David Gates and his group Bread recorded a hit song in 1974 called, “Just to Have You Back Again”. One of the lines, repeated several times is, “I would give everything I own….just to have you back again….just to touch you once again.” A casual listener would probably assume this is one more love song about a boy/girl relationship gone bad. In reality, Gates wrote the song about his father, who had passed away the previous year; at least so I’ve heard.

I’ve identified with that song ever since learning about its origin. That’s exactly how I feel about my Dad.

Funny thing, I didn’t fully appreciate my Dad when he was living. I guess like any boy/man, I always wanted his approval. But I’m sure I must have disappointed him more times than I made him proud.

Dad was an officer in the Federal Prison System for 23 years. Started out at the maximum-security penitentiary in Atlanta. Then a transfer to a Federal Prison Camp in West Virginia, not far from his home which was across the state line in Virginia. I was born in the little hospital in Marlinton, the nearest town to the Camp itself, which was situated atop Kennison Mountain in the middle of the Monongahela Forest. The prison camp served as a supplier of forest products for the federal government; lumber for
desks, buildings, and the like. There were around 300 inmates at that minimum-security facility, and probably a staff of 35 officers and civilian clerks.

Nine of the officers had apartments on the Prison Camp reservation, on a hill just above the long white dormitories that housed the inmates. Dad was one of those officers.

There were no walls or chain link fences between the inmates and us, just a single chain, mounted on posts about waist high that surrounded the dormitories and mess kitchen. Signs on each post warned the inmates to stay inside the perimeter created by the chain. Stepping over the chain was considered an escape attempt, and that carried an automatic 5 years added to the original sentence, plus a trip to Leavenworth. An escape attempt got the perpetrator hard time in a Maximum Security pen. But, most of the inmates at the prison camp were young first time federal offenders, or older prisoners no longer regarded as a real threat, so generally the days passed without incident.

One night, my parents talking in the living room awakened me. I was probably six years old. My brother, who could sleep through anything, was four. I got up and wandered out into the living room of the apartment. Dad was in his gray uniform, but tonight his pant legs were stuffed into combat boots, and he was wearing a gun belt. My little boy eyes were instantly drawn to the .38 caliber revolver in the holster, to the bullets in the loops on the belt and the handcuffs in a leather pouch. Dad had a rifle in his hand. He looked at me and said, “Eddie, better get back to bed.” Mom turned and took me back to my bedroom. I asked, “What’s wrong, Mommy?”

“There’s been an escape. Several inmates are missing, and your Daddy has to go help find them,” she said as she tucked me back into bed.

Wow, I thought, my Dad, with a real gun. Just like Gene Autry. Going out in the dark to capture escaped prisoners. I couldn’t wait to get to school the next day and tell all the kids about my Dad.

Escape attempts were rare, but they did happen. A couple of the inmates would get homesick, or whatever, and simply step across the chain and disappear into the woods. Problem was, most of the inmates were from the city, or from other parts of the country, and didn’t know those woods. This was a pretty remote place. Black bear country. Easy for a newcomer to get lost, quickly. It was nine miles to the nearest town, and at least 3 miles to the closest farm through the woods. The camp was situated in the middle of a thick hardwood forest, atop a mountain in one of the most remote parts of the state. Steep rocky hollows cut into the mountain. A swamp, known as the Cranberry Glades, bordered about 25% of the camp. It was a mosquito infested, snaky place, and a bad place to get lost. There was one highway that ran past the camp, and it was posted with warnings about the Federal Prison and the danger of picking up hitchhikers.

The officers, on the other hand, were from the surrounding area, and knew the woods and how to survive in them. But they wouldn’t actually try to search the woods for the missing men. Instead, they would simply take positions on the highway, or on one of the
many log trails, and wait. Eventually, after 3 to 4 days, the cold, wet, mosquito bitten inmates would stumble onto one of the officers stationed at a post, practically begging to be taken back.

Seeing my Dad that night, uniformed and armed made an impression on me. My dad was different from the other kids Dads. He had a real he-man’s job! Roy and Gene had nothing on my Dad.

Dad, and all the other officers, had to qualify with a variety of weapons every six months, from pistols to sub-machine guns, Dad really didn’t like guns. He often said, “A gun will get you into more trouble than it’ll ever get you out of.” He hated to waste a day shooting up all that government ammunition. But he did it, and was a good shot. He gave me my own .22 single shot rifle and taught me how to shoot when I was 10 years old. Guess he knew I was fascinated with guns, and he wanted me to know how to handle them safely.

One evening, years later, after we had moved to Ohio, Dad and I were watching Highway Patrol, one of the early police shows on TV. It starred Broderick Crawford. He played a plainclothes Lieutenant of the California H. P who carried a little snub-nosed .38, and in every episode found a reason to use it. In this particular episode, ol’ Brod shot the gun out of the bad guy’s hand at a distance of 50 yards. Dad just snorted, “Look at that! You can’t hit the broad side of a barn with that dinky little barrel. There’s no way he could do that in real life.” Dad told me once, “I’d have a better chance of hitting the crook if I threw that pistol at him, rather than shooting at him!”

The Prison Camp was under the jurisdiction of the Department of Justice and, from time to time, visiting dignitaries from Washington would visit the camp. They would always want to go into the woods, to see the logging operations first hand. The inmates were assigned to work details as loggers, equipment mechanics, or sawmill hands. Dad was in charge of the sawmill, and he frequently went into the woods to mark the trees that the logging crews would cut and drag to the mill with heavy equipment. Dad knew those woods like the back of his hand. He loved the outdoors.

One day, Dad had the duty to escort a couple of visiting Congressmen on a tour of the Prison Camp. They specifically asked to be taken back into the woods to see the cutting operations. Both men wore suits. Dad drove them in a truck up one of the logging roads to where the crews were working. It was in the spring or early summer. Dad and the Congressmen got out of the truck and started walking up the log road. One of the Congressmen said to Dad, “Mr. Friel, do you ever see any rattlesnakes in these woods?”

Now, Dad had worked in the woods for probably seven years by this time, and in all that time he had never seen a rattlesnake; but at that very moment, he spotted one just off the road.

“Oh yes, Mr. Congressman; we see ‘em occasionally. Why, there’s one right over there!”

Dad said those guys couldn’t wait to get back in the truck to get out of there.
I can still see my Dad the evening he came into the apartment after work, and announced as soon as he opened the door, “Well, I’m being transferred. Got my choice; Chillicothe, Ohio (a medium security Federal Pen) or Alcatraz.”

That evening after supper, while my brother and I were in the living room, Mom and Dad were talking at the table over coffee, discussing the transfer. I remember Dad saying, “Only trouble with Alcatraz is we’d have to live in quarters on the Island. The boys would have to go to school on the mainland, and I don’t think I want them on that boat every day going across the bay to San Francisco.”

A boat? Going to school on a boat? Sounded better than the smelly old school bus we had to ride every day. Where was California, anyway?

Dad settled on Chillicothe. Looking back, I don’t think he ever was serious about Alcatraz. Too far from home, and Dad loved the mountains of Virginia and West Virginia. Chillicothe was only 6 hours away. And I’ll bet every Federal officer was offered Alcatraz at some point in his career. Probably pretty hard to find men who wanted to live and work in that environment.

Years later, I visited Alcatraz as a tourist and saw the Officers Quarters where we would have lived. It would have been a real adventure to have lived on that island.

Dad was thirty-six when I was born. He’d had a pretty tough life as a kid. His own father died when he was young, and Dad had to work to help his Mom raise his six brothers and sisters. He finished high school, though, and later landed a pretty good job as a Regional Manager for Armour and Co. Even in the late 1920’s, he had a company car and traveled a two state region, from his home in Richmond. I still have a picture of him as a young man, standing in front of a 1920 something Ford Coupe. When the Depression hit and he lost that job, he found work for a time as a tree trimmer for Davie and Co. in St Louis. But, needing to be closer to his home and brothers and sisters, he took a job as groundskeeper at The Greenbrier, an old-time, dignified railroad resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. Beautiful place, the playground of the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, many Presidents and other dignitaries.

To save money, Dad took a room with another dirt-poor young man from West Virginia, an aspiring golfer named Sam Snead. They lived together for a time, sharing a car, and often double dating. Dad remembered loaning Snead $5.00 one time, and that he was never paid back.

Dad told me that Sam once said, “Carl, why don’t you go with me to the course and play a round?”

Dad told me he had never hit a golf ball in his life, but he went anyway. He used one of Sam’s clubs, and on the first shot, caught it just right. Straight down the middle, about
250 yards. Sam looked at him and said, “Carl, you’re a natural. Let’s see you do that again.”

Dad teed up another ball, took a mighty swing and missed it completely. He told me those were the only two swings he ever took at a golf ball in his life.

After I got older and was married, I thought it would be fun to see if I could contact Snead and get him to write a letter to Dad. Dad had long since lost contact with him, but enjoyed telling the story of Sam being his roommate at family gatherings. So I wrote to Sam Snead; told him who I was and my purpose in writing. About what a wonderful surprise it would be for my Dad to hear from him after all those years.

That was probably 1972 when I wrote my letter. Dad died in 1979. We never heard from Sam.

Growing up in those times toughened Dad. And working in the prison system produced its share of stress. My memory of Dad is of a quiet, somewhat stern man, as tough as a bar of iron. Just under six feet, black hair swept back (his early pictures resemble Tyrone Power), with a solid build. Devoted to his family, but certainly not a Ward Cleaver or Ozzie Nelson.

At Chillicothe, dad was assigned to one of the Prison industries. His detail had about thirty inmates. Chillicothe was a medium security penitentiary; most of the inmates were young, 18 to 35 years of age, serving time for Federal offences like car or mail theft; kidnapping, and bank robbery. This was now the early ‘60’s. The times, they were a’changing. The prison system was starting to employ a new breed of psychologists and social workers. Inmates were demanding and getting more privileges like longer hair. “All those clowns think they’re Elvis” my Old Man would say. “They got more TVs, more free time…and discipline’s a joke.”

From time to time, I’d hear Dad talking to Mom in the living room after supper when I was doing homework.

” I sent some young punk to the Hole yesterday for fighting,” I heard Dad say. “Today he was back. He met with a social worker and told her he was mistreated as a child. She called me into her office and told me I’d just have to understand these boys. It’s not their fault they broke the law; it’s society’s fault. That kid came back to the detail with a big smile on his face. There’s no way I can discipline those men anymore. The social workers are taking over the system.”

Dad was furious, his voice would tremble with emotion as he told Mom story after story like that. I guess it was too much to expect that Dad would be as relaxed and happy go lucky as Ozzie Nelson. What did Ozzie do for a living, anyway?

Dad was always close to his brothers and sisters and their families. We’d visit the aunts, uncles, and cousins as often as possible. One weekend, Dad and Mom traveled from
Chillicothe back to West Virginia to attend the wedding of my cousin Butch, the oldest son of one of Dad’s sisters. This was probably 1966 or so. Butch had met a girl from Washington, D.C. while attending college, and they were getting married on a fine spring weekend in Marlinton. All of Dad’s brothers, sisters, and assorted relatives attended.

Apparently this young lady was from a fairly well to do family in Washington. I’ve never really understood why they got married in that small town in West Virginia instead of in Washington, but they did. Butch’s father was Principal of the high school in Marlinton, not that that makes any difference.

Anyway, as Dad told the story later, they all went to the wedding at the Church, and then everyone assembled back at the home of Butch’s parents for the reception. After an hour or so, the newlyweds went upstairs to get ready to leave for the honeymoon. Dad and his brothers John and Dan were standing at the foot of the stairs, in their Sunday best, talking. Dan had just complimented the young bride, saying to Dad and John, “Well, Butch has sure married a fine young lady. She’s so polite and personable.”

At that very moment they heard the bride upstairs say to Butch, “You have to get me out of here. If I have to spend five more minutes with these ignorant hillbillies, I’m gonna scream!”

As Dad told the story, he smiled and said, almost to himself, “That kinda hurt my feelings”

I was probably sixteen the first time I was locked up in a Federal Prison cell. I’d gotten my drivers license earlier that year, and like a lot of guys, decided that I’d look a little like Elvis if I let my hair grow. Dad tolerated my long hair, complete with ducktails and sideburns, but barely. Periodically, he said, “Why don’t you get a haircut? You look just like those convicts I’m around all day.”

One Saturday, Dad got up from the breakfast table and said to me, “I’ve got to run up to the Penitentiary and check on something. You want to go along?”

“You mean actually go inside the gates and see the place?” I asked. He nodded yes.

Now this was pretty cool to me, to have a chance to go inside the gates of a huge Federal Penitentiary. Past the guard towers. Across “dead man’s” land, that space between the two chain link fences that surrounded the prison. Rumor was, and Dad never denied it, that the tower guards could shoot to kill if they spotted an inmate between the fences. Dad himself had been a tower guard in Atlanta.

I remember an incident that made the Chillicothe newspaper a year or so earlier. An inmate was spotted going over the high chain link fence. The tower guards fired a number of shots from their high-powered rifles, but never hit him. He was captured just outside the fence. The newspaper had a field day with their “guards who couldn’t shoot straight” story and opined that the townspeople were hardly safe from those vicious felons, if the
guards were so ineffective with their rifles. The Warden was forced to respond with some intense training on the range.

Shortly afterwards, another inmate scaled the first fence, and this time the guards nailed him with several .30-.30 rounds. He was taken to the prison hospital in serious condition. The newspaper howled about the use of such excessive force on a young inmate, just because he was climbing the fence. Dad got a kick out of the hypocrisy.

That Saturday when I rode with Dad up to the Penitentiary, I paid close attention to its layout. It covered probably a hundred acres. With that double chain link fence, topped with vicious looking razor wire, surrounding a number of green-roofed, red brick buildings. Towers were strategically placed around the prison compound. An armed guard manned each tower. We parked the car and got out, and walked to the main tower by the front gate.

“How’s the weather up there?” my Dad called up to the Tower guard. I thought my Old Man was pretty quick to come up with that quip on the spur of the moment. The guard passed down a clipboard on a chain, and Dad secured his I.D. to it. Satisfied after he hauled it back up, the guard motioned us through the gate that he opened electronically. Then we passed through the second gate and started down the long walk to the Administration Building.

We went through the lobby of the Administration building and turned right to the first set of locked doors. Showing his I.D, the doors opened, and Dad told the guard on duty that he was giving me a tour. I thought I saw that guard wink and smile slightly. The guard opened a second set of doors after assuring the first set was locked behind us. Now, we were in the cellblock where, Dad explained, new prisoners spent their first month, locked in a single man cell before being placed in the general population. I was wide-eyed to be in that cellblock, locked cells on either side of the aisle. The doors were solid steel, with a small barred window looking out into the aisle. I saw faces behind several of the windows, obviously checking out the “new man.”

We continued down the aisle, the floors spotless, our footsteps echoing, and the smell a combination of cleaning solutions and sweat.

Dad stopped in front of a cell. He said, “How’d you like to see what one of these is like?” I was hoping he’d say that.

I really wanted to see the inside, to see if it looked like those jail cells in the movies. “Sure,” I said.

Dad looked back in the direction of the cellblock guard and motioned, and the electronic lock released. Dad pulled the door open, and I stepped in.

I heard the door close and lock behind me.
I turned to the little window and saw Dad walking away. I turned and looked over my new surroundings. The cell was maybe six feet wide and nine feet long. A lidless stainless steel toilet. A small stainless steel sink. A polished square of stainless steel bolted to the wall above it as a mirror. A square of concrete, over six feet long and about 3 feet wide, along one wall was the bed. A rolled up mattress waited for the next occupant. A narrow window, too narrow to require bars, looked out into the prison yard.

I didn’t want to touch anything.

I went over to the door, and looked down the aisle. No sign of the Old Man. Was he checking on his work? How long was I going to be in here?

I checked out the yard. Just a few inmates were on the walks. I felt stark loneliness. The reality of being locked up.

Dad came back and opened the door. “How’d you like it?”

I don’t remember how I answered, probably something like, “Boy, that’s pretty interesting.” But I never forgot the experience.

Dad didn’t say anything else. Not a thing, and never brought up the experience again as long as he lived. But I got the message loud and clear. He didn’t have to say a word. I knew if I ever got in trouble with the law, or locked up in jail, that I shouldn’t bother calling him to bail me out. I would be on my own.

I never had to find out.

The phone call came about 4:00 pm on Labor Day, 1973.

My wife, two small kids and I were living in Roswell, just north of Atlanta. We had several friends over for a Labor Day cookout. We were about to put the chicken on the grill. Creedence Clearwater Revival was on the stereo. The beer was cold and life was good. I had just been handed a major promotion with my company, I was going to Toronto to be in charge of all sales activities in Canada, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories.

My wife answered the ringing phone. “Oh no, John…when?”

I asked her what was going on, but she held up her hand as a signal for me to be quiet, and continued to listen. Then, she put her hand over the mouthpiece, looked at me, tears welling in her eyes and said, “It’s your brother…. your Dad is dead.”

I took the phone. ”John, what’s going on?” John gave me the news. Dad had gone for his afternoon walk. It had been a hot day in Chillicothe, and when he got home, he got a glass of ice tea and went to the basement. He complained of being over heated and a little
short of breathe. John and his family were at Mom and Dad’s home for their own Labor Day cookout.

Dad liked to go to the cool basement in the summer and watch his favorite TV shows during the heat of the day. It was cool in the basement. Mom and Dad didn’t have air conditioning. John said Dad told him he was going downstairs to watch “The Beverly Hillbillies,” to cool down and get his breath back. Mom got worried about Dad and went down to check on him. She thought he was asleep in his recliner. She tried to wake him, shook his arm, and got no response. She screamed.

John and his wife, a registered respiratory specialist, got Dad out of his chair and loosened his clothing. John tried to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. John told me much later that his efforts caused an apparently involuntary vomiting response, and he actually got Dad’s vomit in his mouth.

They called the ambulance, but it was too late. Dad was gone. Later, the Doctors told us the heart attack was so massive that, “Even if he’d had the heart attack in the hospital, we couldn’t have saved him.”

I hung up the phone. I was numb. I looked outside. The sun was still shining. Creedence was still playing. And yet, in the space of one phone call, everything was different. My life had changed forever.

My wife alerted our guests, and they gathered around to offer their help. We had to get to Chillicothe. Fast. I knew Mom would be beside herself. One of the couples offered to take care of the kids for the night, and send them on a plane the next day.

After our guests left, we made the airline reservations, and called the family.

I started upstairs to pack. As I walked into the bedroom, it hit me. My Dad was dead. I’d never talk to him again. Never see him again. I broke down and cried for the first time in years.

Around 3:00 the next morning, we arrived in Chillicothe. We pulled up in front of the house in the rental car. All the lights were on. John came out the door, and we shook hands. I’m not sure what we said to each other.

In the house, Mom was seated in her chair. I went to her, knelt down, and took her hands. Tears streaming from her eyes, she asked me, “How will we ever live without him?” My throat was too thick to answer.

Later, when there was nothing left to say, we crawled into bed to get a few hours sleep. I awoke first, just as the sun was coming up. For a second, I didn’t know where we were. Then I remembered we were home, the comfortable small home I’d known since 6th grade. It took a few more seconds before I remembered why we were there. And the bitter tears started again.
The next few days were a blur. The kids arrived from Atlanta. Other relatives came in from Michigan. There were a myriad of details: the attorney, the will, the bank accounts. And there was the funeral.

After a Masonic service at the funeral home in Chillicothe, his body was driven to West Virginia. We followed in our cars. Dad was buried in the shadow of his beloved Cheat Mountain.

John and I picked out the casket. Dad loved working with wood. He was a skilled forester, and spent much of his life working with wood, from logging to finishing fine furniture. We decided on an oak casket, a deep rich brown. Dad would like that, we thought.

I dreaded the next day. The visitation, the first time I would see Dad in his casket. I wasn’t sure I could do it. I didn’t want to break down and cry in front of everyone. I couldn’t be weak in front of Mom, John and the others. I had to be the strong one.

I wasn’t sure how Mom would react, either. Would she collapse? Could she make it through four hours of greeting friends and relatives, while her husband lay dead just a few feet away?

I went to where Mom was sitting in the living room, and tried to prepare her. “Mom, tomorrow is going to be the worst day of your life. We’re going to see Dad in a casket, and it’s going to be a shock to all of us. Just try to be prepared. We’ll be there with you.” But who, I wondered, was going to be there when I fell apart?

The next afternoon, I drove to the funeral home with Mom, Agnes and the kids. We had an hour to be with Dad privately.

It struck me that life in Chillicothe was going along as usual. People were going about their business. Kids, on their bikes, laughing. I was on my way to see my dead father.

In front of Ware’s Funeral Home, on a shaded street near downtown, I helped Mom out of the car. We all started up the front steps. Mr. Ware greeted us at the door. I remember the smell of flowers as we entered and the soft funeral music in the background.

“He’s in the room just to your left,” Mr. Ware said. He took Mom’s hand to offer his comfort.

We turned into the room. I swallowed hard as I took Mom’s arm. The casket was at the front of the room, surrounded by flowers. Candles had been placed at either end of the casket. A large floral display was arranged on the lower half. The lid was open. And I could just make out my Dad’s profile. I looked away, my eyes brimming. I held Mom’s left arm. John was on her right, our wives and small children behind us. We walked slowly up to the casket. Mom just shook her head, as if in disbelief, and cried quietly.
We were at the open casket. I still hadn’t looked directly at my Dad. I knew if I did, I’d lose whatever composure I still had. But I heard Mom say, “He looks so peaceful....”

I lifted my eyes.

He did look peaceful, eyes closed and lips forming the slight hint of a smile, the same look I remembered from countless times I’d seen Dad snooze on the couch. But then a realization hit me. That was not my Dad. He was not in there.

The Dad I knew was full of life, and love of nature, an avid reader, and a wonderful grandfather. That part of Dad wasn’t in that casket.

It was true. All those Bible stories were true. How else to explain what I was seeing? My Dad, my wonderful Dad, was somewhere else. I’d never been a very religious man. I went to church when I had to, but I had a lot of questions.

In that instant, Dad taught me the most important lesson of my life.