

SOARING WITH EAGLES

INTRODUCTION

An Uncaged Eagle is a continuous saga of victory over adversity. Anyone who lived in this world during the past sixty years has witnessed a myriad of unprecedented events of historical proportions. Every ethnic group in America shared in these experiences; however, the lives of black people have been particularly tempered by many obstacles, pitfalls, setbacks, and often, soul-wrenching events. Such tribulations were especially challenging for those who grew up in America during the late 1940s and early 1950s. As one of those, I was trapped in a cage of bitterness, despair, and hopelessness compounded by a broken home and poverty. The horrific racist South caused additional suffering, and I was like a caged eagle, fluttering vainly against the unyielding bars of indifference, callousness, and oppression. The deep yearnings of my soul strained against the circumstances of my life, and I cried out to be free from the stifling, blind, and prejudiced society.

Throughout the history, the cry and quest for freedom have been documented and characterized in every way possible. But such presentations failed to illuminate us regarding the path to true freedom. As a war-scarred veteran, I know that *freedom is not free!* America's history is replete with evidence of this fact. For example, over the last 100 years nearly 40 million men and women have served in the U. S. Armed Services all over the globe. Over 625,000 have paid the ultimate price during World War I, World War II, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, and other conflicts, including Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 142,000 have been captured and imprisoned; nearly 93,000 are still unaccounted for; and over 1,155,000 have been wounded in action. Despite these astounding and noble sacrifices, the collective and individual freedom has not been assured. The truth is, even the greatest sacrifices of mere mortals cannot liberate the imprisoned and the oppressed. God is the only one who can provide freedom and peace for the soul. Thus, this book was written to inspire and motivate those who seek the freedom I have been blessed to find – the freedom to create, dream, live, love, strive and to experience a life for which each of us was created.

PROLOGUE - WHERE EAGLES FLY

Summer, 1951

It was a hot, sweltering Sunday afternoon as I walked home from church on the oil-paved streets of my neighborhood. Many families had gathered on their porches to fan the humid air while listening to the special *Negro Spiritual Hour* on the local radio station. The late Reverend C. L. Franklin, father of Aretha Franklin, was preaching a rousing sermon about an eagle that had been unwittingly caged by a chicken farmer.

As the story was told, one day, the chicken farmer discovered a strange-looking bird growing among his flock. This particular bird did not associate with the other chickens and often seemed restless and agitated. As the bird grew, he began to look, act, and strut about the yard differently than all the other chickens. One day, the bird appeared to hear a sound from high in the sky. He began to make strange noises, rigorously flapped his wings, and vainly struggled to get free of the cage.

The farmer eventually called a friend over to witness the behavior of this peculiar bird. After observing the bird, the friend proclaimed, *"My friend, this is not just a strange bird; what you have here is an eagle! And eagles are not created to be caged in with chickens. You must set this eagle free so that he can fly where eagles soar!"* After a bit of persuasion, the farmer reluctantly opened the cage. Slowly the eagle emerged, flew to the roof of the cage, and began to flap his wings. Next, he flew to a nearby tree and began to make sounds as if calling to the wind. Soon, similar sounds were heard high above the farm, and the eagle flew to the top of the nearest mountain. With one last flap of his outstretched and newly discovered wings, the eagle soared toward the sound above the distant clouds and beyond the sight and sounds of his earthly cage. After a prolonged and restless struggle, the eagle was finally set free to become what he was created to be. Reverend Franklin concluded by stating that the human spirit is like an eagle, and God created all humanity to be free. His sermon pierced my heart that day and inspired me to press on in the face of adversity that I faced in my life.

Summer, 1996

The night of August 11, 1996 was warm and festive in Long Beach, California. As the sun set over the Pacific Ocean, a gentle breeze blew in over a city charged with excitement. The legendary Queen Mary of WW II fame, having made its final voyage from Southampton, England nearly 30 years prior, quietly graced the waters of Long Beach Harbor. Nearby, the Convention Center began to fill with thousands of the new Reform Party for its historical, First National Convention. Scores of international media teams had assembled to cover Ross Perot's second bid to become President of the United States. His highly improbable garnering of nineteen percent of the popular vote in 1992 shocked the world and resulted in the formation of United We Stand America (UWSA). Not since Teddy Roosevelt ran on the progressive ticket in 1912 had such popularity been seen. The Reform Party exceeded the predictions of "expert political pundits" by gaining ballot access in all fifty states in just eleven months!

That night, as the great grandson of a slave, I stood backstage waiting for my turn to speak. In a few minutes, I would be called to a world stage before thousands of cheering supporters and a horde of glaring cameras. My task was to introduce billionaire patriot Ross Perot as the Party's choice to be the next President of the United States! While waiting, flashes of the past flooded my mind. What a journey it had been. Nearly fifty-four years earlier, my family barely avoided the deadly clutches of the Ku Klux Klan in a desperate escape from a small town in Louisiana. At the same time, Ross Perot, the son of a successful cotton farmer, was growing up free and safe seventy miles away in Texarkana, TX. Three years earlier, destiny had brought us

together, and an immediate bond was forged by mutual admiration and respect for what each had achieved in his life. Our profound love for God, family, and country began a friendship that would last for the rest of our lives. On that night, our indomitable spirits would reach the boundless heights of those who dared dream beyond the cages that too often imprison the souls of humanity.

The crowd responded raucously to my speech that highlighted little known but powerful personal facts about Ross Perot. Dutifully, I stuck to the script prepared by the speech writers, but suddenly, my pent-up thoughts burst forth in an emotional rush. Although the speech writers had cautioned me to the contrary, I continued,

“Thirty-eight years ago, I met another great man, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I heard him speak; I shook his hand; and I felt the fire of his dream burning from his very soul.”

Hearing these words, the auditorium burst into a deafening roar as I paused.

“As I have come to know Ross Perot, I want to testify tonight that he shares the same dream; he has the same fire; and he has the same hope for a greater America for all of its people! Please join me now in welcoming the man who truly has been called to lead this nation into the 21st century. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Ross Perot!”

The Birth of a Dream

I got my first look at the vast Pacific Ocean in 1944 as we drove along the coastal highway between Los Angeles and Oxnard, California. The massive waves that crashed against the rocky cliffs were overwhelming in sight, smell, and sound. My father stopped the car along a stretch of beach to allow us a close-up view of this spectacular scene of earth, sea, and sky. All along the beach, the water ebbed and flowed in a persistent, rhythmic pattern, sweeping away footprints or small debris. I had no knowledge of what a symphony was, but I could *hear* and see the harmonious movement that lay before me. At once, I fell in love with the ocean and tried to take in all of its beauty. I didn't know it then, but one day I would walk along beaches in other parts of the world and recall that beautiful portrait of the California Pacific coast.

The thrill of living in our new home and surroundings was made even more exciting by some of the young WW II naval pilot trainees who lived in the apartments. Seeing them in their flight suits was fascinating. The flight path to the base passed overhead the playground, and sometimes the pilots would dip their wings or wave their hands as they flew by. My fascination with flying grew out of these experiences, and I wanted to be a pilot like the young men at Oxnard Airfield. Watching them fly, I would imagine myself climbing, rolling, and twirling around the beautiful, puffy clouds that filled the sky. I pestered my mother until she bought me my own toy aircraft. Then I could fly! While other kids played cowboys, Indians, or soldiers, I could be found “flying” my toy P-38

around the playground. Years later, I recalled these experiences and noted my first pilot role models were young white men who trained to serve their country. My youthful dream of flying was impervious to race or color; all I wanted was to be like these men when I grew up. Thus, was the birth of a dream that resulted in an incredible and eventful journey for the next sixty years.