

Who Packed Your Parachute?

Servant Leadership in Action

Told by Barry Richmond

It broke a hot day, that 19th of May, 1967, when the F4 Phantoms hurtled in the air off the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. US Navy pilot Ensign Charles Plumb piloted one of the F4's ~ it was his 75th mission over North Vietnam. From the corner of his eye he saw the white plume of a surface to air missile arch up towards the aircraft. Seconds later an explosion rocked the aircraft and inverted it. Charlie fought to right the aircraft in order to be able to initiate the ejection system. As the aircraft plummeted to the earth, he somehow got it right side up. He reached up over his head with both hands and pulled the ejection shield over his face. Instantly the cockpit cover was blown from the aircraft and a split second later the rocket under his seat launched him out of the aircraft with a force of eighteen G's ~ eighteen times the force of gravity ~ enough to tear off arms and legs that weren't held tight against the body. After what seemed like an eternity, but was only a few seconds, the seat separated and he heard the soft "whumpf" sound the parachute canopy makes as it inflates. He looked up – good, there were only two gores, or panels of the parachute, blown out.

Anti-aircraft rounds exploding around him, Charlie started to destroy his flight schedules book, and then searched the ground for a good landing place. There was none. He landed in a rice paddy and soon he was surrounded by a group of local farmers who hit him with their shovels and hoes and put him a pen with water buffalo and tried to goad the buffalo to gore him. Fortunately, water buffalos are mostly passive creatures. Then the soldiers arrived – he had landed less than 50 miles from Hanoi. [And so began six horrific years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.](#)

After 2,103 days in captivity, Charles Plumb was repatriated to the United States. He didn't know what would be next as he began the medical care and de-briefing processes at the Great Lakes Naval Station. As one of first POWs returning to the Midwest he was a bit of a celebrity in that many reporters wanted to learn of his imprisonment and how he was able to cope and survive. Over and over again, he relived his experience and recounted how his faith in God, self-discipline and love for America sustained him.

One day, after having been interviewed, Charlie got on the elevator to go back to his room. Before the door could fully close, a man wedged his shoulder

in the door to keep it open a moment longer. He was one of the reporters and he was crying. He told Charlie how much he was feeling sorry for himself until he heard Charlie's story. He thanked Charlie profusely for sharing and said it raised him out of his self-pity and would change his life. Charlie thought that maybe there was some value in continuing to share his story. Thousands of speeches and presentations later, US Navy Captain Charles Plumb, continues to inspire and motivate audiences all over the world.

But the story doesn't end there. Here is the incredible chance encounter and "the rest of the story" as Paul Harvey would say.

One day, Charlie and his wife were having dinner in a Kansas City restaurant. Charlie noticed a man at another table looking at him intently. The man got up, came over to Charlie's table and asked, "You're Charles Plumb, aren't you?" Charlie said yes, trying to think who this man was and how he knew of him.

The man continued: "You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down! You spent six years as a POW in Vietnam."

"How in the world did you know that?" asked Charlie incredulously. **"I packed your parachute,"** the man replied.

Charlie gasped in surprise and gratitude. The man vigorously shook his hand and said, "I guess it worked!"

Charlie assured him, "It sure did! If your chute hadn't worked, I wouldn't be here today!"

They reminisced about their service those many years ago. And when Charlie went back to his room, he couldn't sleep that night, thinking about that man. Charlie says, "I kept wondering what he had looked like in a Navy uniform: a white hat, a bib in the back, and bell-bottom trousers. **I wonder how many times I might have seen him and not even said 'Good morning, how are you?' or anything, because, you see, I was a fighter pilot . . . and he, well he was just a sailor.**" Charlie thought of the many hours the sailor had spent at a long wooden table in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hands each time the fate of someone he didn't know, with the understanding that most likely, the parachute would never be used. yet there was always the chance.

Now, when Charlie gives his talks he asks his audience, "Who packed your

parachute?"

You see, everyone has someone who provides what they need to make it through the day. Charlie said he needed many kinds of parachutes that terrible day when his plane was shot down over enemy territory – he needed his physical parachute, his mental parachute, his emotional parachute, and his spiritual parachute. He called on all these chutes before reaching safety. Sometimes in the daily challenges that life gives us, we miss what is really important. We may fail to say hello, please, or thank you, congratulate someone on something wonderful that has happened to them, give a compliment, or just do something nice for no reason. As you go through this week, this month, this year, take time to remember, and to recognize the people who pack your parachutes.

I tell this story a lot and shared it with each departing military unit when I commanded a military mobilization center. When I would come to the end of the story, I would always add: "I think if Charlie were standing before you today, he would ask you a second, more important question: "Who's parachute are you packing?" Because our service and support to others is our true mission in this life.

Postscript — This is the story Charlie Plumb shares with audiences throughout the US. The core of this story is a shorter story that Charlie shares in his presentations and it is on the web and in some inspirational books, etc.. The story I shared above is an expansion and personalization from reading his book, I'm No Hero, and from meeting him and sharing an evening of dinner and conversation.

Charlie is such a gracious soul – to give you an idea, when I was leaving command and the staff was planning my "get out of Dodge" informal farewell, they contacted Charlie and asked for him to write a personal letter to me (which he did). They knew I told the story all the time and thought a letter from him could be incorporated into a recognition award for me. Charlie asked when the farewell would be, and when told, said he was giving a presentation in Louisville, KY the day before and would drive up and be a part of the ceremony.

Keep in mind that this man commands \$15K for a speaking engagement. So, 28th of January, 2009, the day of the ceremony, there was a huge snowstorm, but the ceremony continued (albeit smaller attendance) and about halfway through as LTC Ron Morris, the deputy commander, was saying "Now one of the stories COL Richmond tells is about a parachute packer, and you have all heard it many times no doubt, but if you haven't it goes something like

this..." and Ron began to tell it, hoping I wouldn't butt in (as I am want to do sometimes). But I didn't say anything as he began. After a minute or so, there came a voice from the back of the auditorium that echoed "Now Ron, it didn't go quite like that." I peered through the darkness, saw the outline of a man in an aviator uniform and cried, "Charlie, is that you?!" Yep, it was Charlie. And he came bounding down the aisle, jumped up on the stage, and hugged me and presented me with one of his POW bracelets (which I oftentimes wear).

That evening, after sharing dinner with him and my wife, Kathy, I told Charlie about the second, and more important, question I told my audiences that I thought he would ask of them. Charlie paused a moment, smiled at me and said, "I will ask that question from now on".

And that is, as Paul Harvey used to say "The rest of the story". Charlie Plumb packed my parachute that day.