Chapter 1 – Know Yourself

> "…find that peace within yourself, that peace and quiet and confidence that you can pass on to others, so that they know that you are honest and you are fair and will help them, no matter what, when the chips are down."
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> Major Dick Winters, 101st Airborne Division, WWII, Commander, Band of Brothers

November 7, 1967, 4:00 p.m.—Captain Ken Fisher and I rolled our F-4C Phantom jet into a dive-bomb pass. 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.

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 in 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 five thousand feet, descending in a dive at more than 450 miles per hour. 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 Gs[1], 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 carnival stunt artist shot from a cannon—at an acceleration force eighteen times the force of gravity.[2]

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 ejected from the womb of the F-4 into a very unfriendly world.[1] Hanging in the parachute without my shell of protection, I felt vulnerably exposed. Gunfire cracked below and bullets whizzed by me. Instinctively, I reviewed the procedures ingrained by constant training since entering flight school: C*heck 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 tranquil 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 the 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 them, but that was not my case. The scene that kept breaking into my consciousness during the parachute descent, and now that 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 Navy pilots 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.[3] 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 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 to escape is immediately after capture, because frontline soldiers are typically the least trained in handling prisoners. Deciding to try one last ploy, 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 talkie," 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, "Handsjup! Handsjup! Shurrenda no die! Shurrenda no die!"

Pilots 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. [4] 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. This 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, processing, and operating at nanosecond speed. My training "programs" had translated into almost flawless execution, a 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.

❖ *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. And 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, our 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 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 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 for some reason he felt drawn to educate people on finances. 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 response 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 my 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 is largely 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 left successful business careers—one in banking and the other as the director of human resources in the paper industry—to assume key management positions with not-for-profit organizations (CEO and Chief People Officer, respectively). A third left her twenty-year career as a television network news producer in New York to become the COO for Development, Marketing, and Community Relations at a not-for-profit. All three 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. Here is how it emerged in a training session with executives and senior leaders of a Fortune 500 company.

To illustrate different styles of leadership, I 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."[6] 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.

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"*

Would you like to be more authentic? If so, dig deeply for responses to these exercises:

1. **Consider Your Purpose.** As best you can discern, what on earth were you created to do? What are your primary goals in life? Forgetting the past and looking to the future, 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 www.leadershipfreedom.com/Articles/.

[1] G-forces describe the impact of the centrifugal force of gravity. Normally we live in a one-G world. Positive Gs pull us 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.

[2] 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.

[3] *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 also 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 *the N8Traits*™ Profile online assessment, see www.n8traits.com.