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Surviving The Hanoi Hilton

One of the names that immediately comes to mind when we consider the Vietnam years and the poignantly human stories that came out of that time is James Stockdale's. Stockdale was one of the longest held prisoners of war, and he has remained active in professional activities and writings in the twenty-five years that have passed since his release from prison in 1973. I thought it would be instructive to take a look at Stockdale's easily accessible writings and to see what retrospective light he sheds on his particular Vietnam experience.

First, a word about the books I will be talking about. Probably the most well-known of Stockdale's books is the one written jointly with his wife Sybil, *In Love and War*, published in 1984. This is the story of Stockdale's seven and a half years in prison both from his perspective and that of his wife. It is indeed, as the title suggests, very much a family story of ordeal, sacrifice, and courageous survival. As such, it is the most unified of the three books I will be talking about, and certainly the most moving.

A Vietnam Experience: Ten Years of Reflection was also published in 1984. This is a book of essays, speeches, and short reflections that date from April 1973, only a few months after his return from North Vietnam, to June 1983. In those ten years Stockdale was promoted first to Rear Admiral, then to Vice Admiral, served for two years as President of the Naval War College in Newport,

Rhode Island, served for a year as President of The Citadel, in South Carolina, retired from the Navy and became a scholar at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

Finally, the newest Stockdale book, published in 1995 by the Hoover Institution, is *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, another book of essays and speeches covering the 1981 to 1994 period. Stockdale is now almost seventy-five years old, still in active public life. In 1994, twenty-one years after he was released from prison in Hanoi, Stockdale returned to North Vietnam with his wife to reflect on the seven and a half years that so colored and changed his life. That visit was documented in a film sponsored by Stanford University.

We look at men who have had extraordinary experiences and wonder what, exactly, set them on that road, and what qualities have made it possible for them to achieve the kinds of things they have. I was listening recently to the actor Tom Hanks talk about his reservations in playing James Lovell, the astronaut of Apollo 13 whose leadership was instrumental in the nip-and-tuck survival of the mission's men after the command module began to lose it power in orbit.. Hanks remarked, humbly, that he didn't quite see "a guy like me playing a guy like Jim Lovell" until he met Lovell. Lovell, Hanks said, turned out to have the appearance and mild-mannered personality of a scholar, an insurance salesman, a high school civics teacher. He was, Hanks finally concluded, a "guy like me." This realization, whether regarding Jim Lovell or Jim Stockdale (as he seemingly likes to be called) is one that makes the mystery regarding their achievement even more frustrating, for it is easier to believe that "different" people achieve things that the rest of us only contemplate with intimidated admiration. "Different" people accomplish the unaccomplishable, survive the unsurvivable, display the superhuman courage or strength of character that leaves us average mor-

tals shaking our heads and imagining that the seeds of greatness were of course visible early, that these people were superlative from earliest childhood. As Stockdale would tell us, as Tom Hanks reflected in the interview I referred to, it's not true. These are ordinary people, stuck in extraordinary situations where they are required to give more than most of us are ever required to give. How does one find the resources to do that? This question, for me, was the one that was most compelling about Stockdale, and the one to which I sought an answer in his writings. I discovered some surprising things.

First, however, let us quickly take a look at Stockdale's life before the day in September 1965 when he was shot down over North Vietnam. He was born in Abington, Illinois in 1923, to a couple who were modestly middle-class. Stockdale described himself during his boyhood as chubby and short, a good student, but a boy who had to fight to make the football team, and who took a lot of knocks in the process. He was an ordinary boy, in a small midwestern town, but a boy with a father who had the dream of sending his son to Annapolis. Vernon Stockdale had served in the Navy during the First World War, and for him, the Navy was the opening up of the world; he wanted the same for his son. The first trip Jim remembers with his family was a summer trip to Annapolis, right after Jim's graduation from first grade! The trip made Annapolis Jim's dream too. As he puts it, "My dad's commitment to a pipe dream was not at all like him, but this was to be the exception that proved the rule. He was making a big statement to himself, to me: You do your part, I'll do mine, and it *will* happen" (*In Love and War*, 65).

Eventually it *did* happen. Jim was accepted at Annapolis and made it through successfully, armed with admonitions from both parents. "I want you to be the best man in that hall," his father said, as he left him at

Annapolis. "You must not humiliate us," his mother wrote after his first few months at the naval academy (*In Love and War*, 69). He graduated in 1946 and the following year married Sybil. For the next ten years the Stockdales lived typical Navy lives, transferred from coast to coast while Jim moved up the ladder as a Navy pilot, building a family of four boys who ranged from high-school age to three-years-old by 1965, when Stockdale was on his sea tour in the eastern coastal waters of Vietnam. By this time he was commander of a fighter squadron operating off the aircraft carrier *Oriskany*. He had been in Vietnam waters for almost a year and a half.

A year earlier, he had had a frustrating experience as a squadron commander aboard the aircraft carrier *Constellation*. August 1964, as you will remember, was the month in which the Tonkin Gulf incident occurred—the menacing of the destroyer *Maddox* by North Vietnamese PT boats. Following a tense night on August 3rd, in which the *Maddox* was harassed by the North Vietnamese, Stockdale's squadron was ordered to the defense of the ship. Ironically enough, as the American public learned years later, the subsequent Tonkin Gulf incident was actually a non-incident. The Navy pilots were never able to locate the supposed attacking boats of the following night, August 4th. The captain of the *Maddox* wrote an after-action report that questioned whether, indeed, anything had been out there at all. The next night, Stockdale's squadron was ordered out on strikes against the coast, reprisals for the action against the *Maddox*. By this time there were many aboard the aircraft carrier who doubted there was anything to launch reprisals for. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August 1964, however, is still generally conceded as being the document that formalized our involvement in Vietnam, a resolution pushed through Congress by President Johnson in the aftermath of the two chaotic evenings off the coast of Vietnam.

Stockdale was interviewed regarding Tonkin in the *Stars and Stripes,* in an article that named him as one of the Navy pilots who witnessed the confusion of August 4, 1964. This unhappy coincidence would haunt him for the next eight years.

A year later, in 1965, Stockdale's squadron was flying bombing missions off the *Oriskany,* and in early September his plane was hit as he was on a bridge-destroying mission. He bailed out and was immediately captured; his shattered leg was badly set by a Vietnamese doctor, his dislocated shoulder and smashed spinal disks were ignored. Within forty-eight hours of capture, he was delivered to Hoa Lo prison in Hanoi, where he would spend the next seven and a half years.

Stockdale's experience during those years was complicated by the fact that he was the senior ranking prisoner most of the time he was confined. This placed not only the burden of leadership on him, but also guaranteed the constant attention of the North Vietnamese, who hoped that by breaking down his spirit they could also destroy the resistance of the other prisoners. Added to these unhappy circumstances was the private, paralyzing fear that Stockdale himself carried, the knowledge that it was very possible that the North Vietnamese knew he had been a witness to the Tonkin Gulf non-event. If they could get him to admit what he knew about Tonkin, the North Vietnamese had a lethal propaganda weapon, proof that the war had been launched by the imperialistic Americans with no legitimate excuse.

The narration of his time in prison, alternated with Sybil's both humorous and heartbreaking chapters describing her grief, fear, struggles to maintain a halfway normal family life, and frustration with the government's double-talk and inaction regarding the POW's fates is a terribly sobering tale. If we ask how Jim Stockdale made it through his hell, we must also ask the same about

Sybil, who transformed herself from an efficient and traditional Navy wife into a nationally known force for prisoner advocacy. While Sybil was operating on great reserves of courage, faith and love, Stockdale himself was enduring four years of solitary confinement in which he did not hear a single American voice, fifteen episodes of severe physical torture in which his shattered leg was rebroken, his shoulders dislocated, his head smashed. He spent months in leg and hand irons of varying insidiousness. At one point, near the breaking point and afraid that the Tonkin Gulf interrogation was just around the corner, he slit his wrists. At other times he bashed his own face on a daily basis to make sure he was unpresentable for propaganda cameras. The North Vietnamese never asked him about Tonkin—his name had somehow been kept out of the Pacific edition of *Stars and Stripes*, and his August 4th presence was evidently not known.

To learn, even partially, how one survives such an ordeal, or at least how one man survived, we must turn to the comments Jim Stockdale made while describing some of his specific experiences. As he was left with paper and pen to "confess" to American imperialistic crimes, his wonderful ordinariness shines through—

> "O where are those great booming voices from on high that shout down maxims of patriotism, messages from God, when one is at the razor's edge of moral decision? Isn't all of that supposed to be coming down to me about now?
>
> No, it's just me down here; I'm stuck with myself. I've just got to come to terms with this dilemma by logic, intuition, and gut feeling.
>
> . . . Isn't credibility of defiance what it's all about in the long run around here? Where is

> your ego? Who are you to be shoved around? (*In Love and War*, 168-69)

Stockdale eventually hit upon a combination of defiance, parodies of what was demanded, resistance that sometimes broke to pain but always came back for more, and sheer acting, living a role, to continually frustrate the efforts of his jailers to break him. Even in his completely vulnerable state, he assumed the aggressive role periodically, resorting to violent ranting and raving, self-injury, fasting, and ideological debate to keep the North Vietnamese confused about his mental state and his next move. He was not alone in these tactics, and within the cadre of eleven men who did hard-core time in "Alcatraz," these tactics served to subvert constantly the ability of the jailers to intimidate. As he put it, thinking about the last months in prison, when the prisoners were finally grouped together,

> It was not age, or school background, or geography, or roots that welded the ten of us together. It was not even our common experience in prison so much as our mutual respect, our pride in knowing that our experiences, our bond of comradeship, did not come about by any process of random selection. You had to be a threat to the North Vietnamese prison system to get to Alcatraz. We had learned to be very effective at making trouble for our adversaries, and at taking care of our own. And we loved it. It made life make sense to us. We were not here to cope, or languish, or sit out the war, or "be reasonable." And we pledged to "stick it in their ear," to keep it up, no matter how long we stayed. (*In Love and War*, 403.)

Though Stockdale obviously did a great deal of thinking in prison, it is not until he began writing reflective pieces and speeches that we find some of his thoughts on survival skills for ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances. And some of the answers we find in his two books of occasional pieces are both surprising and refreshing. I have considered these remarks first as they apply to a group prison situation, and secondly, as they relate to the individual.

His thoughts on the prison situation are perhaps not particularly exotic, but they speak reams about human associations and the resiliency of the human spirit and mind. First, he stresses communication, the fact that though silence was brutally enforced in the Hoa Lo prison, communication among the men never stopped. Tapping codes, tin cups held against walls to pick up tapping vibrations, hand signals, abbreviations and acronyms—all these served to remind each man that he was not alone, and that the welfare of the group was identical to individual welfare. Even when the men were separated by empty cells and non-adjoining walls, or punished for being caught communicating, conversations never suffered for more than a day or two before a new method of continuing to talk to each other was rigged.

Secondly, a military hierarchy was essential. Not only was it what all were trained and accustomed to, being career officers, but it allowed group discipline to bolster individual resolve, to pattern behavior, and to provide a framework for group action. The military discipline gave structure to their days, moral support to their monotony, and a certain transfusion of courage while under interrogation, for one realized he was in a situation where the group's welfare depended on his individual response to his captors. Ritual got one through the day, the week, the year. Those without the ability to call up group identification and loyalty floundered, often

losing their own individual sense of identification in the process. Stockdale describes one such case, in which the prisoner finally lost his mind after having rejected the group (*In Love and War*, 392-395).

Much has been said about the military code of conduct that demands silence past "name, rank, and serial number." In other words, the code demands one relay no information to the enemy. Is this a realistic demand? For those who will resist, will it be the code of conduct seeing them through? Stockdale thinks not, for, as he emphasized, any jailer with a basic knowledge of torture methods can make short work of the name, rank, and serial number limitations. One breaks under torture to beg for its end; the issue becomes whether a prisoner can make his captors begin the whole process again the next day. But Stockdale argues that the code of conduct is still a necessary stating of ideals unifying prisoners, a set of parameters to ground oneself, a reminder of one's military obligations, and another bond to the context of an outside world and its expectations.

> For us the Code of Conduct became the ground we walked on. I am not aware that any POW was able, in the face of severe punishment and torture, to adhere strictly to name, rank, and serial number, as the heroes did in the old-fashioned war movies, but I saw a lot of Americans do better. I saw men scoff at the threats and return to torture ten and fifteen times. (*A Vietnam Experience*, 8-9)

And what about the individual? The group aside, what sources of support did the individual lean on for survival? The answers for Stockdale are quite singular.

Clearly, the most important thing for Jim Stockdale was a strong sense of himself, who he was, where he

had been, from where he had come. The admonitions of his parents as he faced Annapolis, though demanding, were values he had grown up with and accepted—*be the best, do not humiliate us*. We perhaps couch these exhortations more kindly today, but they remain the classic parental demands; they aren't particularly singular to a 1930's midwestern childhood. Stockdale had lived with those expectations all his life and had absorbed them as his own expectations of himself.

In his postwar writings he also sets great value in the fact that he had learned to live with pain from an early age, as anyone who is trying to make the varsity football team at 5'9" is bound to do. The injuries Stockdale suffered from his ejection were horribly painful, and with the lack of medical attention remained so for years. He was used to pain, he was used to being roughed up physically, he was versed in ways to escape claustrophobia, one of the always-present tortures. In his post-imprisonment speeches, he stressed repeatedly that contact sports, abuse to the body, and the ability to get one's mind outside pain stood him in good stead in Hoa Lo prison.

For many of us, as educators, however, it is Stockdale's stress on the discipline of the mind to which we must pay particular attention. He had pasted this epigram into a dictionary before he was shot down:

Education Is An Ornament In Prosperity
And A Refuge In Adversity.

It was a statement which was to attain particular meaning for him while he was imprisoned (*A Vietnam Experience*, 36).

As Stockdale points out, a little education is a very dangerous thing. He cites, regarding his time in prison, the differences among those with no education, some

education, and sophisticated levels of education. The redneck was strong in his non-knowledge—red-white-and-blue American, any attempted inroads on his patriotic commitment were branded, loftily, as "B.S." The sophisticates had a thorough enough knowledge of history and issues to be able to argue with their captors, to debate ideology, Marxist dogma, logic. Those in trouble, says Stockdale, "were the high school graduates who had enough sense to pick up the innuendo, and yet not enough education to accommodate it properly" (*A Vietnam Experience*, 36).

What, then, provides the spiritual and intellectual necessities to withstand political imprisonment? A couple of quotations from Stockdale's various 1980's and 90's writings should suffice. For those of us who may occasionally bemoan the state of the generalist, the broadly educated, Stockdale reminds us of the crucial connection between idealism, philosophy, pragmatism, and action. For one warrior, reserves of resilience and courage came from reflection, not action, from a grounding and perspective acquired in classrooms before being tested in war. As he writes in *A Vietnam Experience*,

> I think the best preparation for an American officer who may be subjected to political imprisonment is a broad liberal education that gives the man at least enough historical perspective to realize that those who excelled in life before him were, in the last essence, committed to play a role. He learns that though it is interesting to speculate about the heavens and the earth and the areas under the earth and so forth, when it comes right down to it, men are more or less obligated to play certain roles, and they do not necessarily

> have to commit themselves on issues that do not affect that role. (*A Vietnam Experience*, 8)

Later in the book, he expands on these thoughts:

> Education in the classics teaches you that all organizations since the beginning of time have used the power of guilt; that cycles are repetitive and that this is the way of the world. It's a naive person who comes in and says, "Let's see, what's good and what's bad?" That's a quagmire. You can get out of that quagmire only by recalling how wise men before you accommodated to the same dilemmas. And I believe a good classical education and an understanding of history can best determine the rules you should live by. They also give you the power to analyze reasons for these rules and guide you as to how to apply them to your own situation. (*A Vietnam Experience*, 34)

For Stockdale, it was the Stoic philosopher Epictetus and his *Enchiridion* that were the foundations for his own intellectual, physical, and spiritual survival in Hanoi. Stockdale clung to the pronouncements of the slave's son and his manual for the Roman field soldier:

> "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view they take of them."
>
> "Do not be concerned with things which are beyond your power."

> "Demand not that events should happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen and you will go on well."
>
> "Lameness is an impediment to the leg, but not to the will.'"

Stockdale returned home with his spirit unbroken and his honor intact, quoting, after his plane landed at Travis Air Force Base, California, the poet Sophocles—"Nothing is so sweet as to return home from sea and listen to the raindrops on the rooftops of home" (*In Love and War*, 437).

Consistently throughout his post-Vietnam years, Stockdale has insisted upon the absolute necessity of solid, rigorous, organized education in his writings. In turning his thoughts to education, above all, he is unique among the returned POWs. For Stockdale, survival school begins at home, in a library. As he remarked in a quoted description of Sir Thomas More—He

> ". . . knew where he began and where he left off, knew what area of himself he could yield to the encroachments of his enemies, and what area of himself he could yield to the encroachments of those he loved." (*A Vietnam Experience*, 135.)

The same could be said about Jim Stockdale. ❑

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