Admiral John Richardson, CNO
Stockdale Leadership Awards Presentation Ceremony
3 November 2017

Admiral Richardson: I can’t think of a more fitting ceremony for an award like the Stockdale Award, and I just want to talk about why the Stockdale Award is one of my favorites. For three reasons:

One reason is that it is focused on command. And command is the thing that makes the Navy run. It is the coin of the realm in military operations. And it is not only about command, but it is pretty much nominated and run by commanders. This is a peer-nominated award. Your fellow commanders have to nominate you to receive this award, and then there’s a selection process. So the combination of that, focus on command and then commanders nominating their fellows, really makes this a very unique award.

Second, of course, it bears the name of James Bond Stockdale. We’ll talk a little bit about that.

And third, when you talk about the Stockdales, you are talking about not only a magnificent naval officer, but you are talking about really an investment by a Navy family, and we’ll talk a little bit about that.

So I talked about this peer nomination. These two leaders distinguished themselves amongst their peers to the point that their fellows felt motivated to stand them out, and that in and of itself is a true testament, just the quality of this award.

A second reason, Admiral Stockdale. Just a few words about him and what this award symbolizes by taking his name on. As you all know, Admiral Stockdale wrote prolifically throughout his career, talked a lot about what he thought about command, and he had command under some of the most trying circumstances, and he saw command in terms of three roles. A teacher, a jurist, -- I’m sorry, more roles than three. A moralist, a steward and a philosopher. And if you’ve read any of Admiral Stockdale’s works, you know that he was a philosopher himself, heavily influenced by the stoic philosophers, a scholar of Epictetus, a scholar of Marcus Aurelius, all of those stoics. And he wrote a lot about what he learned about those and how they served him in commands.
And the stoics were very clear about a few things. We’ll just boil down stoic philosophy into a few take-aways.

First of all, according to the stoics, there’s really no such thing as good news or bad news, there’s just news. And I’ll tell you, that’s helped me a lot. [Laughter]. I just keep telling myself, okay -- somebody comes in, hey, I’ve got some bad news. Nope, just news. Okay? Although I wish more people came in and said I have some good news. [Laughter].

Then another part about the stoic philosophy is the first question any stoic approach would ask is, hey, what part of this scenario, what part of this situation, what part of this news that you’re giving me is under my control, and what part is clearly outside of my control? And it simplifies things so much. There’s really not a need to spend a tremendous amount of intellectual or physical energy getting worked up about something that’s beyond our control. You just need to concentrate on those things that you can influence.

This approach, this stoic approach, served Admiral Stockdale so well, particularly during his time in the Hanoi Hilton as the senior prisoner of war there. And he quickly set aside those aspects of that situation over which he truly just had no control, and set about taking charge of those things that he could and leading that group of prisoners and also, remarkably, those prisoners’ families back home. If you think about that leadership challenge, when you’re in solitary confinement in a prison camp overseas. And he knew from the start that the key to command, the key to leadership in any situation is communication.

So again, imagine yourself in that prison where everybody is in isolation by design, to break down the lines of communication. And one of, in fact the captors set up many measures to prevent any kind of communication between the prisoners. And just getting the simplest word out to your fellow prisoners, your command, and then back home. Not only a technically challenging risk, but also a very dangerous risk because the captors would punish that. But he knew that it was absolutely imperative to have a way to talk to his people in order to have command. Command is about communication. And in order to exercise those five roles of a leader.

So he took great risk, he and his fellow prisoners, and they devised this code to communicate, the tap code, which I know so many of us are familiar with, that they could figure out how to
talk to one another, they could have a sense of mutual command and mutual effort. It was that communication between the prisoners, if you listen to the stories of those folks, those heroes, that was the thing that got them through.

And as I said, it included communication back home which brings me to sort of the third dimension of this award that I like so much, is that it’s about the Stockdale family. There’s this terrific book that Admiral and Mrs. Stockdale wrote called “In Love and War”. And Sybil Stockdale as just as much a hero as Admiral Stockdale. A remarkable woman. So this is right on cue. We’re talking about families, and there the family rolls in, which is terrific.

I’ll tell you, Sybil was a remarkable woman in and of herself. Understanding the risks that her husband was accepting, and she found ways to communicate back and forth. There was a line of communication between the two of them. And in doing so, communicating from the Admiral to Sybil, out to the families, they were able to resolve some of the just tremendous uncertainty that existed in that family community back home who in many cases truly didn’t know whether their husband was alive or dead.

And Mrs. Stockdale was under tremendous stress herself. I mean she was running a family, and the Stockdale family at the time consisted of four boys who were right at that age where boys are amazingly challenging, right? So not only did she have this need to lead her community back home, but also her family.

And so she found the strength. Once she got the word that Admiral Stockdale was confirmed as a prisoner of war, and she herself went out and basically stared down both United States and world leadership, staring down the North Vietnamese at the Paris Peace Talks, sometimes staring down our leaders back home, insisting that the story of those prisoners got out. And they were standing the watch while their husbands were held captive in North Vietnam.

So for all of those reasons, this is just an amazingly special award because in the person of Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale and Sybil, you get so much about what is the essence of command.

And if I could, there’s a number of Stockdale winners in the room, I think. Could I ask all the Stockdale Award winners, former Stockdale Award winners to stand up and be recognized?
So in 2015 at Sybil Stockdale’s funeral at the Naval Academy, I met Dr. James Bond Stockdale, III. So this is Admiral Stockdale’s son. And we did the same thing. We had a point at which all the Stockdale Award winners, former, were there. And Dr. Stockdale, it was a very poignant moment for him. He said it just didn’t hit me until right now that there is this fraternity, this group of people out there that by virtue of receiving this award are a living and lasting tribute to both my father and my mother. And so it’s terrific to see you two joining that living tribute.

For all the winners, including our two new winners, recipients of this award, you do have a tremendous responsibility to carry on and live up to what this means, to have this award named after the Stockdales.

So it’s a super special award for many, many reasons and our award recipients, we couldn’t have chosen better in terms of two people to carry on this legacy of the Stockdales.

I’ll just close it up. I’ll bet a pay check that these two terrific leaders when they get a chance to talk will both say that their award is a reflection of the performance of their entire team, but today we take some time to acknowledge them, to acknowledge their role in leading that team. They’ve achieved this remarkable success that would make Admiral and Mrs. Stockdale very very proud indeed.

So thank you for the privilege of presenting this award.

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