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Reflections on Captivity: A Tapestry of Stories by a Vietnam War POW

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BOOK REVIEWS

OCCUPATION, CAPTIVITY, STRUGGLE, ESCAPE—AND EXPANSION

Reflections on Captivity: A Tapestry of Stories by a Vietnam War POW, by Porter Alexander Halyburton. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022. 216 pages. \$21.95.

Retired USN commander Porter Halyburton's work constitutes a revisit of his seven-and-one-half-year (2,675 day) imprisonment, mistreatment, survival, and personal empowerment in the prison camps of North Vietnam. The publication of *Reflections*—coming almost fifty years after Halyburton and his fellow prisoners of war (POWs) boarded U.S. planes and departed Hanoi to return to their homeland—provides an especially moving testament to the strength of the human spirit.

Shot down on 17 October 1965, during his seventy-sixth combat mission, Lieutenant (junior grade) Halyburton, the radar intercept officer of a Fighter Squadron 84 (VF-84) F-4B Phantom, survived the traumatic experience; his pilot, Lieutenant Commander Stanley Olmstead, did not. As with many other American airmen who took part in the ROLLING THUNDER bombing campaign, Halyburton castigates the wartime leadership of President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, but he might have added some of America's top military leaders to

that sorry list. He considered most of the missions he flew to be "a waste of time and money," having "little real effect on the war's outcome," and they "certainly weren't worth risking our lives."

Sustaining no serious injuries when he ejected from his crippled plane—unlike many other aviators who had to bail out—Halyburton soon found himself safely parachuted to the ground. Only then did his long ordeal begin. Quickly captured, he spent the next several months being moved from one increasingly desolate prison to another. During his captivity, he was moved thirty times and held in eight different prison camps. His first stop was the infamous Hoa Lo Prison, which the Americans dubbed the Hanoi Hilton.

Halyburton identifies three discrete periods of his imprisonment in North Vietnam: (1) October 1965 to July 1966; (2) July 1966 to 1970; and (3) 1970 to February 1973. In the early days, he focused on the past, to ease his current suffering. In the second period, he concentrated on the future, again to get him through an ugly present. In the last years, he focused on the

present, because he understood then that he had mastered the challenges of captivity and could look forward to freedom and a meaningful life.

Halyburton relates how he and all but a few of the POWs had to endure solitary confinement in dismal cells, at times blazing hot or icy cold; a diet that left the men close to starvation; nonexistent or sometimes harmful medical treatment; and daily abuse by guards who were either sadistic or indifferent to their suffering. Halyburton details how North Vietnam's policy toward the POWs was to exploit them for propaganda purposes against the U.S. war effort; extracting intelligence for tactical purposes was a decidedly secondary mission. Every prisoner had been schooled by the Code of Conduct to divulge only name, rank, service number, and date of birth, and most tried to provide only that information—but failed. The North Vietnamese interrogators, disregarding international conventions, resorted to increasingly brutal physical and psychological torture to gain their ends. Halyburton found the survival, evasion, resistance, and escape training he had received before the war “more a negative than a positive,” since medieval-like torture could break any man, and no American prisoner escaped from North Vietnam during the war. Instead, the key to the Americans' survival was to mount, with the help of strong leaders and fellow POWs, a “second line of resistance” that reaffirmed continued opposition. Indeed, through the inspirational direction of James Stockdale, Jeremiah Denton, Robinson Risner, Robert “Percy” Purcell, and other leaders and the determined efforts of Halyburton and his fellow prisoners, the POWs gained strength as a “band

of brothers.” Halyburton spent months caring for his cell mate, Major (later Colonel) Fred V. Cherry, USAF, who was seriously ill. The North Vietnamese mistakenly expected that locking up a White southerner with a Black American would help break the will of the junior officer, but the opposite turned out to be true. Halyburton was awarded a Silver Star for “conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity” during his imprisonment. The POWs also turned the tables on their tormentors, getting information about their abysmal treatment out to the world. This resulted in Washington gaining an advantage at the negotiating table and the POWs experiencing less-than-draconian living conditions during the last few years of the war.

Reflections is not only an inspirational and especially readable narrative about captivity during the Vietnam War; it is also a graphically detailed “how-to” for enduring imprisonment in similar situations. Halyburton details even the most minute aspects of the POW existence, covering diet, exercise, and communication. His fifty or so vignettes are descriptive, often humorous, and well worth reading.

There are minor quibbles. Halyburton's thrust in his *Reflections* is to emphasize the positive aspects of the POW experience, and he does that admirably; however, it would have not diluted the message to learn that there were American POWs, the so-called Peace Committee Eight, who did the bidding of their captors by taking part in propaganda events in exchange for better living conditions. As other writers on the topic have done, Halyburton links the death of Ho Chi Minh in September 1969 to better treatment of the POWs, but he does not explain that

connection adequately. Lastly, the North Vietnamese attack on USS *Maddox* (DD 731) occurred on 2 August, not 3 August, 1964. Those nits aside, *Reflections* should grace the bookshelf of every serious student of the POW experience.

On the day that Halyburton departed North Vietnam, he did not plan revenge against his former captors; instead he internally conferred forgiveness on them. That sentiment has characterized the rest of his life. He served another twenty years in the U.S. Navy and twenty years on the faculty of the Naval War College, retiring in 2006 as Professor of Strategy Emeritus. Porter Alexander Halyburton has returned many times to Vietnam, including to the sites of his imprisonment, and he has made peace with his former enemies.

EDWARD J. MAROLDA



Escape from Java: The Extraordinary World War II Story of the USS Marblehead, by John J. Domagalski. Havertown, PA: Pen and Sword Books, 2022. 310 pages. \$34.95.

My favorite books are those that begin with a single topic or event and then patiently build the historical context around it. John J. Domagalski's *Escape from Java* does just that. On the surface, it is the story of the heroic crewmembers of the light cruiser USS *Marblehead* (CL 12), who somehow managed to keep their ship afloat and return home. But woven into this story line are both the historical arcs of the Asiatic theater of World War II and the singular rescue story of ten wounded men and one persistent physician. The author's fascination with the Pacific War began at a young age, when he built model

ships and read books about World War II. Now the author of five books and numerous articles, he displays in his writing the characteristics of one who has spent a lifetime studying the topic.

Domagalski begins by describing the U.S. Asiatic Fleet in Manila Bay, the Philippines, where it had been homeported since the U.S. Navy defeated the Spanish navy in 1898. In continuing its historic mission of "showing the flag" in the region, the fleet found itself outmanned and outgunned in the heart of what was enemy territory, considering Japan's desire for land and material resources. One sailor remembered later, "We were aboard outdated, outclassed fighting ships; but with spirit and good morale. Most of us felt that when the 'real thing' came along, we would, at best, fight a delaying action and be rescued by the main fleet" (p. 7).

In December 1941, that "real thing" arrived. Japan launched an attack against the Pacific Fleet on 7 December that was followed by multiple attacks against the Allied forces within the Southern Resources Area, which included Guam, Hong Kong, Malaya, and Shanghai. Ships from the Asiatic Fleet were deployed south to join forces with those of Australia, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. *Marblehead* and the heavy cruiser USS *Houston* (CA 30), operating largely without Allied air cover, fought the Japanese valiantly at the battle of the Flores Sea (also known as the battle of Makassar Strait) in the vicinity of Borneo in February 1942. Although badly damaged, *Marblehead* survived the battle because of the efforts of its resourceful crew. Within a month, though, Japan took control of the region. American, Australian, British, and Dutch forces fought last-ditch