

HOPE AND COURAGE



**A POW's Guide to Life
Recovery, Success, and
Peace of Mind**

Mike Penn

**Foreword by
Chuck "Sly" Magill, Lt. Colonel, USMC (Ret.)**

Testimonials

The measure of a life isn't what you take—it's what you give. By that standard, Mike Penn has handed you treasure worth more than gold.

This man endured hell. The kind of torture and uncertainty that breaks most people. Those brutal days and sleepless nights of captivity didn't just scar him—they forged him into something extraordinary. Now he's offering you the keys to strength you didn't know you possessed.

Penn doesn't just tell war stories. He delivers battle-tested wisdom. Every page contains hard-won lessons that can transform how you face your own fights. You get the benefit of his suffering without having to bleed for it yourself.

I know Mike personally. He's not just a gifted storyteller—though he is that. He's a man whose character runs deeper than his wounds. When he speaks, you listen. When he writes, you learn.

- Don't want to waste your time? Skip the fiction.
- Want to be entertained? Watch TV.
- Want to discover how one man's darkest moments can light your path to victory? Buy this book. Today.

The lessons inside could save you years of struggle. Or they could save your life.

Bob Clinkingbeard

Former FOX News VP

EMMY and PEABODY award-winning journalist, Team Builder



All of our lives are built on hope...that little kernel of belief that one can achieve something in one's life. It is that single flame that gets us through the trials and tribulations of our journey and at times reinforced by the stories of others. Hope and Courage by Mike Penn is that flame.

Rocky Bleier

U.S. Army, Vietnam Veteran

Author, *Fighting Back* (made into a TV movie)

NFL Pittsburgh Steelers 1968–1980; Four-time Super Bowl Winner

Only Super Bowl Champion and Vietnam Veteran in history



Mike's journey takes you from simple definitions to real meaning.

- Beyond Teamwork to Brotherhood, in the police and in war.
- Not simply Success, but Heroism and Never Losing Hope.
- Far greater than to React, but to Survive 8 months as a POW, Recover, and Lead critical businesses. A deeply inspiring American Hero's Story.

Tom Gerry

U.S.A.F., Vietnam Veteran

Author, Payments Power



Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. — John 15:13 — I picked this bible verse because it exemplifies the life of Mike Penn during dangerous times. We began our journey with both of us being commissioned police officers in 1966 which was one of the most deadly times in American history. On the mean streets of Fort Worth, Texas, we found ourselves virtually in harm's way every time we ventured out in our squad cars. Mike and I quickly identified the sound of bullets whizzing past our cars and bodies. We were targeted for assassination and had to hide under bridges and in dark areas just to write our reports. It is common knowledge that men in desperate combat situations when asked why they fight, they all answer, "we fight for our buddies and our friends". At no time when Mike was partnered with me during our police experience, did I ever have a concern about him "having my back."

Mike's book, "*HOPE and COURAGE*", is an example of facing death, finding hope and his belief in God. Lastly, he remains, as always, my best friend.

Warren Conrad

Novelist, *The Jake Stryker* Series Warren Conrad

Int'l Investment Banker, Priv. Equity Investment Manager (U.S. & Europe)

U.S. Marshall



Today's young Naval Aviators are put through several days of what's known as SERE (Survival Evasion Resistance Escape) training. The treatment from their "captors" is based on the lessons learned from the real-life experiences of Mike Penn and his fellow POWs—albeit without the actual torture and other dehumanizing abuses they endured. To a man, these budding aviators come away with a profound respect for what Mike and his fellow prisoners endured—and the true strength of character and resilience needed to survive it.

As the pages unfold on Mike's story, I'm certain it will inspire that same respect and, moreover, will help you understand why hope became such a powerful ingredient in his survival and subsequent success in life.

Captain Belton Jennings, USNR (Ret.)

CEO Emeritus @ Virgin Islands Territorial Assn of Realtors®



While my time as an Army officer was very, very brief, I did learn one lesson: *"It is considered bad form to ever compliment the Navy."* — Until now.

Mike has nailed it with this book. Not only are the documented twists and turns in his life fascinating, but the overall life lessons of goals, dedication, perseverance, and, most importantly, hope and timeless attributes for which we should all strive.

Sadly, the heroes of most people these days reside in sports, Hollywood or Washington. There is an old saying about never meeting your heroes because you will be disappointed. Well, my hero is a lot closer to home. I've known Mike over 40 years and he is my hero. I've never been disappointed. The things he has been through and the way he has responded and lived his life should be an inspiration to us all. Read his book. I suspect that he might become a hero to you, too.

Charlie Gaines

CPA, Businessman, Friend



As someone who has served as a military physician in Europe, practiced medicine for over fifty years, and worked as a police physician for over 40 years, I have seen human suffering and resilience from multiple perspectives. I have treated combat veterans in emergency rooms, responded to countless crisis calls involving PTSD and addiction emergencies, and witnessed both the devastating effects of trauma and the remarkable capacity for human recovery. Mike Penn's *"Hope and Courage: A POW's Guide to Life, Recovery, Success, and Peace of Mind"* offers insights that transcend any single profession—it is a masterclass in human survival and the medical, psychological, and spiritual factors that determine who lives and who dies when pushed beyond normal human limits.

Penn's memoir illustrates a fundamental medical truth I have observed throughout my career: the connection between hope and survival is not metaphorical—it is physiological. His statement that *"one can live about a month without*

food, about a week without water, but not one day without hope” aligns with medical research on how hope and despair directly affect immune function, healing capacity, and will to live. His honest account of PTSD symptoms, addiction, and recovery provides crucial insights for medical professionals, while his work with the HIMS program demonstrates how those who have walked through the valley of death often become the most effective guides for others facing similar journeys. His Saturday morning commitment to “Grand Group” proves what we know from addiction medicine: recovery is not a one-time event but a daily practice, and peer support is often more powerful than any medication we can prescribe.

This book should be required reading in medical schools, police academies, and military leadership courses. Penn’s story proves that healing is possible, that hope can be rebuilt, and that everyone has the capacity for recovery, redemption, and service to others. *“Hope and Courage”* isn’t just a memoir—it’s a medical case study, a leadership manual, and a prescription for resilience all rolled into one. It deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone who serves others in their darkest hours, providing unvarnished truth about trauma, addiction, recovery, and the unbreakable power of the human spirit when sustained by hope and courage.

Paul M. Fine, MD

U.S.A.F Physician Veteran

Reserve Captain & Police Physician

Emergency Medical Services Medical Director

Professor Emeritus at a Major Medical School in Houston



This book is a powerful celebration of a life courageously and purposefully lived. Through times of laughter, joy, fear, perseverance, victories, and setbacks, it will enlighten readers about the many lessons that shape who we become. It’s more than a memoir; it’s a masterclass in perseverance and purpose.

No one can fully understand the bond, bravery, fear, patriotism, scars, faith, and hope, to name a few, that our men and women endure during wartime. Through the years wars change but, the results are veterans that are never the same people, especially if you spend time as a POW. His experiences as such, and his openness about PTSD, emotional scars, and personal struggles, provide an invaluable window into the lasting impact of war. He doesn’t just share his battles—he shares his healing.

“Hope and Courage” is a lesson on the effects of attitude and demeanor affecting outcomes, and highlights examples of someone that has learned from his victories, defeats and is helping so many others improve their life through his solid leadership. His Saturday morning “Grand Group” is only one example of how he continues to uplift and empower others.

Mike’s journey is a profound reminder: the most inspiring people aren’t those who avoid hardship, but those who rise in the face of it. His mantra—*“HOPE and COURAGE”*—isn’t just inspirational, it’s a battle cry, a blueprint, and, for many, a lifeline.

Captain Kenneth Lott

Chief Pilot Dallas. Southwest Airlines, (Ret.)



In 2011, I was a shattered man—an Air Force veteran who had nearly destroyed his marriage, betrayed the trust of his employer, and attempted suicide. Then I met Mike Penn. His quiet strength, humility, and hard-won wisdom lit a spark of hope I thought was gone forever. *“HOPE and COURAGE”* captures the mindset and principles that showed me recovery was possible and life could be rebuilt. This is the best book for anyone who wants to overcome adversity, because it is filled with genuine wisdom, and *Hope and Courage* is a blueprint for building a good life.

Michael G. Wells

USAF Veteran (Captain)

Supply Chain Executive



“Hope and Courage: A POW’s Guide to Life, Recovery, Success, and Peace of Mind” by Mike Penn is a great read and demonstrates Mike’s early grit and determination to not only succeed as the best fighter/attack pilot he could be, but to aid others by opening up himself and showing others that no matter the obstacles you encounter, with a never give up attitude and honest self-reflection, all obstacles can be overcome.

I met “Pig” in 1983 when we were both new hires at Continental Airlines. I too had been a Naval Aviator A-7 pilot but was stationed on the east coast so our paths did not cross until Continental. For 47 years I have been privileged to call “Pig” one of my closest friends.

Reading his book brought emotions of laughter and tears as he described the many facets of life he has encountered. Mike's poignant reflection of his lost squadron pilot brothers definitely caused some tears. Mike's insights on his combat tour in Vietnam and subsequent POW stay in the Hanoi Hilton were very sobering and displayed how never giving up and always having hope are essential to life.

I have a Grandson who is considering attending the Naval Academy with the goal of becoming a fighter/attack pilot and he will definitely be getting Mike's book. I sincerely wish everyone will, so they can highlight their darkest moments with a path to success.

Bruce "Gator" Anderson

VA-81/174

Airbus Check Airman US Airways/American



"Hope and Courage: A POW's Guide to Life, Recovery, Success, and Peace of Mind" is more than the story of a remarkable man—it is a masterclass in resilience, leadership, and the refusal to surrender no matter the circumstances. This book is a guide for anyone who must face overwhelming adversity, recover from deep setbacks, and still move forward with strength and purpose. It delivers hard-earned lessons that can be applied to business, family, and personal challenges alike.

This is a book worth owning, reading, and sharing. The lessons inside will challenge you to think differently about adversity, inspire you to keep moving forward, and remind you that hope is never lost. Buy it for yourself, recommend it to colleagues, and give it to the next generation. Its value goes far beyond one man's story—it is a lasting guide to resilience, courage, and peace of mind.

John G Ross

Former A7 Corsair Naval Aviator

Former VP of Flight Operations at major U.S. and international airlines



Mike Penn's *Hope and Courage* transforms the horrors of captivity into a masterpiece of human triumph. As a former Prisoner of War, Penn doesn't just share a survival story—he delivers a blueprint for conquering life's most brutal challenges.

The deepest wisdom emerges from our darkest moments. Penn proves that adversity, met with unwavering courage and hope, becomes the catalyst for extraordinary achievement. His journey from despair to victory reveals a profound truth: circumstances don't define us—our response to them shapes our destiny.

Each chapter is a masterclass in resilience and the principles that govern true success. Penn's insights cut straight to what matters: the infinite power of the human spirit to overcome, recover, and rise beyond what seems possible.

This isn't just a book—it's a call to greatness. For those ready to understand life's deepest truths, "*Hope and Courage*" serves as your compass, proving that success flows not from luck, but from the indomitable will to persevere.

The road to greatness demands courage and unshakable hope. Penn shows you the way.

Frank Masters
Author and Investor



The Story Behind the Cover

Sometimes the most meaningful creative work emerges from the intersection of friendship, serendipity, and shared vision. This is the story of how two photographers and designers, with the inspiration of their friends, created an award-winning book cover that would come to represent something far greater than either of them initially imagined.

The Collaboration

The cover of *“Hope and Courage”* was born from a collaboration between Frank Masters and Mike Hamers, founder and creative force behind Light-speed Commercial Arts, in Colorado. What follows is Mike’s account of how it all came together—a story he swears is true... to the best of his memory.

A Perfect Setting

In the spring of 2024, Chuck Magill extended an invitation to Frank to visit his home near Pensacola, Florida. They settled on early July, a timing that would prove more fortuitous than anyone could have anticipated. Chuck and his wife Lisa are the kind of hosts who make you feel like family from the moment you arrive.

As Frank later described it to me, the setting was nothing short of magical. The beautiful waterfront location, combined with Chuck and Lisa’s warm hospitality, created an atmosphere of peace and inspiration. The days were filled with home-cooked meals, interesting conversations with visitors from various book clubs and Bible studies, and the joy of watching their playful dogs.

The visit included memorable excursions: a private tour of the National Naval Aviation Museum, complete with access to areas not yet open to the public; a day of coastal touring and fishing by boat; and the unexpected thrill of a Blue Angels flyby. It was the kind of place and experience that stays with you long after you’ve returned home.

The Moment of Inspiration

On the afternoon of July 4, 2024, Mike Penn called to wish everyone a fantastic holiday. During the conversation, Frank asked about the progress of Mike’s book—the very book you may be holding in your hands. Mike’s response was characteristically humble: *“I’m working on it.”*

That evening, as the sun began its descent toward the western horizon, Chuck walked down to the dock to perform his daily ritual of taking down the large American flag that flies from his towering flagpole on the Gulf.

It was then that Frank, an award-winning photographer with an eye for capturing profound moments, recognized something special unfolding before him. Here was a great Marine at sunset, paying quiet respect to our nation's flag—a scene that spoke to themes of service, reflection, and honor.

From Vision to Reality

When Frank and I began collaborating on the cover design, he reviewed several initial concepts I had developed. Then came one of those eureka moments that every creative partnership hopes for. “Hey Mike,” he said, “I have an idea that could work. I’ll do a mockup and send it to you.”

Within about an hour, the first concept arrived in my inbox. As we discussed the image I found myself warming to it quickly. We could both see how it represented something powerful: a place of recovery, a sanctuary for thought and strategic planning, and above all, a space where one could achieve peace of mind.

The Design Process

What followed was the kind of meticulous creative process that separates good design from great design. We experimented with different fonts, brightened key areas of the image, and employed what we half-jokingly call “the secret tricks that the masters of design only speak of in private places.” The cover went through numerous revisions, and we carefully edited the back cover content until every word felt just right.

Then came the testing phase. More than twenty authors, editors, and marketing professionals offered ideas and suggestions. We incorporated their feedback into what we called “storyboards of fury and thought”—a chaotic but essential part of our creative process. Finally, we knew it was time for the ultimate test: showing it to the author, Mike Penn, and his wife JJ.



Their response was everything we had hoped for—they loved it.

The Deeper Truth

The creative process is by its very nature an exercise in trust. You have to trust in your team, and yourself, and that you'll ultimately find your way to the solution, no matter how far off the path it feels like you go, because the path to the solution is rarely linear. Instead, it's undulating. At times, it's even circular.

I believe the reason Frank and I have worked so successfully together for over a decade comes down to two essential elements.

First, we're blessed to have exceptional people in our lives—people like Mike and his wife JJ, and Chuck and his wife Lisa—who provide inspiration, support, and the kind of meaningful experiences that fuel creative work.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, we never, ever, ever give up.

A Cover That Captures Something Universal

The cover of "*Hope and Courage*" ultimately became more than just a visual representation of Mike Penn's book. It became a symbol of resilience, reflection, and the quiet strength that comes from taking time to honor what matters most. The image of a solitary figure at sunset, paying respect to the flag, speaks to universal themes of service, sacrifice, and the hope that sustains us through challenging times.

In the end, this cover represents the best of collaborative creativity—when friendship, inspiration, and unwavering commitment come together to create something that resonates far beyond its original purpose. It stands as proof that sometimes the most meaningful art emerges not from solitary genius, but from the shared vision of people who refuse to give up on excellence.

Mike Hamers

Creative Director, Lightspeed Commercial Arts

HOPE AND COURAGE

**A POW's Guide to Life
Recovery, Success, and
Peace of Mind**

Mike Penn

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HOPE AND COURAGE

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Recovery, Success, and
Peace of Mind**

Acknowledgments

“No one survives life’s greatest challenges alone. This book exists because of the extraordinary people who refused to give up on me, even when, in brief moments, I had given up on myself.”

To my amazing wife JJ, she saw who I was, and what I could be, she always encouraged me and never gave up on me. You are the living testament that no matter how far we fall, we can always choose to rise again. JJ, thank you for saving my life, and providing a loving home and family, but most of all, never giving up. My gratitude knows no bounds. I love you so.....

To the brotherhood of warriors and friends who opened their hearts and shared their wisdom with readers they’ll never meet—your support are gifts that extend far beyond these pages. Each of you took time from your own remarkable lives to help me reach people who desperately need to hear that hope is possible, that recovery is real, and that they are not alone in their struggles.

To those whose names are written in these pages but who cannot read them—Gary, Goody, Smokey, and John—your sacrifice gave meaning to my survival. This book is my attempt to honor your memory by helping others find the strength to never give up, just as you never gave up on your brothers, your mission, and your country.

Chuck “Sly” Magill—my friend, my mentor, and the man who literally changed my career when I didn’t even know it needed changing. Chuck, you understand perhaps better than anyone, that hope isn’t just wishful thinking—it’s the foundation upon which all meaningful courage is built. You’ve been more than a boss, more than a colleague, more than a friend. You’ve been a living example of how military experience can translate into civilian leadership that actually matters. Your own commitment to developing people, your willingness to take risks on those who needed second chances, and your understanding that true leadership is about service. Thank you for proving, through your own example, that the best leaders are those who use their position to lift others up. Our country and the world needs more leaders like you. Never ever, ever, give up, my friend.

Frank “Tank” Masters, my friend, advisor, and the most persistent believer in impossible dreams I’ve ever known. Frank, saw the power in my story from the first day we met. For over 18 years, every time we talked he asked me, “How

is your book coming along?” Tank refused to let me quit on this project, even when it was just scattered memories and half-finished thoughts, and places to which I did not want to return. His unwavering faith in me to tell these stories and strategies needed to reach the world kept me writing when my brain told me to take a break. He became the guardian of its purpose. His professional guidance was masterful, but mostly, his personal friendship was transformational. Thank you for never ever giving up on me.

“Mountain Mike” Hamers, the creative genius and founder of the Colorado based Lightspeed Commercial Arts, he took this manuscript and transformed it into a beautiful, superb, readable, book. Mike’s eye for detail made every page better, his commitment to excellence turned a manuscript into a message that can and will change many lives. After reading, editing and formatting every word, sentence, and paragraph, he started in on the design for the cover. Mike and Tank collaborated to create a spectacular cover that captures the essence of hope, patriotism, and the good life, that exceeded my high expectations. But most of all you guys made this story worthy of the heroes it honors.

Warren Conrad, my lifelong dear friend, your willingness to share your perspectives and literary experiences, brought depth and authenticity that only a true best friend can provide.

Rocky Bleier, your own story of overcoming seemingly impossible odds inspired me then and now—when a four-times Super Bowl champion says recovery is possible, people listen.

Captain Belton Jennings, your military insights reminded me that this story belongs not just to me, but to every person who has worn the uniform and faced the unseen battles that follow. Your support, attention to detail, reminders about when and why, and recommendations took this project to a better and higher level. You exceeded your outstanding reputation Sir.

Bob Clinkingbeard, his Emmy and Peabody Awards and experience in journalism, television, writing and media strategies spanning decades has been a constant inspiration and reminder that professionalism, loyalty, and integrity still matter.

Charlie Gaines, your genuine friendship and understanding of the written word helped shape this message in ways that will touch hearts, as it touched mine.

Dr. Paul Fine, your medical perspective validated what my heart knew but my mind sometimes doubted—that hope is indeed a matter of life and death. Your tri-perspective as physician, military officer, and law enforcement professional gave this book the credibility it needed to help people in crisis.

Ken Lott, your genuine friendship, airline mentor style and leadership is unsurpassed. You are a model of professionalism, true friend, “Never Quit” demeanor and humility. If airline “Chief Pilot” were in Webster’s Dictionary, your name and photo should be representative.

Tom Gerry, our shared military experiences and civilian experiences upon our return gave me perspective and a better path to publishing this book.

Michael Wells and Bruce “Gator” Anderson, your professional perspectives helped bridge the gap between military experience and civilian application, showing that these principles work regardless of background.

John “Goat” Ross, my dearest friend and partner in countless adventures—from Navy wings to Vegas weddings to personal trials and successes—you’ve been there through every chapter of this story, literally and figuratively. Your testimonial carries the weight of forty years of friendship, and your willingness to vouch for both my failures and my recoveries gives this book an authenticity that no amount of editing could achieve.

To every reader who will hold this book in their hands, THANK YOU. I hope you carry the message to everyone you know, now and in the future. You are the reason these words exist. If my story helps even one person choose hope over despair, recovery over destruction, or service over self-pity, then every painful memory shared, every vulnerable moment revealed, and every sleepless night spent writing will have been worth it.

To anyone holding this book in a moment of despair—know this: you are not alone. Many of us have been exactly where you are. When the weight feels too heavy, start simple. Take a few slow, deep breaths. Pause and think of even one thing you’re grateful for—maybe the person who put this book in your hands. Then, pick up the phone and call someone. Hope is always a call away. The men and women in these pages once made that same call. They rebuilt their lives, and today they give back by answering phones, sharing their experience, and passing along the wisdom, strength, and hope that saved them.

Hope is life. Never give up. Never lose hope.

Dedications

To my loving wife JJ, who, through her
courage, love and dedication, saved my life.
To my Mother, who formed and framed my life.
And to my Attack Squadron 56 brothers,
Gary, Goody, Smokey and John,
who gave their lives for their country.

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About The Author

MIKE PENN, former U.S. Navy Lieutenant, worked his way through college playing in a rock band before serving as a police officer in Fort Worth, Texas. After graduation, he became a fighter pilot, flying combat missions over North Vietnam. He was shot down, captured, and endured eight months in the notorious “Hanoi Hilton.”

Following his Naval service, Mike flew for both Continental and Southwest Airlines, meeting his wife while at Continental. He later became Chief Pilot in Houston for Southwest and continues to work as an inspirational public speaker, focusing on leadership, teamwork, customer service, and his prisoner-of-war story.

Mike is known as “Dad” to his three children and “Pop” to his grandchildren.



Foreword

Does courage exist without hope? Mike Penn would say no.

Hope and Courage: A POW's Guide to Recovery, Life, Success, and Peace of Mind is the story of a man who chased his dream of becoming a naval aviator. He faced brutal captivity, endured torture, and fought his way through the darkness of addiction and PTSD. Through it all, he never stopped believing in hope—and never gave up.

Shot down in his A7 Corsair over North Vietnam, Mike was captured and thrown into the Hanoi Hilton. There, hope was his lifeline. It gave him strength to survive, to endure the unendurable, and to hold fast with his fellow POWs. Later, that same hope fueled his fight to overcome addiction and rebuild his life.

Mike carried those lessons into a second career as a leader at Southwest Airlines. His honesty, empathy, and hard-won wisdom made him a vital force in the HIMS program, helping pilots overcome addiction and return to the skies. Beyond his professional work, he has spent years mentoring others in recovery, giving back with the compassion forged in his own battles.

This book is more than survival. It is service to others. It is courage under fire, anchored in humility. It is the torch of hope carried through the darkest nights. It is a battle plan for turning pain into power, setbacks into breakthroughs, and struggle into strength. Above all, it is a blueprint for living stronger, leading with heart, and never, ever, ever, giving up.

Mike Penn is a true American hero—not because of what he suffered, but because of what he gives. His life is a living reminder of his mantra: *NEVER, EVER, EVER GIVE UP*.

**Chuck "Sly" Magill, Lt. Colonel, USMC Retired,
Fighter Pilot, Honorary Lifetime Member of The Assn of Naval Aviation
Member of the EPNAA "Golden Eagles"
Awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross
Active Speaker at Top Gun**

Chapter 1

The Moment That Defines a Life

When Adversity Becomes Your Greatest Teacher

My friend, let me share with you a story that illustrates one of life's most profound truths: it is not what happens to you, but how you respond to what happens to you, that determines your ultimate destiny.

On August 6, 1972, aboard the USS Midway in the Gulf of Tonkin, I learned this lesson in the most dramatic way imaginable. That morning began like countless others in my naval aviation career, but it would end with experiences that would forge my character in ways no classroom ever could.

You see, every successful person must face their moment of greatest testing—their “defining moment” when everything they thought they knew about themselves is put to the ultimate test.

As I sat in my A-7B Corsair II, engine screaming at 100% military power, trembling against the catapult like energy itself seeking release, I had no idea I was about to receive the most valuable education of my life. The Pratt and Whitney TF-30 P-408 engine beneath me wasn't just preparing to launch an aircraft—it was preparing to launch a journey of self-discovery that would teach me more about human potential than any success manual ever written.

The catapult shot that followed—zero to 150 knots in three seconds—was more than a mechanical marvel. It was a metaphor for life itself: sudden, violent, and demanding immediate adaptation.

When that steam catapult released its fury, slamming my head back against the ejection seat with the force of destiny itself, I experienced what every achiever must learn: sometimes life launches you into circumstances completely beyond your control, and your only choice is how you respond.

The Power of Purposes in the Face of Danger

Every worthwhile mission requires courage, my friend, and that day our mission was to suppress enemy missile sites before they could destroy our bomber aircraft.

Ray Oswald and I pushed ahead of the main strike group, carrying AGM-45 Shrike missiles designed to seek and destroy enemy radar installations. Our job was to draw the fire, to deliberately place ourselves in harm's way so that others might succeed. This is leadership in its purest form—willingly accepting greater risk for the benefit of the team.

When the first SAM missiles launched toward us—those “telephone poles with attitude problems” screaming at Mach 4—I learned something invaluable about fear and focus.

Fear, you see, is not the enemy of success—it is the compass that points toward what we must master. That “high warble” warning in our missile detection system wasn’t just alerting us to danger; it was announcing an opportunity to discover what we were truly made of.

When Everything You Think You Know Gets Tested

The moment my aircraft was hit by that surface-to-air missile, when the loudest BOOM I’d ever heard shattered my world and smoke filled my cockpit, I faced what every person pursuing greatness must eventually confront: the moment when all your preparation meets ultimate challenge.

My engine failed with a death rattle that would have paralyzed a lesser spirit. My flight controls froze solid, turning my sophisticated fighter jet into what I can only describe as “a 22,000-pound paperweight with delusions of flight.” But here’s what I discovered in that moment of crisis: **your response to adversity reveals more about your character than a lifetime of easy victories ever could.**

When the second missile missed me by mere feet—close enough that I could see the rivets in its casing—I understood something profound about what Napoleon Hill called “luck.” Luck, my friend, is nothing more than preparation meeting opportunity, even when that opportunity comes disguised as mortal danger.

The Wisdom Found in Desperate Moments

As my aircraft rolled uncontrollably toward the earth, diving inverted at 450 knots, I faced the decision that every successful person must make: when do you abandon what you thought was your path and trust in something greater?

The ejection seat that saved my life required me to literally pull the handle that would blow me out of everything familiar and hurl me into the unknown. This is perhaps the most powerful metaphor for personal transformation: sometimes you must willingly destroy your current situation to discover what you're truly capable of becoming.

When I hit the ground in that North Vietnamese rice paddy, bullets whizzing around me like deadly rain, I learned the most valuable lesson about adversity: it doesn't come to destroy you—it comes to reveal you.

The thousand people shooting at me weren't just enemy soldiers; they were the universe's way of asking, "How badly do you want to survive? How deeply do you believe in your own worth? What will you do when everything is stripped away except your core character?"

The University of Hard Knocks Provides the Most Valuable Degrees

When they tied my arms behind my back and began what I can only call an "impromptu welcome party—North Vietnamese style," I enrolled in a curriculum no conventional education could provide.

One man raised that sharp piece of metal like he was auditioning for a horror movie wasn't just threatening my life—he was offering me a graduate course in the power of mental toughness. When I lunged left and avoided what could have been a fatal blow, I wasn't just saving my skin, I was proving to myself that the human spirit, when properly directed, can overcome even the most overwhelming odds. Fortunately, among the captors, one was a North Vietnamese regular army soldier who had orders to keep American Pilots alive.

*You see, my friend, every successful person discovers this truth:
the same experiences that seem designed to break you
are actually designed to make you.*

When Life Changes Your Address to “Character Building University”

The “spiffy” new uniform they gave me—purple and gray striped prison clothes with titerubber sandals—wasn’t just a change of wardrobe. It was life’s way of teaching me that your worth has nothing to do with your external circumstances and everything to do with the unbreakable spirit within you.

When they repeatedly tried to get me to participate in propaganda “news conferences” and I politely declined, earning myself additional rope restraints and beatings, I learned something invaluable about the price of integrity: it’s always worth paying, even when the currency is suffering.

Every “no” I gave them wasn’t just resistance—it was a declaration that some things are more valuable than comfort, more precious than safety, more important than immediate relief.

The Ride to Real Education

Later that night, after an incredibly long day, that truck carried me blindfolded toward the Hanoi Hilton, arms tied behind my back, I was actually being transported to the most important classroom of my life.

What seemed like the end of everything I had known was actually the beginning of everything I needed to learn. That vehicle wasn’t just taking me to prison—it was delivering me to a university where I would earn an advanced degree in human resilience, a master’s class in the power of hope, and a PhD in the kind of character that can’t be taught in any conventional institution.

The Great Lesson Begins

I share this story not to impress you with tales of danger and survival, but to illustrate this principle: every adversity carries with it the seed of an equivalent or greater benefit.

That day when everything went wrong—when my jet was shot down, when bullets filled the air around me, when I was captured and beaten and stripped of everything I thought defined me—that day was actually when everything went *right* with my education as a human being.

You see, comfort never taught anyone anything of value. Safety never revealed anyone's true potential. Easy circumstances never forged character worth having.

It was in that rice paddy, in those prison clothes, in the back of that truck heading toward possible years of captivity, that I began to understand about the “invisible counselors” that guide us toward our destiny. Sometimes those counselors wear the faces of our greatest challenges.

The catapult that launched my aircraft that morning wasn't just propelling me into the sky— it was hurling me toward the discovery of strength I never knew I possessed, resilience I never knew I could develop, and hope that no external circumstance could ever destroy.

And that is where every great story truly begins—not with the moment when everything goes according to plan, but with the moment when everything falls apart and you discover what you're really made of.

*The greatest victories are always won in the battles
you never wanted to fight, using strength you never knew you had,
for reasons that only become clear when the struggle is over.*



2 hours after initial capture in Haiphong, NVN

Chapter 2

When Dreams Collide – The Choice That Defines Destiny

"Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

— President John F. Kennedy

The Foundation of Character Is Built in Youth

Let me share with you a truth that every successful person must eventually learn: the choices we make in our youth echo through every day of our lives that follow. Sometimes those choices come disguised as simple decisions between two appealing paths, but in reality, they are defining moments that reveal who we truly are beneath the surface.

In Fort Worth, Texas, during my formative years, I was blessed with a best friend named Jim Conrad—a young man who could make a guitar sing like angels and, when the mood struck him, curse like sailors. Jim taught me many valuable lessons about life, including how to charm young ladies and diplomatically avoid their protective fathers. But perhaps the most important skill he shared was how to coax beautiful music from six strings and a wooden box, as well as snap the football, as he was a center and I was a quarterback!

You see, every master must first be a student, and every teacher appears when the student is ready to learn.

When Heroes Shape Young Minds

But it wasn't just Jim who influenced my development—it was his father, Warren Conrad, a genuine war hero who had flown B-24 Liberators over Germany during World War II. Warren had dropped bombs on the heavily defended Ploesti oil fields, missions with survival rates that would make a casino owner nervous.

After dinner, guitars forgotten, Jim and I would corner Warren with the hunger of young minds seeking inspiration:

“Tell us about the time you barely made it back with two engines out, Mr. Conrad.”

“What was it like when the Messerschmitts came at you head-on?”

“Did you ever think you weren’t going to make it?”

Those stories planted something profound in both Jim and me—a seed that would eventually grow into an obsession with aviation and service to something greater than ourselves.

There’s something transformative about listening to a man who has looked death in the eye at 20,000 feet and lived to tell about it. It makes playing guitar in a high school band seem rather tame by comparison, though no less valuable as preparation for life’s larger stages.

The School of Rock and Roll Teaches Life Lessons

As our weekend warrior rock band evolved—Jim departed for real estate ventures and college—new musicians joined our musical family. Jerry Williams, Smiley Williams, John Williams, and Terry Hungerford replaced the departing members. Apparently, if your surname wasn’t Williams, you needed exceptional talent to earn your place in our ensemble.

Every organization, whether it’s a rock band or a military squadron, succeeds or fails based on the character and commitment of its members.

We performed every weekend: fraternity parties where intoxicated college students threw beer bottles (sometimes at us, sometimes in appreciation—the distinction wasn’t always clear), taverns where patrons were more interested in drowning sorrows than appreciating music, and private parties where wealthy individuals paid us to provide background accompaniment for their conversations about stock portfolios and country club affairs.

Then fortune smiled upon us—we secured a regular weeknight engagement at a club in Fort Worth that elevated our reputation citywide faster than good news travels through a small town.

When Opportunity Knocks, Answer the Door

The real breakthrough arrived when we earned our own television program on Channel 11 in Fort Worth. Weekly appearances. Live television. With special guests “hitting it off” each week. This was unedited, unscripted, unrehearsed reality—no retakes, no safety nets, no opportunities to say, “Let’s try that again but with less catastrophic failure.”

★ As President Ronald Reagan once observed, “*There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers.*” — Sometimes the simple answer is to say yes when opportunity presents itself, even when you’re terrified of failing.

The Night Greatness Taught Us About Professionalism

I’ll never forget our inaugural broadcast. Picture this scenario: we’re backstage, nervous as longtailed cats in a room full of rocking chairs, when someone mentions that our “special guest” was nowhere to be found. Not in the building. Not even in the same area code, as far as anyone could determine.

One minute before airtime—sixty seconds!—our missing performer was “assisted” into the studio by what I assume were his handlers. They positioned him on the piano bench with the careful attention usually reserved for handling unstable explosives, and he immediately rested his head on the piano keys.

We stood there gaping like tourists viewing the Grand Canyon for the first time. Thirty seconds to live television, and our star looked as though he’d rather be napping than entertaining.

This is how our television career ends before it begins, I thought.

The floor manager began his countdown: “5... 4... 3... 2...”

And at “2”—at the very last possible moment—this gentleman lifted his head, looked directly into the camera with laser-like focus, and proceeded to perform “*Goodness Gracious, Great Balls of Fire*” with us, flawlessly.

Not merely competently—flawlessly. As though he’d been born for no other purpose than to make piano keys sing and audiences lose their collective minds.

We cut to commercial, and his handlers escorted him to his waiting limousine, leaving us standing there wondering if we'd just witnessed a miracle or an elaborate practical joke.

His name was Jerry Lee Lewis. The Jerry Lee Lewis. The Killer himself.

And he'd just demonstrated that true professionals deliver excellence regardless of circumstances—a lesson that would serve me well in military aviation, where there are no second chances and failure is not an option.

When Hollywood Calls, Destiny Answers

Our manager, a gentleman who knew everyone worth knowing and their relatives' pets, maintained a friendship with a local AM radio personality. One day, this disc jockey received a call from his friend Charlie Rich—yes, the “*Behind Closed Doors*” Charlie Rich—requesting a band for an upcoming performance.

The DJ recommended us, Charlie contacted us directly, and suddenly we're sharing a stage with a musician who could make pianos weep and guitars laugh. Additional opportunities followed, each more significant than the previous, and just when we thought we'd achieved the pinnacle of success, Warner Brothers discovered Jerry Williams and our modest band from Fort Worth.

Warner Brothers. The actual Warner Brothers. The organization that produced recordings actually played on radio stations by people unrelated to us.

They invited us to Los Angeles, to their legitimate studio, to create authentic music that authentic people might actually purchase. This was the golden ticket, the brass ring, the moment every garage band dreams about while practicing in their parents' basement.

There was just one significant obstacle: I couldn't go.

The Choice That Shapes Character

*Courage is not the absence of fear,
but rather the assessment that something else is
more important than fear.”*

– Franklin D. Roosevelt

I needed to remain in college full-time to avoid the draft. While my band-mates dreamed of gold records and screaming fans, I was pursuing something entirely different. Even with Warner Brothers offering stardom like bait on a hook, I desperately wanted to become a Navy fighter pilot and land on an aircraft carrier.

The COOLEST thing I could imagine...

Cooler than rock stardom...

Cooler than seeing your name illuminated in lights...

Cooler than all the money and fame a recording contract might provide.

I had just applied for and been accepted into the US Navy NAVCAD program. After completing two years of college, I could begin officer and Navy flight training. My 60 credit hours were nearly complete, which meant it was time to find a “real job” until departing for the Navy.

So while Jerry Williams and the band headed to LA to pursue their dreams of rock and roll immortality, I remained in Fort Worth, working whatever employment would accept me, counting down the days until I could trade my guitar for wings and admission to the world’s most exclusive club: naval aviation.

When Values Collide with Opportunity

Some people considered my decision insane. Sometimes I questioned my own sanity. But whenever doubt crept into my mind, I’d remember Warren Conrad’s stories about flying through hell and returning home, and I’d know I was making the correct choice.

You see, my friend, there comes a moment in every person’s life when they must choose between what appears to be the easier path and what they know in their heart to be their true calling.

As President Kennedy reminded us during those turbulent times, “*In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger.*” I sensed that my generation might be one of those few, and I wanted to answer that call.

The Wisdom Found in Difficult Decisions

Besides, how many people can claim they declined Warner Brothers to become a Navy fighter pilot? Not many I'd venture.

And as events would prove, that decision to choose steel wings over steel strings would lead me to adventures no rock song could ever capture—adventures that would test every ounce of courage, skill, and determination I possessed.

Sometimes the path that seems to lead away from your dreams is actually the one that leads you to your destiny.

As it's written on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: *"All who have served nobly, we remember especially those who loved and were loved."* Even then, I felt the pull of service, the call to be part of something larger than personal ambition or individual gain.

The choice was clear, even if the consequences were unknown. I was trading the certain applause of audiences for the uncertain skies above Vietnam, trading the safety of stages for the danger of carrier decks, trading the comfort of recording studios for the challenge of combat missions.

But that's a story for another chapter.

