

KIM "KC" CAMPBELL
COLONEL, U.S. AIR FORCE (RETIRED)



FLYING IN THE FACE OF FEAR



A FIGHTER PILOT'S LESSONS
ON LEADING WITH COURAGE

WILEY

Praise for *Flying in the Face of Fear*

“In a world crammed full of leadership books written by academic theorists whose faddish formulas become obsolete soon after publication, my friend, mentor, and real-life superhero Kim Campbell shares battle-tested, irrefutable truths that will never be obsolete! As a legendary fighter pilot, senior military officer, and university instructor, Kim reminds us that under pressure we don’t rise to the occasion; we fall to the level of our training. Kim doesn’t just teach what she knows—she teaches who she is, how she lives, what she’s done—to illuminate the military mindset that makes leadership automatic. Being hit a hundred times in a combat mission over Iraq, and losing her high-tech hydraulic controls, Kim was forced to fly in ‘Manual Reversion,’ becoming an expert eyewitness that leadership will always be an analog job in a digital world! This is a must-read motivational masterpiece and behavioral bible for every entrepreneur, business owner, corporate executive, sports team coach, military leader, and civic influencer in the world!”

—**Dan Clark**, Hall of Fame Speaker and author, *The Art of Significance*

“I’ve had the distinct honor to serve with Kim Campbell while we were both on active duty in the United States Air Force, and now in the public business sector. When it comes to leading people and complex organizations, this exceptional warrior-leader truly ‘walks the talk,’ and is as good as I’ve seen in my 48-year professional career! In this engaging book, Kim really nailed it! She has delivered an invaluable resource for any leader’s library . . . easy to read with incredibly relevant personal stories that are humble, interesting, and inspiring. Most importantly, Kim has done a phenomenal job of drawing out the ‘so-what’ lessons learned from her ‘life experiences.’ I suggest this book as a must-read for our Airmen during their professional military education courses, as well as for the public business leaders who want to drive a healthy organizational climate and culture!”

—**Robin Rand**, General, U.S. Air Force (Retired), Former Commander, Air Force Global Strike Command

“I need to warn you about *Flying in the Face of Fear*. Yes, start the book by reading the Prologue . . . but be prepared to get hopelessly hooked. Immediately.

Colonel Campbell is a master storyteller, and her own story is the stuff of legend. You’ll see from the very beginning that this book is exceptionally gripping, intelligent, and filled with gold-standard advice for all leaders, all teams. Whether your personal military experience is extensive or nonexistent, this book is, quite simply, a great read . . . filled with clear and practical advice.

When Colonel Campbell spoke to our graduating seniors at their Commencement ceremonies, they—and all others in attendance—were absolutely in awe of her and her inspirational competence and courage. The students called her ‘the real deal.’ Indeed, she is.

Of all the books, dissertations, journal articles, and essays I have read and studied on leadership, team building, continuous improvement, and the like over the years, *Flying in the Face of Fear* is the most readable, the most accessible, and certainly the most compelling on a very personal level.

Thank you, KC, for giving the world this amazing and helpful account detailing your style of leadership, mentorship, and service. Everyone who reads it will be inspired to discover and nurture their own true courage.”

—**Dr. Tiffany M. Franks**, President of Averett University,
Danville, Virginia

“An absolute must-read for current leaders and aspirational leaders alike. Kim draws upon her distinguished career as a U.S. Air Force Academy graduate, decorated combat fighter pilot, and senior military command officer. By leveraging these exceptional experiences, Kim offers keen insights on leadership; lessons both learned and earned.

Kim’s key messages on developing and leading high-performing teams, built on trust and bonded by a deeply held common purpose, should resonate with readers and be recognized as widely applicable. Examining leadership at its finest, Kim also emphasizes the human element: facing fears, being approachable, listening to your team, and humbly committing to continually learn while helping others along their own paths. Truly inspirational!”

—**Jeff Boyer**, Vice President, General Motors (Retired)

“Kim ‘KC’ Campbell is a fighter pilot’s fighter pilot. She has seen and experienced it all . . . from sitting behind a desk . . . to training the way we fight . . . and ultimately going to war. Her words in this book jump out; the reader can feel her complete range of emotions. What is extraordinary in this book is how KC can take her unique military leadership lessons and provide insights to corporations to make them operate at a higher level. The United States Air Force was better because KC was a part of it, and now the rest of our nation can benefit from her wisdom.”

—**Lori Robinson**, General, U.S. Air Force (Retired), Former
Commander, United States Northern Command and North
American Aerospace Defense Command

“Fighter pilot Kim ‘KC’ Campbell has delivered a gripping testament to the power of facing fear and embracing failure as a pathway to success. Aspiring leaders at all levels and from all walks of life will find inspiration in her stories of leading with courage to achieve victory over personal and professional challenges. This is a book that merits a place on every leader’s shelf.”

—**Sandra Stosz**, Vice Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard (Retired) and author
of *Breaking Ice & Breaking Glass: Leading in Uncharted Waters*

“*Flying in the Face of Fear* is an exciting story about leading with courage and humility. Whether leading a small team or a major corporation, all leaders can learn from KC’s lessons on vulnerable leadership, service before self, and finding purpose. A must-read!”

—**Byron Bright**, President, KBR (a Fortune 500 Company)

“KC’s experience comes out of these chapters. Whether in combat over Iraq or trying to help teams grow to become better, the perspective she has gained can help us all. This book displays those experiences and how they can be used. Her teachings in Character and Leadership to the Cadets of the Air Force Academy made a difference to future Air Force leaders. In this book, her teachings can make a difference for so many others.”

—**Jay Silveria**, Lieutenant General, U.S. Air Force (Retired), 20th U.S.
Air Force Academy Superintendent, Executive Director of Texas
A&M University’s Bush School of Government & Public Service,
Washington DC

“Throughout her entire Air Force Career, Kim has been on the cutting edge of all the aspects of serving in our modern Air Force and leading people during challenging times both in peace and war. Her many leadership experiences as a fighter pilot, staff officer, and Commander, and her ability to balance both her personal and professional life in very stressful situations, have taught her how to expertly lead people and organizations. Her book, *Flying in the Face of Fear* is a must-read for anyone who wants to learn the many aspects of leadership both in today’s military and in the complex world of business. Her real-life leadership experiences, which have made a positive difference in so many people’s lives all over the world, have been written down in this book in an easy-to-understand format and will help the reader to become a better person and definitely a better leader for the 21st Century.”

—**Stephen Lorenz**, General, U.S. Air Force (Retired), Former Commander, Air Education and Training Command

“*Flying in the Face of Fear* chronicles the remarkable life of USAF Colonel (retired) Kim Campbell—one of the few decorated female fighter pilots in US history—and shares important leadership lessons from which all of us can benefit. Through stories of both success and failure—at the Air Force Academy, in Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond—Kim offers a compelling formula for being successful by pushing through fear and leading through uncertainty.”

—**Deborah Lee James**, 23rd Secretary of the Air Force

“*Flying in the Face of Fear: A Fighter Pilot’s Lessons on Leading with Courage* by retired Air Force Colonel Kim ‘KC’ Campbell is a must-read for all leaders in today’s challenging and divisive world. It is also an inspirational guide for future leaders within all sectors of society.

It is based upon leadership practices proven to be effective in all professions but told from the perspective of a woman combat fighter pilot who rose to become commander of a large Air Force unit, a senior Pentagon policy advisor, and an Air Force Academy professor and leader. Yet despite this prestigious combat, operational, policy, and academic record, she led a well-balanced personal and professional life. She often demonstrated the importance that her children played in her life to those who worked within her command.

The book is full of tips regarding how to become a highly effective leader, even when leading organizations in crisis or facing significant challenges. Her basic message is that all human beings encounter fear when facing difficult choices. The key is how to summon sufficient courage to overcome fear and make difficult choices. This ability is what makes a great leader in any sector. This book provides numerous examples of these choices.

Many additional aspects of this basic leadership principle are highlighted in the book. They range from perseverance to humility, respect, accountability, organization, and planning. The greatest leadership attributes remain courage, integrity, and balance.

I had the privilege of knowing Kim Campbell from the day she processed into the USAF Academy as a last-minute appointee; three years later she served as the top-ranked Cadet Wing Commander and graduated as a Marshall Scholar. I closely followed her progression throughout her Air Force career. She is widely respected as a highly decorated combat pilot, an inspirational senior commander, and a unique policy advisor. Read her book to discover the fundamentals of great leadership!”

—**Joseph G. Burke**, Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Retired), Ph.D.,
Tenured Professor, College President Emeritus, Senior Fellow,
Association of Governing Boards (AGB)

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*For my boys, Colin and Brodie, who continue to teach me lessons
about courage every day.*

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PROLOGUE: SEIZING THE MOMENT

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

—Nelson Mandela



Figure P.1 Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003.

Photo credit: Alan Lessig, *Air Force Times*.

OVER BAGHDAD, IRAQ, 0741AM, 7 APRIL 2003

“My guys are taking fire in the northern part of town. Grid is Mike Bravo 396 990. Rocket propelled grenade teams are working on the east side of the Tigris River putting RPGs into my guys.” I hear the frantic crackle over the radio in my cockpit.

Our role as A-10 pilots, our single reason for being is to support our troops on the ground. The moment an A-10 pilot hears the phrase “troops in contact,” the only place we want to be is in the fight, overhead the troops on the ground. This day is no different, except low cloud cover over Baghdad means my flight lead and I are circling our A-10s high above the clouds and blind to the battle raging below. We know every second is an eternity for those fighting on the ground. We have to get a sense of the situation as quickly as possible, come up with our plan of action, and engage the enemy.

Our troops are on the west side of the Tigris River and small units of the Iraqi Republican Guard are on the east side of the river. The enemy is hiding under the North Baghdad Bridge and firing RPGs into our forces. Through static and intermittent machine gunfire, the ground controller explains the situation over the radio:

“We’re hunkered down awaiting resupply, but our position has been compromised. Enemy troops are hiding underneath the overpass, coming out to shoot at our guys, and then returning to the overpass.”

The clouds are both an obstacle and opportunity; while we can’t see the target area, the enemy isn’t aware of our presence. We stay above the clouds until the very last second, hoping to surprise the enemy. My flight lead goes first, disappearing through the clouds to get below the weather. Now it’s my turn. I find a hole in the clouds and dive through. As soon as I get below the weather, I can see the firefight playing out below me. Muzzle flashes of carbines are interspersed with a steady stream of bright tracer rounds from heavy machine guns, creating a series of luminous arcs across the river. There is smoke in the air, and we are directly over the firefight, ready to attack. I focus on the firefight and look for our target. I set up to shoot my 30mm Gatling gun, when suddenly, I see puffs of gray and white smoke next to my cockpit. I realize the enemy isn’t just shooting at our troops on the ground, they are shooting at us, too. But we have a mission to carry out so we continue with our attack.

“Yard 05, in from the north,” my flight lead calls over the radio. He rolls his airplane toward the ground, aligning his gun to point right underneath the bridge where the enemy is hiding.

I am about one mile in trail, ready to follow up with his attack, when the ground controller shouts over the radio, “Yard 05, not effective, need you to come in from south to north.”

I quickly abort my target run so we can maneuver our formation to set up for south-to-north target attacks. The south-to-north approach means we can hit the enemy hiding underneath the bridge, but it also makes us predictable because we can only ingress and egress from one direction. We decide we will only do two passes, then reassess the situation. It's my turn. I set up for my last rocket pass, check my altitude and distance from the target, and confirm my switches are set correctly. I roll the aircraft and point my nose at the ground. I am precisely where I want to be.

"Two's in from the south," I declare over the radio.

"Cleared hot, Two," comes the quick reply.

I fine-tune my aim point and press the weapons release button, rippling seven rockets down on the enemy. I immediately pull off target to get away from the ground and regain my altitude.

BOOM . . . I feel a large explosion at the back of my airplane and watch a bright red-orange fireball envelope my aircraft. My heart races, and my adrenaline pumps. Breathing rapidly against the pressure of my oxygen mask, my mouth becomes dry with the increase in oxygen flow. I quickly key the mic, "Two got hit. Two got hit."

The jet rolls over to the left and points directly down at Baghdad. In those few seconds looking outside of the cockpit, I can see the Tigris River getting closer, almost serene against the drab desert surrounding both sides of the winding water. As my jet plummets completely out of control, I instinctively pull back on the control stick. But nothing—absolutely nothing—happens. Baghdad is getting closer, and I know I might have to eject. But the last thing I want to do is eject out of my airplane and into the hands of the enemy. I have visions of descending quietly down in a parachute into the hands of an enraged enemy whose comrades we had just killed. It isn't a good option.

My flight lead provides immediate guidance, "Copy, bring it back west, try and come west."

I vaguely hear his response as I quickly try to analyze the situation:

Master caution light.

Hydraulic lights.

Hydraulic gauges are at zero. The system has no pressure. It's empty.

I am plunging to the ground completely out of control in a 45,000-pound airplane filled to the brim with fuel and explosives. I'm in

a left-hand turn, and my left wing is slicing through the sky. There is no sound now except for the static on my radio. I look down at my yellow-and-black striped ejection handles. There is a bright green grassy area on the east side of the river, just north of the bridge. Can I manage to land my parachute there and attempt to evade capture? No, not yet. I'm not ready to take the risk of falling into enemy hands. I don't think that would be a pleasant experience based on the knowledge we have about what the Iraqi Republican Guard has done to previous prisoners. My flight lead's voice breaks through my troublesome thoughts, "Say your position. Got you. Turn west. Chaff, Flare. Chaff, Flare. Turn it west."

I immediately push down on the chaff and flare buttons, dispensing metallic clouds of chaff and bright burning flares from my aircraft in hopes of decoying additional enemy missiles. I can hear my flight lead's directions and I know I need to get my airplane over the west side of the river. If I have to eject, I can ideally float down over friendly forces and not be immediately captured by the enemy. Unfortunately, my airplane won't maneuver. It won't climb, it won't turn, it's just plummeting. My time is running out.

I need to make every second count. If I make the wrong decision, then I will lose time, and I could die trying. I was not giving up. I set aside my fear and focus on taking action. I flip the switch on the left side of my cockpit labeled MANUAL REVERSION.

In an instant, the airplane transitions from hydraulics to a manual flight control mode, now flying on old-school cranks and cables. I pull back on the stick again, and this time, the airplane starts to climb. I am flooded with relief. The green waters of the Tigris River and the brown sandy banks fade away as I finally see white clouds and hints of blue sky appear out my windscreen. The North Baghdad Bridge disappears behind me as I start a gradual left turn to evade the target area and the enemy. It has been less than 20 seconds since my airplane was hit, but to me, it feels like an eternity.

My flight lead is worried and calmly asks, "How are you doing?"

My voice is shaky, but I reply, "I'm alright. I'm in manual reversion, it's flying fine. I'm going west."

As I gain altitude, I can finally see the sun shining above the clouds. I just want to get above the weather and away from Baghdad. My breathing slowly returns to normal as I make my way above the clouds. For the first time, I think I might make it out of here alive. My flight lead radios

to our ground controller, “Advance, we’re out of here. My number-two man is hit.”

“Copy that . . . good luck,” the ground controller hesitantly radios back, not quite sure what to say.

Despite my initial sense of relief, the hard part is yet to come. I know I have to decide whether to land the jet or get to friendly territory and eject. My flight lead confirms the reality of the situation, “You need to start thinking if you want to try and land it or jump out. That is your decision and your decision only.”

The decision feels like it could be the difference between life and death, and it weighs heavily on me. A lifetime of training has prepared me for this moment, but there is no guarantee I will make it out alive. I can’t allow myself to think about the fear that is creeping in. Those feelings and emotions will have to wait until I am safely on the ground.

IN RETROSPECT

The truth is, surviving that combat mission over Baghdad was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. But admit I was scared? I was supposed to be a tough, fearless fighter pilot. I couldn’t admit it then—it’s taken me years to admit it, understand it, and realize how recognizing and acknowledging fear can help me act with courage.

I’ve been scared many times in my life, just like we all have. It can be hard to admit when we’re scared, stressed, or worried about something. And I’m not just talking about the fear associated with life-or-death situations or flying a fighter jet in combat. Fear is fear. It’s about fear of failure, fear of not meeting expectations, fear of change, fear of the unknown. It can all be daunting and stressful, but what matters is what we do when we are scared. It’s about our actions in the face of fear. It’s about having the courage to respond even *when* we’re scared.

The lessons learned from that mission set the stage for the rest of my life . . . for flying future missions in combat, for raising two young kids while my husband deployed, and for leading more than 1,000 military and civilian personnel as a group commander. In each of these situations, there were times when I felt fear. It’s not uncommon to feel stressed, worried, or even scared about the challenges we’re facing. And sometimes when we feel that way, instead of taking action, the fear of judgment and failure can paralyze us. So, we do nothing. We resist change. We avoid

hard conversations. We fail to hold each other accountable. But how can we improve if we don't learn from our failures and mistakes? How can we excel in a competitive environment if we don't push ourselves outside our comfort zone? Fear can prevent us from achieving success, or it can lead us to a greater path of growth and change if we harness it effectively. So as hard as it may be, we need to have the courage to persevere through challenges, do the hard things, and take action even in the face of fear. When we take action in critical moments, when we persevere despite the difficulty, then we are positioned to create a culture of courage and an environment of trust that builds deeper relationships, inspires loyalty, and enables our team to perform at their best.

If leaders are going to be successful in complex, rapidly changing environments, then we need to lead with courage. In a study conducted by best-selling author and researcher, Brené Brown, for her book *Dare to Lead*, 150 global leaders were asked about the future of leadership and what skills were needed for a leader to be successful. One clear theme across all interviews was that we need braver leaders and more courageous cultures.¹ We can make a significant impact on our team when we have the courage to face adversity, take action in difficult situations, and lead our team through challenges. We need courageous leaders. It takes courage to hold ourselves and others accountable, to have difficult conversations, and to make decisions when we don't have perfect information. It also takes courage to get out and connect with our team and to reveal the human side of leadership. When we act with courage, then our team is likely to do the same. And when we lead with courage, then we create an environment in which our team can excel.

Flying in the Face of Fear shares my leadership journey as a combat-proven fighter pilot and senior military leader. Fighter pilot culture is unique. We spend our lives working in a high-stakes environment, where we have to make split-second decisions to survive, and where training missions can be just as dangerous as actual combat.

In a fighter squadron, we learn quickly that the strength of the team is determined by the individuals who make up the team. From the newest wingman to the most experienced instructor, we come to know how each of us plays a distinctive role on the team and how our contributions are critical for our shared success. We clearly understand our roles and responsibilities and how we fit into the bigger picture. We also realize the

importance of holding each other accountable and creating a culture of continuous improvement.

Fighter pilots embrace vulnerability to learn through our successes as well as our failures, some of the most vital lessons coming from friends and teammates we've lost in aircraft mishaps along the way. Because of our high-risk environment, we have developed distinctive leadership techniques and principles that are tested under extreme stress, both in training and combat. These techniques and principles enable us to inspire and empower high-performing teams to succeed.

The lessons I share stem from my successes and failures during my military career, and they are also relevant for leaders outside the military environment. While there is no singular recipe for leadership success, these proven principles have worked for me in training and combat with teams of all sizes. They have also worked for the leaders I've trained and mentored throughout my 24 years of service and beyond. This book is my story of facing fears and leading with courage as a fighter pilot, military leader, mom, and wife. I hope to help leaders deal with challenging and stressful situations, face their fears, and persevere in the face of adversity. *Flying in the Face of Fear* is a collection of lessons and stories that will serve as a resource for any leader who is willing to make an impact and a difference with the teams they lead.

