

a son comes

Taylor Stockdale returns to the site of his
father's capture and imprisonment during the Vietnam War

full circle



A VIETNAM

For most Americans over the age of 40, it is a shared, indelible memory: the returning Vietnam POW, landing on American soil and crossing the tarmac to an open-armed outburst of affection from his family. Across the country, the scene replayed itself — gaunt, valiant men met with joyous embraces and unrestrained admiration. Tears of exuberance, mixed with relief, disbelief and raw emotion defined these reunions for a generation. They were the first of their kind to be broadcast on television — to interrupt regular programming and create a collective welcoming home for the citizenry.

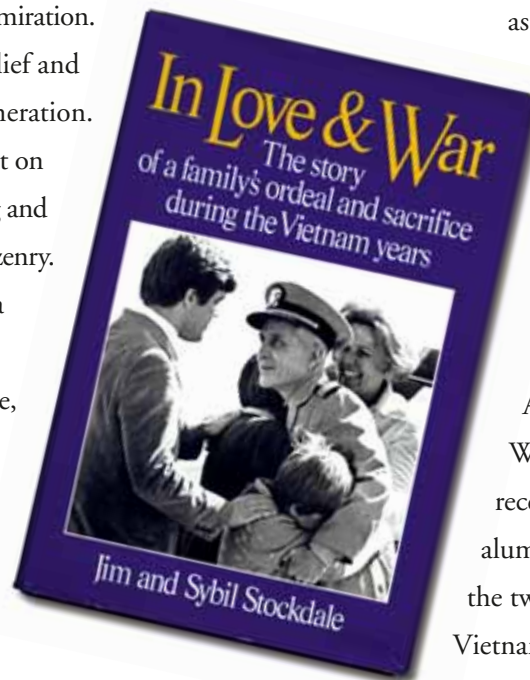
On some level, everyone felt they were a part of it.

On a very personal level, Taylor Stockdale, Webb's Director of Institutional Advancement, was a part of it. He was the little boy with a cast on his wrist, head buried in the fold of his father's elbow, his own arms struggling to encircle the man he had not seen for eight years, his father navy fighter pilot James Bond Stockdale.

Admiral Stockdale is one of the most highly decorated officers in the history of the United States Navy. Among his 26 personal combat decorations is the Congressional Medal of Honor, awarded him in 1976 for his heroic leadership of American prisoners of war in Hanoi during his nearly eight years of captivity, and four Silver Star Medals. A 1947 graduate of the Naval Academy, Admiral Stockdale served two combat tours in Vietnam before his plane was shot down in 1965.

Taylor Stockdale was three years old, the youngest of four sons, when his father, then a commander, was declared "missing in action" on September 9, 1965, (though he was immediately taken prisoner, Admiral

← *Stockdale standing in cell block 3 at the Hao Lo (Hanoi Hilton) Prison — the very room where his father spent his first night of captivity.*



Stockdale was not listed as "captured" until July 29, 1966. He was the 26th American captive in the war).

"I was so young when my dad left for Vietnam, I really grew up into the experience," said Stockdale.

"I didn't know life any other way than having a father as a POW and spending every

Christmas with local news vans parked outside our house filming 'one more Christmas without dad' scenes."

Last fall, Stockdale traveled to Hong Kong with Director of Admission Leo Marshall to greet Webb alumni and parents at a reception and to visit with Webb alumni in the area. On October 30, the two men boarded a Nippon-Vietnam airplane for a bumpy flight that took them southwest along the Chinese coastline into the same airspace from which his father was shot down. Two hours later, the plane descended through the clouds and landed in Hanoi.

"I had always wanted to see firsthand where my father had been all those years," explained Stockdale. "I'd constantly imagined it as a kid, and promised myself that one day, I would go there myself and see, feel and touch it."

In the following excerpts from his travel journal, Stockdale describes his incredible journey of nearly 40 years and 8,000 miles to forge an unforgettable bond with his father.

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“I understood my dad’s experience and could see him there in that setting, inspiring his men to take on their captors with dignity and pride.”

“As we broke through the clouds at a low altitude, I was struck by how primitive the landscape of Vietnam was with rice fields and tiny homes and villages scattered throughout the countryside. It was a bizarre sensation, flying from Hong Kong, one of the most modern metropolises in the world, to such an archaic looking place just a short distance away.”

Though the pair arrived early in the evening at the Hanoi Opera House Hilton, Stockdale soon realized that he couldn’t stand being in Hanoi and not seeing the prison where his father had been incarcerated, at least from the outside. Stockdale and Marshall set off by foot to track down the prison.

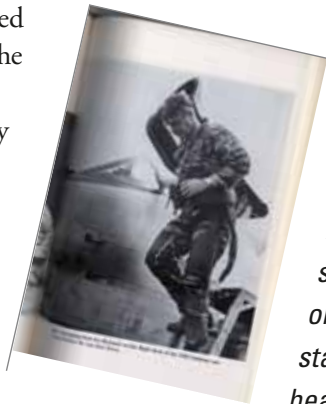
“Our walk down one of Hanoi’s main streets was pretty fascinating. The city seems to have one foot in the 19th century, and one in the 21st. The streets were absolutely littered with mopeds and motor scooters. We walked through a very high-end art gallery, and then just next door there was a restaurant, which consisted of people sitting on plastic stools on the sidewalk eating pig knuckles.

“When we arrived at the Hoa Lo Prison (often referred to by the media as the Hanoi Hilton) about 20 minutes later, I was impressed by how central it was in Hanoi. Leo and I walked down a small side street to the main entrance.

“There was a small ‘peep’ hole in the door. I put my eyes up to the hole, trying to look inside, and I was startled to see a Vietnamese man staring right back at me. Before I could even tell Leo what had happened, the main door was pushed open from the inside. There, a guard doing the night shift signaled for us to come in and was clearly asking for money (in Vietnamese). No doubt, he had done this before. I gave him twenty dollars and he allowed us to walk freely through the prison. It was a fascinating do-it-yourself evening tour.

“I didn’t have my dad’s book with me (In Love and War, which Admiral Stockdale co-authored with his wife, Sybil) — it has all of the maps of where he was imprisoned. I ended up using the evening as a way of getting acclimated to the prison grounds. It was an incredibly powerful couple of hours.

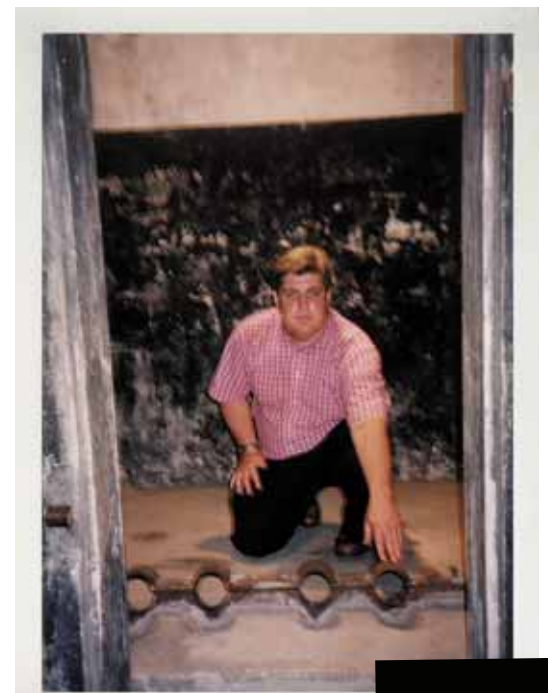
“After wandering around various passage ways, which at night was more than a little eerie, we found ourselves in the leg iron room known by the United States POWs as the Mint (for reference purposes, the POW’s named areas of the Hoa Lo Prison after Las Vegas casinos). At one point, I had Leo close the cell door and shut off the lights. I put on the leg irons and lay flat on the slab and stared at the ceiling my dad had stared at for so many years. I was struck by how heavy the leg irons were, and how excruciating his pain must have been putting them on with his swelled up leg and ankle (injured in the flight ejection after being shot down). I also found it interesting that the floor slanted downward slightly, so that over time a prisoner’s blood would rush to his head.



James Stockdale exiting his A-4 jet just days prior to being shot down.



The leg room at Hao Lo Prison where Stockdale and comrades spent many days and nights.





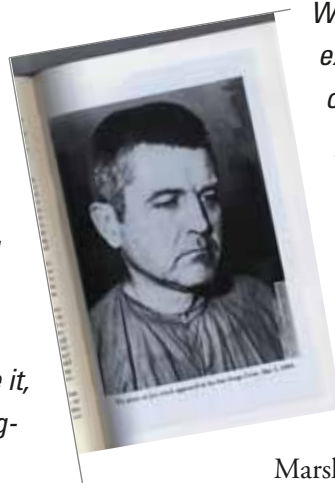
↑ Taylor posing with local Tinh Gia villagers and “the old man.”
The photo of Jim which appeared in the San Diego Union, May 2, 1966.



“I was surprised by how vividly you could hear the sounds of Hanoi in the background — the horns and general city bustling was faded to be sure, but you knew you were in the midst of a city while lying there. Hanoi must have been much quieter in the 1960s, but I was also thinking of how loud the Hanoi bombings must have been to the prisoners in late 1972.

“More than anything though, from an emotional standpoint, I felt a curious sensation of complete satisfaction in being there — a place I had only imagined since my early childhood. To actually see it, feel it, smell it, proved truly cathartic, a ‘life-coming-full-circle’ feeling I wasn’t at all expecting. For the first time I understood my dad’s experience and could just see him there in that setting, inspiring his men to take on their captors with dignity and pride. It just seemed so natural somehow. This was his place.”

The next day Stockdale and Marshall returned to the prison with their 25-year old, bilingual tour guide Thrung who specializes in American POW sites. They revisited the rooms they had seen the night before and actually stood in the cells where Stockdale’s father was incarcerated.



“The cell walls were incredibly thick, and I wondered how they ever managed to have a tap code (the secret method of communication between POWs). But when Leo went on one side of a cell wall and I went on the other, I put my ear flush up to the wall while he tapped with his bare knuckle and heard his taps clearly. (The prisoners used their cups as make-shift hearing pieces on the receiving end for even better reception).

“We then went to Room 18 where my dad was brutally tortured, and the room in which he earned his Medal of Honor by slitting his wrists with broken panes of French windows once he felt he was giving up too much information. Oddly enough, this is the room that they now use as a reception room for the museum. As we were about to leave, a large group of Vietnamese Vietnam War veterans was coming in for a tour. We met them in the courtyard. No words were exchanged, but I did manage to take a picture of them. I kept thinking about my dad 30-plus years ago. Who could have ever imagined that I’d be here, strolling freely throughout the grounds and photographing his enemy? It was surreal.”

Stockdale and his guide also drove to other prison sites in Hanoi that afternoon and then the following morning Stockdale,

Marshall, Thrung and their driver traveled to the village where his father’s plane had been shot down. During the four-plus hour drive, the group listened to Stockdale read aloud from the chapter in his dad’s book on his shoot down. Admiral Stockdale ejected from his A-4 Skyhawk over Tinh Gia, just after dropping his bombs on a railroad track north of town. That fateful September morning, he had been hoping to lead his squadron in an attack on the infamous Dragon Jaw Bridge, a key bridge just north of the city of Thanh Hoa, but they were fogged out and had to choose secondary targets.

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The group stopped and toured the Dragon Jaw Bridge and then made their way to the town of Thanh Hoa where Admiral Stockdale spent his first night after being shot down. He had been taken to a small medical clinic where a primitive doctor almost amputated his injured leg. Through hand signals and intense pleading, Admiral Stockdale managed to convince the doctor to leave the leg attached shortly before he was put under by anesthetic.

“Upon my father’s homecoming, I remember vividly his story of that first night — how much sheer pain he was in, how scared he was, rats and large bugs crawling up the walls of the clinic. So the town interested me.”

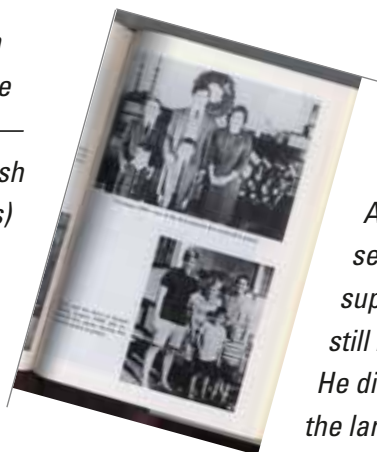
The group continued on to the little village of Tinh Gia where Thrung found a number of villagers who recalled and described the only plane to be shot down in the area. The villagers described the Admiral’s wounded leg and wearing his flight suit around town (he was beaten and stripped after he parachuted down near the village). One person in particular was very articulate (in Vietnamese of course) about the incident, a villager who was eight years old at the time.

“This villager was on the work crew which actually cleaned up the aircraft wreckage in the early 1990s. He was tall and seemed very nice — of course, no one in the village spoke any English at all. He and some of his friends (and their kids) accompanied Thrung back to the car. We all walked through a large rice field on a thin trail that seemed right out of the past — with water buffalo and workers with bamboo hats tilling and plowing the wet soil.

“After about a quarter mile, we arrived at the villager’s home. We sat on small crates in the living room. Vietnamese was spoken, and tea was served. While this was going on, the villager was looking in drawers and cabinets around the house — trying to find a small piece of shrapnel from the plane. I was crushed when he informed me (through Thrung) that he couldn’t find any.



↑ (right to left): Stockdale, holding the part from his father’s plane, with the “old man” and his grandson who was 8 years-old when Stockdale’s father was shot down and who later helped clean up the plane’s wreckage.



As it turns out, he and his family had been selling the small pieces over the years and their supply was completely depleted. He thought he still had some pieces left, but was mistaken. He did tell me, however, that he had given some of the larger pieces of the plane to his grandfather about 10 years ago, and he believed his grandfather still had one of the pieces at his home.

“After more tea and conversation, we decided to visit his grandfather, who lived a little over a mile away. We walked back through the rice fields to the car. The villager got in the front, and Leo, Thrung and I squeezed in the back. The villager looked nervous and started talking

Vietnamese rapidly. Thrung informed us that the villager had never been in a car before. He felt the air conditioning with complete amazement, and waved at his friends as though he was just taking off on an amusement park ride.

“The grandfather’s home was nestled in a bamboo forest. It seemed to be right out of a Hollywood set — a very nice layout with two small homes and large patio, covered with tropical trees. Most of the homes in the village were made of heavy stone with ornate carvings. The interiors, however, were modest.

“More family members and friends arrived. After a lot of meeting and greeting, we sat down on small benches and stools in the living room. The grandfather finally appeared — he looked good — probably 80 years old and I’d be surprised if he weighed as much. Again, only Vietnamese was spoken. Thrung finally turned to me and said ‘they’re saying that your father’s plane part is the table’ and pointed to the living room table. I was taken aback, as the table was clearly made of wood. ‘They’re saying to look underneath the wood top’ (people were talking and motioning upside down). I looked underneath and sure enough, it was solid stainless steel metal in the shape of a bass drum frame.

“Before I could say anything, the family members, at the direction of the grandfather, ripped the wood top off the metal. The old man handed me the part to hold. We took some photos of me holding the part with him. I thought to myself — how much money do I have — I’ll pay anything for this. I spoke to Thrung, and told him to tell the old man that I would be very interested in buying the part. The old man spoke to Thrung in Vietnamese for what seemed like a solid minute. Thrung then interpreted to me something to the effect of: ‘He says that he does not want money — that he wants you and your father to have the part. You have come a long way and it would be his great honor to give it to you. Your father is a very brave man in your country and he deserves this part of his plane.’

“I was completely stunned by this. Thrung laughed at my expression. I said I was just overwhelmed by his perspective and graciousness. The old man and I hugged and took more photos, and I gave him some gifts.”

The group traveled to the site where the plane crashed and where Admiral Stockdale landed. The villager explained to the group that the wreckage had been cleaned up in its entirety about 10 years ago. Before then, no one was allowed to go near the plane parts and occasionally, members of the government came and took pieces away. Stockdale did find some small metal shreds laying about but that was it.

“We then hiked up a steep hill; from the top you could clearly see the Tonkin Gulf not more than a mile away. Thrung and the villager chatted a bit and Thrung finally said my dad landed in this vicinity. My heart completely sank. My dad landed in the middle of a road — one which was going north-south about a kilometer from the main road, Rte. 1. After all this — somehow we had the wrong plane. I can’t even describe the disappointment. But then Thrung kept talking to the villager who was motioning ‘over the hill, over the hill’... and made hand gestures of the parachute floating down the other side of the hill. We walked a bit



↑ Stockdale standing in the spot just outside of Tinh Gia where his father landed by parachute after being shot down.



Stockdale thanks the "old man" for giving him the final remnants of his father's A-4 jet.

Hanoi's Gia Lam airport, February 12, 1973. Jim being escorted from Rabbit's release gate to a waiting Air Force jet for the flight to Manila and home.



through the thick eucalyptus trees to where the villager was pointing, and low and behold, at the base of the hill beneath the heavy tree cover was a dirt road, and it fit my dad's description to a tee. It ran north-south, it ran on the side of what resembled an airstrip, and it was at the base of a steep hill, something my dad recalls seeing after landing in his parachute.

"The villager then described what it was like — how crowded it was that day and how chaotic it was. Everyone in the village came running out of their homes when they heard the 'boom' of the plane being hit. They chased the parachute to where it landed, and the villager remembered running up and over that hill tracking my dad's flight. He also described how loud the plane was when it hit the ground. By the time my dad actually landed (he even described part of my dad's chute getting caught in a tree), everyone was there. Soon, army officials were on the scene and order was restored. I was

completely mesmerized by his story. It stopped there. I wanted him to keep going but that was it.

"As we stood in the road, some other villagers came over and joined us (young and old). They too described it — one motioning to his leg about my dad's injury, and others saying yeah, yeah — in Vietnamese, clearly agreeing with this man. Someone else spoke to Thrung — talked about how they stripped my dad and wore the flight suit around the town for months after the shoot down.

"After some time, an older villager showed up who was obviously drunk. He was being kept back from me and Leo and yelling at us. This was the only time I felt unsafe. Thrung told me later that what he was saying was that we shouldn't be there, taking pictures, etc. and wanted everyone to beat us up. He was obviously drunk and no one seemed to listen to him; but it was clearly time to go so we walked back to the car and drove off."



The next morning, Stockdale and Marshall flew home to California. Stockdale checked the plane part in as luggage and it made it to Los Angeles and through customs without any problems. Though Admiral Stockdale had previously returned to Vietnam with a Stanford

Alumni group and cruised up the Tonkin Gulf where he gave a series of lectures of what it was like being the only aviator flying about the Tonkin Gulf incident (and in doing so shooting the first bullets of the Vietnam War), he was not able to visit the prison in Hanoi as it was not open to tourists at the time.

According to Stockdale, his father seemed “extremely relieved that a member of the family had seen firsthand what he went through.” Admiral Stockdale was astonished by the airplane piece which turned out to be part of the rear air compressor.

For the son, it was the adventure of a lifetime and brought a whole new appreciation for the sacrifice and courage of both of his parents. He later related his experience to students in a Chapel talk.

“Going over there as an adult really allowed me to come to terms with what my Dad went through. I’m now his age when he was shot down so I can appreciate where he was in his life — with his young family and his career. I can also begin to appreciate my Mom’s heroism in raising four young children alone, and all the while starting a national organization of the wives of POWs.”



“By going to Vietnam, I finally understood my father and his incredible experience there. I feel much closer to him as a result — and I’m really grateful I was able to do it while he is still living.” **W**

“I’d constantly imagined it as a kid, and promised myself one day, I would go over there and see, feel and touch it. And now that dream has come true.”

By Taylor Stockdale with Debbie Carini

If you would like to share a comment, Taylor Stockdale can be reached at tstockdale@webb.org.

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Almost 40 years later, Admiral Stockdale receives a piece of his jet that he hadn’t seen since being shot down on September 9, 1965.

