

**Stockdale on Stoicism II:
Master of My Fate**

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Foreword

This is the second in a series of Occasional Papers published by the Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics. It shares with the first occasional paper a common author—Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale—and a common theme—the influence of Stoic philosophy on Admiral Stockdale’s life and career.

As you read these two papers, you will realize that Admiral Stockdale’s own description of himself (in the title of one of his books) rings true: He *is* a “philosophical fighter pilot.”

In this second paper, Admiral Stockdale takes us deeply, perhaps uncomfortably deeply, into the Hanoi prison where he was held captive for seven and one-half years. This is Stoicism in practice, not just in theory. It is *living* philosophy, not just teaching it. This is *applied* ethics, not merely ethics in theory.

Early in 2001, the Naval Academy Alumni Association announced that Admiral Stockdale had been selected to receive the Association’s Distinguished Graduate Award. This prestigious award is given to a living graduate who has demonstrated a strong interest in supporting the Navy and the Naval Academy, has provided a lifetime of service to the nation, and has made significant contributions to the nation through public service.

This paper is a slightly edited version of an article by Admiral Stockdale that first appeared in the May 1995 issue of *The World and I* magazine. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of News World Communications, Inc.



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Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, USN, (RET.)

Vice Admiral Stockdale served on active duty in the regular Navy for 37 years, most of those years as a fighter pilot aboard aircraft carriers. Shot down on his third combat tour over North Vietnam, he was the senior naval prisoner of war in Hanoi for seven and one-half years - tortured 15 times, in solitary confinement for over four years, in leg irons for two.

When physical disability from combat wounds brought about Stockdale's military retirement, he had the distinction of being the only three-star officer in the history of the U.S. Navy to wear both aviator wings and the Medal of Honor. Included in his 26 other combat decorations are two Distinguished Flying Crosses, three Distinguished Service Medals, four Silver Star medals, and two Purple Hearts.

As a civilian, Stockdale has been a college president (a year as President of The Citadel), a college teacher (a lecturer in the philosophy department of Stanford University), and a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford for 15 years, a position from which he is now Emeritus. His writings all converge on the central theme of how man can rise in dignity to prevail in the face of adversity.

Besides numerous articles, he co-authored the book, *In Love and War*, with his wife, Sybil (Harper and Row, 1984), now in its second revised and updated edition (Naval Institute Press, 1990). NBC produced a dramatized version of this book which appeared in 1987, starring James Wood and Jane Alexander. Admiral Stockdale has also written two books of essays: *A Vietnam Experience: Ten Years of Reflection* (Hoover Press, 1984), and *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Hoover Press, 1995). Both of the latter won the Freedom Foundation at Valley Forge's George Washington Honor Medal for books.

Upon his retirement from the Navy in 1979, the Secretary of the Navy established the Vice Admiral James Stockdale Award for Inspirational Leadership, which is presented annually to two commanding officers, one in the Atlantic Fleet and one in the Pacific Fleet. In 1989, Monmouth College in his native state of Illinois, from which he entered the Naval Academy, named its student union "Stockdale Center." The following year he was made a 1990 Laureate of the Abraham Lincoln Academy in Illinois in ceremonies at the University of Chicago. He is an Honorary Fellow in the Society of Experimental Test Pilots. In 1993 he was inducted into the Carrier Aviation Hall of Fame, and in 1995 was enshrined in the U.S. Naval Aviation Hall of Honor at the National Museum of Aviation in Pensacola, Florida.

Admiral Stockdale holds honorary degrees.

Master of My Fate: A Stoic Philosopher in a Hanoi Prison

When I debated Al Gore and Dan Quayle on television in October 1992, as candidates for vice president, I began my remarks with two questions that are perennially debated by every thinking human being: Who am I? Why am I here? The questions were relevant in terms of the evening's purpose, which was to introduce myself and let the American people know where I was coming from. But I also chose them for their broader relevance to my life: I am a philosopher.

I came to the philosophic life as a 38-year-old Navy pilot in graduate school at Stanford University. I had been in the Navy for 20 years and scarcely ever out of a cockpit. In 1962, I began my second year of studying international relations so I could become a strategic planner in the Pentagon. But my heart wasn't in it. Then I cruised into Stanford's philosophy corner one winter morning and met Philip Rhinelander, dean of humanities and sciences, who taught Philosophy 6, "The Problems of Good and Evil." Within 15 minutes, we had agreed that I would enter his two-term course in the middle. To make up for my lack of background, I would meet him for an hour a week for a private tutorial in the study of his campus home.

Phil Rhinelander opened my eyes. In that study, it all happened for me—my inspiration, my dedication to the philosophic life. From then on, I was out of international relations and into philosophy. We went from Job to Socrates to Aristotle to Descartes. And then on to Kant, Hume, Dostoevsky, Camus. On my last session, he reached high on his wall of books and brought down a copy of the *Enchiridion*. He said, "I think you'll be interested in this."

Epictetus and the *Enchiridion*

Enchiridion means "ready at hand." In other words, it is a handbook. Its author, Epictetus, was a very unusual man of intelligence and sensitivity who gleaned wisdom rather than bitterness from his early first-hand exposure to extreme cruelty, the abuse of power, and self-indulgent debauchery.

Epictetus was born a slave around 50 A.D. At 15 he was sold at a slave auction in Rome to Epaphroditus, a secretary to Emperor Nero. When Epaphroditus helped Nero complete his suicide attempt, Epictetus was able to venture out on his own. (Editor's Note: For a detailed description of

Epictetus's background, see *Stockdale on Stoicism I: The Stoic Warrior's Triad*, Occasional Paper Number One in this series.)

Being a serious and doubtless disgusted young man, he gravitated to the high-minded public lectures of the Stoic teachers who were then the philosophers of Rome. Epictetus eventually became apprenticed to the very best Stoic in the empire, Musonius Rufus. After ten or more years of study, he achieved the status of philosopher in his own right. With that came true freedom, and the preciousness of that was duly celebrated by the former slave. In his works, individual freedom is praised about seven times more frequently than it is in the New Testament. The Stoics held that all human beings were equal in the eyes of God: male and female, black and white, slave and free.

Epictetus speaks like a modern person, using "living speech," not the literary Attic Greek we are used to in men of that tongue. The *Enchiridion* was actually penned not by Epictetus, who was above all else a determined teacher and man of modesty who would never take the time to transcribe his own lectures, but by one of his most meticulous and determined students, Arrian, who, with Epictetus's consent, took down his words verbatim. Arrian bound the lectures into books; in the two years that he was enrolled in Epictetus's school, he filled eight books. Arrian put the *Enchiridion* together as highlighted extractions "for the busy man." That last morning, Rhinelander told me, "As a military man, I think you'll have special interest in this. Frederick the Great never went on a campaign without a copy of this handbook in his kit."

Stoicism is a noble philosophy that has proven to be more practicable than a modern cynic would expect. The Stoic viewpoint is often misunderstood because the casual reader misses the point—that all talk is in reference to the "inner life." Stoics belittle physical harm, but this is not braggadocio. They are speaking of it in comparison to the devastating agony of shame they fancied good men generating when they knew in their hearts that they had failed to do their duty *vis-à-vis* their fellow men or God. Though pagan, the Stoics had a monotheistic natural religion and were great contributors to Christian thought. The fatherhood of god and the brotherhood of man were Stoic concepts prior to Christianity. In fact, Chrysippus, one of their early theoreticians, made the analogy of what might be called the soul of the universe to the breath of a human (*pneuma*, in Greek). Saint Paul, a Hellenized Jew brought up in Tarsus, a Stoic town in Asia Minor, always used the Greek word *pneuma*, or breath, for soul.

The Stoic demand for disciplined thought naturally won only a small minority to its standard, but those few were the strongest characters of that time. In theory a doctrine of pitiless perfectionism, Stoicism actually created men of courage, saintliness, and goodwill. Rhinelander singled out three examples: Cato the Younger, Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. Cato was the great Roman Republican who pitted himself against Julius Caesar. He was the unmistakable hero of our own George Washington; scholars find quotations of Cato in Washington's Farewell Address—without quotation marks. Emperor Marcus Aurelius took the Roman Empire to the pinnacle of its power and influence. And Epictetus, the great teacher, played his part in changing the leadership of Rome from the swill he had known under Nero to the power and decency it knew under Marcus Aurelius.

Epictetus drew the same sort of audience Socrates had drawn 500 years earlier—young aristocrats destined for careers in finance, the arts, public service. The best families sent him their sons in their middle 20s—to be told what the good life consisted of, to be disabused of the idea that they deserved to become playboys, and to be taught that their job was to serve their fellow men.

Epictetus explained that his curriculum was not about “revenues or income, or peace or war, but about happiness and unhappiness, success and failure, slavery and freedom.” His model graduate was not a person “able to speak fluently about philosophic principles as an idle babbler, but about things that will do you good if your child dies, or your brother dies, or if you must die or be tortured. . . .Let others practice lawsuits, others study problems, others syllogisms; here you practice how to die, how to be enchained, how to be racked, how to be exiled.” A man is responsible for his own “judgments, even in dreams, in drunkenness, and in melancholy madness.” Each individual brings about his own good and his own evil, his good fortune, his ill fortune, his happiness, and his wretchedness. It is unthinkable that one man's error could cause another's suffering; suffering, like everything else in Stoicism, was all internal—remorse at destroying yourself.

Epictetus was telling his students that there can be no such thing as being the “victim” of another. You can only be a “victim” of yourself. It's all in how you discipline your mind. Who is your master? “He who has authority over any of the things on which you have set your heart. . . .What is the result at which all virtue aims? Serenity. . . .Show me a man who though sick is happy, who though in danger is happy, who though in prison is happy, and I'll show you a Stoic.”

Fighter Squadron Commander

When I got my degree, Sybil and I packed up our four sons and family belongings and headed to Southern California. Our new home was to be in Coronado. I was to take command of fighter squadron 51, flying supersonic F-8 Crusaders, at Miramar and at sea aboard carriers. Exactly three years after we drove out of our driveway in Los Altos Hills, I was shot down and captured.

I was not a bookworm throughout those three years before I was shot down; most of the time I was busy at sea in the western Pacific. I launched on three seven-month cruises, all centered on the buildup and explosions of the Southeast Asian war. I was in command throughout, the last cruise as the commander of the air wing on the *Oriskany*. I dropped the first bombs of the war into North Vietnam and flew more than 100 missions in the flak.

But I was a changed and better man for my introduction to philosophy, and especially to Epictetus. I was on a different track—certainly not an anti-military track, but to some extent an anti-organization track. Against the backdrop of all the posturing and fumbling that peacetime military organizations seem to have to go through, to accept the need for graceful and unself-conscious improvisation under pressure, to break away from set procedures, forces you to be reflective as you put a new mode of operation together. 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. I was able to put juniors over seniors without embarrassment when their wartime instincts were more reliable. This new abandon, this new built-in flexibility I had gained, was to pay off later in prison.

My bedside table on the ship was stacked not with busywork to impress my boss, but with Stoic readings: the *Discourses*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, recollections of Socrates, and of course, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Epictetus expected his students to be familiar with Homer's plots.

The Stoics were the ultimate warriors. The Roman Stoics coined the formula, *Vivere Militare!*—Life is being a soldier. Epictetus said in *Discourses*: “Do you not know that life is a soldier's service? One must keep guard, another go out to reconnoiter, another take the field. If you neglect your responsibilities when some severe order is laid upon you, do you not understand to what a pitiful state you bring the army in so far as in you lies?” *Enchiridion*:

Remember, you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses—if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, or a cripple, or a ruler, see that you act it well. For this is your business—to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to Another. . . .Every one of us, slave or free, has come into this world with innate conceptions as to good and bad, noble and shameful, becoming and unbecoming, happiness and unhappiness, fitting and inappropriate. . . .If you regard yourself as a man and as a part of some whole, it is fitting for you now to be sick and now to make a voyage and run risks, and not to be in want, and on occasion to die before your time. Why, then, are you vexed? Would you have someone else be sick of a fever now, someone else go on a voyage, someone else die? For it is impossible in such a body as ours, that is, in this universe that envelopes us, among these fellow creatures of ours, that such things should not happen, some to one man, some to another.

Becoming a Prisoner

On September 9, 1965, I flew at 500 knots right into a flak trap, at treetop level, in a little A-4 airplane that I suddenly couldn't steer because it was on fire, its control system shot out. After ejection, I had about 30 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."

"Ready at hand" from the *Enchiridion* as I ejected from that airplane was the understanding that a Stoic always kept separate files in his mind for those things that are "up to him" and those things that are "not up to him." Another way of saying it is those things which are "within his power" and those things which are "beyond his power." Up to me, within my power, within my will, are my opinions, my aims, my aversions, my own grief, my own joy, my attitude about what is going on, my own good, and my own evil.

To explain why "your own good and your own evil" is on that list, I quote Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*: "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not between states nor between classes nor between political parties, but right through every human heart." Long before reading Solzhenitsyn, I learned that good and evil are not abstractions—the only good and evil that mean anything are right in your own heart.

But a greater realization is that of your own fragility; that you could be reduced as I was from leading over 100 pilots and 1,000 men to “taking the ropes” in a matter of minutes. This is an example of not having control over your station in life. (Editor’s Note: For a more in-depth discussion of good and evil and things within our power, see *Stockdale on Stoicism I: The Stoic Warrior’s Triad*, Occasional Paper Number One in this series.)

Everybody does have to play the game of life. You can’t just walk around saying, “I don’t give a damn about health, or wealth, or whether I’m sent to prison or not.” Epictetus says everybody should play the game of life—that the best play it with “skill, form, speed, and grace.” But like most games, you play it with a ball. Your team devotes all its energies to getting the ball across the line. But after the game, what do you do with the ball? Nobody much cares. It’s not worth anything. The competition, the game, was the thing. The ball was “used” to make the game possible, but it in itself is not of any value that would justify falling on your sword for it.

The ball-game analogy, incidentally, is almost a verbatim quote of Epictetus’s explanation to his students in Nicoipolis, colonial Greece, 2,000 years ago.

My Mission in Prison

So I took those core thoughts into prison; I also remembered a lot of attitude-shaping remarks. Here’s Epictetus on how to stay off the hook: “A man’s master is he who is able to confer or remove whatever that man seeks or shuns. Whoever then would be free, let him wish nothing, let him decline nothing, which depends on others; else he must necessarily be slave.” And here’s why never to beg: “For it is better to die of hunger, exempt from fear and guilt, than to live in affluence and with perturbation.” Begging sets up a demand for *quid pro quo*, deals, agreements, reprisals—the pits.

If you want to protect yourself from “fear and guilt”—and those are the crucial pincers, the real long-term destroyers of will—you have to get rid of all your instincts to compromise, to meet people halfway. You have to learn to stand aloof, never give openings for deals, never level with your adversaries. You have to become what Ivan Denisovich called a “slow movin’ cagey prisoner.”

All that, over the previous three years, I had unknowingly put away for the future. So when bailing out of my A-4, after the gang tackling and pummeling was over (it lasted for two or three minutes before a man with a pith helmet got there to blow his police whistle), I had a very badly broken leg that I felt sure would be with me for life. My hunch turned out to be right. Later, I felt some relief—but only minor—from another admonition of Epictetus that I remembered: “Lameness is an impediment to the leg, but not to the Will; and say this to yourself with regard to everything that happens. For you will find such things to be an impediment to something else, but not truly to yourself.”

So in prison I had become a man with a mission. To explain this, let me unload a little emotional baggage that was part of my military generation’s legacy in 1965.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, just over 10 years before, we all had memories of reading about and seeing early television news accounts of U. S. government investigations into the behavior of some American prisoners of war in North Korea and mainland China. The gist of it was that in prison camps for Americans, it was every man for himself. Since those days, I’ve come to know officers who were prisoners of war there, and I now see much of that as selective reporting and as a bum rap. However, there were cases of young soldiers who were confused by the times, scared to death, in cold weather, treating each other like dogs fighting over scraps, throwing each other out in the snow to die, and nobody doing anything about it.

This could not go on, and President Eisenhower commissioned the writing of the American Fighting Man’s Code of Conduct. It was written in the form of a personal pledge. Article 4:

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

In other words, as of the moment Eisenhower signed that document, American prisoners of war were never to escape the chain of command; the war goes on behind bars.

As an insider, I knew the whole setup; that the North Vietnamese already held about 25 prisoners, probably in Hanoi, and as I was the only wing commander to survive an ejection, that I would be their senior, their commanding

officer—and would remain so, very likely, throughout this war that I felt sure would last at least another five years. And here I was, starting off crippled and flat on my back.

Epictetus turned out to be right. All told, it was only a temporary setback from things that were important to me, and being cast in the role as the sovereign head of an American expatriate colony which was destined to remain autonomous, out of communication with Washington, for years on end, was very important to me. I was determined to “play well the given part.”

The key word for all of us at first was fragility. Each of us, before we were ever in shouting distance of another American, was made to “take the ropes.” That was a real shock to our systems—and as with all shocks, its impact on our inner selves was a lot more impressive and lasting and important than to our limbs and torsos. These were the sessions where we were taken down to submission and made to blurt out distasteful confessions of guilt and American complicity into antique tape recorders, and then to be put in what I call “cold soak,” six or eight weeks of total isolation to “contemplate our crimes.” What we actually contemplated was what even the most self-satisfied American saw as his betrayal of himself and everything he stood for. It was there that I learned what “Stoic harm” meant. A shoulder broken, a bone in my back broken, and a leg broken twice were peanuts by comparison. Epictetus said: “Look not for any greater harm than this: destroying the trustworthy, self-respecting, well-behaved man within you.”

When put into a regular cell block, hardly an American came out of that without responding something like this when first whispered to by a fellow prisoner next door: “You don’t want to talk to me; I am a traitor.” And because we were equally fragile, it seemed to catch on that we all replied something like this: “Listen, pal, there are no virgins in here. You should have heard the kind of statement I made. Snap out of it. We’re all in this together. What’s your name? Tell me about yourself.” To hear that last was, for most new prisoners just out of initial shake-down and cold soak, a turning point in their lives.

A Society of Prisoners

We organized a clandestine society via our wall tap code—a society with our own laws, traditions, customs, even heroes. To explain how it could be that we would order each other into more torture, order each other to refuse to comply with specific demands, intentionally call the bluff of our jailers and

force them to repeat the process described above, I'll explain with an apocryphal statement that could have come from at least half of those wonderful, competitive fly-boys I found myself locked up with:

We are in a spot like we've never been in before. But we deserve to maintain our self-respect, to have the feeling we are fighting back. We can't refuse to do every degrading thing they demand of us, but it's up to you, boss, to pick out things we must all refuse to do, unless and until they put us through the ropes again. We deserve to sleep at night. We at least deserve to have the satisfaction that we are hewing to our leader's orders. Give us the list: What are we to take torture for?

This was a first step in claiming what was rightfully ours. Epictetus said: "The judge will do some things to you which are thought to be terrifying; but how can he stop you from taking the punishment he threatened?" That's my kind of Stoicism. You have a right to make them hurt you, and they don't like to do it. The prison commissar told my fellow prisoner Ev Alvarez when he was released: "You Americans were nothing like the French; we could count on them to be reasonable."

I put a lot of thought into what my first orders should be. They would be orders that could be obeyed, not a "cover your ass" move of reiterating some U.S. government policy like "name, rank, serial number and date of birth," which had no chance of standing up in the torture room. My mind-set was, "We here under the gun are the experts, we are the masters of our fate. Ignore guilt-inducing echoes of hollow edicts, throw out the book, and write your own." My orders came out as easy-to-remember acronyms. The principal one was **BACK US**. Don't **Bow** in public; stay off the **Air**; admit no **Crimes**; never **Kiss** them good-bye. **US** could be interpreted as United States, but really meant that each of us had to work at the lowest common denominator, never negotiating for himself but only for all.

Prison life became a crazy mixture of an old regime and a new one. The old was the political prison routine mainly for dissenters and domestic enemies of the state. It was designed and run by old-fashioned Third-World Communists of the Ho Chi Minh cut. It revolved around the idea of "repentance" for "crimes" of anti-social behavior. American prisoners, street criminals, and domestic political enemies of the state were all in the same prison. We never saw a "POW camp" like in the movies. The Communist jail was part psychiatric clinic and part reform school. North Vietnamese protocol called for making all their inmates demonstrate shame, bowing to all guards,

heads low, never looking at the sky. It meant frequent sessions with your interrogator, if for no other reason than to check your attitude. And if judged “wrong,” then you were maybe down the torture chute of confession of guilt, of apology, and then the inevitable payoff—the atonement.

The new regime, superimposed on the above, was for Americans only. It was a propaganda factory, supervised by young, English-speaking, bureaucratic army officers with quotas to fill, quotas set by the political arm of the government: press interviews with visiting left-wing Americans, propaganda films to shoot (starring intimidated people they called “American Air Pirates”), and so on.

An encapsulated history of how this bifurcated prison philosophy fared is this: The propaganda footage and interviews started to backfire. Smart American college men were salting their acts with double-meaning sentences, gestures read as funny-obscene by Western audiences, and practical jokes. One of my best friends, tortured to give names of pilots he knew who had turned in their wings in opposition to the war, said there were only two: Lieutenants Clark Kent and Ben Casey. That went on the front page of the *San Diego Union*, and somebody sent a copy back to the government in Hanoi. As a result of that friendly gesture from a fellow American, Nels Tanner went into three successive days of rope torture, followed by 123 days in leg stocks—all while isolated, of course.

So after several of these stunts, which cost the Vietnamese much loss of face, North Vietnam resorted to getting its propaganda from only the relatively few Americans they could trust not to act up—real loners who, for different reasons, never joined the prisoner organization, never wanted to get into the tap-code network, well-known sleaze balls we came to call “finks.”

The great mass of the other Americans in Hanoi were, by all standards, “honorable prisoners,” but that is not to say that there was anything like a homogeneous prison regime we all shared. People like to think that because we were all in the Hanoi prison system, we had all these common experiences. It’s not so. These differing regimes became marked when our prison organization stultified the propaganda efforts of this two-headed monster called the “Prison Authority.” The North Vietnamese turned to vengeance against the leadership of my organization and to an effort to break down the morale of the others baiting them with an amnesty program in which they would compete for early release by being compliant to North Vietnam’s wishes.

To the "Dark Place"

In May 1967, the PA system blared out: "Those of you who repent, truly repent, will be able to go home before the war is over. Those few diehards who insist on inciting the other criminals to oppose the camp authority will be sent to a special dark place." I immediately put out an order forbidding any Americans to accept early release, but that is not to say I was a lone man on a white horse. My order was accepted with obvious relief and spontaneous jubilation by the overwhelming majority.

Guess who went to the dark place. They isolated my leadership team—myself and my ten top cohorts—and sent us into exile. The Vietnamese worked very hard to learn our habits, and they knew who were the trouble-makers and who were not making any waves. They isolated those I trusted most: those with a long record of solitary and rope-mark pedigrees. Not all were seniors. One of my 10 was only 24 years old—born after I was in the Navy. He was a product of my recent shipboard tendencies: "When instincts and rank are out of phase, take the guy with the instincts." All of us stayed in solitary throughout, starting with two years in leg irons in a little high-security prison right beside North Vietnam's "Pentagon"—their Ministry of Defense, a typical, old French building.

There are chapters upon chapters after that, but what they came down to in my case was a strung-out vengeance fight between the Prison Authority and those of us who refused to quit trying to be our brothers' keepers. The stakes grew to nervous-breakdown proportions. One of the 11 of us died in that little prison we called Alcatraz. There was not a man who wound up with less than three and a half years of solitary, and four of us had more than four years.

Howie Rutledge, one of the four of us with more than four years, went back to school and got a master's degree after we got home. His thesis concentrated on the question of whether long-term erosion of human purpose was more effectively achieved by torture or isolation. He mailed out questionnaires to us (who had also taken the ropes at least 10 times), and others with records of extreme prison abuse. He found that those who had less than two years' isolation and plenty of torture said torture was the trump card; those with more than two years' isolation and plenty of torture said that, for long-term modification of behavior, isolation was the way to go. From my viewpoint, you can get used to repeated rope torture—there are some tricks for minimizing your losses in that game. But keep a man, even a very strong-

willed man, in isolation for three or more years, and he starts looking for a friend, any friend, regardless of nationality or ideology.

Epictetus once gave a lecture to his faculty complaining about the common tendency of new teachers to slight the stark realism of Stoicism's challenges in favor of giving the students an uplifting, rosy picture of how they could meet the harsh requirements of the good life painlessly. Epictetus said: "Men, the lecture-room of the philosopher is a hospital; students ought not to walk out of it in pleasure, but in pain." If Epictetus's lecture room was a hospital, my prison was a laboratory—a laboratory of human behavior. I chose to test his postulates against the demanding real-life challenges of my laboratory.

I'm not talking about brainwashing; there is no such thing. I'm talking about having looked over the brink, and seen the bottom of the pit, and realizing the truth of that linchpin of Stoic thought: that the thing that brings down a man is not pain but shame!

Why did those men in "cold soak" after their first rope trip eat their hearts out and feel so unworthy when the first American contacted them? Epictetus knew human nature well. In that prison laboratory, I know of not a single case where a man was able to erase his pangs of conscience with some laid-back, pop-psychology theory of cause and effect. Epictetus emphasizes time and again the fact that a man who lays the causes of his actions onto third parties or forces is not leveling with himself. He must live with his own judgments if he is to be honest with himself. "But if a person subjects me to fear of death, he compels me," says a student. "No," says Epictetus, "It is neither death, nor exile, nor toil, nor any such things that is the cause of your doing, or not doing, anything, but only your opinions and the decisions of your Will."

"What is the fruit of your doctrines?" someone asked Epictetus. "Tranquility, fearlessness, and freedom," he answered. You can have these only if you are honest and take responsibility for your own actions. You've got to get it straight! You are in charge of you.

In prison, I never tapped or mentioned Stoicism once. You soon learned that if the guy next door was doing okay, that meant that he had all his philosophical ducks lined up in his own way. But some sharp guys read the signs in my actions. After one of my long isolations outside the cell-blocks of the prison, I was brought back into signaling range of the fold. My point of contact was a man named Dave Hatcher. As was standard operating proce-

ture on a first contact after a long separation, we started off not with gushes of news but with, first, an agreed-upon danger signal; second, a cover story for each of us if we were caught; and third, a back-up communications system if this link was compromised—"slow movin' cagey prisoner" precautions. Hatcher's back-up system for me was a note-drop by an old sink near a place we called the Mint, the isolation cell-block of his wing of the prison—a place he rightly guessed I would soon enough be in. Every day we would signal for 15 minutes, over a wall between his cell-block and my "no-man's-land."

Try to Check Out

Then I got back into trouble. At that time, the commissar of prisons had had me isolated and under almost constant surveillance for the year since I had staged a riot in Alcatraz to get us out of leg irons. I was barred from all prisoner cell-blocks. I had special handlers, and they caught me with an outbound note that gave leads I knew the interrogators could develop through torture. The result would be to implicate my friends in "black activities," as the North Vietnamese called them. I had been through those ropes more than a dozen times, and I knew I could contain material—so long as they didn't know I knew it. But this note would open doors that could lead to more people getting killed in there. We had lost a few in big purges—I think in torture overshoots—and I was getting tired of it.

It was the fall of 1969. I had been in this role for four years, and saw nothing left for me to do but check out. I was solo in the main torture room in an isolated part of the prison the night before what they told me would be my day to spill my guts. There was an eerie mood in the prison. Ho Chi Minh had just died and special dirge music was in the air. I was to sit up all night in traveling irons. My chair was near the only pane-glass window in the prison. I was able to waddle over and break the window stealthily. I went after my wrist arteries with the big shards. I had knocked the light out, but the patrol guard happened to find me passed out in a pool of blood but still breathing. The Vietnamese went to General Quarters, got their doctor, and saved me.

Why? It was not until after I was released years later that I learned that that very week, my wife, Sybil, was in Paris demanding humane treatment for prisoners. She was on world news, a public figure, and the last thing the North Vietnamese needed was me dead. There was a very solemn crowd of senior North Vietnamese officers in that room as I was revived. Prison torture, as we had known it in Hanoi, ended for everybody that night.

Of course, it was months before we could be sure that was so. All I knew at the time was that, in the morning, after my arms had been dressed and bandaged, the commissar himself brought in a hot cup of sweet tea, told my surveillance guard to take off my leg irons, and asked me to sit at the table with him. “Why did you do this, Sto-dale? You know I sit with the army’s General Staff; they’ve asked for a full report this morning.” (It was not unusual for us to talk like that by that time.) But he never once mentioned the note, nor did anybody else thereafter. That was unprecedented. After a couple of months in a tiny isolated cell we called Calcutta to let my arms heal, they blindfolded me and walked me right into the “Las Vegas” cell block. The isolation and special surveillance were over. I was put, solo of course, in the Mint.

Dave Hatcher knew I was back because I walked under his window, and though he could not peek out, he could listen, and over the years he had attuned his ear to my walking “signature,” my limping gait. Soon enough, the rusty wire over the sink in the washroom was bent to the north—Dave Hatcher’s signal for “note in the bottle under the sink for Stockdale.” Like an old fighter pilot, I checked my six o’clock, scooped the note up fast, and concealed it in my prison pajama pants, carefully. Back in my cell, after the guard locked the door, I sat on my toilet bucket—where I could stealthily jettison the note if the peephole cover moved—and unfolded Hatcher’s sheet of low-grade paper toweling on which he had printed with rat dropping, without comment or signature, the last verse of Ernest Henley’s poem *Invictus*:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.