

Faith, commitment, pride and enthusiasm gave farm boy strength during six years of capture



Charlie Plumb, Kansas farmer and former POW, gave couples attending the Baltimore Farm Credit Forum an inspirational and motivating send-off.

By JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

COCKEYSVILLE, Md. — "I'm No Hero" is a book, written by Charlie Plumb. Those who've heard the outgoing, warm and personable Kansas farmer refuse to accept that opinion.

Faith, commitment and pride are what sustained the young, farm-reared flier as he waited in solitary confinement, a numbered prisoner captured in enemy territory defending freedom in Vietnam. Today, he says that young farmers must find strength in those same characteristics.

Plumb stands as an inspiration to all who hear his spell-binding story. He was wrap-up speaker for the Baltimore Farm Credit's Young Farmers' Forum, held last week at the Hunt Valley Inn. Motivation is the message of Plumb's presentation and he sent the young farm couples back home to rural Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia rededicated to the challenges of farming.

A pilot with an engineering degree from Annapolis Naval Academy, Charlie Plumb was flying his 75th combat mission when enemy fire hit his plane. He and his co-pilot bailed out and watched their jet crash to the

ground and burn, as they parachuted toward waiting enemy troops.

They took his name. They took his clothes and all his possessions. They took his body and tortured it for information. They took him to a tiny cell and locked him in solitary confinement. Ultimately, they took six years of his life.

After many days in solitary, Plumb received secret contact from another prisoner, Pennsylvania Bob Shoemaker. Eventually, the men were moved to another camp and settled into their day-to-day existence routine.

With an overriding desire to communicate among themselves, against strict rules governing talking, the POW's devised underground systems of contact. Morse code was tapped on walls and guttural language of "coughs, sneezes, grunts, wheezes and spits" developed.

Spiritual strength became the tie among the fellowship of prisoners and underground prayer list added to their mutual support of one another.

After six years of meager vegetable and rice diets, uncertainty about home and loved ones and the discovery of reserves of faith and strength that few knew they possessed, release finally came.

"We were given a pair of trousers," recalled Plumb. "They had pockets — real pockets! And a real zipper! For years, all we'd had were pajama-type clothing with drawstrings."

Only after receiving proof that all the sick and injured had been sent home first did the POW's finally board the bus sent to haul them to transport planes headed for home and freedom.

Today, the Vietnam prison "alumni" meet periodically to renew friendships and keep track of how they're coping with the return to civilian life.

"It appears that most of us are healthier than those who weren't shot down," related Plumb, who spent his prison years at a thinned-down 125 pounds. "But that's because we had to develop proper attitudes to survive; we had to hold fast to the goal to return to our loved ones back home."

Only through total attention to those three ideals—faith, commitment and pride — can young farmers successfully operate under the stress of today's economic forces, Plumb insists: Walking proof of that belief, he's returned to the Kansas countryside to crop corn and soybeans

between frequent speaking engagements across the nation.

"Hang on to your enthusiasm" he concluded. "It's the first thing you get when you enter this world and the first thing you're going to lose. If you want a feeling, grab that feeling and you'll have that feeling to hang on to."



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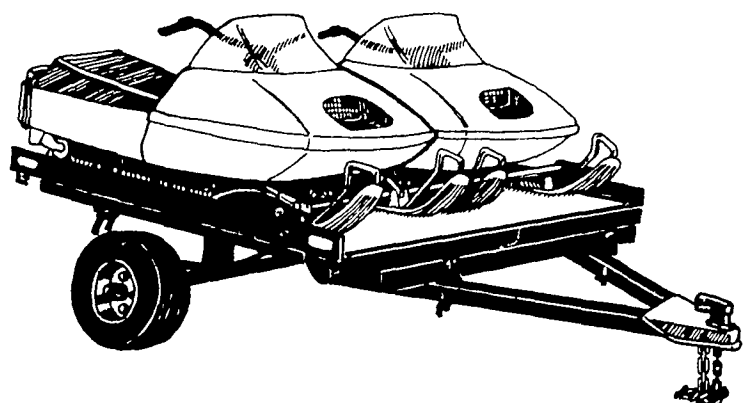
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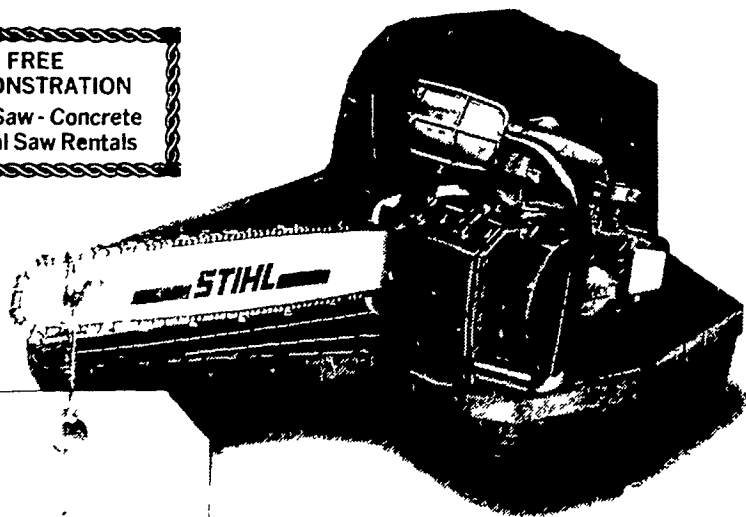
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