

Remarks by Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale
Statue Dedication Ceremony
U.S. Naval Academy
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Stockdale family, Medal of Honor recipients, former POWs, Admiral Fowler, Mr. Perot, ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be here.

It would be difficult to imagine a better example of leadership, courage, and moral excellence than the example set by Vice Admiral James Stockdale.

In contemporary jargon, Admiral Stockdale, not only talked the talk, but, more importantly, he walked the walk of a leader during his entire professional and personal life.

The more one studies his life, and the more one reads his writings, the more one comes away with the conviction that Admiral Stockdale was the sort of man that comes along very seldom in life.

He not only had a profound impact on his contemporaries, but he left behind a legacy that will influence generations to come.

It is most appropriate that a statue of Admiral Stockdale be placed here, in front of Luce Hall where ethics are taught to midshipmen, at a school whose mission it is to mold future leaders.

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If Admiral Stockdale were here with us today, I believe that it would give him immense pride in seeing this gathering, and knowing that this statue will play a role in guiding and inspiring future leaders in the Navy and Marine Corps.

Admiral Stockdale credited his own experience at the U.S. Naval Academy as having molded his character, and as having helped him survive seven and a half years in Hoa Lo prison—four of which were in solitary confinement.

He specifically cited the stern discipline and demanding environment of his plebe year as invaluable.

He said that it helped him develop the mental toughness he needed when coping

with his Vietnamese torturers.

Admiral Stockdale graduated from the Naval Academy in 1947, with leadership skills that served him well as one of the Nation's finest pilots.

He was so exceptional as a pilot and as a leader that he was accepted into the Navy Test Pilot School at NAS Patuxent River, Maryland in 1954.

As a Naval Aviator, he excelled.

As a leader, he stood out.

As a test pilot, he had to assess an aircraft's performance in situations that were outside the envelope of previous experience, and he was often faced with a decision-making window that afforded little margin for error.

This experience helped him develop a mindset that he could handle the most difficult challenges.

This self-confidence would serve him well in the years to come.

Admiral Stockdale was also blessed with great intellectual gifts, and in 1957 he was selected to enter the master's degree program in international relations at Stanford University.

At Stanford, he studied the classical philosophy of the stoics, particularly that of the Roman philosopher Epictetus.

The lessons of Epictetus would later become his constant companions through many days of unimaginable physical suffering, loneliness, and fear as a prisoner of war.

Little did he know how important his studies at Stanford would become.

By the time Admiral Stockdale's plane was shot down in September 1965, he had been tested in countless ways—at Annapolis, in test pilot school, and in combat missions over Vietnam.

In Hoa Lo prison, Admiral Stockdale was one of eleven Americans living in tiny windowless boxes, most of the time in leg irons.

Admiral Stockdale was a 41-year old Navy commander, and he was the senior man.

He was expected to be the leader.

He vowed never to let his fellow American prisoners down, and he accepted the burdens of leadership stoically.

He organized a system of communications between prisoners, and he instituted a culture of defiance towards his captors.

Admiral Stockdale and the other prisoners used a tap code as a method of communicating by tapping on the prison cell walls.

Whenever the prisoners were caught using their covert communications methods, they were beaten and tortured—especially Admiral Stockdale, who was singled out for his constant resistance.

The goal of his tormentors was not to extract information.

It was to discourage the other POW's.

And even more insidiously, the goal was to get the inmates to falsely confess to crimes they had not committed.

They hoped to create doubt about the war effort among Americans back home through television broadcasts of such coerced “confessions.”

Ironically, those communists understood the critical role of public opinion in a democracy.

As did Admiral Stockdale.

And so he resisted.

Throughout the long years of isolation and confinement in a North Vietnamese political prison, he never broke faith with his country.

He had a deep and abiding attachment to America that none of his torturers could break.

He sacrificed and suffered so much for a reason.

He believed in America and what it stood for.

And as a U.S. Naval officer, he believed in the Navy's core values, with honor at the top of the list.

In fact, in his writings about his experience as a prisoner of war, his daily battles were almost exclusively concerned about one thing—how to maintain his honor.

As a prisoner of war, he believed that, in his words, “the best defense is to keep your conscience clean. When we did something we were ashamed of, and our captors realized we were ashamed of it, we were in trouble.”

Admiral Stockdale protected his honor to the limits of his endurance, and he encouraged his fellow prisoners to do the same.

As one of his fellow captives said, “Jim inspired us to do things we never believed we were capable of. Without him, I certainly wouldn’t have made it out of prison with my honor intact.”

For Admiral Stockdale, the price of honor was always worth paying.

It is telling what so many of Admiral Stockdale’s fellow prisoners have said about what his leadership meant to them.

He inspired them by his example.

By his constant encouragement, he made them understand that they were not alone.

By his protests and outrageous defiance, he showed them that they were not powerless.

By his actions and his indomitable spirit, he reminded them that they had a leader.

He gave them hope.

He made them understand that they could survive this terrible ordeal.

Their limited communications to each other was a lifeline, sustaining them during endless hours of despair.

The prisoners were kept isolated from each other, and it was not until the prisoners were just about to be released that they were able to mingle and speak to each other freely.

Marine Colonel Orson Swindle finally got a chance to thank Admiral Stockdale personally at this time, and he told him, “When you moved into that cell, you saved my life by yourself and by your leadership.”

Admiral Stockdale’s experience in captivity left him with a passionate interest in leadership, and it was one of his favorite topics as President of the Naval War College.

During his lifetime, generations of midshipmen followed the program of ethics and leadership that he designed.

He made it one of his missions in life to talk about military leadership at every opportunity.

Some of the leadership traits he liked to discuss were compassion, spontaneity,

bravery, self-discipline, honesty, and above all, integrity.

Of his own experience as a leader in prison, Admiral Stockdale wrote:

“I believe that I had the easiest leadership job in the world: to maintain the organization, resistance and spirit of ten of the finest men I have ever known.”

That is the kind of leader Admiral Stockdale was.

That is the kind of leader the U.S. Naval Academy produced, and that is the kind of leader our Nation will always honor.

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And so today, with this statue, we honor a great leader, a man who will serve as the ultimate example and role model for all who come here, and absorb his lessons.

Throughout Admiral Stockdale’s long life—a life marked by countless awards, distinctions, and achievements—he lived honorably.

His moral compass was always sure, his passions always in service to noble ideals, and his character always his greatest, most precious asset.

May God bless him, his family, the brigade of midshipmen, and may God bless America.