

The Legacy of Admiral James Bond Stockdale

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Admiral James Bond Stockdale





Stockdale's Legacy in the US Navy

- Annual Stockdale Leadership Lecture at San Diego
- The Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership at the US Naval Academy
- The Stockdale Chair of Professional Military Ethics at the Naval War College – my own position
- The “Stockdale Course” at the Naval War College – philosophy for military officers!
- The Stockdale Group at the Naval War College which studies issues in leadership in the Navy
- The Stockdale Award for Outstanding Naval Leadership – one for Atlantic Fleet and one for Pacific Fleet
- Bottom line: Almost *EVERYTHING* in the US Navy having to do with Ethics and Leadership is named after him!



Why Stockdale?

- Certainly not one of our Navy's most distinguished combat commanders! Raymond Spruance at the Battle of Midway! Oliver Hazard Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie in the War of 1812!
- His rank when he was shot down was only Commander (O-5)! His highest level of operational Navy command!
- Spent 8+ years as a Prisoner of War and recovering from his injuries – so effectively out of the Navy for that whole period.
- Promoted and became President of the Naval War College up his return.



Stockdale Shot Down over North Vietnam September 9, 1965: Entering the World of Epictetus

Stockdale: “On September 9, 1965, I flew at 500 knots right into a flak trap, at tree-top level, in a little A-4 airplane—the cockpit walls not even three feet apart—which I couldn’t steer after it was on fire, its control system shot out. After ejection I had about thirty seconds to make my last statement in freedom before I landed in the main street of a little village right ahead. And so help me, I whispered to myself, “Five years down there, at least. I’m leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus.”



Medal of Honor Citation

Recognized by his captors as the leader in the Prisoners' War resistance to interrogation and in their refusal to participate in propaganda exploitation, Read Adm. Stockdale was singled out for interrogation and attendant torture....Stockdale resolved to make himself a symbol of resistance regardless of personal sacrifice. He deliberately inflicted a near-mortal wound to his person in order to convince his captors of his willingness to give up his life rather than capitulate....[T]he North Vietnamese...convinced of his indomitable spirit, abated in their employment of excessive harassment and torture toward all of the Prisoners of War.



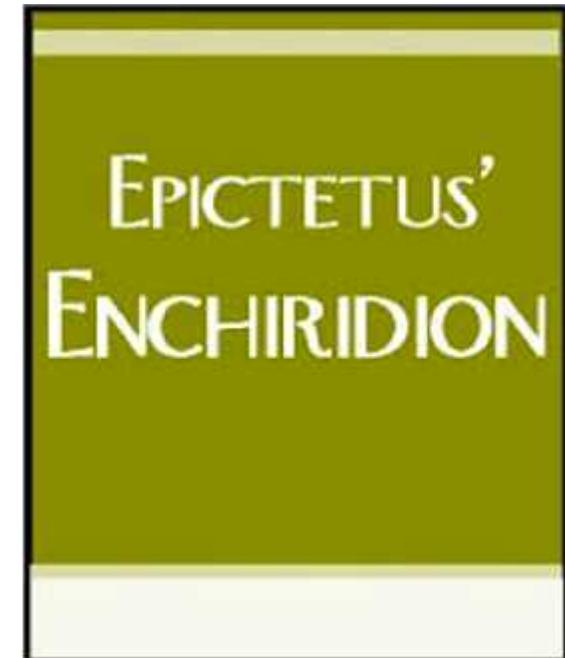
Stockdale's Intellectual Development

- Naval Academy graduate with heavy emphasis on science and technology
- Aviator, Instructor Pilot, Test Pilot
- In short: almost entirely educated in technical subjects
- In 1959, Navy sent him to Stanford to study international relations and economics
- Kept asking questions and being deflected by Economics faculty saying, “Well, we’re getting into philosophy now” – much to his frustration
- So, he went to the Philosophy department and asked to read philosophy



The Effect of Philosophy on Stockdale

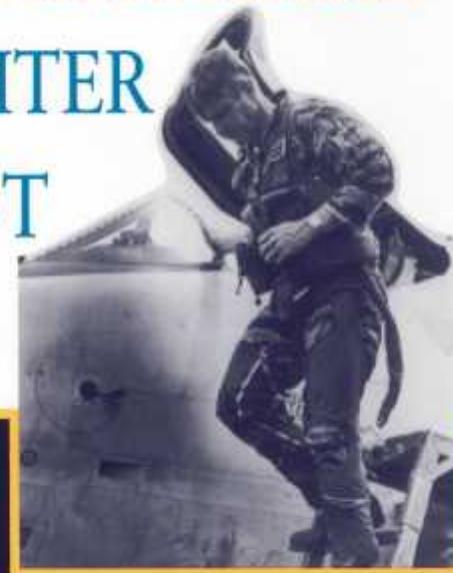
- Credited the study of philosophy – especially the Roman Stoic Epictetus – with giving him the inner strength and perspective to survive the Prisoner of War Experience. Kept Stoic writings and Homer by his bedside, even on aircraft carriers, and read them for several hours every week.
- Main themes for him: “life isn’t fair” “optimism kills” “the pressure cooker” “character is more important than technical competence”





Stockdale Reflections

THOUGHTS OF A
PHILOSOPHICAL
FIGHTER
PILOT



JIM STOCKDALE



Stockdale's Reflections on the Effect of Philosophical Study

I think it was obvious to my close friends, and certainly to me, that I was a changed man and, I have to say, a better man for my introduction to philosophy and especially to Epictetus. I was on a different track—certainly not an antimilitary track but to some extent an antiorganization track.... I had become a man detached—not aloof but detached—able to throw out the book without the slightest hesitation when it no longer matched the external circumstances .



Stockdale Course Readings

- Stockdale himself, along with Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius
- Plato (Apology, Crito, Euthyphro, Republic selections)
- Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics selections
- Selections from the Bible, Thomas Aquinas, Soren Kierkegaard
- Karl Marlantes, “What it is Like to Go to War”
- The Bhagavad Gita (Hindu classic)
- Mill “On Liberty”
- US Declaration of Independence, Constitution, UN Charter
- Nietzsche, Camus, Dostoyevsky



Stockdale Comments on “The Stockdale Course”

We studied moral philosophy by looking at models of human beings under pressure, their portraits drawn from the best materials we could find in philosophy and literature. The professional implications for military men and women followed. We did not have to draw diagrams; the military implications came up naturally in seminar discussions



Stockdale on What's Most Important

Character is probably more important than knowledge....Of course, all things equal, knowledge is to be honored....But what I'm saying is that whenever I've been in trouble spots – in crises (and I've been in a lot of trouble and in a lot of crises) – the *sine qua non* of a leader has lain not in his chesslike grasp of issues and the options the portend, not in his style of management, not in his skill in processing information, but in his having the character, the heart, to deal spontaneously, honorable, and candidly with people, perplexities, and principles.



Questions left from the Stockdale legacy

- How do we balance the operational and technical training necessary for the military to function with the reflective self-exploration he advocates?
- What place do the humanities have in development of military personnel?
- How do we design true education, in addition of training, into military organizations the development of military leaders?
- To what degree is combating the somewhat natural anti-intellectualism of military culture a necessity for proper development of military leaders?



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