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From Our January-February 1974 Issue . . .

Experiences as a POW in Vietnam

Rear Admiral James B. Stockdale, U.S. Navy

LAST FEBRUARY, WHEN I FIRST TOUCHED FOOT on American soil, I was asked to make a few remarks on behalf of the ex-POWs who were embarked in the airplane with me. An ancient verse came to mind that best summarized my relief at dropping the mantle of leadership and responsibility I had held during seven and a half years of imprisonment, four of them in solitary. These lines are attributed to Sophocles; I remember them well because of their modern ring: "Nothing is so sweet as to return from sea and listen to the raindrops on the rooftops of home."

Well, I was dreaming. I had forgotten that an old sea captain's job does not end when he anchors in home port.

My wife Sybil and I have a private joke. Before I returned she was advised by a Navy psychiatrist, "The fellow will probably make a quick readjustment to modern society if you will remember one rule for the first few months: Don't put him in decision-making situations." Well, the reality of my post-confinement simply did not allow such an environment. In the past year I have probably made more important decisions than in any like period in my life.

Vice Admiral Stockdale graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1946, serving first in destroyers and later as a naval aviator. In 1965, as Commander Air Wing 16 embarked in the carrier USS *Oriskany* (CVA 34), he was shot down over North Vietnam, becoming the senior U.S. naval prisoner of war until his release in 1973. After his return he became Commander Antisubmarine Warfare Wing Pacific in the grade of rear admiral, then President of the Naval War College in 1977 as a vice admiral. Retiring from naval service in 1979, Admiral Stockdale became the president of The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina; in 1981 he joined the Hoover Institution as a senior research fellow. He is a member of the advisory board of the *Naval War College Review*. His books include *A Vietnam Experience* (1985) and *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (1995); he and his wife Sybil wrote *In Love and War* (2nd ed. 1990). He holds a master's degree from Stanford, honorary doctorates from Brown University and the University of Rhode Island, nine other honorary degrees, and the Congressional Medal of Honor.

This article reprints an address given to the Executives Club of Chicago in 1973.

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Today I find myself truly back home. I am back with old friends, back in my native Middle West, and I have decided that this is my last public speech as an ex-POW. I have no ambition to become a professional ex-prisoner. As soon as I finish today, I am going down to my farm in Knox County [Illinois] for a couple of days, then to Colorado to spend the weekend with my second son, who is in college there, then back to Sau Diego. Next week I hope to check out of the hospital, and then, I hope, I will be ready for a good seagoing job.

Incidentally, before we were released by the North Vietnamese, I had occasion to be approached by other prisoners who were thinking about their careers. We were all more or less pessimistic about our future utility to our services. Not with any malice—it was just that we had been used to living that stoic life and faced up to the fact that there was a good chance that our service careers had been overcome by time. We came home to find that the service was devoted to giving us every chance to regain that time. I am informed, as our Navy ex-POWs' duty assignments are made—and their orders are good—that each man has been given the personal attention his devotion to duty deserves.

As a theme for this audience, I will address the subject of how a group of middle Americans—average American guys who have chosen military life as a profession—survived in a POW situation and returned home with honor.

The conditions under which American POWs existed have changed radically since World War II. It is no longer a matter of simply being shot up, coming down in your parachute, going to a reasonably pleasant *Hogan's Heroes* prison camp, and sweating out the end of the war. At least it was not that way in Vietnam. In Vietnam the American POW did not suddenly find himself on the war's sidelines. Rather, he found himself on one of the major battlefronts—the propaganda battlefront. Our enemy in Vietnam hoped to win his war with propaganda. It was his main weapon. Our captors told us they never expected to defeat us on the battlefield, but did believe they could defeat us on the propaganda front.

Unlike the World War II POW, who was considered a liability, a drain on enemy resources and manpower, the American POW in Vietnam was considered a prime political asset. The enemy believed that sooner or later every one of us could be broken to his will and used as ammunition on the propaganda front. Some of us might take more breaking than others, but all of us could be broken. Thus, for Americans who became POWs in Vietnam, capture meant not that we had been neutralized, but that a different kind of war had begun—a war of extortion.

For the sane man there is always an element of fear involved when he is captured in war. In Vietnam the enemy capitalized on this fear to an extreme degree. We were told we must live by sets of rules and regulations no normal American could possibly live by. When we violated these rules and regulations,

we gave our captors what they considered sufficient moral justification for punishing us—binding us in ropes, locking us in stocks for days and weeks on end, locking us in torture cuffs for weeks at a time, and beating us to bloody pulps. As we reached our various breaking points, we were “allowed” to apologize for our transgressions and to atone for them by “confessing our crimes” and condemning our government.

At this point you may be asking the question, Had the POWs received any training to prepare themselves for possible capture? The answer is yes, and it was based on two things that I have come to respect very, very much.

One was on the taking of physical abuse. I think if you were to prepare yourself to be a prisoner of war—and I cannot imagine anybody going about that methodically—one should include a course of familiarization with pain. For what it is worth, I learned the merits of men having taken the physical abuse of body contact in sports. It is a very important experience; you have to practice hurting. There is no question about it.

Second, survival school was based on taking mental harassment. I came out of prison being very happy about the merits of plebe year at the Naval Academy. I hope we do not ever dilute those things. You have to practice being hazed. You have to learn to take a bunch of junk and accept it with a sense of humor.

On the subject of education, beyond the scope of survival school, there is always the question, Do we need to start giving a sort of counter-propaganda course? Should we go into the political indoctrination business? I am not very enthusiastic about that. 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 obliged to play certain roles, and they do not necessarily have to commit themselves on issues that do not affect that role.

Now, how does the average American—which is what the POW is—deal with his world? On a day-to-day basis, the POW must somehow communicate with his fellows. Together they must establish a viable set of rules and regulations to live by. We were military men. We knew we were in a combat situation and that the essential element of survival and success in a combat situation is military discipline. That meant, isolated though we were from each other, we could not afford to live in a democracy. We had no choice but to live in a strictly disciplined military organization—if you will, a military dictatorship.

Our captors knew this as well as we did. Several members of Hanoi's Central Committee had spent long periods in confinement as political prisoners. They felt that we too were political prisoners. They held as their highest priority the

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prevention of a prisoner organization, because they knew an organized body of prisoners could beat their system. If they were to get what they wanted from us, they had to isolate every American who showed a spark of leadership. They did so. They plunged many of us into a dark, solitary confinement that lasted, in some cases, four full years.

“For what it is worth, I learned the merits of men having taken the physical abuse of body contact in sports. It is a very important experience; you have to practice hurting. There is no question about it.”

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 always 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 10 and 15 times. I saw men perform in ways no one would have ever thought to put in a movie; because they did perform that way, we were able to establish communication, organization, a chain of command, and an effective combat unit. We lost some battles, but I believe we won the war.

In fact, I am not so sure we lost many battles. Unless you have been there, it is difficult to imagine the grievous insult to the spirit that comes from breaking under torture and saying something the torturer wants you to say. For example, “My government is conducting a criminal war. I am a war criminal. I bomb churches, schools, and pagodas.” Does that sound silly to you? It does to me. But I and many others were tortured in ropes for that statement. The reason it was important to take torture for that statement was to establish the credibility of our defiance—for personal credibility—so that the enemy would know that they must pay a high price to get us into public if they ever could. Needless to say, in a POW situation, viable leadership is not possible without example. In a unit with good communication, almost everyone knows what everyone else is doing or not doing most of the time.

In short, what I am saying is that we communicated. Most of the time most of us knew what was happening to those Americans around us. POWs risked military interrogation, pain, and public humiliation to stay in touch with each other, to maintain group integrity, to retain combat effectiveness. We built a successful military organization and in doing so created a counterculture. It was a society of intense loyalty—loyalty of men one to another, of rigid military authoritarianism that would have warmed the cockles of the heart of Frederick the Great; of status—with such unlikely items as years in solitary, number of times tortured, and months in irons, as status symbols.

Most men need some kind of personal philosophy to endure what the Vietnam POWs endured. For many it is religion; for many it is a patriotic cause; for some it is simply a question of doing their jobs even though the result—confinement as a POW—may not seem necessarily fair. For myself it seemed that becoming a POW somewhere, someday, was a risk I accepted when I entered the Naval Academy. I think it is fair to say that most POWs—including, certainly, those who did not attend service academies—felt the same way. They accepted this as a risk they undertook when they took their oath as officers. To be sure, very few sat around bemoaning their fate, asking the heavens, “Why me?”

As POWs who were treated not as POWs but as common criminals, we sailed uncharted waters. The Code of Conduct was the star that guided us, although several of us are making recommendations for its modification, particularly in the area of a prisoner’s legal status. The Code did not provide for our day-to-day existence; we wrote the laws we had to live by. We established means for determining seniority. We wrote criteria and provided mechanisms for relieving men of command for good and sufficient cause—and we used those mechanisms. We set a line of resistance we thought was within the capability of each POW to hold, and we ruled that no man would cross that line without significant torture. Thus, in effect, we ordered men into torture.

From what I have said here today, I think you can realize that as we prison leaders developed this organization, this unity, this mutual trust and confidence, this loyalty that permitted us to ask a guy to give his all sometimes, we acquired a couple of things. We acquired a lot of close friends, but in addition we acquired a constituency. Now life has to make sense to that constituency. And that constituency comes home and says to itself: You spoke with force of law, and at great personal pain and inconvenience I obeyed that law, and now I come home and no one seems interested in whether everybody obeyed it or not. What kind of a deal is that? We prison leaders have a lifetime obligation to back up our stalwarts.

A couple of final comments. Self-discipline was vital to self-respect, which in turn is vital to survival and meaningful participation in a POW organization. Self-indulgence is fatal. Daily ritual seems essential to mental and spiritual health. I would do 400 pushups a day, even when I had leg irons on, and would feel guilty when I failed to do them. This ritual paid valuable dividends in self-respect, and, incidentally, I learned yesterday at Mayo Clinic that it also paid physical dividends.

I thank God for the other Americans I was imprisoned with. The respect one develops for others in a POW situation is really indescribable. I think it might be best illustrated with a story of something that happened once when I was in solitary and under extremely close surveillance. I was in dire need of a morale boost when two other POWs, Dave Hatcher and Jerry Coffee, sent me

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a note at great risk to themselves. I opened it and found written the complete poem, "Invictus," which begins,

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

[William Ernest Henley, 1849–1903]

In our effort to survive and return with honor, we drew on the totality of our American heritage. We hope we added something to that heritage. God forbid that it should ever happen to other Americans—to your sons and grandsons, and mine—but if it does, we pray that our experience will be known to them and give them the heart and hope they will need.

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