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Wings & Things Guest Lecture Series

Getting Through Tough Times

Medal of Honor recipient Col. (Ret.) Leo K. Thorsness discusses how combat and prison expand the importance of making the most of what we have and techniques of coping with disadvantages.

I stopped by the bookstore and talked to who's wife – there she is – and a couple months ago, we live in Huntsville, Alabama now, been there about a year and a half, and somebody put together a program and advertised that I was going to be out at the PX in Redstone Arsenal signing books. So there's several people there. A guy came by, a friend of mine, said Leo, you're the only guy I know trying to become a millionaire one dollar at a time. So go ahead and buy the book, show us another book.

Thank you for having me here. I've been here before and General Metcalf and General Hudson who I just met. So it really is a pleasure to be here. You're bright; you know what aviation is and you're interested in what our careers were and it's just a fun thing to be here and a fun thing to be involved with. I first learned to fly and I got my commission and my wings and got paid to do it. Being a fighter pilot, until I got shot down, was the best job I ever had. That was just a little bit of fine print, but I was very blessed to be allowed to fly fighter airplanes and whatever the current airplane was at the time was state of the art.

I've often said when I ejected, I was doing 600 knots. My back seater, Harry Johnson, survived. Electronic warfare officer, I was Wild Weasel ... you people know what that is ... a lot of people don't. Our job was to go in first and find surface-to-air missiles which was the first war there were surface-to-air missiles. It took away a chunk of air space, and the war in North Vietnam was just an air war, there was no ground war. We lost that air space so our industry, military, there were people right around here and others who got together and designed those black boxes, put it in a two-place fighter, in this case it was a 105 – you have one here – and put an electronic warfare officer in the back seat – EWO – and an experienced pilot driver in the front seat, and as you know they called us Wild Weasels. The first five Weasels went to Takhli, Thailand. They got there and felt pretty good about this brand new mission and job and they were saying to these guys carrying the iron bombs – dumb bombs, as you know in those days – “Have no fear, we're here and we'll take care of those SAM guys” and all that stuff. Forty-five days later, all five crews were gone, or all five airplanes were gone.

Harry and I were the sixth crew to get there. And, as you know, normally it's nice to have a wingman. It was kind of difficult to get the ops officer to schedule anybody to fly with us because we'd go in there and troll around. The odds of getting shot down were about two or three times as much as the guys carrying the iron bombs so what we ended up with is they gave us the dregs of the wingmen. There's nothing wrong with lieutenant colonels – I was a young major at the time – but anyway, these guys, the lieutenant colonels, they'd been flying multi-

engines. They'd been flying bombers or MATS or something, and they weren't trained as fighter pilots. So the fighter pilots cycled through the system by the time I got there. So now it was kind of their turn. They went to RTU, I guess we call it, to learn how to fly a 105. They got over there ... you get to North Vietnam, it was a violent environment. You're yanking and banking and keeping a good air speed and you got SAMS and Flaks, and you're jinking and you're in there just trolling around. There's no set plan. You're just waiting for SAM to fire at you so you can find him and kill him, assuming he doesn't get you first.

I was losing my wingmen. I was spending more time or as much time trying to ease into turns. Anyway, eventually being about two missions later, I said to the ops officer, "Look, give me some young guys. Give me some lieutenants that don't know any better." Some of those lieutenants I'd trained at Nellis Air Force Base, and they'd been there a little before I did, and they weren't real happy to fly with me. I said we'll have a good time up there or whatever I said. But the very first mission I got these lieutenants, three lieutenants, and I put the greenest, more inexperienced at number two and we got up, we were still up north of the Red River. We hit a couple SAM sights and there were MiGs around always, but anyway, all four of us survived and we were able to stay in there until the last ... guys in and out and our turn to go out and we're still up north of the Red and I called Green Two, Cadillac, and said, "Cadillac Two, go ahead and lead. Take us home." Where's China?

It's just more an accident than anything else. But you know, as a young lieutenant flying in combat, they're going to see somebody's wing. That's all they're going to see for a hundred missions. All of a sudden now, here's a guy still up there, still some danger around, so from that day on, I had people volunteering to fly with me. It was just these young guys. As we know, in any job that we have anywhere, there's so much knowledge and smarts and motivation in young people and depending on the job, it's how much authority you can give them. It was the best leadership I'd ever shown and it was by accident. It really worked out well and they were better wingmen and they kept track of what was going on. The whole mission improved because of that.

I want to mention ... I'm going to try to be ... my talks are so smooth ... tonight I'm going to jump around a lot. I didn't say speech – I just give a talk.

But I want to mention a couple things that I hope have analogies to any job, whatever it might be. One is teamwork. At Takhli, where we were ... I'll drop down three levels. The first one is the people on the ground that are providing the airplanes. The crew chiefs, the maintainers, the weapons people, the people that put the right fuse on it, the weather people, everybody that was involved on the ground giving us, and they ... when we were there, their cycles went ... all the maintenance people belong to a maintenance organization, sometimes belong to squadrons that's gone back and forth a lot. Over there, the maintenance people belong to the squadron so we're kind of a cohesive unit so we got to know them better. If there was one little gig on that airplane in the afternoon and you write it up, they'd stay up all night. The next morning it was like we got a new airplane. They were so good and so dedicated. When we took off and flew, the maintainers when they had some time sat out there on top of the revetments and when we came in, they counted, there's one, there's two, there's three, and if we were missing an airplane or two, they were just crushed, especially if they found out it was their airplane. They'd say, "Did I do

something wrong? Could I have done better?" It was just a great team effort. So we were given great airplanes.

Number two, the wingmen I picked out, they became very dedicated. You pick out guys who would stick with you and they'd fly through a bunch of flak, and they had trust in your leadership, and you give them some authority, they could put bombs on target, they had good eyeballs, they could pick up a surprise MiG or a SAM launch and would hang in there with you. Every team has got a key person, no matter what that is ... whether it's your marriage, which is a joint effort, but no matter what it is, there's always a person that's key on that team. In my case, my key person was Harry Johnson, my backseater. He knew so much about electronics, in fact, he knew too much. I'd say, "Harry, what's that signal?" It would sound like a rattlesnake, some of the signals that they'd set up so the SAMs start pinging on. Harry would say, "Oh, that's a ... " and he'd start explaining to me what the antenna looked like. We're up there ... I'm thinking about staying alive, and I'd say, "Harry, can it kill us or not? That's all I need to know right now. Maybe tonight we can talk about it." But Harry was just so good at what he did. He got us out of trouble sometimes before we were in trouble. Plus, he was cross-eyed. He could be crawling stuff out of the cockpit saying, "Leo we've got a MiG at five o'clock." I don't know how he did it.

But anyway, the point being maybe I over-stressed the time on team, but if all three levels of that team did their job well that day, we were successful. If any one level of that team failed that day, we were either dead or prisoners of war. Most of the Weasel missions were near Hanoi so if you were shot down, you weren't going to get rescued or any chance of that. So I've never had such a great lesson on teamwork and how vitally important every level, no matter what you do in this organization or anyplace else, your job is important.

To pick out another analogy, and I'm going to talk about focus for a moment. Those first five Weasels we lost, they got there and it was a steep learning curve. It wasn't their fault. We didn't know how to do it. By the time we got there, Harry and I read everything about the loss reports, the wingmen that flew with them. We learned as much as we could about why they lost those five airplanes. Harry's from Iowa and I'm a Minnesota guy, so we're both rocket scientists, grew up on farms. So we had this yellow pad of paper and here's what they did. We didn't do any of those things – those are out! So we tried to come up with some ideas, and we did. We came up with some different ways ... we decided to go in at higher altitude. SAMs travels, SA-2 travels at 3,000 feet per second once it accelerates and so the way we set it up is try this one, and I wrote to the Fighter Weapons School and said, "Look, if we do this, do you think it will work?" and they said, "Geesh, you might give it a try." And what I suggested we were going to do and what we did was we went up to 18-20,000 feet, kept a pretty good Mach. As soon as we got a confirmed launch, and there are two, three or four you're pinging on, and as soon as we got a confirmed SAM launch, I'd crank the airplane quickly, so its either my three o'clock or my nine o'clock position, and my wingman knew what was going on, "Cadillac," I'd say. As soon as we get that launch, they'd see me crank around and they'd start closing a little bit and I'd say, "Take it down! Cadillac, take it down!" We all rolled in, plugged in the burner, pointed the nose about 70 degrees straight down, not quite straight down, and we'd pick up about 600 knots. We've still got our bombs, we're still a big old 105 would do it, and I'm watching the SAM come in. My

dive angle, I've kind of adjusted it so I could put everything just right here – wherever just right is.

Let me just stop and freeze. The ground is getting really big, fast, okay? I'm watching the SAM. It's arcing down, of course, because it's going to cut me off. They've fired three, six seconds apart, but we didn't worry about number two and three, so we're concerned about one first. So I'm watching that thing and when it's a mile to a mile and a half out or so, and it's about like a telephone pole, a little bit fatter but proportionally, you see it, and that's two or three seconds out, and if I did everything just right ... and first let me just say, this is where I learned focus ... if you're not focused now, probably you never will be ... I just punched my mic button and say "Pull," and all four airplanes, we swap ends as fast as we could. We did it just right. We did two things right: we didn't hit the ground and we didn't get SAMed. The first SAM would usually hit the ground if we got low enough, second one about here, third one about here, then we'd go back in burner and roll in and now we could find it. The reason we were doing this is a lot of sites were camouflaged, but once they launched at you, it leaves a contrail in certain atmospheric conditions. In dry season, it kicked up a bunch of dirt down there so now the odds of finding that SAM site are real good. It worked pretty well for 92-½ missions.

I hope those analogies have some meaning now – the focus and the teamwork. We all who are in the working world are preparing for the next job most times and hoping to get a promotion or move on to the next job, whatever it might be. As fighter pilots in Vietnam, the job none of us wanted but the job we all knew we might get, was being a prisoner of war. The worst job in the world we think about but most every day we lost someone getting killed, captured or shot down. The preparation I had to take on this new job, my personal mantra was "Do what's right, help others." I just developed that from the time I was mature, an adult, which was well after I was 18, but I started thinking about certain people I respected more than others. Why is that? I started figuring out they do what's right, regardless of the consequences, they do what's right. Where other people, including my daughter, she was always helping others. She'd pick out little girls who didn't have or fit in school very well, but she'd always do what's right, help others. Those are five great words to live by. They work together or separately.

That was part of my makeup. That was my mantra. Also we knew the Geneva Convention – in that war there was still such a thing as the Geneva Convention. There still is, but you know now if you're captured by the terrorist in Iraq now, I think you're more of a hostage. People who are captured now days, I don't have any good answers when you talk to them about that. But we had the Geneva Convention and we hoped they wouldn't abuse it too much. We had the Code of Conduct which you are all familiar with – do not attempt to escape and all kinds of things. You follow the senior ranking officer.

The other thing that gave me a degree of confidence was we had a lot of friends. My wife and my daughter – we were a typical family – and I'd flown with some of these people in the fighter business for many years who went ahead of me and some of those were shot down and some of those were announced as being prisoners. I thought, well I know those people and know them well ... Sam Johnson, Fred ... all those people we knew over there. I thought they made it into the system and obviously they still have their honor and their integrity and if they can do it, I can do it. I didn't want the job, but that was my preparation.

Floating down, Atoll right up the tailpipe, didn't see the MiG, or being in a valley we picked up and launched a strike and right up the tailpipe, and it came apart. Harry and I ejected about 600 knots. We'd seen airplanes hit badly and the guy's trying to slow down to get into a safe ejection speed envelope, right? You slow down, less a chance, but often times they didn't get out. The airplane implodes or explodes and so they didn't make it. So Harry and I said from day one just about, if we're hit badly, we're going to go right now, regardless of speed and we'll take our injuries, but we're going to survive. And that happened. The airplane was coming apart and my knees went straight sideways. Harry hurt his back badly and some other injuries, but we made it.

But floating down, a couple of things are still vivid in my mind. One was I was still 3-4,000 feet in the air, mountain jungle west of Hanoi, it was afternoon and a little clearing. It was kind of dark in there. Your adrenalin is flowing, airplanes are zipping around, and I looked back and there were muzzle flashes. They were shooting at me. Now this is true: it's hard to hide in a parachute – really hard. You get a real pucker factor on that one, I'll tell ya!

Two other quick things, thoughts passed my mind. One, we were on our 93rd mission. We were as good as we were going to get at our job. We'd shot down a couple MiGs. We'd killed more SAM sites. We were Sink Weasels, so to speak, and yet there we were floating down, and I knew it had to be my fault – I'm the pilot, I'm in charge, and my thought was some of my friends were in prison. Some had been shot down days, months, weeks, years ago, and the wife and family didn't know what happened to them. It's a terrible thing to put a family in that condition, and I thought, it's my fault for floating down, and if I'm killed when I hit the ground, will my family – my wife, my daughter – ever find out about it? I felt like a total failure to my family. I realized what they were going to go into.

The other part of it, I say this phrase ... I think everybody has a better, fuller life if they have some spirituality, believe in something greater than self. In our case, our family, our spirituality happens to be Christian. And while I was floating down, there was this voice in my – it was just like a little tape just rolling, going over and over and over – it kept saying, "Leo, you're going to make it. Leo, you're going to make it." I'd never had a prayer preemptively answered like that. I liked that a lot. That was the Lord, no question, talking to me.

One other thing, by the way, if you've got your priorities sort of slipped in ... it's important to have a certain kind of car, a certain kind of house, a certain kind of clothes ... when you're floating down and you look down and see them shooting at you, with a snap of the fingers, your priorities are back where they ought to be. All of a sudden, those things aren't real important or your bank account or something.

I won't go into much on prison, on Hanoi – 18 days and nights. Heartbreak – you've all heard about the heartbreak – a little cell block, knobby walls, cement slabs, stocks like you see in cartoons – little circles and your feet fit in there and they're too tight and your ankles bleed and sores on them and stuff – a very difficult time. And at some point, hooks on the ceiling, a lot of really bad stuff. And at some point during those 18 days and nights – I don't know when it was, the first day, last day, someday in between – I went past name, rank, serial number and date of birth. They broke me. It was a bad feeling in my family, but that time it failed me. It was terrible,

terrible, I'll never forget it. And I remember I thought I tried to cry and I was past tears, and I thought I'm not worthy living, maybe I could die. You're in these stocks. They have two feet and a hand in stocks and they're watching and in control of your life. And then I thought well, if I survive this, however long it takes, I hope they don't put me in with another American because these are the guys I know and they all made it and I didn't. It was a terrible moment.

Of course I survived and of course they put me in with somebody else or they did, a man named Jim Haichu, who died a couple years ago, and Jim and I had known each other at Takhli, Thailand. He'd been there about six weeks longer than I. We didn't recognize each other. We'd changed too much. I couldn't walk and they kind of pushed me in. I stumbled in there and I wouldn't look at Jim. I started explaining to him what a failure I was. He said, "You're Leo Thorsness? Leo, knock it off. Don't you know everybody who went through that type of interrogation, they either died or they broke, or they did both." I never felt so elated, so wonderful, to be average. Man, average is really good! Okay, that's all of that.

Communications: you all know the tap code, it's in the book. There will be a test before you get out of here because you've got the book. A-B-C-D-E, F-G-H-I-J ... there's no K, we threw K away ... so my initial L is the third row down, first one. So you tap row, then column, and T happens to be ... let's see how this works ... here's LT [*taps out the code*]. Four, four, right? That's where T would fall if you looked in there.

By the way, for a long time after Johnson and McNamara – probably two people it would be fun to live next door to, but they had no idea how to run a war – they stopped the bombing. There was nothing else going on in North Vietnam. There was no lever to get us out. There was no pressure. They stopped the bombing for several years. When that first happened the North Vietnamese told us America stopped the bombing because their defenses were so good we were afraid to come over so we just couldn't do it anymore. Whatever it was, we knew they'd stopped, so right away we knew we're going home because that's all the Commander in Chief had to get us out was the pressure of bombing North Vietnam.

Then the days went by and the weeks went by and we started falling. I mean, we hit the bottom so hard. For years we sat there. So it was a difficult, a difficult ... and the first three years, as you know, were pretty brutal. Torture was off and on, kind of regular. They want a lot of propaganda. They knew the equipment pretty well. It wasn't that. They just wanted us to make anti-war statements and all that and they would torture you to write a statement saying you're being treated well. That's happened to me more than once and how ironic.

The tap code was so essential. Two thirds of us there were Air Force aviators, a third were Navy and there were five Marines. That was just the break out. The Marines were close air support near the DMZ, like they fly on and were captured and brought north. General Metcalf, he and I were Air Force and if he was on the other side of the wall, once we learned the tap code, you can tap back and forth quietly and the guard doesn't hear you. If they hear you, they beat you, but most time you can tap about 15 words a minute.

Anyone here with naval background? You sir. Anybody with the Marines background? Okay, I'll make one up. So you're Navy and if you and I were tapping back and forth, I would slow

down to about 11 words a minute. And in case there's a Marine or somebody's got a Marine in their family, we didn't teach those five Marines the tap code. Right? But I always say, they were tough enough they didn't need. Really, that may or may not be true, but once you put pajamas on people and you don't bathe at all, you look and smell about the same. It's hard to tell one service from the other.

That was our communications and it generally worked. It was essential to communicate. If somebody was tortured in this cell one, and you live in cell two, they start another purge this week or something, they want propaganda. If he can get himself back to the cell that night and get himself to the wall and tap to you what it is they wanted, what type of torture they used, what he finally said if he had to say something, what lies he told them, keep them simple. It was a bad night because it's your turn tomorrow, but you're better prepared. Truly life and death sometime depend on communication. It still does. Ours was very fundamental. Good communication, simple communication, you don't mix up what's being said. Be it with the technology we have now or with the tap code, it's just essential.

A little bit on surviving ... tough time survival. When we came home, we came home in four groups. When the last group was home, no one POW at the time, we talked to DOD and said we didn't want to talk about torture until the last guy is out because if we start talking about it too soon, they may keep the guys there or take it out on them. So we didn't. Once the last group is out, they said okay, have a press conference. I was at Scott. You were closest to your home state, which for me was Scott Air Force Base. There were three press conferences – West Coast, Mid, and East Coast. There were three of us, Dave Winn and I and I forget ... there were four of us. They said make a statement and answer questions, any questions the media have. So we did. Made a short statement and right away the first question was "Were you tortured?" Yes, we were. "Why were you tortured?" Well, mostly for propaganda. "How did they torture you?" Well, they used the suitcase trick or the rope trick. "What does that mean?" So we kept answering, and their eyes kept getting bigger and bigger saying, "Really?" And you know, it was hard for them to believe us, but we were sitting in the hospital and we had scars to show them. And they did, but there was kind of a pause and then they said, "How did you do it? How did you get through those tough times, time after time?"

We answered it, but I wish I would have said ... we talked about it afterwards and we didn't answer it well but we talked about it afterwards and here's how the POWs, some of the way the POWs got through tough times, and I think it applies to a lot of people in a lot of situations. Everybody here has been through a tough time in their life. Probably everybody will have another tough time, whatever that relatively is. It is tough. Number one, the will to survive is really strong. You just don't give up. Number two, it has to do with time, and everybody here has heard it or said it ... I'll take it a day at a time, going through this tough time, whatever it is. For us, you're by yourself in these difficult times and you're always by yourself, and there's always a bunch of them on you. You'd break it down and say to yourself, I think I can last another minute, I think I can last another 30 seconds, rather than saying I can get through this session. It didn't make time our friend but it didn't seem to be as much of an enemy. Number three, it took me a little while to come up with it, but the word is love. At one time I was with Jack Bomar, who died recently, a really tough, good man, and it was the only time I'd ever been tortured with somebody back with Jack in a little cell. When it was his turn, you'd hear things snap or pop or

sounds coming out by him, and you'd do anything you could for him. You love that man so much. And I think the lesson I brought home with me was, when you're with somebody, either by design or accident, and they're going through a real tough time, if they know that you care about them and give them a hug or spend a little time with them, hold their hand, that's meaningful. I guess we call them support groups in one way. My wife has been through cancer like a lot of people, but support groups are being with someone, that they know you care, it helps, and love that person.

Another way of getting through tough times ... we were blessed with more than our share of really outstanding men. I didn't know the tap code when I got there. Fred Cherry, some of you know him, little black guy, tough as nails, there a year longer than I or so. He was in Heartbreak ... he'd broken the rules and he was back in there being brutalized when new guys went in there and so he started the tap code. Obviously I didn't know what it was. So he just got down by the bottom of the door – he wasn't in stocks right then – and hollered as loud as he could so I could understand it. It took about 20 seconds, what I told you, and of course, he knew what would happen, just beat the living hell out of him for a couple days. But we were blessed with a lot of Fred Cherry's, Jack Bomar's. We were blessed with more than our share of good, and I think every organization is. The thing that surprised me, some of the people would actually step forward and make a ruckus so the point that somebody was being tortured and weren't sure they were going to last another day, somebody else would go out of their way to be obnoxious and they'd stop over here and start on this guy. But anyway, some of the people who stepped forward to help you were surprises. They were some scrawny little guy. They weren't big, tough, handsome, you know, sometimes they were people you would not expect are going to be your strongest helpers in tough times.

I won't say it's the last way, but I've got to stop on this issue. The last way I mention, it doesn't come in last, is there were times when I was just not going to make it, I simply was not going to make it, and some prayers were answered – somehow strength helped me through those prayers, spirituality again.

Now just a little bit on tough time, on humor. We had some really great times over there. We laughed. I lived one time in a cell, this is true, now you're going to say, oh, come on, but this is true! In the cell block, looking out the top ... here's down the middle ... there were six cells, a total of nine POWs in there. We lived together for a long time, that combination. With the tap code – you have to live, you can't just sit there in fear every day and hope you don't hear the keys jingle at the wrong time or at night – so we started tapping the jokes that we knew with the tap code. Even there, if you have a good time, and you can tell if your joke's a little better, but if you tap long enough, the long jokes were probably the best but also the odds of getting caught ... its dumb to be beaten for trying to be funny, right? So we tried shortening them down and then they'd lose the value of the joke and so on, but after a while – there were only nine of us – it turns out fighter pilots and aviators are very good at what they did. I've become better now that I've retired and I think back how good I was, like a lot of us. But one of the things none of us had any skill at was writing humor. We just had no skill at that. So all we had was the jokes we knew. After two or three times going around, eventually you get caught, somebody gets beaten over it ... we said, look, we know all the jokes, let's number them. And we did. We truly numbered them and now you can tell, just like that, there's no question if their timing is good

and they tap 21, that was a knee slap. You could just about hear the guy laughing in the cell next to you. By far, the best joke was number 21! It was such a good joke, but I can't tell you – I'd have to kill you – but it was! It had to do with a lady walking in the bar ... But we did have humor and one of the tough things in our families, the families always imagine the worst. It wasn't always the worst, especially the last three years. Torture became abnormal rather than normal. We lived in big cells. But anyway, we had periods of humor, and some of our humor was pretty sick, not something I'd talk about here, but it seemed to fit there.

Just a little bit about leadership ... two of the best examples, and I'll try to make them summarize, but two examples of leadership I've ever seen: one is if you log on Google and just type in "Mike's Flag" – probably a lot of you know what that is – it'll come up and it's taken on a life of it's own. That started when I was a Washington State Senator during the Flag Amendment period. That was about 1990 or so, remember? I'd never spoken about being a prisoner of war when I was in the State Senate. So that amendment came up and we were debating that flag amendment so I stood up and told "Mike's Flag" and I told how that happened in prison. And somebody's up in the gallery and wrote it down and sent it to Reader's Digest and it was published. That's kind of how it started, but Mike Christian happened to be from Huntsville, Alabama, where we live now. I'd forgotten that until we moved down there. But Mike scrounged a piece of cloth. We were outside, they'd strip you naked every so often. Mike found a little rag in the gutter and got it in and cleaned it up best he could, tattle tail gray. We had mosquito nets by now and treatment was a lot better. It was about a year to go before we came home, and at night he was working on this thing, and you can find bamboo everywhere over there, a sliver of bamboo, we had one blanket. It was the kind you could pull a strip of thread out of. It was different than the way they make them I guess today. So we had a needle and a thread. By the last year or year and a half we got some medicine. It was blue. We had no idea what it was for but they'd always say, "Here, medicine." And it was blue. And also, tile roof, red tiles, around the world, if you sneak a little patch in the cell, take a little water, grind it back to where it would become kind of a maroon color pasty stuff. So Mike had red, which is maroon, and blue medicine and a white handkerchief, and he's got a needle and thread to sew little stars up in the corner. It took him about two weeks. Mike and I were good friends and we talked about what he was doing and I said – and a lot of people said – Mike, you know what's going to happen to you ... yeah, yeah, yeah ... so it took him about two weeks to finish and one morning before the guards were around, he got out and kind of stood up and said, "Hey gang! Look here and he waved this little tattered cloth, and if you used a lot of imagination, it looked a little bit – just a little – like the American flag. But I think everyone of us ... we were scruffy and ... we popped to – we were so proud of that. It was the best looking flag we had seen in six years or five years. About every two weeks or 10 days they'd run you outside, strip you of your clothes ... two sets of pajamas ... you had one to wear ... and they found it, of course, in the sleeve, and the interrogation was probably the worst, you know, but they came that night and it was just so brutal and even before they got him to Heartbreak you could hear it, and sometime after midnight or wee hours, pushed him in. He couldn't talk, his eyes were closed and some bones were broken, discolored. It was a terrible beating and torture but Mike was walking again in two weeks, he could talk and he started looking for another piece of cloth. He was just a tough, tough man, a handsome young guy.

Ned Shuman led us in the Lord's Prayer, knowing full well that we wanted to have church when we moved in the big cells. They didn't let us the first Sunday so we marked and complained about it, and Ned said are we committed to have church? And everybody ... yeah, yeah ... and he said No. There were 43 of us in that big cell, right after we moved out of solitary, a lot of people and it was great. So he went around, by name, and said, Leo, Charlie, Jim, Chuck, are you committed to hold church next Sunday? Forty-two people said yes. He was the senior ranking officer of the 43rd and so he knew right then he was going back to Heartbreak for torture. But Ned was a true leader, great leadership. He said okay, we have a goal of holy church. We're committed to holy church. We all knew what that meant. We said, "What's the plan?" So we made a plan and this is what it was. Sunday morning came and we started gathering up in the back of the cell and they came in with some guards and so as they did the Sunday before we first tried this. They had guards, English speaking interrogator had guns and Ned said, "Not a problem. We'll do quiet church for 10 minutes" Church in a Communist prison camp doesn't go over real well and they instantly grabbed Ned and hauled him off to Heartbreak. Second ranking man stood up, walked up to the center of the cell and said, "Gentlemen, the Lord's Prayer." So we started reciting the Lord's Prayer. We got about halfway, and they weren't sure what's going to happen and we thought we knew what would happen, and they did finally grabbed the guy and hauled him to Heartbreak. Same thing ... number three didn't get as far in the prayer. Number four probably got six words ... probably, Our Father who art. We were drowning out the interrogators saying "STOP! STOP!" Guards running around hitting people with guns, just chaos. Fifth ranking man, way back in the corner ... he's taking his time and I'm not blaming him because I'm number seven and I'm beginning to wonder about this plan ... but whoever it was committed and anyway, just before he got to the center of the cell, somehow it just became instantly quiet and the interrogator said something to the effect that this isn't working. Let's get out of here and we'll try something later and they took number five with them and went out. Five people went into torture, five people survived, and we all churched on Sunday until we came home.

A great victory. They held all the aces, but it was so meaningful. I've never seen better raw leadership than that. Ned knew he was going to be tortured. He knew that for sure, and everybody else who stood in line ... we didn't know how far they would go. But every person to a man, but Ned was the leader. That's as good as I'll see it.

Just a little on a couple more points and we'll have some Q&A or something. What's important in life? About a year to go before I came home, we'd been in big cells now and they moved us around some even then but there were 20, 30, 40 of us in a cell generally the last three years. We all had different gimmicks on ways to pass time. We could talk out loud now. We held classes now with whoever knew the most about anything. They claimed they knew everything, and we had no way to know. So we had classes and stuff, but no pencil and paper. But one day I came up with the idea: I'm going to keep track of what we talk about. What is it we spend our time talking about? We're all aviators, right? Most of us are fighter pilots and I thought I bet number one is going to be our job. It's a great job, and they pay us to have this much fun and all that. I kept track, and you mentally did things just to pass time, and I built a little file cabinet and I put some little files and papers in there. I had blue medicine, so imaginary, I put four marks ... this topic, this topic ... and after about two weeks I found out we only had about 20 things we talked about. Just about all our time was devoted to these 20 things, and guess where work came in:

17th. It hardly came up and I'm not saying ... work is important, you feel good about doing it. You do your job well. You have milestones and you get promoted. You provide for yourself. Work is important. and I'm not knocking it at all.

But in the big scheme of things, you know what was important to us when you pull away all the stuff, this laboratory we were in? There were four things that dominated our conversation. It kind of moved around but I can put an F ... our faith, our friends, our family and fun. That's what we talked about. Moving around some, maybe family was just about always first. But faith, family, friends and fun ... those are important things in life. The point I make is especially young people out there working hard and hustling, moving on ... don't get so wrapped up like I did as a young lieutenant. I'd be flying all week and my wife would give me kitchen passes and I'd go cross country in a weekend so I'd get better and maybe get promoted faster or whatever. But don't pass up some of those really important things in life – friends, family, faith and fun. They're going to last you forever, so enough on that.

I just want to make one more point and I want to talk about freedom. It's in the book, I think. I was in a solitary cell. It was a camp they called Camp Punishment. They took 36 of us. Long little building, long down the middle and there were 36 cells. They were 5 ½ by 6 feet. We found a way to very accurately measure and the advantage of living in a 5 ½ by 6 foot cell, you don't have to worry about jogging ... if you're not into jogging and stuff, you've got a good reason not to. Also, the advantage, when you wake up in the morning, you reach out like this, you can touch everything you own. It's all right there. I spent about a year there and they call it Camp Punishment. We call it Skid Row and it was kind of a Camp Punishment, but about once a week or so, or every 10 days, a guard would come, and this was still the first three tough years and they don't want you to see each other and you couldn't communicate. If you communicate, you can organize, and if you can organize, you can resist, or at least resist better. That was the only reason we had to communicate. But they tried to keep us from that. The guard opened the cell door once in a while, and by the way, when the guard opened the cell doors, those first three years at least, every time you'd hear the key, you had to stand in front of your cell and if there were one or two of you in the cell, when the door opened you had to make a full 90 degree bow and you'd dump your bucket out in the sewer every two or three days. When you came back in, you had to get in front of your door and make another full 90 degree bow when they closed the door. We call it their form of humiliation, intimidation and degradation. It was just nothing ... the Geneva Convention ... it was just their showing their control over us. They gave us Vietnamese names. If you used Major Leo Thorsness, they beat you and knocked you down and pulled you around by your hair or whatever. So it was obnoxious treatment but their proof that they could control us, I guess. And you live with it. It's how you survive.

One day I was taken down to the end of the building, walked down to the end of the building ... there's a little piece of concrete, slimy faucet and it dripped some and you could turn it up a little bit more and you took your cup with you and – we always kept a cup with you, an old rusty cup in the cell – and you'd get maybe two or three cups and you'd pour it on yourself and then the guard would say, "Go, go in," and that was your bath for the week. I found a little rusty nail by that piece of concrete there and I was able to slip it in when the guard wasn't looking and got it inside the cell. The windows were bricked up so we couldn't see out, but they'd put the bricks in this way rather than this way so the mortar was pretty thin. It wasn't a great quality mortar but

with that nail and enough time, and that's what I had, you could drill a hole in the mortar, just a little teeny peephole. And I did that, and when you weren't there, you'd put a little dust or something in there because they'd come in and look to see if we could see out some. I would spend hours looking out that little peephole. I had my eye right up against it and I could see like this aisle, a slice of life, two or three degrees out there. A POW would walk by and you wouldn't know who they were, but with the tap code, you'd find out who went to interrogation so now you knew what they looked like, kind of.

I'm a farm kid. One day a mother hen and some little chickens walked by. Now that was big news for a guy from Walnut Grove, Minnesota. There's chickens in the camp! Really? How many are there, what kind ... it was BIG news! It killed a whole day talking about little chickens.

But a guard would walk by and one day, as this guard walked by, and I didn't know his real name and he knew my Vietnamese name. As that guard walked by, this is the image, that all of a sudden just came into my mind. I hadn't thought about it before. I visualized myself flipping a coin and I caught it and put it down, and I remember it was a dime I visualized, and I looked down ... it was so real, I took my eye off the little peephole, and I looked and sure enough, it was heads ... which that meant that the guard out there I'd seen walk by had tails but the thought behind that was – it was profound – the thought behind it was that just by the flip of a coin, that my parents were American and his were Vietnamese. How did I luck out? I could have been him. There's nothing wrong about being a Vietnamese. There was a lot wrong about being a Vietnamese and you're born in Hanoi or somewhere around there, and your job is to guard and torture prisoners. That's bad. I thought that kid out there will never have the chance to marry who he wants, maybe. He certainly can't go to school, won't have the opportunities, will never fly a fighter airplane. The more I thought about this, I thought, concentrate on all the rights and the freedoms and opportunities we have just by our birthright. Just by the flip of the coin, we're born here. It amazed me ... what a great thought it was! I concentrated and then I got to thinking about the world. I thought, Leo – and at that time I figured out it was 1967 – I thought probably three-fifths of the world lives under some form of autocratic government, and two-fifths maybe or so are living in America. I started realizing I could have been any of those other million or billion people out there. It finally settled in on me. It made a major difference in my attitude about being a prisoner. And that is if I die today, I'm ahead of the game, if I compare myself to the rest of the world. That freedom ... it was the first time I was able to make ... freedom just about became real and touchable. By watching him and looking out that peephole, and those thoughts just flashed through my mind.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have just given me the freedom to use about 37 minutes of your time. I hope you got a good investment out of it and thank you very much and I think we'll take some questions ... is that right sir?