



Escape from the Box: *The Wonder of Human Potential*

By Col. Edward L. Hubbard, USAF (Retired)

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“...Human potential is nothing more than a state of mind, and that

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ABOUT THE BOOK:

The above quotation forms the heart of this fast moving, hard-hitting, inspirational self-leadership book in which Col. Hubbard shares the valuable lessons he learned during 2,420 days as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. Based on his experience as a POW, Col. Hubbard takes the most negative situation you can imagine and turns it into one of the most positive personal growth transformations you will ever read. His message is for everyone in any walk of life.

Escape from the Box will leave you richer, having opened doors for greater understanding of your own unlimited potential. You will laugh, you will learn, and you will sing as you read this book. Moreover, you will feel good about your country, yourself, and your own ability. For you will have discovered “The Wonder of Human Potential.”

Beyond helping him survive as a prisoner, Col. Hubbard’s discovery of “The Wonder of Human Potential” helped him achieve success following his release from prison. In the first seven years following his return to the United States, he completed all requirements for five college degrees in his spare time.

Col. Ed Hubbard wrote *Escape from the Box* to help others overcome any obstacle, survive any ordeal, and reach any goal by developing the right state of mind.

REVIEWS

“As a fellow veteran, Col. Hubbard is to be commended on his efforts in turning an otherwise horrific experience into a positive one, as illustrated in his new book.” —Bob Dole, Former United States Senator

“From a harrowing experience in North Vietnam prison camps that would have embittered or crushed a less resilient man, Col. Hubbard has distilled a set of sound, positive, and practical lessons for the fuller realization of our human potential. His insights are well worth reflecting on.”

—Townsend Hoopes, Former Under Secretary, United States Air Force

“Col. Hubbard’s experience as a prisoner of war and his belief that human potential has limitless possibilities are important messages for both Americans and American business leaders.”

—Dr. Joseph S. Bravman, President, Fairchild Defense

“As an American businessman, I see Col. Hubbard’s principles at the very foundation of the only viable strategy for competing in the global economy of the next century.”

—John G. Johnson, Vice President, Manufacturing Operations
Harris Corporation Electronic Systems Sector

“What an uplifting experience. It’s all about belief in yourself, desire to achieve, and the capacity of the human experience.”

—Jerry W. Box, Senior Vice President, Exploration & Production,
Oryx Energy Company

“Truly an inspiration.. will always be remembered.”

—James F. Lahey, Director, Total Quality Leadership,
Ingersoll-Rand

“By challenging us all to relearn how to learn, Ed Hubbard teaches us to soar above our expectations.”

—Larry Shpiner, President, Catalyst For Change

SELECTIONS FROM *ESCAPE FROM THE BOX*

FREEDOM

We must change our view of the world, our perceptions and our attitudes, or we will be destined to live in the box with limitations as defined by others. Our forefathers were unwilling to accept that fate. How about you?

Do you have the courage to try? I can show you how to escape from the box. Only you can make the decision to try, and that decision will be driven by your attitude!

Let me share my attitude and my view of the world. After the President of the United States designated July 20, 1984 to be National Prisoner of War and Missing in Action Day, the Veterans Administration published a poster similar to the left half side of the picture on the cover of this book. When I saw the poster, I felt that it truly reflected all the frustration and futility of captivity. It showed the eagle with the chain on his leg, the barbed wire fence and guard tower. As I looked at the painting, however, the image bothered me considerably because I believe the positive side of life is much more important than the negative side. I am so convinced of that fact that I spend most of my time traveling across the country speaking about the positive side of life. However, I felt that the painting could have a great message if the positive side of life could be included.

I made about a thousand calls and I eventually cornered the man who painted that original eagle. He is Tom Nielsen, a graphic artist with the Veterans Administration in Washington. I told him, “Tom, I think that is a very intelligent picture, but you never finished it. It would have been nice if you had done the positive side of life also.” He told me that he had never even thought about that,

so I requested and received his permission to take his concept and expand it to include the positive.

What you see on the front cover of this book is the result, a reproduction of an oil painting I did in 1984. Essentially, Tom saw the eagle as representing those in captivity. I saw the eagle a lot bigger than Tom did. That's our national emblem. In my painting, the eagle represents every American. It could be you, it could be anybody else. The chain on the eagle's foot represents all the burdens you have, or perceive that you have, which you are dragging around in the world, i.e., your ball and chain! It could be anything—it could be folks who smoke and wish they could quit. It could be folks who drink and wish they could quit. It could be folks who are married and wish they could quit! It could be folks who have jobs they would like to quit. It could be folks with jobs they perceive to be too difficult to do with the resources they have been given. Whatever your perceptions are, whatever you see as your burdens in this life, that's what that chain is meant to represent. The left-hand part of my painting represents the difficult part of life. Unfortunately, it will always be there.

The right-hand part of my painting represents the hope for the future. I added the Statue of Liberty. I think you all know what that represents. It represents freedom! In my mind, and in my painting, it represents freedom from everything including all of your burdens and all the perceived limitations which prevent you from reaching for your full potential.

The most important part of my picture is the little ray of sunshine that comes down behind the cloud and shines on the Statue of Liberty. This represents the little ray of sunshine that comes down into your life every day if you just know where to look for it. It is the idea that something good happens in your life every day, which is how I see the world. The title of my painting is KEEP FAITH. If you can believe in the meaning of the painting, if you can learn to accept my view of the world and you keep faith, it is possible you won't ever have any bad days again for the rest of your life!

ATTITUDE

As I sat in prison, discovering my life wasn't going too well, I realized I had better take action. I sat down and decided to make a serious plan to fix my life. Not so that I would be perfect—you cannot get there from here—but just to improve a little bit every day! I worked on that plan over the next five years. As I did, I evolved my own personal philosophy of life. I think you can benefit from my philosophy. It is very simple. I believe that human potential is nothing more than a state of mind. Your state of mind, or potential, is controlled by two things: what you think you can do, and how hard you are willing to work to accomplish it. That's all! Absolutely nothing else plays in that equation. It doesn't make any difference what your boss would like for you to do, or your parents or anyone else. It has absolutely nothing to do with training or education. Those are only aids to get to what we want. It has nothing to do with IQ because I believe that we don't even know what IQ measures. It depends entirely on you and what you

sincerely believe you can do and how hard you are willing to work. Don't ask me how I arrived at that conclusion. It just evolved over a long period of time.

When I was shot down I was 28 years old. Up until that day I had no direction in my life whatsoever. I had no focus whatsoever. I was drifting along having a good time. I thought that all there was in this world was having a good time. I was doing that very well. In the spring of 1971, after I had been in prison for almost five years, I had a very interesting experience early one morning. It was probably one of the most important events in my life. It suddenly put my life clearly in focus and it has been clearly in focus ever since...

I was very lucky because I lived with another American who was only three years older than I was but probably a couple of hundred years smarter at least. (That morning) he said, "I know something that you don't know but something you desperately need to know." He continued with this admonishment, "What we are receiving in this prison is the most expensive education you are ever going to get in your entire life. We came dangerously close to dying to be enrolled here. In this school, each day for the last five years you have had an equal opportunity to die or to stay enrolled here. We have paid a very high price. Now is the time to reap the rewards. The day you leave here is going to be critical. You must leave the horrors of this experience behind, and you must take the valuable lessons we have learned home and use them to improve the rest of your life." This has to be the most intelligent thought I have ever heard in my life. He told me that more than 20 years ago, and I think about that every day. I think about what it meant then and what it still means to me today.

I want to provide you some insight to the valuable lessons my cell mate was talking about over 20 years ago. I want to share a little bit about how those lessons affected our lives in prison and a little bit about how they have affected our lives since we returned. Most importantly, I want to share how I think those lessons can affect your life and your state of mind. You see, if I can influence the way you think just a very, very small amount, I believe you will greatly change the way you act for the rest of your life. You can change your attitude about the world. The minute that happens, without a push from anybody, each of you will quietly steal away and attempt this greater effort that I mentioned earlier. In an instant, no matter what your pay grade or job title, no matter what your status in society used to be, you will immediately become a leader in your community. Everybody will rally around you because of your positive attitude. You are going to grow and benefit from that attitude. Everyone around you will benefit. The bottom line is that The United States of America will benefit, and that's why I go around the country to speak to people. That's why I wrote this book.

When you look at the world today, even with the positive changes in Europe, there is total chaos in virtually every part of the world. The entire world is searching and screaming for some leadership. There is nobody in the world who is better prepared and better qualified to provide that leadership than the citizens of this country! That is not something that you ought to take lightly! It is an awesome responsibility we have as citizens of this country. If we do not step up and assume the leadership role in this country and in the world, we may never get

another chance in our lifetimes. It is critical. All I ask is that you consider becoming a participant.

HOLD ON

Earlier I mentioned I was not going to waste your time telling you a lot of horror stories, and I don't plan to do that. I want to tell you one brief story about adverse circumstances because I think it will help you understand more clearly what's really, truly available to you as a human being, both physically and mentally, when the chips are down. *If*, by Rudyard Kipling, one of the poems we learned, has several verses that apply to this situation I'm going to describe to you. The verses are:

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold On!"

I am going to tell you what it means to hold on according to one man's standards. This is a story about a man who understands that poem so well he could have written it. About midnight on May 9, 1969, two men escaped from the camp where we lived. They went over the wall and into downtown Hanoi. They walked around most of the night, and about 5:00 a.m. they were captured and brought back. By the time the sun went down that day, one of those men had already been beaten to death. This was a very, very serious business we were involved in. You could lose your life in an instant if you made a mistake. This guy made a mistake. Anytime we broke the rules there was a purge and this purge was different only in that it was probably the worst purge we ever had. They took the senior ranking man from every building in camp, 16 men, took everything they owned, tied them up and put them in solitary confinement and started beating them. The beatings went on for an extended period of time. The North Vietnamese wanted to know who knew about the escape, what the plan was, and if we had collaborators on the outside. Because none of these 16 men was particularly interested in discussing those subjects with them, the beatings continued for some time.

Eventually, the North Vietnamese guards got tired of the program and they took 15 of these men and put them back in the system and took one man and isolated him. They decided they could get everything they needed from this individual. To truly understand and appreciate what that man went through you would really have to know him. Basically, he was a man from the deep South, and if you have ever met a true Southerner, you know that they walk much slower than the average person. They talk so slow you always want to help them finish their sentences. But they have a neat quality that folks from the North don't have.

People from the South rarely get upset about things. We call them easy goin'. That's the kind of person this man was. He was very humble almost to an extreme. He was nearly apologetic. When he was being interrogated he would say, "I'm sorry, I can't answer your questions." He stuck with that for about a week and then he got sick of that. The next time he was taken to be interrogated that afternoon he told them, "You know, I have told you that I'm not going to answer your questions, but today I want to tell you something you have never heard before." The interrogators became excited. They thought they had finally broken this man. He continued, "Starting right now, I am never going to speak to you again." He refused to talk to them. Nobody knows why he made that decision but it was certainly gutsy. We gave him very high marks in courage, but perhaps slightly lower marks in judgment.

The Vietnamese were totally unimpressed. They merely marched him into a cell, put him down on his hands and knees on the concrete floor, and said, "You have had a tough week. Now we are going to let you rest. From 9:00 p.m. tonight until 5:00 a.m. tomorrow morning you are allowed to stay right there on your hands and knees. You can even sleep there if you want. But from 5:00 a.m. tomorrow morning to 9:00 p.m. tomorrow night you'll stay there on your knees and hold your hands over your head and you are going to do that every day from now on." Have you ever tried that before? Someday, when you are bored, get on your knees and put your hands over your head and see how long you like that game. It won't take very long. The first thing that happens when you put your hands up is that your back hurts. Shortly after that your arms hurt. Shortly after that you put your arms down. There is a slight difference when you are in prison. When you put your arms down, the guy standing behind you has a rubber hose and he rips you across the back to get your attention. It's absolutely guaranteed to work. It leaves a welt about three inches wide all across your back that lasts about six to eight weeks and causes excruciating pain. This guy was getting hit with the rubber hose about 100 times a day. Still, he refused to talk to them.

They continued that treatment for a while and then they got tired of clowning around so they decided to get serious. They took him out and tied him up into a little ball and hung him up. They did everything they knew how to do and in the process they broke his left arm. They continued to beat this guy and he resolutely refused to talk to them. They did that for several days and then they put him back to rest again. He was allowed to rest on his hands and knees at night and hold his hands in the air during the day. He did that for 14 consecutive days, with a broken arm and little or no sleep. He never talked to them. We don't know what happened on the 14th day. All I know is that I was at my favorite location, down on my knees by my door. I had drilled a tiny hole and I could see the courtyard. About 5:00 p.m. that evening they dragged this man's body into the courtyard right in front of me. He was about 10 to 15 feet away from me so I got a good look at him. Based on his physical appearance, one would have to assume that he was dead, except for one thing. That guy had gotten up and was still able to walk on his own power. He was still holding his head up. He understood what Kipling was talking about. "If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew To serve your turn long after they are gone, And so hold on when there is nothing left in you except the

Will which says to them: "Hold on!" That man knows more about holding on than any of us will ever know.

I have told that story to several hundred thousand people over the last few years. Without exception, everybody says, "God! I'm glad I wasn't there. I would never be able to hold on." The most important thing I am going to tell you in this entire book is that you are wrong. Nobody was handpicked to go to prison in North Vietnam. Nobody volunteered to go to prison in North Vietnam. Every one of us got there by accident. We represented a cross-section of the American public just as you do. There is only one very small difference between you and us. We were there, we didn't have any choice, so we did whatever it took to stay alive. Because you weren't there, because you don't have the privilege of that kind of experience it's probably a little tricky to sit in your comfortable surroundings and try to figure out what you would do, what you could reach out to and hold on to for up to nine and a half years to stay alive in that environment.

For you to understand what's available to you as a human being, what's really truly possible, it's very important for you to understand where we have been, what we did, why it worked so well for us, and why it would work for everyone of you if you had been there. The only way I know to get you closer to understanding that is to put you through a little exercise which takes just a few minutes. Let me describe a day in solitary confinement. I describe the situation as "my place." When I give a speech, I have people close their eyes and visualize and feel just a little bit of what I saw and felt. For purposes of this book, if you must read the words yourself, you will just have to exercise your imagination a bit more. Or, you can have someone read you the words so that you achieve the full effect audiences receive during a speech. I hope when you complete the exercise, the meaning of everything I have described will be much clearer and your appreciation for your own untapped potential will be far greater.

My place was a little cell that I referred to earlier. This particular cell was in the camp we called the Zoo located on the outskirts of Hanoi. The cell was affectionately known among the prisoners as the Outhouse. The time for me was December 1966. I had been in prison about five months and I had been in solitary confinement in the Outhouse for the preceding 28 days. I couldn't see in those days, partly because I didn't have a window, but mostly because both my eyes were completely swollen shut from being beaten in the face every day for the past 28 days. I could not hear in those days either, with the exception of a strange thumping noise. I had never heard that noise in my entire life and it took me four or five days to figure out that it was my heartbeat. That throbbing sound was all I could hear because both my eardrums were broken.

Less than five feet from where I spent my life in those days, where I ate and diagonally across the cell from where I slept in the corner, was a little rusty bucket which served as my latrine. The smell from that bucket was absolutely unbelievable. That wasn't particularly important. What was important was the fact that the bucket only had a one-day capacity. Because I had been in a reasonable amount of trouble, I had not been allowed to go out and empty that bucket for the last 10 days. The only option available to me was to dip the contents of the bucket

and pour them through a tiny hole in the wall of my cell. I had to do this with the soup bowl from which I ate. There was no way to wash the bowl. I slept on a concrete floor in those days. The temperature outside was 20 degrees. The temperature of the concrete was 20 degrees. I hadn't had a bath for 28 days and I have never been so filthy in all my life. My morale has never been that low before or since.

I wasn't overly concerned about the small amount of rations or the cold. I was concerned with something that never crossed my mind before. Would I still be alive on New Year's Day? That was exactly three days away. TAP ... TAP TAP TAP, When I heard that sound, I suddenly remembered it was Sunday again. Even though I had been completely separated from everyone in the camp for 28 days, I never lost sight of the value and importance of attending church call with everybody else. I have told you that church in prison is probably a little bit different than any church you have ever been to. Our program always started with "I Pledge Allegiance to the Flag of The United States of America..." which we did with greater sincerity than anything we had ever done in our lives.

Depending on where you lived, the program varied, but usually the next thing was the Twenty-third Psalm. There were a couple of lines that seemed to be written for us. One of those lines says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..." The single most important lesson we learned in prison was that fear is nothing more than a feeling that comes over you when you lack confidence in your ability to cope with life as it has been dealt to you. Once you step up and accept full responsibility for your own future and your own fate, and once you step up and find out how simple it is to cope with life, fear is not such a big deal anymore.

The other line says, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...my cup runneth over." This was certainly the most ironic situation we had ever been in during our lives: locked up, ten thousand miles from home, all by ourselves, giving thanks every day for our good fortune. You see, those of us who were locked up behind bars were actually the free people in that prison. The men on the outside with the guns and the keys are still there. Those people have been imprisoned for life because their minds have been captured. Ours are still free. We always finished our church service in prison by singing "God Bless America." We sang it rather quietly in those days because the last thing we needed to do was to get into any more trouble.

Now I would like you to do something today that you may not have done for a long time, maybe something that you have never done before in your life. I would like you to sing, "God Bless America." If you are alone, sing it alone. If you are with others, explain what you are reading, and ask them to join you. You might be amazed at how it makes you feel. You might feel a chill up your spine or a lump in your throat. That, ladies and gentlemen, is pride in being an American. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is pride in doing the very best in everything you do in life. That, ladies and gentlemen is exactly what we felt all day, every day for five, six, seven and up to nine and a half years in prison, in one man's case. That's what we reached out to, grabbed and held onto. Personal pride is the most important

possession you will ever have. If you have a sufficient amount, there are no limits in your world. If you don't have it, you may be in rather serious trouble.

When you finish singing, I hope you will understand where we have been, what we did, why it worked for us there, why it would have worked for you too if you had been there, and why and how it applies to everything you do right here in the good old USA. I hope you now understand why I say human potential is nothing more than a state of mind. Most importantly, I hope you can see and understand why I painted the picture you see on the cover of this book. That eagle, with the chain on his leg, represents the difficulties and burdens you will have in life, and there will be many of those. The hope for the future, the real hope for the future, lies in the portion of the painting with the Statue of Liberty and the rays of sunshine. If you can learn to view the world as I do, something good will come out of every day in your life. If you keep faith, you can join me and walk through this world and never have another bad day. Then, and only then, can you escape from the box. Now please sing, "God Bless America!"

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