

2017

Remarks, Stockdale to Pilots, 1965

Martin L. Cook

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Cook, Martin L. (2017) "Remarks, Stockdale to Pilots, 1965," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 70 : No. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol70/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

REDISCOVERIES

REMARKS, STOCKDALE TO PILOTS, 1965

Martin L. Cook

Dr. Cook taught at the Naval War College from 2009 to 2016 and is the Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale Professor Emeritus of Professional Military Ethics at the College. He now serves as a distinguished visiting professor of philosophy at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

In *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, his collection of reflective essays published long after his time in Vietnam, Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale writes eloquently about the importance of the study of philosophy in helping him to endure the prisoner of war (POW) experience. While at Stanford completing a degree in economics, he found his most important questions being deflected by the economics faculty, often with the remark, “Well, we’re getting into philosophy now.” Exasperated by that reaction, Stockdale found his way to the Philosophy Department and embarked on a course of reading in the subject, guided by Professor Philip H. Rhinelander.

As Stockdale was leaving Stanford, Rhinelander gave him a copy of the work on Roman Stoicism by the freed slave–philosopher Epictetus, which Stockdale read (he says) initially only out of respect for Rhinelander. But Epictetus’s thoughts clearly stuck with him and, in the end, helped him find the resiliency and determination to endure the POW experience honorably. The key tenet of Stoic philosophy is the distinction between what one can control (only one’s own actions and inner reactions to things) and what one cannot (the actions of others and the unavoidable circumstances life brings).

Although written well before Stockdale began his POW experience, this speech to his aircrews en route to Vietnam demonstrates the degree to which he already was thinking about and articulating what they were about to undergo in Stoic terms. His discussion about moving up bomb-release altitudes or adding

fuel reflects exactly the Stoic notion of accepting the mission one is given, realistically and uncomplainingly. His unflinching dismissal of “Hollywood answers” and straightforward recognition that, as military officers, his listeners do not get to pick, or even to some degree judge, the war to which they are assigned are a perfect illustration of recognizing what is within one’s own powers and what is not. It recognizes that political decisions about where military force is used are “above the pay grade” of his officers.

Stockdale reminds his listeners, “[Y]ou [are] an actor in a drama that you’ll replay in your mind’s eye for the rest of your life.” In other words, you are not the playwright, but how you perform in the play rests entirely in your hands. In this remark, he is virtually paraphrasing Epictetus (*Enchiridion* 17): “Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it. If short, of a short one; if long, of a long one. If it is his pleasure you should act a poor man, a cripple, a governor, or a private person, see that you act it naturally. For this is your business, to act well the character assigned you; to choose it is another’s.”

So, in this short address, we see Stockdale the Stoic warrior attempting to impart Stoic wisdom to his aircrews. It is the perfect illustration of the “operationalization” of the importance of philosophy that he will write about years later with such eloquence. But already, here, he is attempting to help his aircrews steel themselves mentally to accept the war and the missions assigned to them unflinchingly, realistically, without illusions. He is, as the Stoics would say, leading them to live “in accordance with Nature” (*kata phusin*) by calling things what they are and calmly facing what lies before them.

Remarks of wing commander James B. Stockdale to the pilots of Carrier Air Wing 16 aboard USS Oriskany, at sea en route to the Gulf of Tonkin, on April 29, 1965, one week before they entered combat. Presented as found in the archives of the Naval War College. Excerpted version available in U. S. Grant Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (Presidio, 1978).

Having reviewed for you the terrain of Vietnam, the enemy’s order of battle, the rules of engagement, and to some extent the modern history of the conflict and the evolution of America’s strategy, I think I owe you in addition a straight-from-the-shoulder discussion of pilots’ mental attitudes and orientation in “limited war” circumstances. I saw the need for this last summer aboard *Ticonderoga*—after the start of the war had caught us by surprise and we had gone through those first, exciting days pretty much on adrenaline. In the lull that followed, as we prepared for a next round, I could sense that those fine young men who had measured up so well in the sudden reality of flak and burning targets wanted to talk and get their resources and value systems lined up for the long haul. Like

most of you, they were well read, sensitive, sometimes skeptical—those educated in the American liberal tradition to think for themselves—those who are often our most productive citizens and, just as often, our best soldiers. They realized that bombing heavily defended targets is serious business and no game—that it is logically impossible, in the violence of a fight, to commit oneself as an individual only in some proportion of his total drive and combative instinct. It has to be all or nothing; dog eat dog over the target. I think they were asking themselves, as you might—Where do I as a person, a person of awareness, refinement, and education, fit into this “limited war,” “measured response” concept?

I want to level with you right now, so you can think it over here in mid-Pacific and not kid yourself into imagining “stark realizations” in the Gulf of Tonkin. Once you go “feet dry” over the beach, there can be nothing limited about your commitment. “Limited war” means to us that our target list has limits, our ordnance loadout has limits, our rules of engagement have limits, but that does not mean that there is anything “limited” about our personal obligations as fighting men to carry out assigned missions with all we’ve got. If you think it is possible for a man, in the heat of battle, to apply something less than total personal commitment—equated perhaps to your idea of the proportion of national potential being applied—you are wrong. It’s contrary to human nature. So also is the idea I was alarmed to find suggested to me by a military friend in a letter recently: that the prisoner of war’s Code of Conduct is some sort of a “total war” document. You can’t go halfway on that, either. The Code of Conduct was not written for “total wars” or “limited wars,” it was written for all wars, and let it be understood that it applies with full force to this air wing, in this war.

What I am saying is that national commitment and personal commitment are two different things. All is not relative. You classical scholars know that even the celebrated “free thinker” Socrates was devoted to ridiculing the sophist idea that one can avoid black and white choices in arriving at personal commitments; one sooner or later comes to a fork in the road. As Harvard’s philosophy great, Alfred North Whitehead, said: “I can’t bring half an umbrella to work when the weatherman predicts a 50 percent chance of rain.” We are all at the fork in the road this week. Think it over. If you find yourself rationalizing about moving your bomb-release altitude up a thousand feet from where your strike leader briefs it, or adding a few hundred pounds fuel to your over-target bingo because “the Navy needs you for greater things,” or you must save the airplane for some “great war” of the future, you, you’re in the wrong outfit. You owe it to yourself to have a talk with your skipper or me. It’s better for both you and your shipmates that you face up to your fork in the road here at 140 degrees east rather than later, two thousand miles west of here, on the line.

Let us all face our prospects squarely. We've got to be prepared to obey the rules and contribute without reservation. If political or religious conviction helps you do this, so much the better, but you're still going to be expected to press on, with or without these comforting thoughts, simply because this uniform commits us to a military ethic—the ethic of personal pride and excellence that alone has supported some of the greatest fighting men in history. Don't require Hollywood answers to "What are we fighting for?" We're here to fight because it's in the interest of the United States that we do so. This may not be the most dramatic way to explain it, but it has the advantage of being absolutely correct.

I hope I haven't made this too somber. I merely want to let you all know first of all where this wing stands on "Duty, Honor, Country." Secondly, I want to warn you all of excessive caution. A philosopher has warned us that, of all forms of caution, caution in love is the most fatal to true happiness. When that Fox flag is two-blocked in the Gulf, you'll be an actor in a drama that you'll replay in your mind's eye for the rest of your life. Level with yourself now. Do your duty.

Footnote: No one came forward with reservations. By the time Oriskany returned to San Diego in December 1965, its pilots had earned a record total of military decorations for Vietnam carrier deployments. Of the 120 pilots addressed in this talk, thirteen did not return to the ship: eight were killed in action, one is still unaccounted for, and four—including the speaker—spent seven and a half years as POWs in Hanoi.