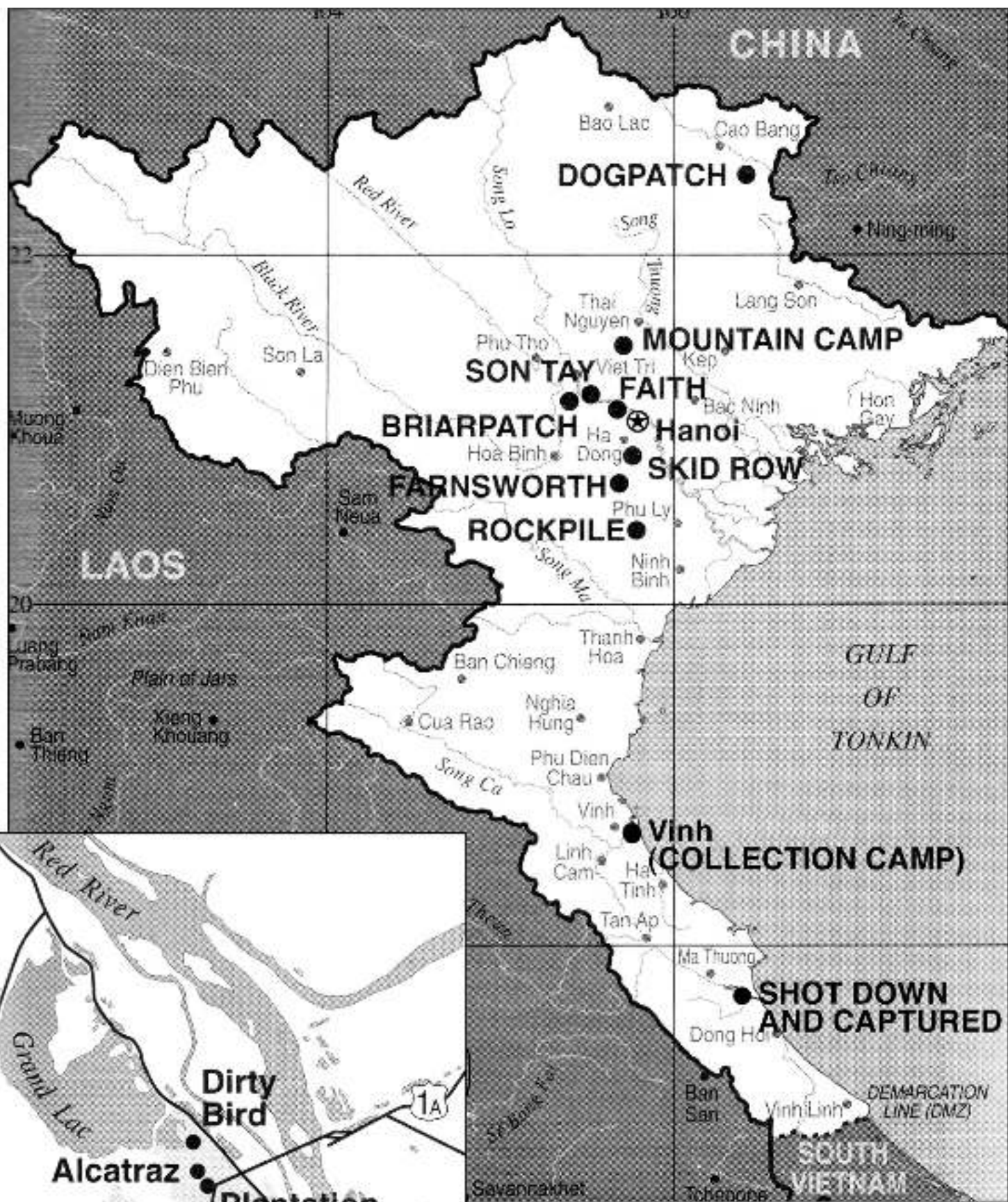
Foot Stomper: Authentic leadership flows from the inside out. You will be most successful and fulfilled when you clarify who you uniquely are in terms of purpose, passion, and personality, and then lead authentically from that core.

➤ **Coaching: KNOW YOURSELF**

One of the goals for the coaching in this book is to help you become more aware of your true self. Begin that process using these questions.

1. **Consider your purpose.** As best you can discern, what on earth were you created to do? What are your primary goals in life? Capture in one sentence what you would like your legacy to be.
2. **Connect with your passion.** What activities are so satisfying that you look forward to doing them? When do you feel as if you're in "the zone"? What types of environments make you feel perfectly at home?
3. **Clarify your unique personality talents.** What are your innate personality strengths? What are your natural struggles? How will these strengths and struggles impact your career and leadership choices?⁷

Note: To download an expanded version of these coaching questions for writing your responses, visit LeadingWithHonor.com.



▲ North Vietnam Prison Camps

◀ POW Prisons in and around Hanoi

Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia 1961-1973*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999) 599, Adapted

1 To view pictures of an F-4 and the one I was flying when shot down, see *Leading With Honor*, LeadingWithHonor.com/photos.

2 G-forces describe the impact of the centrifugal force of gravity. Normally we live in a one-G world. Positive Gs pull toward the earth; negative Gs push us away from the earth. At five Gs a two hundred pound person weighs one thousand pounds. At some point, when the heart is unable to overcome the weight of the blood and pump it to the brain, a person will black out. Aviators are trained to fly and fight for short periods with as much as six to eight Gs. Too many negative Gs cause a red-out from blood pooling in the head and eyes. The negative Gs we experienced were enough to lift up our bodies, so that we could not achieve the proper sitting position for ejection.

3 This original ballistic (one-shot) seat was a lifesaver, but the instantaneous explosion gave many of us back problems. Later Martin-Baker ejection seats employed a rocket seat that spread the acceleration over a longer burn time, reducing the “G” onset and its resulting compression to the spinal column.

4 *The Bridges at Toko Ri* was based on a true story. When James Michener wrote the book in 1953, it was believed that the pilots had been killed, so that’s the way he wrote it. Later it was learned that Michener’s characters were captured and had survived the POW camp. I did not learn about the real storyline until recently, while doing research for this book. That alone was a cause for reflection.

5 U.S. presidents have exhibited a variety of traits. CEOs, athletic coaches, and leaders in all fields also exhibit different leadership styles, depending on their unique, innate traits.

6 New behaviors can be learned. Effective leaders adapt their behaviors to match the situation, but they still operate primarily out of their own unique style and values.

7 For help in discovering your unique talents and information on *N8Traits*™ Profile online assessment, see *Leading With Honor*, LeadingWithHonor.com.

Chapter 2

GUARD YOUR CHARACTER



“There is an ongoing battle between conscience and self-interest in which, at some point, we have to take sides.”

Robert Brault

A few hours after I was captured, the militia allowed me to get back into my flight suit. Then they led me—blindfolded, hands tied, and barefoot—to a nearby hamlet and shoved me down into a cave that I surmised was a bomb shelter. I thought I was alone, until I heard someone breathing heavily. “Ken, is that you?” Ken answered in the affirmative. We had time to exchange only a few sentences before they pulled me out and led me away like a dog on a leash.

On several occasions I managed to push up my blindfold, but I could see only a few feet ahead. After we had walked for an hour or so, passing by what I sensed were several small hamlets, the guards began to talk excitedly, as if something big was about to happen. Looking a few yards ahead beneath the blindfold, I observed an irrigation ditch bordering a rice paddy. With mounting fear, my emotional memory pulled up stories of the Korean War when POWs were marched to exactly such ditches and shot. Was this the termination of my death march?

I decided I must not let them shoot me in the back. I had always had a phobia about being hit from behind. And if I faced my captors, I figured, they might lose their courage or decide to show mercy. Stopping at the ditch, I wheeled around toward the firing squad. The guards reacted with angry shouts. Through the bottom of my blindfold I saw them raise their rifles to the firing position. One guard spun me back around and cut loose with what sounded like every curse word in his repertoire.

Powered by the adrenalin that comes in a life and death struggle, Robert Brault I again wheeled to face their rifles. This time they went berserk. The two guards closest to me started pummeling me and spun me around again. One of them kicked me in the butt as hard as he could, knocking me off balance. I had a choice between stumbling into the ditch or jumping over it. Instinctively, as I had done so often at the creek back home, I made a “flat-footed leap.”

My safe landing on the other side miraculously broke the tension. The guards, giggling like school children, jumped over to join me. In one powerful second, fear gave way to hope. That experience provided the first installment on a lesson that would continue in the days and years ahead. My fears had been largely a product of my imagination. What I assumed was about to happen was actually very different from what they wanted to happen. I don’t think

I've ever been so glad to be wrong.

The journey from the southern panhandle of North Vietnam to Hanoi was a long, grueling ordeal. For the first few days they moved me from hamlet to hamlet during daylight; at night they tied me down to boards in bomb shelters. As I contemplated what suffering might lie ahead, I found encouragement in the words of the Apostle Paul: "... we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope."¹

On three occasions American fighter jets flew in low and attacked trucks parked in the trees alongside the road. We took shelter in foxholes and bomb shelters and watched the fireworks—a front-row seat to the terrors of war. Foot-long chunks of red-hot shrapnel sometimes landed not more than six feet from me. The sights, sounds, and smells of the bombs and anti-aircraft artillery explosions are indelibly etched in my memory. War attacks the emotions in a way that's impossible to describe and difficult to erase.

More threatening than the bombs were attacks from angry peasants. A mob of old women and teens, furious over the destruction American pilots had wrought, rushed toward me wielding rocks, sticks, and rice-cutting sickles. My young North Vietnamese escort and the guards under his authority formed a cordon and ushered me to safety, even absorbing some of the blows. Several times during the weeklong journey north, this young soldier saved my life. In following his orders to transport me safely, he displayed a remarkable balance of toughness and kindness, not only to me, but also to his men and to the civilians we met along the way. Strong character is remarkably apparent, even in your enemy.

My escort deposited me at the collection prison near Vinh, which was nothing more than a bamboo-pole barn divided into individual cages, each with a pile of straw on the floor for sleeping. Ken had already arrived. LtCol Ted Minter² and 1stLt Jim Warner, whose Marine F-4 Phantom jet had been shot down a few weeks earlier, were also there. We were kept isolated from each other and fed a small bowl of rice topped by a few greens twice a day.

A day or so after my arrival, the camp commander, whom I derogatorily nicknamed "Madman," summoned me for my first interrogation. According to the Geneva Convention, captured soldiers are required to provide name, rank, service number, and date of birth. Our Code of Conduct says that we should resist answering other questions. When I tried to stick with these "big four," Madman went berserk. He called me a criminal and threatened to kill me on the spot.

After I still refused to answer, he shouted a command in Vietnamese. A nearby guard jammed his AK-47 barrel against my head and chambered a round. Still in shock of capture and unsure of how POWs had actually been treated (all I knew was that some had been shot in Korea), I decided to talk a bit more. Spying my F-4 aircrew checklist on the table, I admitted that I had been flying the F-4 Phantom out of Danang.

Madman asked several more questions about my unit and command structure. I stalled, then gave bogus answers to a couple and "did not know" to the rest. That was sufficient to end the interrogation without giving up any meaningful or accurate information other than the big four.

The next evening, under cover of darkness, the V (that will be my shorthand in this book for our Vietnamese captors) shoved the four of us into the back of a truck. Accompanied by several armed guards, we headed for Hanoi on bomb-crater-pocked Route 1A, the primary

- [**City Magick: Spells, Rituals, and Symbols for the Urban Witch pdf**](#)
- [click Tales of Mystery and Imagination pdf](#)
- [read Big Ideas in Brief: 200 World-Changing Concepts Explained In An Instant online](#)
- [click The Town That Drowned](#)
- [read Die Cappins \(Perry Rhodan SilberbÄnde, Band 47; Die Cappins, Band 3\)](#)

- <http://pittiger.com/lib/Cheaters.pdf>
- <http://dpsam.org.my/freebooks/Homicide--A-Year-on-the-Killing-Streets.pdf>
- <http://flog.co.id/library/Big-Ideas-in-Brief--200-World-Changing-Concepts-Explained-In-An-Instant.pdf>
- <http://patrickvincitore.com/?ebooks/MacRuby--The-Definitive-Guide--Ruby-and-Cocoa-on-OS-X.pdf>
- <http://wind-in-herleshausen.de/?freebooks/Die-Cappins--Perry-Rhodan-Silberb--nde--Band-47--Die-Cappins--Band-3-.pdf>