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'The Triumph of an Ordinary Man'

EX-POW: Former Captive in North Vietnam Motivates His Audiences

by Bob Baker – Times Staff Writer

NASHVILLE – Captain Charles Plumb, his words coming fast, his voice raising and falling along the course of a sentence as rhapsodically as a television evangelist, is telling an audience about his first days of torture, emaciation and self-pity in a tiny North Vietnamese prison cell.

"I was going stir crazy. I needed something – A game to play. I made a deck of cards. I tore 52 little strips from pieces of toilet paper. And I can tell you this with authority..."

He pauses. This morning's listeners – 200 independent Tennessee oil salesmen who hired Plumb to address their sales convention – are groggy after a party last night, but they remain riveted until he exclaims:

"Toilet paper is tough to shuffle!"

More than 100 times each year, Plumb, a former Navy fighter pilot, resurrects this kind of pain, pathos and gallows humor for quota-be-leaguered salesmen, suicide-minded high school students, striking airline pilots or any other group willing to pay for 45 gripping minutes.

Most of the 588 men who came home from the North Vietnamese prisons returned to the military or private life with a determination to transcend the "POW" label.

"It's not a distinction you're looking for when you get your wings and go off to war," said one.

Many of the ex-prisoners have given scores or hundreds of speeches. Plumb, though, is one of the few to parlay the public's thirst for knowledge for the POW experience into a long-running career as a "motivational" speaker, in which he defines his livelihood by his six years of imprisonment, reliving it nearly every other day.

He estimates that he has told his story more than 4,000 times since his release in 1973, and says he hopes to continue to make his living from it as long as people will listen.

"I want people to think better of themselves. Those six years were the greatest training a person could have. I can't think now of a challenge in life I can't overcome. I truly believe that if I could put each person through those years, they would come out with the self-confidence that I have."

Plumb bills his story as "The Triumph of An Ordinary Man" and he looks the part: medium height, medium build, soothing voice, prominent ears and thinning hair.

Inside is a performer, fascinated by the process of reaching an audience. He takes pains to inject each presentation with Hollywood dramatics (often pacing and pivoting the imaginary length of an eight-foot cell as he speaks), everyman vulnerability (noting freely that he graduated in the half of the U.S. Naval Academy class "that made the top half possible") and fighter-jock stoicism (mentioning offhandedly two tragedies of timing: He was shot down five days before his tour of duty in Vietnam was to end and was divorced by his wife three months before he was free).

Plumb has been able to profit without offending the sensibilities of his fellow ex-prisoners, according to interviews with a number of men well known in the fraternity of POW's.

"The guy's absolutely tremendous," said Navy Capt. Richard Stratton, president of NAM-POW's Inc., an organization that counts among its membership about 400 Vietnam POW's.

“He has the character to make his story authoritative,” said retired Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale, who was the highest-ranking American POW in Vietnam and knew Plumb in prison. “I have high regard for him.”

Bob Moore, a Chicago-based convention planner who has hired Plumb as a keynote speaker for corporate sales meetings, said Plumb holds an advantage over most motivational or inspirational speakers, who specialize in finding new ways of saying the same old things about building that positive attitude.

“He’s not sitting there with platitudes,” Moore said, “He touches home. He all of the sudden has you thinking very seriously about what he’s talking about. It’s almost like he talks in parables.”

Like this:

“...so there I was in my little cell with my little deck of cards and I heard a cricket across the floor,” Plumb is telling the Nashville salesmen as the noise of a jackhammer grates irritatingly outside the overly air-conditioned banquet room. “But it wasn’t a cricket. It was a wire being slid under the wall of the cell next to me. And at this point I needed so desperately somebody to validate my sanity, to tell me it was going to be all right. But you know my overriding reaction? I was afraid. I was afraid of the guy on the other end of the wire.”

Tugging On Wires:

“You see, I figured, well, whoever’s on the other end is another prisoner of war, he’s a fighter pilot, probably, and he’s probably a better pilot than me and he’s probably more handsome and bigger and stronger and he probably didn’t cry when the enemy tortured him, like I did. I didn’t want that guy to see me in the shape I was in.”

The voice soars in sarcasm: “I was 24 years old! Jet fighter pilot! The guy with all the right stuff!”

The voice plummets back to reality: “Me, with four open wounds, no medical care.”

It soars: “Graduate of the Naval Academy! Pride of America’s youth!”

It plummets: “Twenty-seven boils I could see – had more on my back, but I couldn’t count them. My total possession in life was a rag knotted around my waist to hide my nudity. I weighed one hundred fifteen pounds and I didn’t want anybody, least of all my peers, to see me the way I saw myself. I was afraid to tug on that wire.”

Plumb pauses and stares out at the oil salesmen.

“Ever get like that? Ever afraid to expose the tender underbelly of your personality to somebody else? Sure, we all get that way once in a while. It’s tough to tug on a wire.”

Plumb’s basic speech is crammed with these homemade Aesop’s fables. He batters his audiences with the insistence that they must struggle against life’s adversities and inertia to emerge triumphant, improved, successful.

As he did in Vietnam, they must learn to fight off “prison thinking,” in which “you think of yourself as a prisoner – you blame everybody else, you think you are the victim of circumstance and not the master.”

They must learn “to take the sock out of your mouth” – to be the person who’s willing to offer that pat on the back.

Firing Up Morale:

Like all Plumb’s metaphors, this one is rooted in prison, recalling a day when he couldn’t take a sock out of his mouth. His sock. The enemy had gagged him with it, shackled him and thrown him into a truck with two dozen other prisoners. He continues to explain, he wanted so badly to fire up morale that he used his big toe to tap out in code the prisoners’ favorite slogan, “keep the faith, baby,” on the shoulder of a buddy. “He passed it on and somebody else passed it on and it went around and around.”

He survived, Plumb tells his listeners, because he was lucky enough to have been exposed at several junctures in his life to people he calls “parachute packers.”

There was, literally, one anonymous seaman on the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk who packed Plumb’s parachute properly before his last mission, allowing him to eject safely from his F-4 Phantom after it was shot out of the sky by a surface-to-air missile.

And there were, figuratively, the parents and teachers and coaches and Navy instructors “who packed my emotional parachute, my spiritual parachute and my physical parachute.”

Then he talks about a kid named Doug Hegdahl, a Navy seaman who fell off his ship in a freak accident in the South China Sea and wound up a POW at the age of 19. (“He used to tell us, ‘I wasn’t captured, I was rescued!’”) In 1969, the North Vietnamese decided to release a few prisoners early as a public relations gesture. The senior officer in Plumb’s camp chose Hegdahl, who had managed to alphabetically memorize the names, ranks, next of kin and phone numbers of about 250 POW’s.

“Now, here he comes home,” Plumb says, voice soaring again. “He’s got all this back pay in his pocket and he hasn’t seen a woman in more than two years, and he’s loose on the streets of San Diego. What would you do?”

“Now remember, I told you this kid was a parachute packer. Sure, he started to travel. He went north to south, east to west, contacting families, telling them that their prisoners were alive.” Eventually, in person or by phone, Hegdahl spoke to a relative of every prisoner whose name he remembered.

Life is a Choice:

And, finally, there was a crusty old man named Francis Smith, Plumb’s high school basketball coach in Overland Park, Kansas.

“It was his last year as a coach and we lost the last game. We were walking off the court and all I could think to say was, ‘I’m sorry, Coach, I guess we’re just a bunch of losers.’”

“Coach squeezed my shoulder and said, ‘Son, whether you think you’re a loser, or whether you think you’re a winner, you’re right!’”

“I didn’t understand what he meant!” Plumb exclaims to the audience, his words coming faster. “I asked him the next day at school and he said: ‘Life is a choice, a choice between happiness and sadness, profit and loss, even life and death. Don’t give away your choice by blaming others.’”

“I don’t want you coming back in four or five years telling me the reason you flunked out of college was because you went to this little bitty school and didn’t learn anything.”

'I don't want you coming back in eight or ten years saying you got a job but you couldn't work with your mean ol' boss, and you couldn't agree with any of his philosophies, so you quit just to show him.'

'I don't want you coming back here in twenty years telling me you married some gal and she was beautiful before you married her but after you married, then she turned out bad and wouldn't support you in anything you wanted the family to do so you divorced her and that's the reason for your problems.'

'The difference between happiness and sadness is not what's around you; it's the way you think about what's around you. And if you think you're a loser, or you think you're a winner... you're right!'"

Yet Another Challenge:

Late in his speech, Plumb recalls telephoning home from the Philippines the day after his release and finding out that his wife had divorced him and was engaged to another man.

"I came back home and you wouldn't believe the 'good advice' I was getting from the 'professionals'. The lawyers were saying, 'We're gonna sue her and her boyfriend, we're gonna put her in jail for what she's done to you.' The psychologists had good advice too: 'Charles, you need to get mad about this. You need to get bitter. After all, if anybody has the right to be bitter, you do.'"

"Well, I didn't learn much at the school of hard knocks over at the University of Hanoi but I did learn this: Coach Smith was right! Life is a choice. Life is a choice in a prison camp in Vietnam just like life is a choice each day. Don't give away your choice by blaming somebody else for your problems."

"And I said to myself. 'Mister Lawyer, Mister Psychiatrist, I can sue everybody I can think of, I can feel sorry for myself, I can fall into a corner and atrophy and die. Or I can take Option No. 2. I can pick up the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle, put them back together as best I can, and put the energy in a positive direction. Thank you very much, I think that's what I'll do.' And I did. And so did the other guys."

In an interview at the time of his return, Plumb said he was planning to resign from the Navy because he could not imagine continuing his military career without his ex-wife. (He later remarried and is now the father of two teenagers.) He said he considered an airline-pilot offer but was gradually drawn to public speaking after accepting a wave of invitations that many POW's received after the war.

"I was quite surprised when I got back that I not only had a story to tell people, but that I had the ability to evoke a response," Plumb explained. "People would come to me two or three months later and say, 'You really changed my life.' I'd never thought I would be able to do that. I had been in some plays in school, but I was the kind of guy who would get physically sick if I had to give a book report."

Remembering Austerity:

Plumb says he believes he is emotionally healthier than most because he consistently confronts his imprisonment.

"No dreams, no flashbacks," he says. "A lot of my speech, I'm talking to myself. It's beneficial to remember the austerity. I bet I have more appreciation than other POW's out there, for a good meal, of seeing a pretty girl smile, or holding a child, because three or four days a week I remind myself of the down side."

Convention planner Moore regarded Plumb as the perfect antidote last year when he was organizing a conference for a major vacuum cleaner company. The salesmen were demoralized, he said, because after a record-breaking performance they were being asked to meet even higher quotas.

“Charlie came in and told them, ‘Forget about management; you owe it to yourself to do better,’” Moore said. “It’s one thing for the chairman of the board to say that; it’s another for a guy like this to say it, and mean it. I could see the whole mood turn around.” Plumb, reminded of the speech, smiled.

“I just made it hard for them to feel sorry for themselves,” he said. “What I’ve got to share is not really a war story. It’s the story of a guy who had a big problem. As long as people have a problem, there’ll always be an audience.