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BEYOND SURVIVAL

Speaker: CAPTAIN GERALD L. COFFEE*

MR. IAN M. ROLLAND: I would like to introduce our keynote speaker, Captain Gerald Coffee, to deliver his presentation "Beyond Survival." Captain Coffee joined the Navy in 1957 after his graduation from UCLA, receiving his Navy wings in 1959. He was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam from 1966 until 1973. After his return, he earned a Masters degree in Political Science, graduated from the National War College and commanded an aircraft squadron. His last naval assignment was in Public Affairs on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Hawaii. He retired from active duty in 1985. Captain Coffee's military awards and decorations include the Silver Star, two awards of the Legion of Merit, the Distinguished Flying Cross, two awards of the Bronze Star, the Air Medal, two awards of the Purple Heart, the Combat Action Ribbon, two awards of the Navy Unit Commendation Medal and the Vietnam Service Medal with thirteen stars. For his contributions to Americanism through public speaking, he has received numerous civic awards, including the George Washington Honor Medal presented by the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge. By 1986, he had received the Counsel of Peers Award of Excellence, the highest recognition of the National Speakers Association for speaking skills and professionalism. You are in for a real treat. Please join me in welcoming Captain Gerald Coffee.

CAPTAIN GERALD L. COFFEE: First of all, let me say that I certainly appreciate the privilege of being a part of your meeting and for your gracious hospitality. My family and I have been blessed with the opportunity to live on Hawaii now for about fifteen years; somebody has to do it. We have become very sensitive to the Hawaiian spirit and culture and having worked with your staff and your officers and seeing many of you, talking with you, some familiar faces, it's very clear to me that the spirit of Aloha is alive and well here in the SOA and I certainly appreciate your warm welcome and hospitality.

I read a column recently where the columnist was decrying the information glut that we have to wade through nowadays and how there is no time for legitimate political debate and we only have time for information bits on the evening news. And they were saying that, for example, if Abraham Lincoln were alive now, there would have been no time for the Gettysburg Address. The best he would have been able to do would be to say "Read my lips, no more slavery."

It's that information and increased technology that I'd like to address. We've been making reports here, the Treasurer's report, report on the Board Meeting, I'd like to report on the invincibility of the human spirit.

I served my country as a naval officer for 28 years and, of course, that is service of which I am very proud. I know that many of you are just as proud of your service to our country as well you should be. But to have been a prisoner of war, a POW, during part of that time, of course is a more dubious distinction. That's not what I re-enlisted for as a young officer back in the early 1960s when I had the option certainly. And it isn't my intention to go into that experience in some kind of a chronologically detailed account. I realize that for the most part now and certainly as it should be, the whole Vietnam and POW issue is fairly obsolete. In fact, for me it seems more like something that I read about in a book. It happened to somebody else and his family rather than to me and mine. I think it is important for us to continue to try to focus upon certain lessons that can be extracted from such a unique experience, a bizarre experience such as this, and of course the application of those lessons in our own daily lives right here at home.

We all find ourselves frequently trying to navigate through difficult and complex passages in our own personal and professional lives, especially more recently when it seems like so few of those

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old black and white answers which used to solve many of our problems, those old anchors and touchstones upon which we could rely, don't seem to work as well as they used to. We look around us to those answers and solutions and instead, as often as not, we tend to find so much ambiguity and gray areas and compromise and experts on every side of every issue. And about the time we think we have a decision or a policy made, we get another input and kind of go back and re-think the whole thing again. Its darn tough to make those decisions as parents, as professionals, as citizens, so we have to extract those lessons from our past experiences as well as from those around us. None of us has time to make all the mistakes to learn from certainly to make the right decisions and judgment calls, so that's where I hope you'll focus your attention. Some of these lessons that can be learned.

While I do that, if I don't accomplish anything else, I hope to make it so clear to every single one of you here how the experience from which I'll be drawing on is really so much more than just my experience, or that of my friends in the other prisons of North Vietnam all those years, but really every one of yours as well. Whether you know it or not, you were there with us everyday. Regardless of your station in life, your age, where you were, what you were doing, you were there everyday giving us the strength and sustenance and the will to go on. And as we go along together, maybe that will become more clear, more apparent, because believe me I'm talking about our shared experience.

The third of February 1966, my crewman and I were flying combat reconnaissance missions from the decks of the aircraft carrier, USS Kittyhawk operating on the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of North Vietnam. We were flying an airplane called the Vigilante, a fairly complex, twice-the-speed-of-sound reconnaissance airplane, much like the F-14 Tomcat that we've all seen Tom Cruise bop and run on in *Top Gun*, right? You all saw *Top Gun*, that was me. Every Navy pilot thinks he's Tom Cruise bopping through San Diego on his motorcycle, right, flying F-14 Tomcats around, making it with his instructor, right, right. You guys are waking up. In any case, as we came across the last target on our planned route there in the southern part of North Vietnam, the airplane was hit by anti-aircraft fire. And the hit itself wasn't anything spectacular, no big explosion, just kind of a thump in the after part of the air frame, but I felt it and realized we'd probably taken a hit, so I turned the airplane toward the ocean, pushed my throttles forward into after burner to get maximum acceleration; I wanted to get as far out to sea as possible quickly to enhance our chances of rescue by our own forces, should we have to leave the airplane. So we found ourselves climbing out toward the ocean, accelerating, and as we did I began to watch my hydraulic pressure gauges start to flicker and go towards zero. The warning lights were flashing on and off in the cockpit. I was losing my hydraulic fluid over the side where we had taken the hit and of course, the Vigi, like most of our modern day airplanes, require hydraulic power to steer; just like the DC-10 over Iowa. So as we crossed the beach going outbound still climbing and accelerating, I watched those gauges go to zero. The control stick froze in my hand, stiff, I couldn't move it and the airplane began to roll, but I couldn't stop the roll and it went slowly at first, but then began to wrap up more and more rapidly and as it did the nose began to drop down through the horizon, still accelerating. All I could see now was the ocean spinning around in front of us and it became clear that we couldn't stay with the airplane any longer. So I called to my crewman, who sat behind me, I called him on the intercom, "Eject, eject, eject," but I never heard him go. So I reached up and pulled the pace cord of my own ejection seat, which automatically ejects him first. Ready or not. Myself, a split second later. By this time because the engine's working fine, we had continued to accelerate to a speed of about 680 miles an hour, 680. Can you imagine bombing down the nearest interstate highway close to home there in your convertible with the top down at 680? Stand up in the front seat? And some small idea of the impact at high-speed ejection and, in fact, it was so severe that I was knocked unconscious immediately.

When I regained consciousness some time later, I don't know how long, I was floating in the water about a half a mile from the coast of North Vietnam. All of the automatic functions of my ejection seat and parachute opening device had worked properly. Unconsciously I had released my oxygen mask which kept me from suffocating. I had released my parachute harness which kept me from being dragged down in the water as the chute was sinking below me. I had inflated the flotation gear that was keeping me up in the water, all of this with a broken forearm and a shattered elbow, dislocated shoulder and many cuts and burns from the impact of high-speed ejection. I could see my crewman about 80 yards away inflating his own one-man rubber raft, while already beyond him there were several Vietnamese boats coming out toward us with six or seven Army and Militia men in each boat. They were shooting at us with their automatic weapons and rifles and the bullets were zinging over our heads and splattering on the water all around us.

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There were no airplanes overhead, no place to go or escape and it became fairly clear that our capture was eminent. And indeed it was.

The first boat reached me. They pulled me very roughly over the side, began stripping me of the survival gear I had attached to my torso harness. But then while that was going on before even I realized it, some airplanes did show up, a couple of our own attack airplanes from the Kittyhawk and they began rolling in and strafing the boats that had just picked us up. Shooting at us with their twenty-millimeter cannons, obviously not realizing that we had been picked already and were in those boats. And I can recall pulling myself up along the shallow gull of the boat, watching those airplanes roll in and the bullets bracket the bow and the stern of the boat from both sides, strafing each pass. The Vietnamese stood up in the boats, returned their fire with their own weapons. After six or seven passes like that, they finally broke it off. We reached the coast. Jumped out in the water. Ran across a wide sandy beach. Dove behind a rice patty dike to take cover just as another airplane rolled in and fired a pack of rockets which blew all those beach boats to splinters. And that was my introduction to North Vietnam.

As it turned out, some time in that battle for our capture there and in all the confusion, I really couldn't keep track how but my crew man, also my good friend, was killed. And to this day, I'm not exactly sure how, either killed by our own airplane strafing by mistake, all the more tragically, or perhaps by the Vietnamese out of excitement or revenge or maybe the boat that had taken him was capsized or sunk. I'm not sure. I just couldn't keep track, but I never saw him again and I'm sure that he died that day. Ironically, his remains returned just a year ago through Hickham Air Force Base in Hawaii, 22 years later. My captors took me northward and we traveled in a Russian-built jeep kind of a vehicle over very rough and bombed-out roads and we'd stop frequently out on the countryside of the small villages and hamlets so the people out there could take out their frustration upon me, the captured U.S. air pirate, as they called us. Finally on the twelfth day of traveling there, we reached the outskirts of a very, large city, Hanoi, the capitol of North Vietnam. We continued on down to the suburbs of Hanoi to the very heart of the city and finally we pulled up in front of a huge, formidable looking fortress of a prison. A prison called Wah Lo, which in Vietnamese means fiery forge, named by the Vietnamese themselves for their treatment under the French there during all those days, years, of colonialism in Indochina. So we bound through the big iron gate of Wah Lo and through a big entry tunnel, center courtyard, where several guards took me out of the vehicle through a big arched doorway and down through the corridors and around corners to my first cell, and they shoved me roughly inside. A heavy wooden door slammed behind me; a big iron bolt clanked home on the lock outside with a note of finality. And boy I couldn't believe this was happening to me. We all know it's supposed to happen to the other guy, right? Never to us. And for the first time in my life now I found myself literally thrust into a totally foreign and hostile environment. Nobody else to turn to for advice or help or sympathy. No other source of strength except that which I was to bring in there with me or maybe find on my own.

The cell in which I found myself was about six and a half feet long. Along one wall was a concrete slab that jutted out twenty inches or so, that was my bed, the foot of which was a set of ankle stocks, wooden on the bottom, heavy iron manacle that came down across the top and locked in place with a big rusty padlock. There was one small window very high on the back wall with a double row of iron bars through which all I could see were the shards of filthy, broken glass imbedded in the concrete on top of the 16-foot wall which surrounded the city block size prison. Barbed wire stretched on top of that, of course. The small tin bucket in one corner of the cell was supposed to take care of all my physical requirements. A piece of yellowed paper plastered to the wall next to the door listed all the prison regulations very clearly delineated there in English, all designed specifically to make it impossible for me to also obey the American fighting man's Code of Conduct, those six articles that prescribe a behavior for those circumstances, like a checklist. And the Communists knew very well what our code said; that's why they designed the prison regulations the way they did. You couldn't possibly obey them both. It's a classic trip wire set-up. And that old cell just literally reeked of the human misery that had been there before me. Decades of human misery.

In those earliest weeks and months when the interrogations and the extortion and the pressure were the most intense as they tried to exploit me, all of us really, for information, military information, propaganda, you'd only get enough time to get back to that cell sometimes, kind of take a big breath, lick your wounds and get ready for the next time that those keys rattled, would rattle outside your door again at the wrong time of the night and you were up again; it's your

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turn. You can be sure I prayed a lot. But I began to realize that the nature of my earliest prayers was kind of futile, kind of useless. Because I seemed to be expecting God to do everything for me, rather than take enough of an active role to do something for myself. My earliest prayers were futile to the absurd, because I can remember specifically praying, "God if you just give me those last five minutes to fly over again, I'd sure fly somewhere else." That was my prayer for starters. Very productive at that time. Or futile in the sense I'd say, "I don't care how it happens, but please God get me out of here, back to my country, back to my family because I just don't know how long I can endure in these circumstances." And if I could have known in the very beginning that I was going to be there for more than seven years, I don't know what I would have done. Finally, I began to realize and accept the fact that this might be my life for awhile, so I better get my feet on the deck and my stuff together and get on with it, and make the most of it.

My prayers changed and I quit saying, "Why me God," and I started saying, "Show me God. Show me what I'm supposed to do with this experience. What are you preparing me for? How am I supposed to use this? Help me to use it to go home as a better, stronger, smarter person in every possible way that I can. To go home as a better Naval officer. To go home as a better American, a better citizen, a better Christian, husband, father, a better friend to all my friends. Every way God please help me to use this time productively so that it won't just be a void or a vacuum in my life."

After that realization and commitment, every day did begin to take on a new meaning. I found there really were ways to be better, tougher; there were new insights to gain about myself or the men in the other cells around me. There were the Vietnamese in the cells or even the little ants and lizards that shared my cell. And I'd pace back and forth in that tiny cell; you could walk three steps and turn, three steps and turn. We call this the Hanoi shuffle. I walked several miles a day literally that way, pacing back and forth, and as I would, it would sometimes occur to me that whenever I returned home, I don't think I ever lost hope that I would, but sometimes it was tough, whenever I returned home maybe there would be opportunities to share something about this experience. Of course, with my own family, friends, honestly I never dreamed there would be opportunities like the ones I've had, like this one, for example. But I'd ask myself there, "what are you going to say? How can you condense the essence of an experience like this into 30 or 40 minutes and say anything that really makes much difference at all?" And I didn't know the answer to that question the whole time I was there in prison. It never really occurred to me until I was repatriated in February 1973.

I came home then, seven years and nine days later, and I looked around and saw that so many changes had occurred in our country during those seven years. Changes in my family, our Navy, military, society, some for the better, but many for the worse I felt. And it didn't take very long to figure out that probably the very key to my survival all those years in prison was going to serve me just as well as the key to survival right here at home on a daily basis for the rest of my life. The key was simply faith. When I say faith I know it sounds simplistic and we automatically tend to think of spiritual, religious faith and that's natural because that's the vehicle by which most of know about our ability to believe in the things that we can't touch or hear or see. You just have to believe they're there, take it on faith as we say. I'm talking about four aspects of faith.

First of all, faith in ourselves. Faith in ourselves in those prisons in North Vietnam to simply recognize and pursue our duty. Seldom perfectly, but always to the very best of our ability. The second aspect of faith is faith in one another. Faith in the people with whom we work. Faith in the people that we love. Faith in those men in the other cells around me there all those years. Men upon whom I depended and who in turn depended upon me. Sometimes desperately. The third aspect of faith is faith in our country, for most of us America, for all of us North America. Faith in our basic institutions, our national purpose and cause at any given time. And the fourth aspect of faith, of course, faith in my God. Maybe the foundation for it all.

Let me share with you in just a little bit more detail how each aspect of faith worked for us in the prison environment, has continued to work for me since I returned home, but better than that can work for any of us. You don't have to go through some kind of a weird experience like that to derive the benefits of keeping faith. And I know that there are many of you who could just as well be standing up here saying the same things that I'm saying. You have gone beyond just surviving your own personal tragedies or professional setbacks, but have been able to build upon them, to emerge better and tougher because of them. That's the point. There is inspiration at our elbows everyday of our lives if we but stay aware. Start out with faith in ourselves. Faith in

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ourselves in those prisons in North Vietnam to just recognize and pursue that duty. Faith in ourselves to resist the efforts of the enemy there to exploit us for that military information and propaganda. Faith in ourselves to obey that American fighting man's Code of Conduct, especially in that context, the one article which reminded us, "I am bound to give only my name, rank, serial number and date of birth. I will evade answering all further questions to the utmost of my ability." And yet, faith in ourselves when after months and months and as it turned out years and years of pressure, extortion and torture, you found you couldn't always stick to those four items and dying just wasn't an option. Faith in ourselves at least to learn how to minimize the net gain the enemy could achieve by having us there at its total mercy for such a long time. Faith in ourselves to do all the things we've all been educated and socialized not to do all of our lives. For starters, how to lie, how to deceive, how to be as sly and wily and slippery and clever as you could possibly be. To become good actors. We learned they couldn't extort from you that which you could convince them that you didn't really know. But failing that, faith in yourself to simply bounce back every time you found yourself down and hurting and frustrated and scared, to gut it out, hack it, be as tough as you could for as long as necessary. Faith in yourself to not just survive the experience, but to go beyond survival. To survive and return with honor. Faith in ourselves physically and mentally.

We all know there is a linkage, right, between our physical and mental health and our ability to pursue any objective or achieve any goal. Walking those several miles in my little cell each day just to maintain the muscle tone in my legs. Doing push ups, sit ups on that little concrete slab each day, at least as many as our diet or injuries might allow at any given time. Staying in as good a physical shape as possible. Learning the value of good physical conditioning, not just to look good and be in shape, but to survive. Faith in ourselves intellectually as well. Sometimes in that intellectual mode it seemed like it would have been easier for our brains to atrophy from lack of use, but we did just the opposite. We devised all kinds of ways to stay busy and active and vital, involved with one another.

As it turned out in retrospect, in comparing notes, every man went through a period of very deep personal introspection, thinking about yourself. When is the last time you had a chance to take one day, let alone three or four days or a week or more, with no radio, no TV, no newspapers, no telephone, no newsletters, no meetings and just think about yourself. How you got to where you are, how your life might be different if you had taken a different fork in the road back there along some of those decision points. But in any case getting a feel for your own personal strengths and weaknesses, acknowledging what you find, how to maximize those strengths and minimize or work on the other. Getting a handle on yourself. Learning how to appreciate yourself and your own humanness. Maybe learning how to forgive yourself for the first time in your life.

We used that time to do memory work as well. We memorized all of the obvious that I'm sure you would have thought of too, the books of the Bible in order, the capitals of all of our states alphabetically. Ultimately, every man had committed to his own personal memory bank, the names of over 560 other American POWs, all alphabetized, going over them frequently to make sure we didn't drop any. We also used that time as productively as possible by learning everything we possibly could from one another as well. Any man who had any knowledge or expertise to pass on or share would do so. We passed information through the walls by tapping from cell to cell, sometimes cell block to cell block. And by this means, we learned, we studied foreign languages, sciences, mathematics. Almost every man there studied a foreign language at one time or another. I'd only studied Spanish in high school, but while I was in prison there, I learned so much French through the walls that when I returned, I went to U.C. Berkeley pursuing a masters in political science, and they gave me two years of credit just by examination for the French that I had learned in Hanoi. I figured since I could survive seven years in a Communist prison, I could hack two years at Berkeley too. I was almost wrong.

We also used that time as productively as possible, by doing, by reciting and learning, memorizing and composing poetry. (In the prison we were about two-thirds Air Force and one-third Navy.) A young Air Force captain shared this with us: every year when he was a youngster, his mom had forced him to learn a brand new poem to recite to the annual Thanksgiving family reunion. And he hated it, but like most moms, she had the hammer, so he did, but better than that he retained so much of that poetry and he began to pass it to us. He shared some of the classic poetry of Rudyard Kipling, poems like "The Ballad of East and West," "Gunga Din," the poem, "If," Alfred Noyes' old classic, "The Highway Man," many of Shakespeare's sonnets and quotations; his plays and the poetry began to mean so much to us because of the beauty and the strength that they

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provided, but you know, it got to be just like a TV soap opera because you could only get a couple of verses a day of whatever poem you were working on, but you could hardly wait for the next day to get the next verse to find out, for example, what Bess the landlord's dark-eyed daughter and the highway man were up to in the old inn yard. Poetry of Kipling really appealed to us, I think, because of the masculine quality and as you might guess, we focused upon his poem, "If," you've all heard you know where a father is giving advice to his son, it could as well be to his daughter nowadays. We locked onto the verse in the poem, "If," that says, "If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew to serve their term long after they are gone and yet hold on when there is nothing left within you except the will that says to them hold on, hold on." We were also inspired by a poem called "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley, part of which says "Out of the night that covers me/Black is the pit from pole to pole/I thank whatever gods may be/For my unconquerable soul. In the fell clutch of circumstance/I have not winced nor cried aloud./Under the bludgeoning of chance/My head is bloody, but unbowed. It matters not how straight the gait/How charged with punishment the scroll/I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul."

We were so inspired by the poetry there that we all began to compose our own. I say composed as opposed to wrote because we had no pencil or paper. I'll never forget my own first effort at composing poetry there. One day I was sitting on that old concrete there in my cell and I was munching on a small piece of bread. You know, sometimes we got bread as a break from the usual rice diet. The bread would come in a small little loaf with crust all the way around it and wherever they kept the flour for that bread in those old dungeon-like kitchens of Wah Lo, you can be sure there were bugs and weevils and roaches and flies, a little protein supplement in our bread, that's okay, we could use that. One day I took a bite out of my bread and I looked at it and I was inspired to compose my very first poem. I said, "Little weevil in my bread, I think I just bit off . . . Coffee you've got to be going off your rocker. How can you be sitting here in these abysmal circumstances laughing at your stupid little poem?" But I was. It just reminded me of that beautiful, traditional, axiomatic sense of humor that serves every single one of us each day. I couldn't do what I've done, you couldn't do what you do without that sense of humor.

There was a section of Wah Lo we had nicknamed Heartbreak Hotel because it's where those initial interrogations would take place and cell number eight of Heartbreak had been converted into a shower. They'd run a rusty pipe up the wall and bend it over the top so the water could run on your head. Early on, the guard would bring you to cell number eight there in Heartbreak and he'd shove you inside and say "Wash" and slam the door, lock you in and leave. And for the first time in the whole experience now you're sort of left alone to think about those previous weeks and months and that which had transpired. And for some reason it seemed like the worst might be over, and as it turned out, it never was. But as you did think back about those previous weeks, inevitably you ended up feeling about as low as the rats and the roaches that were scurrying across the floor in front of you there because you began to realize that no matter how tough you had been, it hadn't been tough enough. No matter how well you had done, it hadn't been good enough. You hadn't met your own personal standards and expectations and you were so disappointed. Boy, you're devastated. You started stripping off whatever you might be wearing by now, just remnants of your flight suit probably, and turn on that rusty faucet on the old pipe, hang onto the pipe as the water began running over your head, head down kind of pensively, and pretty soon you'd look up and right there on the wall in front of you at eye level, scratched indelibly by some other American who'd been first, were the words, "Smile, you're on Candid Camera" and you couldn't not, you couldn't not. It would help you to kind of shake your head clear and to get that sense of humor back, resolve to get your feet back up under you, pursue that sense of duty, purpose, priority, principle, faith in yourself to continue to gut it out and hack it and to be as tough as you could for as long as necessary. Faith in yourself to go beyond just surviving, but to survive and return with honor. Keeping faith in ourselves.

When I came home in 1973, again because of all those changes that I just mentioned, in fact, think back in your own life for a second between February 1966 and February 1973. All the things that went on in your own lives during those seven years, personally, professionally. As a nation, of course, in 1973 we were still reeling from the trauma of Vietnam. We didn't even know then how much worse it would get when in two more years we'd have to simply stand by and watch as South Vietnam fell to the Communists anyway. Almost as if we could foresee the whole Watergate tragedy coming upon us as a nation, we came home and looked around and perceived this crazy lack of faith in ourselves as individual Americans and it hasn't gotten very much better. We seem to be overwhelmed by the complexities of our society, technology; we develop technology to solve the problems that are caused by technology. None of us seems to have much control over our lives

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and in some cases our families, our communities, our churches, our schools, our profession, much less the international scene, but to me and my friends returning there, that was kind of ironic. Those previous seven and a half years, for some of them eight and a half years, had taught us that we're really so much better and tougher and more durable and capable than we frequently give ourselves credit for or hear about ourselves from so many other sources.

Keeping faith in ourselves on a daily basis should be easier than we tend to make it. Faith in ourselves to simply look around each day and see the things that are wrong, fouled up, and really believe hey I can step in, I can change that thing, I can make that wrong thing right. I can get it going in the right direction at the very least because we can with that kind of faith and commitment. Faith in ourselves to see the needs around us, again needs in our families. The same kind of needs that we saw filmed as the relief effort for Hurricane Hugo and now the earthquake in San Francisco. Incredible volunteerism. This organization is an incredible example of volunteerism. People seeing the needs, using your talents, making things better, solving problems. Keeping faith in ourselves to do that on a daily basis. Faith in ourselves in that same respect to simply plant our feet somewhere, I mean firmly and finely in this otherwise sea of ambiguity and gray and compromise and all these experts and say once and for all, that's right and that's wrong. And I know the difference. And not allow ourselves or especially those who look to us for leadership and example to sway back and forth of what might be stylish or fashionable or convenient or easier and be dictated by some of our media. But to stick to the things that we know down deep are right and just and moral and ethical. But again, perhaps more importantly, to set the example for the people who look to us for example.

From this room, there are thousands of other people affected by your example and leadership. Set that example and stand up tall, proudly, and say the things we believe loud and clear. Whether it happens to be something professional or political or spiritual or patriotic, without being embarrassed or intimidated by what someone else might think because, hey, we say the things that we believe. That is a kind of faith in ourselves and our convictions. Or how about faith in ourselves to simply cope with the prison-like aspects of our own daily lives sometimes. Certainly, none of us in this room are totally free to simply come or go or do as we please. Every one of us is constrained by the responsibilities and the consequences of every decision or commitment or vow, promise that we might have made back up the pike somewhere. And as much as I sometimes tend to wish that we were somewhere else or doing something else so that our circumstances were different, well realistically for now perhaps change might not be easy. Sometimes it's a state of mind. But sometimes we simply have to gut it out and hack it and be tough and bounce back when we find ourselves down and hurting and frustrated and scared and keeping faith in ourself to do that as often and long as necessary as we each try hard to pursue our own duties at every level in our lives. Keeping faith in ourselves to do the things that we simply have to do because we can. Faith in ourselves like we kept in Hanoi.

The second aspect of faith, faith in one another. Our motto there in the prison system was very simple. Unity over self. Unity over self. Not a bad corporate motto or association motto. The Communists realized very early on that there is indeed strength in unity and togetherness; that's why they kept us separated in isolation, solitary confinement for as long as they had the facilities to do it. We weren't allowed to communicate with each other, and if you're caught communicating with another American, you're punished severely. But we communicated all the time anyway, covertly, secretly, as I mentioned by tapping on the walls from cell to cell. And the way we communicated really does illustrate how you can overcome obstacles with originality and innovation, creativity, persistence.

I'd like to share with you briefly how we did that communicating. Now tap code was based upon 25 letters of our alphabet, just throw away the letter "k" because we can use a "c" interchangeably, it makes the same sound enough of the time. Arrange those remaining 25 letters in five rows of five letters each, one row on top of the other. As you're looking at it, it would be "a" through "e" in the top row and then "f" through "j" in the second row, the third row of five, the fourth row of five, the fifth row of five putting "z" in the lower right hand corner. That gives me five horizontal rows and five vertical columns of letters all in the same square. That puts "a" up in the corner, first row, first column. So if I want to tap an "a" on the wall I tap (tap sound), once for the row, once for the column, so "a" is one and one. "B" is in the first row, but the second column over (tap sound), one and two. "C" first row third column over (tap sound), one and three. "F" second row, first column (tap sound), two and one. "N" is right in the middle of the square, third row, third column (tap sound), three and three. "Z" down in the lower right hand corner would be

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five and five, great POWs (tapping sound), fifth row, fifth column. So I'm there in prison and I want to spell out the Society of Actuaries . . . I used to spell that all the time in prison, I'd abbreviate just like you do (tap sound), "SOA." How about The Big Apple? (tap sound) "T" which is the abbreviation for the (tap sound), "BIG," (tap sound) "APPLE." How about Canada? (tap sound) "CANADA." How about America? (tap sound) "AMERICA."

We tapped so much in those early days, I'll tell you, we got callouses on our knuckles and the guards began to wise up. They'd come into your cell to inspect your cell, grab your hand, if you had callouses, you're guilty. You'd be punished summarily. So we began to wise up and tap on the walls with pieces of metal or rocks or something hard so we wouldn't have callouses and unnecessary punishment. You'd come back from interrogation sometimes and maybe the interrogator had let slip some news going on here at home or out in the world and you'd be anxious to share that news with the rest of the guys in the cell block. So as soon as the guard brought you back and put you back in your cell, locked the door, you'd watch his shadow disappear under the crack of the door to make sure he really left, you'd go over to the wall, you'd call up your friend in the next cell (tap sound), naturally, of course, he'd respond, and you pass on the news, wait a few minutes, put your ear back on the wall and now the whole cell block would sound like an office full of professional secretaries pounding away on their typewriters as the news was being passed from cell to cell to cell. I mean you'd spend hours on the wall with that guy next door each day. I mean you'd get to know and love him literally like your own brother. You'd know about his home town, his family, his hopes for the future, but you wouldn't even know what he looked like. You wouldn't have a chance to meet him and shake his hand or more likely hug him for three or four years off in the future sometimes.

Tap code was very versatile. It could be used in many different ways. Sometimes you'd get a bucket of water to slosh out the concrete deck of your cell. You'd throw the water down there on the floor, then take a stiff bamboo broom to sweep the water out of the rat hole at the end. You'd take the little broom and go swish, swish, swish, swish, swish, swish, swish, you know, communicate to the whole cell block at once and that was gravy. You'd tell jokes and funny stories about the guys next door, it was good for our morale. A very small prison complex on the outskirts where communication was especially difficult because every cell was a separate little hut, there were no common walls through which to tap. But like every place else in North Vietnam then, every morning somebody had to chop the wood to build the fire to boil the water to drink. So every morning a different American was out at the wood pile. Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, you know broadcasting to the whole Vietnamese countryside. Anybody could listen. But every American was listening in and being kept apprised of the senior officer's policies or what the Vietnamese were up to in their interrogations and your drawing strength and sustenance came just from the continuity and the contact. I guess the ultimate refinement of tap code was something we developed that we called vocal tap. And this was where you translate those taps on the wall, one through five, to the everyday noises that we make as people any way and it translated like this, again one through five (tap sound, cough), (tap sound, sniff, sniff), (tap sound, throat clearing), (tap sound, snore sound), some of us make these noises, (tap sound, sneeze). So you could cough and hack and sniff and sneeze in order, see, and communicate it well. It took a little longer but you'd always do it. The guards were always spitting and hacking anyway. They had no idea we were communicating.

I was in a tiny courtyard one time waiting to be interrogated, a guard about six feet away from me, his A.K. 47 rifle slung over his shoulder. The guy in the cell behind him, who had been shot down a couple of months before, brought into the com system, through a very high window in this guy's cell I could hear him coughing and hacking and sniffing and sneezing. It sounded like he was about to die of pneumonia, but he was really telling me that just before he had been shot down, the Miami Dolphins had gone to the Super Bowl and I'd been in prison so long I didn't know what the Super Bowl was if you can believe that, you see.

Communicating, see, making it a sacred obligation to bring every new man into that com system. Teaching each new man how it worked. Writing a note on a piece of paper maybe, writing with a burnt match stick or a piece of red brick. Drawing out that little matrix and leaving it some place you knew the guy would find it. Or whisper the instructions under the doors or window to window on the same wall or if necessary, shout it across the courtyard. Risk the punishment, but making sure that each new man could use that com system, because sooner or later for him or somebody near him, it could be a matter of life or death. When the guy next door, your buddy, when he was down and hurting, being punished over there for whatever the reason, you'd get up

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to your wall frequently and you'd tap to him (tap sound), "GB" which means God bless and he knew that also meant, be tough babe, hang it there, I love you and I'm praying for you, and you bet you were. And then when he knew that you needed him (tap sound), he'd be up for you too every time. Each night when things quieted down before we went to sleep, you'd always tap to the guys on either side, maybe they'd tap to you first, it didn't matter, you'd always exchange (tap sound), "GN," good night, "GBA," God bless America, every single night. That was the kind of faith in each other.

That was the kind of caring and trust and support and respect and love. We had faith in our senior officers that we organize ourselves all in the military chain of command, of course, faith in them to fulfill the most difficult leadership challenge of their whole careers and making decisions that were resistance oriented. Sometimes that meant more pain or challenge for the rest of us. But they fulfilled our faith. Faith in our fellow, faith in the very humanness of the Vietnamese. Faith in them that once in awhile we might even get some compassion. Once in awhile we did. Or faith in our fellow Americans half the world away. Starting out with our own wives and families, right? Realizing they had to gut it out and hack it and be tough, keep faith. Faith in my wife to be raising our four children much as if we'd been together all those years. My youngest son was born two months after I was shot down. Didn't meet until he was seven. Keeping faith in them to keep me a part of the family all those years. A faith more than fulfilled. Faith in our fellow Americans in general. Faith in the people in the rest of the free world.

The interrogators used to love to say to us, "in Vietnam the war is everything, it's everybody's war, it's the people's war, but in America, it's a very small, unpopular war, besides that it's baseball season back there now and they've forgotten that you even exist," and we knew that wasn't true, of course. When a man was shot down in 1970, brought into the com system and the very first piece of news that he passed to the rest of us was, "Hey, you guys, back in America, people are wearing bracelets with your names on them, the POW bracelets." Boy that reaffirmed our faith. And faith in our leadership from so far away. Our President, our Congress, faith in our military leadership to be able to articulate the alternatives that we truly faced there in southeast Asia, to make the right decisions and judgment calls and regardless of the ones that should have been made, speaking for myself having been there for seven years and nine days and seeing that Communist alternative firsthand, each day my convictions were strengthened that we were right to be there in the pursuit of that cause, regardless of the outcome. Faith in one another.

Boy I came home in 1973 and it was almost like a mirror-like image of that lack of faith in ourselves, at the lack of faith in the people around us for the same dumb reasons. A lack of faith in our own families, right, spouse to spouse, parents to kids, the kind of faith whereby we can simply communicate with each other, honestly, frankly, say what needs to be said and have faith that other person will give us the patience and understanding that we need, maybe desperately at that time. Why do we make it so much more difficult than it needs to be so often? We don't have to tap to the walls from the bedroom to the kitchen, or from office to office in our work places. Faith in one another professionally, really believing that every other man or woman is doing his or her best to maintain the same standards of professionalism, quality, dedication that has seen your profession through a 100 years now. That kind of faith in one another. Keeping those lines of communication open throughout our corporate chains of command as well. Telling it like it is, not what you think somebody wants to hear.

That's the only way that we can solve many of the problems we face today. The problems of the economy, the problems of federal regulation, tax law changes, the problems with the deficit, the balance of trades, keeping our environment clean, avoiding nuclear accidents and war. We can do anything we need to do if we don't lose faith in ourselves and in one another to solve those problems together. The same kind of faith in one another, as a matter of fact, that those men who may still be held captive in southeast Asia right now, are still keeping in us not to forget. We'd like to think sometimes that we just don't need anybody else, right? Especially us macho guys, I suppose. But when the chips are down and you've run out of all your alternatives and you're really, really hurt and some of you know this already, we need one another. Keep faith in each other like we did in Hanoi.

The third aspect of faith, faith in our country. Again, for most of us, America, but our Canadian friends have the same reasons to keep faith. Every day there for those seven years and nine days, I heard everything that was bad about the United States of America. Through the loudspeakers that were in each cell located very high on the wall with no on, off or volume switch, we heard

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everything that was bad about the United States of America, about the free world, about the free enterprise system, about our cause there in southeast Asia, all the negative, all the sensational. We heard about every natural calamity, I mean, forest fires and hurricanes even, plane crashes, every riot and demonstration, well we heard about. Every anti-war statement by entertainment personalities and politicians. We heard about the crime and the murder that was going on, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, for example, I mean everything that made us feel so badly about what was going on there at home all those years without us. And I'll tell you, after four, five, six years of that overwhelming wave of negative propaganda about our country and our cause, you'd have to say to yourself, "Wait a minute, don't believe that junk. You're an American, you've lived there, that's your home. This isn't the place to change your mind, dummy. Keep faith." And boy you'd go back into your past, you might latch desperately onto the words that a high school history or civics teacher might have once told you about all the reasons that our country has been able to stay strong and endure for almost two centuries at that point. You might recall something that your coach or your scoutmaster or maybe your priest or minister or rabbi had once told you about all the reasons to be proud of our country and the freedoms that it guarantees. Not only for us, but for so many of the people in the world. You might remember something your uncle who fought in World War II or your aunt who'd worked and waited, something that they had told you about all the reasons to flat out sacrifice for our country. Not just for the geographical security and integrity of America, that of course, but to be willing to sacrifice as well for the very principles of freedom and human dignity which have become synonymous with the word America.

Keeping faith in our country and our cause was difficult there sometimes, but we did. Maybe because the alternative system was so evident around us on a daily basis. Or maybe because we were always reminded by the last article of that American fighting man's Code of Conduct. "I will always remember that I am an American fighting man, responsible for my actions and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America." Faith in our country. Boy I came home in 1973, still in October 1989, I open up the newspaper of whatever city I might be in, I watch the news on TV at night, I continue to see and hear so much that's bad about our country, all the negative, all the sensational again, all of which we have the least to be proud, right here at home sometimes we tend to forget that it's our responsibility to separate the wheat from the chaff. As our media tends to give us little snapshots of ourselves and our leadership and our society, our economy, totally out of context, glossing over so much that's positive and strong and beautiful, sometimes even true, and isn't it difficult sometimes not to become kind of cynical and sarcastic about the whole thing. Isn't that ironic when you stop to consider that we are constantly surrounded by reminders that we continue to live in and make work the most democratic form of government, the freest, most powerful, yet charitable and merciful, that has ever existed on the face of the earth. And we're the ones that make it work or not work.

Reminders like this gathering right here, for example. Boy, don't let it be lost on us. What's going on here? The freedom to assemble, crossing international borders in some cases, traveling freely, coming together. Freedom of speech. Listening to somebody who might even say something about spiritual values in public. How many actuarial societies do you think are getting together in Poland, even with the changes there? Eastern Europe, Cuba, much of southeast Asia? No way. Reminders like the democratic process that we tend to take for granted. Reminders like the one-way flow of refugees all over the world. More than 15,000 East Germans in the last two months. Things are loosening up in the Soviet Union, Poland, Eastern Europe and that's to be encouraging. More than 1.5 million southeast Asian boat people today; you have to be aboard a Navy ship once, bring aboard one boat load of Vietnamese refugees and see the looks on the faces of peoples who have risked everything they've ever worked for all their lives, including their lives, to get out of the system they're in now, the one that we were trying to preclude all those years, to get out to Western democracy. So many reminders.

I was flying from Hawaii a while back to the mainland here and I happened to sit next to a businessman from Indonesia. We were talking about America's role, internationally, diplomatically, economically, so on. He summarized our conversation when he said to me, sort of offhandedly really, "Well you know I suppose if it weren't for America, there probably wouldn't be much freedom left in the world." I suppose if it weren't for America, there probably wouldn't be much freedom left in the world. Indeed, given the last 60-80 years of modern history, if not for the sacrifices and dedication of Americans and our free world allies as well, people just like you and me and our grandparents and parents before us, there wouldn't be much freedom left in the world.

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Stop for a second and think what it would look like without us. And if we can't keep faith in ourselves and our system and that and its future in that context, we just don't have our eyes open. Keeping faith in our country everyday of our lives, in spite of those inputs which would tend to lead us to the contrary, like we did in Hanoi.

Finally, the fourth aspect of faith, faith in our God, again, perhaps the foundation for it all. The first two English words that I saw scratched on the wall of the cell there by some other American prisoner who had been in that cell before me, in fact it was now-retired Air Force General Robby Reisner from Oklahoma, very active in the Texas and Oklahoma Governor's Drug and Alcohol Abuse Program since he's returned, Robby scratched in two words with an equal sign between them and his little formula simply said God equals strength, God equals strength, and for me it really worked. I was never, ever totally alone. I could always find just a little bit more strength when I needed it. And every man there had his own personal spiritual routine on a daily basis, but for sure, every Sunday the senior officer in each cell block would pass a certain signal on the wall, church call, waited a few minutes for it to circulate down to the rest of the cells and then every man would stand up in his own cell, if he were able, and at least in some semblance of togetherness, they'd all recite out loud the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag and the Lord's Prayer and frequently the 23rd psalm, focusing as you might guess on that part of the 23rd psalm that says "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, thou annointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over." As we looked at the Vietnamese officers and guards who kept us there everyday, we realized that in spite of the fact that it was we who were incarcerated, it was our cup that runneth over. Because we knew that someday, whenever, however, we would return to a beautiful and free country. They're never going to know anything else. It's our cup that runneth over. So many reminders of that spiritual role all those years.

When I came home in 1973, again for all those crazy reasons, individually, collectively, so many ways, we seemed to be at the very nadir, the low point of our realization of the spiritual role in our own personal lives and that of our nation as well. And again we have reminders of that role in our nation, not that least of which of course that we Americans, in God we trust. Every time we pledge our allegiance to the flag of our country, one nation under God. Every time I go back to Washington, D.C., I jog along the monument trail, right? Maybe some of you do too, Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, stop and re-read the quotations of our own forefathers in their shrines. How many times they have referred to spiritual strength, spiritual guidance, divine providence, reference to our creator. It's been there from the very beginning and they knew what they were talking about. We can't conduct our businesses. We can't legislate our laws. We can't educate our children in a spiritual vacuum. That's the last line of defense. Believe me, the final source of strength and it works. Faith in ourselves, faith in one another, faith in our country and faith in God. Literally the key to my survival all those years and for most of my friends as well, but better than that, can work for any of us truly. You don't need to go through that kind of an experience to derive the benefits of keeping faith.

It's so much more than just my experience, but every one of yours as well. I was first reminded of that when we came home in 1973. Friends would come up to me, sometimes even strangers, and they'd say something like, "Boy my family and I stayed up until three in the morning and we watched you guys come home on television. The way you got off those big airplanes at Clark Air Force base there in the Philippines, the things you said made us feel so good, so proud." The things that we said like "We're proud to have served our country during some very difficult and adverse times. We're grateful to our commander in chief and to the people of our nation for this day. God bless America." "Boy, when you guys said those things, it made us feel so good, so proud." And if any of you stayed up late and watched that live on television or maybe saw the film clips later on and felt good or proud about what you might have seen and heard, or if anything I said might have given you just the slightest little twinge of pride or good feeling about ourselves individually or collectively, listen, that's how you should feel. You should feel good and you should be proud because you can be sure that as you related to me and my experience and that of my family that whatever your role might have been or might have to be in some way in the future, you would come home the same way, say the same things and feel the same way. Because we are so much alike. We are all the same clay and spirit, we derive our strengths from the very same sources, all those years the Vietnamese tried to break our spirit, our confidence, our faith and they couldn't do it. And the reason that they couldn't, believe me, in great part is right here before me, truly every one of you. I want to take this opportunity to tell you how proud I am of you. Of us, because I have seen how tough we can be, and even overcome and for your help all those years behind those prison walls, I want to tell you how grateful we are.

