



SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 16, ISSUE 9 • SEPTEMBER 2025

Review and Excerpt
Soldiers Widow...
Soldiers Wife...
Soldiers Mother...
by Norma Shinno Irving Donlon

Vice Admiral
James Bond Stockdale:
Vietnam War Hero and
Indomitable Spirit
at the Hanoi Hilton





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FRONT COVER: Norma Shinno Irving Donlon at the December 5, 2018, dedication of 7th Special Forces Group Headquarters at Eglin Air Force Base, named in honor of her husband, Col. (Ret.) Roger H. C. Donlon, the first Green Beret Medal of Honor recipient of the Vietnam War. Norma's smile reflects a secret triumph: she commissioned a life-size bronze bust of the young Roger Donlon of ODA-726, sculpted by Douwe Blumberg, the artist behind the Horse Soldier monument at the World Trade Center. Unveiled during the ceremony, the sculpture astonished Roger and became the centerpiece of a memorable dedication that honored his legacy. The story recounting this event, and COL Donlon's simultaneous secret project, appeared in the [January 2019 Sentinel](#). (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jose Vargas)

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From the Editor | September 2025



How Miller
Sentinel Editor

Debra Holm starts off this issue with an article about the state of negotiations around a proposed park memorializing two Owens Valley, CA, residents who were standout veterans.

MG Jack Singlaub, onetime Chief SOG in Vietnam, and CPT James Birchm would be honored, at no apparent expense to the County of Inyo. SFA and SOA are both supporting this effort, along with chapter member Dr. Robert Reed and others.

The dual and mingled conventions, SFACON 2025 and SOAR, are rapidly approaching—next month. There is still some time to sign up.

SFA Chapter 88 is seeking to raise \$18,000 by December 31, 2025, to install a Special Forces monument at Jacksonville National Cemetery. The goal is to complete the project in time for the planned unveiling on April 11, 2026, which marks the 39th anniversary of the Special Forces Branch. The December goal will ensure there is enough time for the monument's construction and installation. The monument will honor Army veterans and serve as a lasting tribute. Corporate sponsors are welcome to contribute.

Marc Yablonka reviews a book that will be of interest to many: *Wartime Athletes* by Bill Brown. Many of these patriotic athletes left successful sports careers to serve in the armed forces during a war, with some of them making the ultimate sacrifice. Bill covers many sports and wars, illuminating the dedication to their country that many of us will be heartened to hear about.

How Miller reviews Norma Donlon's book, *Soldiers Widow...Soldiers Wife...Soldiers Mother...* Before she met Medal of Honor recipient Green Beret Roger Donlon, she had already lost her first husband, John Irving, who was a door gunner on his final mission in Vietnam. Later, and after three more years of trying, Roger was able to marry her. They went on to a long, happy marriage with children, two of whom also joined the military. Norma shares two chapters of her book with us about John Irving and Roger Donlon, following the review.

Marc Yablonka wrote a story for *Vietnam Magazine* about VADM James Stockwell and his heroic service as the leader of the American prisoners of war at the "Hanoi Hilton" during the Vietnam War. He relates his story and how much of an inspiration he was to others, during and even after the war.

Another of our readers, LTC (ret.) Sam Seetin, sent us a short piece called "Emotions Anonymous," describing how a surprise inspection of his A camp by General Creighton Abrams helped save the camp, though not necessarily the way the general intended.

Our July meeting was held at Iron Mike's Guns in Yorba Linda. Michael Healy III, grandson of "Iron" Mike Healy, 20-month commander of 5th SFG (A) in Vietnam, among other things, invited us to shoot after our meeting at his high-tech gun range and all-level training venue that showcases Iron Mike and is undoubtedly heavily influenced by his son, Green Beret Mike Healy [Jr.].

Please enjoy and keep sending us your interesting stories about your SF experience. ♦

How Miller
Sentinel Editor



Some of the attendees at the July Chapter meeting, which was held at Iron Mike's Guns located in Yorba Linda, CA, gathered for a group photo. Left to right, (back row) Mike Healy, III, owner of Iron Mike's, Cody, Tom Turney, James McLanahan, Brent (guest of Tom Golden), Tom Golden; (front row) Johann Hindert, Gary Macnamara, and Jerry Guzzetta. Read more about this meeting on the back cover of this issue.



SFA Chapter 78 Monthly Meeting

September 20, 2025

Breakfast – 0800 • Meeting – 0830

Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos
The Pub at Fiddlers Green

4745 Yorktown Ave Bldg 19, Los Alamitos, CA 90720-5176

Next scheduled chapter meeting
October 18

2025 Meeting Schedule

November 15 • December (to be announced)

Independence Veterans Memorial Park Proposal Faces Delays, But Supporters Remain Determined

By Debra Holm

At the July Inyo County Board of Supervisors meeting, a proposal to create a Veterans Memorial Park in Independence honoring two local heroes faced unexpected resistance, leaving supporters both disappointed and determined.

The community-led project, involving the Independence Civic Club, the Special Operation Association (SOA), and the Special Forces Association (SFA), proposed the transformation of a dirt lot—currently used for informal parking—into a landscaped public space honoring the two extraordinary servicemen, MG John “Jack” Singlaub and CPT James Birchim, both Independence natives with deep ties to the Owens Valley.

The *Inyo Register* reported that the planned memorial would occupy the southwest corner of the Independence Courthouse campus, where the old county jail once stood, transforming the dirt lot into a landscaped memorial, entirely funded through grants and donations.

Committee member Nancy Masters noted the location was chosen to beautify what local residents have called “the ugliest spot in Independence” and to provide both a place of honor and a spot of respite for residents and visitors.

When some Supervisors suggested the memorial should recognize all local veterans rather than focusing on two individuals, Lone Pine resident and committee member Travis Powell—an Army medevac pilot who served eight years in Iraq and Afghanistan—pushed back.

Speaking to *The Sheet*, a weekly local newspaper, Powell was unconcerned “with the larger vet population needing any particular award or recognition,” adding that “a generic memorial was politically safe. It’s okay... if not everyone gets a trophy.” Powell said, “These guys did something unique. A small town producing this type of talent [Singlaub and Birchim] is rare and should be lauded.”

Concerns from the Board

While Supervisors Jennifer Roeser and Will Wadelton have expressed support for moving forward, other board members have voiced concerns. Issues raised include the loss of parking spaces for county employees, water supply for landscaping, ongoing maintenance costs, and, as mentioned earlier, whether the memorial should honor all veterans rather than focusing on two individuals.

Supervisor Jeff Griffiths questioned why the project should create a new park rather than place a memorial within an existing one. Supervisors Trina Orrill and Scott Marcellin emphasized the need for more detailed plans, including architectural renderings, water sourcing, and parking adjustments, before granting approval.

Supporters, however, point out that without the Board’s preliminary approval of the site, fundraising and detailed planning cannot proceed—a “chicken-and-egg” dilemma that continues to stall progress.



Proposed memorial site — This vacant corner lot beside the Inyo County Courthouse in the heart of Independence is the proposed location for a memorial park honoring two of the town’s own: MG John Singlaub and CPT James Birchim. (Google Maps image, June 2025)

HONOREES AT A GLANCE

Major General John “Jack” Singlaub

- Born in Independence, 1921
- Served in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam
- OSS operative in WWII, later founding member of the CIA
- Awards include Distinguished Service Medal (with Oak Leaf Cluster), Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart (with Oak Leaf Cluster)

Captain James Birchim

- Independence native and Owens Valley High School graduate
- Special Forces officer in Vietnam
- Seriously wounded during 1968 Laos mission; ensured team’s rescue before falling during helicopter extraction
- Posthumously awarded Distinguished Service Cross; promoted to Captain while missing in action

Community Response

The local press has been critical of the county’s initial hesitation, with some residents expressing frustration that verbal praise for veterans is not being matched with policy action. As veteran Randy Short told *The Sheet*, “If we can’t recognize this gentleman [Singlaub]... then we’re missing something. I’m personally offended by the pushback.”

Next Steps

A working committee consisting of Civic Club members, John Singlaub, Dr. Bob Reed of SFA Chapter 78, and Rick Estes of the SOA, has been formulating plans, coordinating with County departments, fundraising, and applying for grants. According to Don Bright, one of the project’s leaders, the committee is now meeting with county staff to address questions about site preparation, cost estimates, Caltrans requirements, and water access. The goal is to convert at least two of the three supervisors currently withholding support, allowing the project to move forward to the design and fundraising stage.

While the July meeting was a setback, the memorial committee most definitely hasn’t given up. ♦



SFACON 2025

OCTOBER, 14-17, 2025



*Last Call!!!
Register NOW!*

Don't miss out—book your stay at the Orleans Hotel & Casino today!

Reserve on or before 9/12/2025 to ensure both availability and our special group rate.

Group Rates: Sun–Thu \$82.48 • Fri–Sat \$139 (taxes/fees incl.)

Use Group Code SFAJ25C.

Join us for the first-ever joint SFACon and Special Operations Association Reunion (SOAR) gathering. Enjoy shared hospitality, vendors, symposiums, fundraising, and top-tier speakers.

Register now at www.specialforcesassociation.org/sfacon-2025/

Help Honor Our Heroes: *Help Build the Special Forces Monument*

**TO REMEMBER AND HONOR
THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS**



SFA Chapter 88 (Northeast Florida) has set a goal to raise **\$18,000** to install a Special Forces monument at Jacksonville National Cemetery. Its unveiling is planned for **April 11, 2026**—in conjunction with the 39th anniversary of the Special Forces Branch. This tribute will honor Army veterans interred there and serve as a lasting remembrance for families, comrades, and visitors.

Our goal is to raise the money before **Dec. 31, 2025**. This allows us time to complete a contract, finance the down payment and balance, construct the monument, deliver and install it in time for the unveiling ceremony this next year. **Corporate sponsors are welcome.**

Donate online at www.gofundme.com/f/SFA88-SF-Monument-Fund or mail checks payable to “SFA Chapter 88” (memo: SF Monument) to: 10539 Inverness Dr., Jacksonville, FL 32257

Donations are tax-deductible.

Questions?

Contact Padraic Mulvihill
at (904) 534-0035 or pem@axisp.com.



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Book Review

Wartime Athletes: Stories of Sports Stars Who Joined the U.S. Team by Bill Brown

By Marc Yablonka

The following previous review of this book was posted on the VVA Veteran magazine's Books in Review II website at <https://vvabooks.wordpress.com/tag/wartime-athletes/>

When Pittsburgh Steelers veteran running back Rocky Bleier was wounded in Vietnam, he prayed to God, "You have my life to do with what you want. I'll share the good times, and I won't complain about the bad times. That's the best I got to offer." "But just to make sure that I was committed," he told Bill Brown, author of the just published book *Wartime Athletes: The Stories of Sports Stars Who Joined the U.S. Team*, "He let me get wounded one more time!"

Brown, the author of *Wartime Athletes* (Kindle Direct Publishing: Paperback \$15, Kindle Unlimited \$1.99), himself a Vietnam veteran, plied the broadcast journalism trade he learned at the University of Missouri's renowned School of Journalism for the Hometown News Service based at Long Binh, and as a sportscaster for the American Forces Vietnam Network. After Vietnam, Brown went on to do play by play on radio and TV for the Cincinnati Reds and Houston Astros.

He has put together a fascinating book of profiles of professional athletes from World War I to Afghanistan, boxing to baseball, bowling to golf, who served in the US Military in times of war. Names like New York Yankee slugger Joe DiMaggio, and Brooklyn Dodger Jackie Robinson, the first Black player in the Major Leagues, come to mind. As does Pat Tillman, Arizona Cardinals linebacker killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan. Each of the athletes' stories are engrossingly juxtaposed against what was happening in history during the wars in which they fought and make for an extremely captivating read.

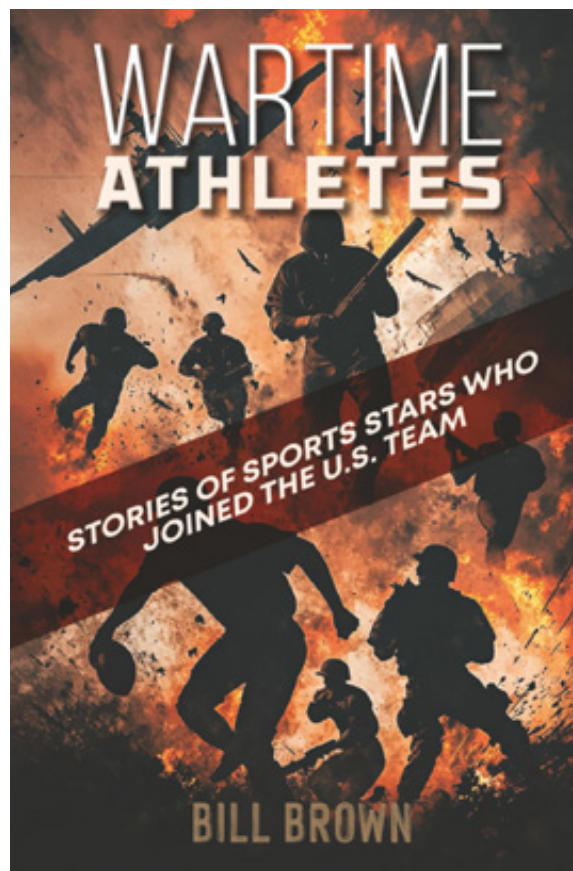
Six of the 18 known professional athletes who served in Vietnam are featured in the book. Baltimore Orioles Hall of Famer Al Bumbry was one of them. Author Brown highlights what Bumbry called the changes he went through as a result of his service in Vietnam as a platoon leader.

"I realized that I had been in a do or die situation. That I was responsible not just for my life but for other men as well. It made me focus more on what I had to do and what my responsibilities were. After that, baseball didn't seem as hard as it was before."

Readers may learn a side of Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach's life that they never knew.

"I was not out there in combat," he told the author. "I supported the Marine Corps and South Vietnamese troops." None the less, Staubach drew valuable life lessons from his time in Vietnam. "You learn about the importance of someone other than yourself to get that balance in life. Not only to take out of life, but to give back."

According to Brown, a newspaper article quoted Staubach as saying he felt guilty that he did not contribute more to the fighting. However, what he did do was command 100 enlisted personnel and 30 Vietnamese troops at a "Sand Ramp" at Chu Lai where LST's handled moving supplies.



[Wartime Athletes: The Stories of Sports Stars Who Joined the U.S. Team](#)

By Bill Brown

Kindle Direct Publishing (May 9, 2025)

345 pages

Available in hardcover, paperback, and Kindle

By far the most endearing profile in *Wartime Athletes* belongs to Buffalo Bills guard and Hall of Famer Bob Kalsu, who once said, "I gave my word to my country. Just because I play pro football doesn't make me any better of a man than the men already serving our country. I'm going to live up to that commitment and the word I gave."

Lt. Kalsu, at 25, was an acting field artillery commander with the 101st Airborne when he was killed when the firebase he was serving on was barraged by hundreds of NVA rounds.

(The only other NFL player to die in combat in Vietnam was Cleveland Browns offensive tackle Don Steinbrunner, who left football in 1954 to fulfill his military obligation).

Wartime Athletes: Stories of Sports Stars Who Joined the U.S. Team will be a welcome addition to the libraries, not only of Vietnam veterans, but sports fanatics who never knew that the men they admired on the playing fields of America should also be revered for their selfless service to our country. ♦

Book Review

Soldiers Widow... Soldiers Wife... Soldiers Mother... by Norma Shinno Irving Donlon

By How Miller

Norma Donlon's book *Soldiers Widow... Soldiers Wife... Soldiers Mother...* is about how she saw life while involved with the military. She reveals intimately the pains and joys she experienced with each of the four military men in her life.

Part one describes a young Norma meeting, marrying, and losing Lieutenant John Irving. John was KIA on what already would have been the last mission of his tour before returning to his wife, who was waiting in Hawaii. The devastating news and all that followed is told in touching detail, which is heart-grabbing.

In Part 2, Norma relates her not wanting to get involved with another brave soldier, let alone a Medal of Honor recipient. Eventually, a young Captain Roger Donlon, in an effort spanning more than 3 years, won her trust and her heart. During their long, wonderful life together, they adopted two children and then succeeded in having one of their own.

She points out how Roger's patient temperament made him ideally suited as a spouse, parent, and in his many high-level assignments.

Norma was Roger's strength during his final twelve years while he fought the effects of Agent Orange.

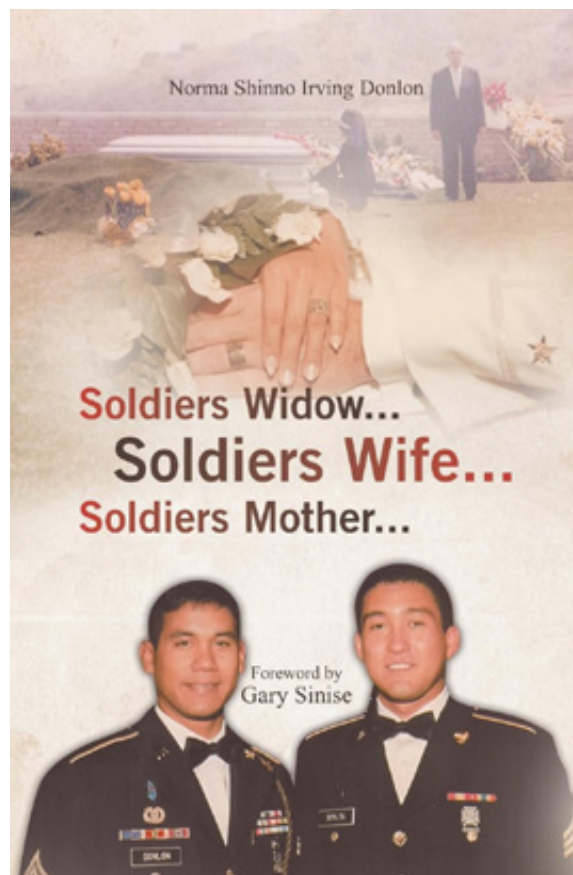
Parts 3 and 4 are about their sons, Derek and Justin, two of their three sons, who entered the military and had widely different experiences.

Norma doesn't dwell on the combat experiences of her men; after all, she wasn't there.

But she does a marvelous job of conveying many of the intense experiences of a wife and mother. It's the cost paid by our military families that often goes unheralded.

This book is well worth the read. ❖

Editor's Note: Excerpts from this book can be read beginning on page 6.



[Soldiers Widow... Soldiers Wife... Soldiers Mother...](#)

By Norma Shinno Irving Donlon

Forward by Gary Sinise

LifeRich Publishing (June 15, 2025)

202 pages

Available in hardcover, paperback, and Kindle

What others are saying about *Soldiers Widow... Soldiers Wife... Soldiers Mother...*

"A powerful and honest memoir by an indomitable woman and an extraordinary Army wife. The traumatic experience of losing her first husband to the Vietnam War, followed by a horrible betrayal, should have broken her spirit. Instead, she showed exceptional resilience and made the decision to love another soldier, the heroic Roger Donlon, and embrace the Army life once again, wherever it led them. We can all learn lessons from Norma Donlon in grace, courage and love."

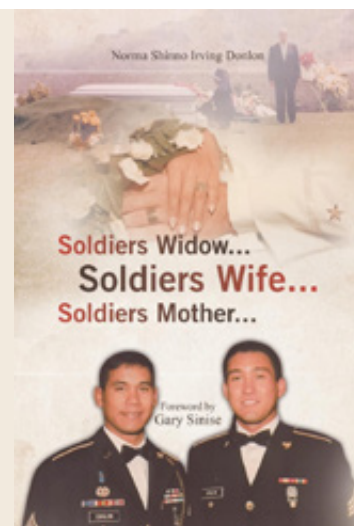
Hollister (Holly) K. Petraeus
Military Advocate, Army Daughter, Sister, Wife and Mother

"Norma's remarkable story of service to her family and country is one that everyone can learn from. A dedicated Gold Star Wife, Army wife and mother, Norma's story of resilience and dedication will remain with you long after reading. How lucky are we to hear her story in her own words. We hope that when you read this book, you share Norma's example of service with the children in your life so they can be inspired too."

Karen Worcester, Executive Director
Wreaths Across America

Excerpts from

Soldiers Widow... Soldiers Wife... Soldiers Mother...



By Norma Shinno Irving Donlon

Excerpted from *Soldiers Widow... Soldiers Wife... Soldiers Mother...*; LifeRich Publishing, June 15, 2025; Soldiers Widow, Part I, JOHN, Chapter 1, *Notification*; Soldiers Wife, Part II, ROGER, Chapter 1, *Meeting*; used with permission.

All accompanying photos are courtesy of Norma Shinno Irving Donlon.

Soldiers Widow

Part I: John

Chapter One — *Notification*

The blue waters of Hawaii came into view as I looked down from the window of the airplane. I could see Diamond Head and Waikiki Beach; my heart began to beat a little faster. In just a few minutes I would be on the ground, the past 3 months were already beginning to fade into the background. It had been a rough 3 months; my husband John had made me leave Hawaii for an extended visit to my parents in California while he was on temporary duty in the Republic of South Vietnam, as a door gunner on a helicopter.

Just 1 week after arriving in California my best friend's husband was killed in a hunting accident... 22 years old and a widow with a 3-month-old baby! It just didn't seem possible. Although I was glad to be close to help her through some of the toughest days of her tragedy, living with my parents again had been a struggle.

My parents had been against my marriage to John, and I really dreaded listening to them repeatedly going over and over on what a "mistake" I had made... I was truly glad to be returning to my real home... the small government quarters at Schofield Barracks that I had so loving fixed up for John and myself.

As the plane touched down at Honolulu Airport, I looked into the crowd to see who was waiting to pick me up. It would not be John as I knew he was not due home for another week. Returning early, I was going to clean up our quarters and plan a "welcome home" for my Soldier coming back from the war!

It was a surprise to see the Battalion Commander waiting for me. He and his wife had decided that my arrival in the early evening would not allow me time to shop for any groceries at the post commissary and so, had graciously invited me to their quarters for dinner.

I loved this Army life so much! Everyone helping everyone... like one big happy family. It was always my dream to be part of a family like this.

The dinner was lovely, but my hosts could plainly see that I was anxious to return to my own quarters. Soon the commander drove me home. Thanking him again for being so kind, I said we would reciprocate as soon as John was home next week.

Unlocking the door to our quarters I was surprised to hear the telephone ringing, I couldn't imagine who it was and hurried to answer it. The voice on the other end was unmistakable with her soft, sweet southern accent... John's mother. She wanted to know if I had heard from John and if he was alright. Sharing that the last letter I received before leaving California was full of news about going out to the field with the Vietnamese Rangers... this weekend as a matter of fact. It would be his last mission before coming back to Hawaii next week. Mother Irving expressed her relief that I had heard something more recent than the last letter she had received. She told me that all that day she had a terrible feeling that something was wrong. It made her physically ill and given her such a bad headache she had not gone to school. This news surprised me as she had been an elementary school teacher for 30 years and I knew how precious her children were to her. I did my best to reassure her and told her that we would call as soon as John was home next week.

Beginning to unpack my suitcase, I opened the closet door. Hanging there was the shirt John wore to dinner the last night before he left for Vietnam. I took the shirt off the hanger... it still had the faint smell of him. Holding the shirt close to my face I recalled every detail of our last night together... going out for a special dinner in Honolulu, one we could hardly afford on a Lieutenants salary, but we felt the need to make this night a memorable one. As we drove back towards Schofield, in our convertible with the top down, the night was magic! There was a full moon and so many, many stars. We decided to make a short stop at the beach house we rented for the first 10 months we were in Hawaii. With our arms around each other we took a stroll on the deserted beach reminiscing how lucky we were to have had such a beautiful spot for our honeymoon and the beginning of our marriage.

Later, as I lay in John's arms drifting off to sleep, I softly asked him, "If something happens to you, how will I know?" He laughed and said,

"If you see the Chaplain coming up the walk that means something has happened, but don't worry I won't let anything stop me from coming home to you."

The hour was getting late, and after the long trip from California fatigue began to overtake me. Slipping into the nightgown that was John's favorite I caught a glimpse of myself in the long mirror on the closet door and smiled at the image I saw. In one week, I will wear this again, I promised myself. The only difference would be that John would be there to admire the body filling out the long, split to the thigh, leopard print gown.

Our government quarters were furnished completely with issue furniture that included two twin beds in each bedroom. As most of the young couples did, we shoved the beds together and turned the mattresses so that the split was not between you! Climbing into the makeshift king size bed I fantasized about how wonderful our homecoming reunion would be in just seven more days...

After thirty minutes of tossing and turning I decided to start on some housework until I was tired enough to sleep. Why was I so restless... was it just the excitement of coming home? Perhaps the call from John's mother unsettled me more than I would have admitted. Anyway, I could work it off!

Our old wooden, government quarters were notorious for having all kinds of creepy crawlers and being in the tropics the kitchen cabinets were bugs favorite hiding place! After wiping down the refrigerator and stove I emptied the cupboards of all the dishes, pots and pans. After thoroughly cleaning everything, I finally felt tired enough to sleep. Looking around at the mess of stuff piled high on counters and tables I decided to put it all back in the morning, it was too exhausting a job to do now. In the bedroom I noticed the clock as I turned out the light... it was 1:00 AM...

BANG! BANG! BANG! I sat bolt upright in bed! What was that noise? Was someone trying to break in!!? Reaching for the loaded .38 which was always kept in the nightstand drawer when I was alone, I got out of bed... the clock read 4:00 AM.

In the dark I quietly crept toward the glassed-in sunporch. Perhaps I could see who was banging outside my bedroom window. I didn't think about calling the military police as John had trained me with weapons and I knew how to use a gun and was sure I would not be afraid to do so if the need arose.

As I entered the sunporch, I saw the Battalion Commander on the front step... he was standing under the porch light, and I could see him clearly. There was another man with him that I did not recognize, both were in uniform, which I thought was very strange. What in the world was anyone doing on my porch at 4:00 AM on a Saturday morning?

Unlocking the door, everything began to take on a surrealistic feel... I saw the Chaplain's insignia... looked at the expression on the Commanders face... I took two steps backward pointing to the Chaplain and said, "You can't come in here! Why are you here? Please get out of my house!" Gently the Commander came towards me and said, "Norma, please give me the gun... I must speak with you, but first just give me the gun." By this time the Chaplain, startled by my response, had retreated to the front walk, but there were other people coming into the house. The Company Commander and his wife, with

several other people I did not know. The Battalion Commander said, "Norma, you might want to sit down." "No, I protested, what do you have to tell me." He answered, "John has been killed in action in Vietnam."

Suddenly, I knew I was dreaming... it must be a dream... a nightmare! Soon I would wake up and begin to get the house ready for John's homecoming! This just couldn't be for real!!

The Company Commander and his wife were good friends, and she saw that everyone was staring at the way I was dressed. She hurried to the bedroom to get me a robe. By now my mind was in a whirl... I knew there were things I would have to take care of... I struggled to compose myself. Someone asked if there was anyone they could call to come and help me. "Yes" I answered, "please get Lt. Dan Deliz and his wife Kathy here." The Deliz's were our neighbors for 10 months when we lived in the beach house in Haleiwa and we had become very close. They arrived in minutes.

Next, I called my parents in California. They decided that my mother would fly over to help me pack for my return... she would arrive the next morning. I knew I had to call John's parents and dreaded having to tell Dad and Mother Irving that their worst fear had come true. Especially since I had just spoken with them a few hours earlier to assure them that everything was ok with John. As I dialed their number, my hands began to shake, and a wave of nausea swept over me... my knees began to crumble, and I felt weak. I leaned against the wall in the hallway as someone went to get me a chair. It seemed like an eternity before they answered their phone. I don't remember



John Irving and Norma Shinno at ROTC Formal

what I said to them, but I know I turned the phone over to the Battalion Commander so he could answer their questions... I could not give them any details because I had not asked how John had been killed; at the time it didn't seem to matter. He was dead and the words seemed to be like a huge shot of Novocain making me numb to anything else. It was as if time stopped at 4:00 AM on Saturday the 7th of May 1965.

The next few hours saw many people come and go... food was brought in and several ladies from the battalion were in my kitchen trying to make ready for the onslaught on visitors I would have. I was keenly aware of the mess I had left the night before, but someone said, "Oh don't worry about it, you'll just have to get it all out again when the packers come on Monday."

Sometime that day I sat down with the Chaplain to talk about a memorial service. I had already decided to take John's body to California to be buried but his unit wanted to have a memorial service at Schofield. I was adamant with the Chaplain that the service would not be a religious one as John did not profess to have a belief in God. We settled on a short, non-religious service at the Post Chapel on Monday morning at 11:00 AM.

The minutes turned into hours, and the day passed just as every other day passed, I seemed to be having an out of body experience... standing on the sidelines watching this drama unfold but not really being a part of it. So far, I had not shed a tear, I think I was in too much shock to cry.

Toward evening I went into the bedroom to begin sorting my clothes, what to take with me to California and what could be packed with the household goods. I opened the closet door and there was that damn shirt of John's! It set off something in me and anger and resentment towards him welled up... how dare he do this to me! He promised nothing would happen!! Why did he have to volunteer for duty in Vietnam anyway!!! I flung the shirt to the floor of the closet!!!!

As darkness approached, I realized that exhaustion was setting in. After a long day of travel yesterday I had only slept for three hours, and it was all catching up with me. I lay down on the bed and drifted off to sleep only to wake up a few hours later to the sound of someone banging on the window! It was the first of many nightmares I would have for years...

Sleep was impossible... sleep meant reliving the moment all over again, the noise outside the window... seeing the Battalion Commander and Chaplain on my porch... the terrible words, "Killed in Action!" I immersed myself with getting ready for the packers on Monday.

As I watched my mother deplane, I began to feel all the old resentments toward her coming to the surface. Why did she have to be the one to come and help me? She never did like John and was very much against our marriage. As a new bride, just seventeen months earlier, I had gone to say "good-bye" to her before John and I left for Hawaii. Could I ever forgive her for the last words she spoke? "Don't forget, all men cheat on their wives." She was probably glad John was dead.

As mother approached, she held out her arms and tried to give me a hug. This was so foreign to me, as my mother and I never hugged, that I pushed her away saying, "NO, please, not now!" In retrospect I can

see that she was reaching out to me for the very first time, but I was afraid that in her arms I would find comfort and solace... if I let myself cry, I might never stop... anger was keeping me going.

Back at Schofield Barracks, mother looked around our quarters with her usual efficient gaze. Fewer people were coming by to call on me now and we were alone for most of the afternoon. During these periods of quiet, mother would coach me on my behavior. It was always very important to her to do things properly and this was no exception... after all what would people think! She reminded me time and time again to keep my emotions under control. She scolded me for being so angry, after all it was really no one's fault that John died... just fate. Something better lay in store for me she said... I was young and would marry again. Although I was seething inside, I kept quiet, I wanted to scream at her that she was wrong... there would never be another man like John.

Finally, I gave in to the fatigue and told mother I was going to bed. She followed me into the bedroom and as I opened the closet door, we both saw John's shirt on the floor. Reaching for it at the same time, mother realized that this was a special article of clothing. As I lovingly caressed the shirt, I told mother about the last night before John left for Vietnam. She seemed uncomfortable as I spoke and tried to take the shirt away from me, saying I should get rid of it. Snapping out of my romantic dialogue, I turned on her and angrily told her to get out of the bedroom. No one was going to take this shirt away from me... it was all I had left of John. That night, and every night for the next seven months, I slept with the shirt next to me.

On Monday at 11:00 AM, there was a brief memorial service at the Main Chapel at Schofield Barracks... it was standing room only. I don't remember anything that was said by the Chaplain or the Commanding General. I had resisted the tranquilizers and sleeping pills that had been offered to me by the doctor, but I still felt as though I had been drugged. Everyone commented on how calm and composed I was.



Norma and her mother departing Hawaii

Rushing back to my quarters after the service and short reception, I had the packers coming at 1:00 PM. Since they would pack and move me at the same time, I wanted to be sure I was ready. All afternoon different people kept coming by with papers to sign, I signed everything without even reading the contents. It was amazing at how efficiently everything was going... the Army is prepared to deal with death. Somehow, I remembered to leave John's dress blues out so I could carry them with me to California for his burial... I even remembered his shoes, which seemed so silly at the time.

That night the quarters were so empty with all our things gone. Since the furniture was government issue, I still had the beds and so slept in the quiet, empty quarters... I felt like I was in a tomb.

On Tuesday morning, mother and I left Hawaii. Almost the entire battalion turned out to see me off.

It was a tearful farewell at the airport for all but me... I still was unable to let myself cry...

.....

Soldiers Wife

Part II: Roger

Chapter One—*Meeting*

Waiting for my flight at the Atlanta airport, I was glad the long day was almost over. My layover had been three hours... I wondered why there weren't more flights to Columbus, Georgia on a Friday night. On my way to a library dedication in memory of John, on Monday morning, I could not resist taking a walk down memory lane to visit the place where John and I were married and spent part of our honeymoon. On Sunday I would continue on to North Carolina where the Irving's lived.

In line to board, I noticed the man in front of me was wearing a cowboy hat... he turned and said, "Honey, are you going to Dallas or San Antonio?" "Neither" I answered. "Well, you better not get on this plane!" I grabbed the gate agent and inquired about my flight. He pointed through the low window. I could see the plane sitting there, but to get to it I had to run up the corridor I was in, down the main terminal, then down another corridor! "Please" I pleaded, "can you have them hold that plane?" He picked up the phone and said to me, "you had better hurry, they are going to try to wait for you." I hiked up my short, tight skirt and started to run in the four-inch-high heels I always wore.

My legs carried me as fast as they could. Disheveled and out of breath, as I climbed the stairs to the plane, I was the last person to get on board. I noticed the bulkhead seat on the right was empty, but there was a man in a green Army uniform sitting in the other seat. I passed that row, looking for another seat on the small commuter hop that would only last about 30 minutes... there were none.

A little embarrassed that I had passed the front window seat, I walked back and asked, "excuse me, is this seat taken?" "No," he answered as he stood up to let me pass. As I squeezed in front of him, I noticed his rank and nametag... he was a Captain named Donlon. I sat down, buckled up and the flight took off.

Now, where have I seen this name before, I asked myself. Then it came to me... while glancing through a bookstore one day I saw a book about the Vietnam War. Wanting to bring a gift to the library for the dedication, I bought the book and hoped to get it autographed for the library. I actually called him a few weeks ago to see if he would autograph his book. And here he was, sitting right next to me! Knowing he would not recognize me, I decided to introduce myself. I turned, and said, "I'm the widow who called last month and asked you for an autograph on your book my name is Norma Irving." We shook hands, but he had a puzzled look on his face. Calmly, he answered, "nice to meet you, I'm Roger Donlon."

As the plane took off, I silently wished I had the book with me so he could sign it now, but it was packed in my luggage. I looked out the window remembering the last time I had flown to Columbus two years ago to get married. There would be no John to meet me this night...

We made some small talk, but the flight was brief so before we knew it, we landed in Columbus. The captain asked me if someone was meeting me. I told him I planned to just grab a taxi to my hotel. Kindly, he offered a ride into town if there was no cab available. Having a good amount of luggage for my two weeks in North Carolina with the Irving's, I didn't really want to haul it in a taxicab, so I said, "I'll take you up on the offer." "I hope the hotel is not out of your way." He answered, "no, I don't live in the barracks, I have an apartment in town that I share with another officer."

Driving towards Columbus, I was quietly looking out the window, recalling the events of two years ago. Finally, breaking the awkward silence, the captain asked me if I would like to stop to get something to eat before he dropped me at the hotel. Worn out from my day of travel, and feeling very emotional being back in Columbus, Georgia, I wondered if the restaurant would serve me, but I answered, "yes, thank you."

"I'm taking you to a restaurant with great steaks, but first I'd like to get out of this uniform," he said. Wary of the prospect of going to his apartment, I thought to myself, well I'll just wait in the car.

The captain lived in a large apartment complex and told me his roommate was someone he had served with in Vietnam. Pulling up to his parking space, he saw his roommate's car was there, and invited me in. I hesitated at first, but he said it would not take long for him to change.

As I entered the living area, I noticed that the furniture looked very utilitarian. I sat down on the couch and the captain put some Barbara Streisand music on the record player.

In a few minutes he started downstairs. As I looked toward the stairway, I saw two very big shiny uniform shoes appearing one by one. Next, I noticed that the suit he was wearing was changing color with every step he took... maroon one step, dark green on the next! It was horrible! The suit was almost as shiny as his shoes; must be silk I thought to myself. Oh well, this is only dinner, and I don't know anyone here so it will be ok, I mused.

The restaurant was a huge Southern looking plantation home. All the customers were leaving when we arrived, so the dining room was very quiet. Columbus was a "dry" county which meant you had

to bring your own alcoholic beverages. We had not stopped at an Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) store, so we drank only sweet, iced tea! I could have used a real drink.

Faintly, I heard what sounded like a piano playing and loud voices trying to sing. The menus appeared; the captain did not even look at it. He must eat here a lot, I said to myself. There was nothing remotely exotic on the menu, so I took the captain's lead and ordered the same meal he was having. It was a salad, filet mignon, baked potato, and green beans.

We were seated at a small table for two, and as I looked directly at him, I saw a clean cut, boyish looking man with a blonde crew cut and piercing blue eyes. He looked a lot like the boys I had dated in high school. He seemed very socially awkward. The conversation was almost nil, as he was extremely quiet, so I was glad when our dinner arrived, and we could begin to eat.

When we were finished, the captain said, "I'm sure someone brought a bottle tonight so let's have a nightcap in the bar." Relieved that I would finally have something to drink, I followed him down the stairs. Asking me what I would like, he went around the room until he met one of his friends who had a bottle of scotch.

The music I heard was a blind piano player, and the singing was a group of Soldiers and their girlfriends who the captain told me were his classmates at the Infantry Officer Career Course.

It was comforting to be part of a group of military people again, and after I downed my scotch and water I began to loosen up and enjoy myself more. Most of the songs were patriotic ones and I knew all the words, so I was able to sing along.

We did not stay very long, and presently the captain drove me to the hotel. After I registered, he carried my suitcases to the room, I unlocked the door and waited outside while he put them into the room. As he was leaving, I looked up at him, extended my hand and said, "thank you for dinner tonight, I can't remember the last time I enjoyed myself this much." I was surprised as he leaned toward me and gave me a chaste kiss, much like the ones I used to get from my high school dates!

Calling the next morning, the captain asked me if I still wanted him to autograph the book. Of course I said, that is one of the reasons I'm here. Well, let's get some breakfast first. "Oh, my goodness," I said, "You want to feed me again?" "Well, a girl has to eat" he said answered. OK I relented, but only if you let me treat!"

There was a small diner, close to a laundromat where he stopped first to throw in a load of dirty clothes. After we ate breakfast, he retrieved

his wet laundry and told me we would go to a friend's house where he could dry his clothes. Several of the "gang" who were at the sing-along the night before were there, watching a football game. My favorite sport! And so, we watched the game as the captain waited for his clothes to dry.

One of the young officers wanted our group to have dinner together at the Officer's Club that evening. I was hesitant to accept when the captain looked at me with a question on his face. The Officers Club held so many memories for me... did I want to go there? Conquering my emotions, I nodded that I would go.

Before taking me back to the hotel, there was one more stop. A close friend of his had a new baby boy, after three girls, and he wanted to see little Michael for the first time. Well, I loved babies, especially infants so I agreed to accompany him. Holding little Michael in his arms, the captain looked as if he did this every day. He was so natural with an infant, when most men looked frightened of them. As I watched him, I thought... if I were ever to marry again, this is the kind of man I would look for... Then it was my turn, and as I took baby Michael into my arms, I felt hot tears well up in my eyes. I would have given anything to be holding John's baby...



Captain Roger Donlon and Norma Irving

By the time we reached the hotel, we knew we would have to rush to be on time for the group dinner. Both of us had to change clothes, so I was dropped off first at the hotel and the captain went back to change at his apartment.

Upon his return to pick me up, he said, "I consider this our "first" date so please can you call me "Roger" instead of Captain Donlon?" Well, I didn't consider it a "date" at all. It was just dinner, and I had no intention of seeing him again after I left for North Carolina the next day. But I acquiesced and said, "of course."

Entering the Officer's Club I glanced up the stairs where the guest rooms were... another memory of John...

They served alcohol at the Club, so I was glad to have my drink with my usual brand, Chivas Regal instead of the cheap scotch Roger's classmate offered the night before. It turned out to be another fun evening.

As we walked back to my hotel room, I realized we had not taken the time for him to autograph the book that day. I asked him if he was too tired, and he answered, "no."

Once inside my room, I unpacked the book and handed it to Roger. He sat down on the bed and began to write. When he finished, I reached out to retrieve the book. He pulled me toward him. Panicky now I thought to myself, oh no, not again! Fear overtaking me I began to cry.

I don't know what his intention was, but he immediately rose from the bed and began apologizing. Why was I in this situation again? Is this all men want from a widow? Just because I had been married did not mean I needed another man!

The sobs would not stop. I felt so completely helpless. Roger said, "please, if you just let me stay and comfort you, I promise nothing will happen." At this point, I didn't care... if he raped me, he would be raping a corpse...

When I woke up the next morning, we were both fully dressed. The last thing I remember was Roger holding me in his strong arms and letting me cry until I fell asleep.

My plane was leaving in a few hours, and I needed to pack and get to the airport. Roger insisted on driving me. We did not speak, words seemed unnecessary. He had given me something I had lost... trust. My heart had stopped beating the day John was killed, now I felt a tiny flutter...

Climbing the stairs to the waiting plane I turned and waved good-bye... I had made up my mind that I would never see him again... ❖



Donlon Family Christmas



Justin and Derek Donlon



Justin Donlon Airborne graduation photo.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norma Donlon, an American of Japanese ancestry, was born in the WWII Camp Jerome War Relocation Center in Arkansas. Losing her hearing at age 7, she learned to lip-read and pursued a career as an Executive Assistant and Special Events Director, dedicating her life to serving others—especially children. Widowed at 22 when her first husband, 1st Lt. John Irving, Jr., was killed in Vietnam, she later married U.S. Army Special Forces officer Roger Donlon, moving 16 times in 20 years while advocating tirelessly for soldiers, families, and communities worldwide.

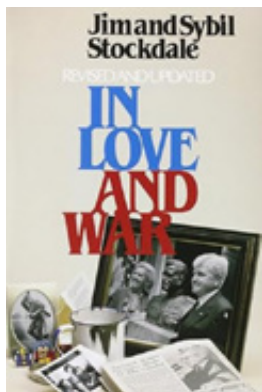
Her decades of service have earned her numerous honors, including the Department of the Army Outstanding Civilian Service Medal, the Shield of Sparta, the Martha Raye Award, and Honorary Membership in the Special Forces Association. She has been a sought-after speaker on leadership, patriotism, women's history, and the Japanese American experience, and in 2025 received the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Medal of Honor. Norma and Roger were married for 55 years until his passing in 2024, and she is devoted to her family, faith, and freedom.

VICE ADMIRAL JAMES BOND STOCKDALE: VIETNAM WAR HERO AND INDOMITABLE SPIRIT AT THE HANOI HILTON



By Marc Yablonka

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As author Joseph Conrad wrote in his great book *Lord Jim*, 'A certain readiness to perish is not so very rare, but it is seldom that you meet men whose souls, steeled in the impenetrable armor of resolution, are ready to fight a losing battle to the last.' Conrad could not have described Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale better if he had tried. That might be why the late admiral included the quote in his memoir *In Love and War*, co-written in 1990 with his wife Sybil.

The former prisoner of war, arguably one of the best-known residents of the infamous Hanoi Hilton (Hoa Lo Prison), died at age 81 in July 2005 on Coronado Island, Calif., after a battle with Alzheimer's disease. Forty years earlier, on September 9, 1965, the commander of the air group — 'CAG,' as his fellow naval aviators called him — flew his Douglas A-4 Skyhawk off the deck of USS *Oriskany* for the last time. Stockdale's plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire later in the mission. He ejected, breaking a bone in his back and, upon impact with the ground, dislocating a knee, which never properly healed.

The mission on which Stockdale was shot down, a bombing run over the North, took place just a little more than one year after the Gulf of Tonkin incident of August 2 and 4, 1964. Congress had quickly passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, with only two senators, Wayne Morse and Ernst Gruening, opposed. That, in turn, had cleared the way for bombing North Vietnam. The retaliatory bombing raids ordered by President Lyndon Johnson were the first major step in the escalation of American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Above left, a formal portrait of Rear Adm. James B. Stockdale (U.S. Navy photo); at right, Stockdale exiting his A-4 Skyhawk attack jet weeks before becoming a POW (U.S. Navy photo)

Whether or not North Vietnamese torpedo boats actually fired on destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* remains highly contested to this day. General Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese military commander from the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 through the 1968 Tet Offensive, has disavowed the August 4 attack, although he confirmed that the August 2 attack on the American vessels did occur.

Commander Stockdale was airborne during the Tonkin crisis, and he seemed to express doubt about the incident that changed American policy in Vietnam. 'When the destroyers were convinced, they had some battle action going, I zigged and zagged and fired where they fired, unless it looked like I might get caught in their shot patterns, or unless they had told me to fire somewhere else,' he wrote. 'The edges of the black hole I was flying in were still periodically lit by flashes of lightning — but no wakes or dark shapes other than those of the destroyers were ever visible to me.'

Ironically, Stockdale was sitting in his chair in the ready room of *Oriskany* when President Johnson announced on nationwide television that the retaliatory bombing raids had begun. In fact, they had yet to commence. 'We took off knowing that the Vietnamese had been alerted that we were coming,' he told filmmakers Freida Lee Mock and Terry Sanders in their 1998 documentary *Return With Honor*.

Recalling his 1965 capture, Stockdale told the Academy of Achievement's Museum of Living History in Washington, D.C.: 'As I ejected from the plane, I broke a bone in my back, but that was only the beginning. I landed in the streets of a small village. A thundering herd was coming down on me. They were going to defend the honor of their town. It was the quarterback sack of the century.'

At the very beginning of his 7 1/2 years in captivity, four of which were in solitary confinement, Stockdale was the senior ranking naval officer in the prison. According to his Medal of Honor citation: 'Recognized by his captors as the leader in the Prisoners' of War resistance to inter-

rogation and in their refusal to participate in propaganda exploitation, Rear Adm. Stockdale was singled out for interrogation and attendant torture after he was detected in a covert communications attempt.'

Commander Everett Alvarez Jr. was the first American to be shot down and captured (August 5, 1964). From his office in McLean, Va., Alvarez remembered: 'In hindsight, it was as if [Stockdale] were meant to be there. It was as if God had a plan for him.'

During their long years of imprisonment, Stockdale and the other POWs used the 'Smitty Harris Tap Code,' named for Captain Carlyle Smith Harris, the POW who introduced it to the other prisoners. The tap code was a method of communicating by tapping on the prison cell walls. While the code initially eluded the North Vietnamese prison guards, they quickly caught on. From that point forward the prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton suffered severe punishment whenever they were caught using it.

'On one of those cold December nights, Robbie [Lt. Col. Robinson Risner, the senior Air Force POW in the Hanoi Hilton] gave me lessons in how to tap messages through the wall,' Stockdale wrote. 'Robbie instructed me to call him up with the 'shave and a haircut' beat: tick-tick-ta-tick-tick. He would let me know he was ready to receive my first word by answering tick-tick.'

'We were lucky to have Risner,' remembered Alvarez. 'With Stockdale we had wisdom. With Risner we had spirituality.'

Inspired by Stockdale and Risner, the POWs persevered, but the severe punishment continued at the hands of their North Vietnamese captors. The POWs continually were beaten within an inch of their lives, and some died as a result. They were forced to spend hours locked in leg irons and crude handcuffs, sleeping on cement slabs and using rusted-out slop buckets for a toilet.

Stockdale was no exception. Because he was the highest-ranking naval officer, he often was beaten more severely than others in a symbolic effort to break him. The goal of his captors was not only to discourage other POWs, but also through television broadcasts by foreign media to create doubt about the war effort among Americans back home.

Stockdale's captors long tried to extract information from him about troop strength aboard naval vessels, and confessions for what they termed 'war crimes against the Vietnamese people.' Often the POWs made up information that fooled their captors for a time. Nonetheless, the North Vietnamese managed to extract forced confessions: 'I understand that I am a criminal who has bombed churches, schools and pagodas of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,' read one confession Stockdale was forced to sign. 'I know the nature of my sins, and I now submit to you to do whatever you tell me to say, tape, or write.'

Stockdale did his utmost to remain strong in the face of his captivity. There is little doubt that both his fierce will to live and his burning anger combined to keep him alive. Often that anger was focused against the man people all over Vietnam referred to as *Bac Ho* (Uncle Ho). As Stockdale later recounted, in 1969 'Ho Chi Minh was on his death bed, or dead. It was odd to think of him over there in his house, a mile or less away. I could almost yell over there. What would I say? 'You old son of a bitch'? No, I'd probably say something like 'Good-bye you old bastard. You know how this game is played. You didn't snivel — and neither will I!'

For all of his mental and physical fortitude while a prisoner, Stockdale's wife, Sybil, was unstoppably ferocious in her own right. Her fight to bring home her husband, and the other POWs, resulted in the founding of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. The organization's efforts took her to Paris in the fall of 1969, where she met with a delegation of North Vietnamese officials in their embassy. It was no easy task to arrange such a meeting.

'Each afternoon I sat in my room waiting for the phone to ring and staring into the mirror as I practiced what I wanted to say to the North Vietnamese. I telephoned Xuan Oanh [temporary head of the delegation] to remind him we were waiting,' Mrs. Stockdale recalled in *In Love and War*.

On a Saturday morning in early October, Xuan called without warning and instructed Mrs. Stockdale and her delegation of one father and several wives of POWs to come to the embassy for afternoon tea. 'I was both elated and terrified that we were actually going to see the enemy face-to-face,' she wrote.

Following that single meeting, the North Vietnamese officials feared they would be inundated by other relatives. They stressed that no other delegations needed to come to Paris, but they promised to look into the individual cases raised by Stockdale and her group. Emerging from the meeting, they were met by a hostile media. 'Sarcasm salted their questions,' she recalled. 'Why were they so angry at us?' I wondered as I stood in the line-up facing their glaring camera lights.'

That was not the only time Sybil Stockdale faced hostile media. Three years later, in July 1972, she appeared on ABC's *Dick Cavett Show*. That experience proved equally negative. While her entire purpose in appearing on television was to help win the release of her husband and the other POWs, she was warned prior to airtime by a Cavett staffer that the show was not political and she was not to make any political statements.

'As the show unfolded, it became clear that Dick Cavett would make the political statements and I was to be Mrs. Dumb Dumb Navy Wife who could only sit and wring her hands,' she wrote. 'When his remarks seemed to be critical of the present [Richard Nixon] administration, I reminded him that Johnson, [Dean] Rusk, and [Robert] McNamara had gotten us into this war.'

Cavett, according to Judy Englander, spokeswoman for his New York-based Daphne Productions, does not have a clear recollection of that interview. But as Sybil Stockdale later wrote: 'I was relieved when the show was over. I was glad to have told his audience where they could order POW bracelets, and not too sorry later that the program had been canceled.'

She could not know until the POWs were released five months later, on February 12, 1973, that she and her organization had provided a beacon of hope for her husband and the other POWs. While forced to sign and broadcast bogus confessions, they never gave up any militarily significant information that the North Vietnamese could use to prosecute their war against South Vietnam.

Fellow POW Commander (later Rear Adm.) Jeremiah Denton, who after retiring from the Navy went on to serve as a U.S. senator, pointed out in the *Return With Honor* film that he warned the other POWs never

to allow their captors to advance the indoctrination process to the point that the POWs were giving up without torture any information that was useful to North Vietnam's cause.

Stockdale was a practitioner of Denton's philosophy. True to his tough character, honed at the U.S. Naval Academy from which he graduated in 1946, throughout his imprisonment Stockdale constantly urged his fellow inmates to abide by the U.S. military Code of Conduct for POWs, and adhere strictly to the principle that the longest-held and the sickest would be released first. 'No early releases,' as the POWs termed it. Constantly upholding the code, Stockdale often endured beatings and multiple forms of abuse, including the painful Vietnamese 'rope trick.' With the POW's hands behind his back, his arms were rotated in their sockets until the bones popped out of joint, while the guards simultaneously forced his neck forward.

All the POWs went through their individual low periods. Stockdale opted more than once to harm himself rather than submit to the indignations of interrogation, confession and the international media there to film him and the other POWs. In 1969, just after the death of Ho Chi Minh, Stockdale reached a point where he tried to commit suicide rather than be forced to make a confession on international television. His attempt to end his own life was thwarted by prison guards.

The extent to which the North Vietnamese attempted to coerce and exploit Stockdale was never clearer than when they found him lying in his own blood in his cell in the section of the Hoa Lo Prison the POWs called Las Vegas. (They had names for the other areas in and around the prison, such as New Guy Village and Heartbreak Hotel.) 'How dare you do this! Why did you do this?' his captors shouted at him as they sloshed soapy water all over the floor of his cell and on his body, in a frantic effort to prevent Stockdale's suicide attempt from becoming international news.

Stockdale's survival was fortunate for the other POWs, who would continue to rely on him as a role model and a leadership figure. One of those POWs was future Senator John McCain, the son of Admiral John McCain II, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command during



Then Commander James B. Stockdale emerges to freedom in 1973 after being held as a POW in the Hanoi Hilton during the Vietnam War (Photo courtesy of US Navy Archives)

the Vietnam War. McCain's own POW ordeal began on October 23, 1967, when he landed in the middle of Truc Bach Lake in downtown Hanoi, after a Soviet SAM took the right wing off his Skyhawk bomber.

McCain, whose cell at Hoa Lo was two doors down from Stockdale's, recalled: 'Jim inspired us to do things we never believed we were capable of. Without him, I certainly wouldn't have made it out of the prison with my honor intact.'

Many years later, McCain got additional support from Stockdale as the former was campaigning for the Republican Party nomination for president during the 2000 campaign. According to McCain, his political opponents were accusing him of being unpatriotic, treasonous and crazy from having been in prison. 'Jim told everyone that I was solid as a rock,' McCain said. 'He was an inspirational leader. I was very saddened by his illness and death.'

Another of Stockdale's fellow POWs, retired Marine Colonel Orson Swindle, was equally saddened. Swindle was a captain flying out of Da Nang when he was shot down on an interdiction mission north of the DMZ on November 11, 1966, some 14 months after Stockdale's capture. Following his arrival at Hoa Lo, he remembered, 'One night around 10:00, I heard the familiar shuffle of the guards bringing in a prisoner.' It was Stockdale. 'We had such high regard for this man. He had been worn down very badly and wasn't in a talkative mood. Like all of us, he had to recover from what he'd been through.'

One Sunday while the guards were lax, remembered Swindle, the prisoners were whispering argumentatively about how something — which Swindle has long since forgotten — should be done. Stockdale, who had not involved himself in the conversation to that point, suddenly whispered, 'How about listening to an old man tell you what we should do?'

Swindle got the chance to thank Stockdale personally in February 1973, when the POWs learned that they would soon be released. The two POWs finally met because the prison rules were relaxed somewhat after Ho's death in 1969, and authorities allowed the POWs to mingle and talk to one another openly. 'A silver-gray-haired man came limping over to meet me and said hello. I told him I was honored to meet him, but was feeling low having just given a [forced] confession. I told him, 'When you moved into that cell, you saved my life by yourself and your leadership.'

Swindle later served as the national spokesman for Ross Perot's failed independent campaign for the U.S. presidency in 1992. Perot seemed to agree wholeheartedly with his former spokesman about the leadership qualities of Jim Stockdale, whom he chose as his running mate. 'He was an incredibly intellectual talent,' Perot remembered from his office in Plano, Texas. 'He was brilliant and a wonderful man who was a great role model.'

Perot, who at the government's behest spent four years involved in an effort to bring more humane treatment to the POWs in North Vietnam, also recalled that the torture Stockdale underwent was unthinkable. 'Yet he never broke,' Perot said. 'He never gave a thing. He did one heroic thing after another. He was a hero.'

Perot also believed the North Vietnamese eventually realized it had been a huge mistake to brutalize Stockdale to the extent that they did. The more they tortured him, the worse the North Vietnamese looked in the world's eyes.



Then Commander James B. Stockdale is presented with the Distinguished Flying Cross by Capt. Bartholomew J. Connolly III, commanding officer, USS *Oriskany* during her 1965 deployment on August 13th of that year. The award was presumably received for actions taken early in the Vietnam War. (Photo courtesy National Archives)

Whatever Stockdale's political contributions as Perot's running mate, they never matched the skills and toughness he had honed as an aviator in 1964 at the Test Pilot School at Patuxent River, Md., alongside the likes of future astronaut and senator John Glenn. Nor did Stockdale's brief foray into politics match his brilliant years following Vietnam as an educator, which included service in 1976 as the president of the U.S. Naval War College, followed by the presidency of The Citadel military academy in South Carolina in 1979 and 1980. In 1981 Stockdale became a scholar in residence at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where he had earned a master's degree in 1962.

Although he excelled as a scholar and a lover of the Greek classics, politics just did not prove to be Stockdale's cup of tea.

Remembering his performance in the 1992 vice presidential debate, Stockdale later told PBS anchorman Jim Lehrer: 'It was terribly frustrating because I remember I started with 'Who am I? Why am I here?' And I never got back to that, because there was never an opportunity for me to explain my life to people — the four years in solitary confinement in Vietnam, seven-and-a-half years in prisons, dropping the first bomb that started the American bombing raid in North Vietnam. We blew the oil storage tanks off the map. And I...don't say it just to brag, but I mean my sensitivities are completely different.'

Stockdale came out of the debate as a laughingstock, much to the dismay and anger of longtime Washington insider Ed Rollins, deputy chief of staff for political and governmental affairs during the Ronald Reagan administration. 'Of all the political injustices of my lifetime,' Rollins wrote in his book *Bare Knuckles and Back Rooms*, 'what happened to Jim Stockdale was the greatest. Congress should pass a law requiring every person who laughed at him during the vice-presidential debate to read the citation that explains why Stockdale received the Medal of Honor as a senior prisoner of war in Hanoi.... This man is a great academic scholar, a true war hero, and a wonderful human being — the best the military and this country has to offer. He deserved better.'

McCain expressed the sentiment that much of what Stockdale was as a human being came about as a direct result of his time at the Naval Academy: 'No doubt his time at Annapolis was a great molding experi-

ence for him. He passed those ideals on to others during and after prison,' the senator said in a telephone interview from his office in Washington, D.C. When asked what Stockdale's legacy would be, McCain replied, 'That under the most extreme conditions, American heroes not only conduct themselves with honor, they inspire others to do the same.'

Still another man inspired by Stockdale is fellow POW Edward Martin, a retired vice admiral. Martin's imprisonment began October 9, 1965, when his A-4 Skyhawk was hit by anti-aircraft fire 30 miles southeast of Hanoi. 'He gave me inspiration and hope, told me what to expect, how to conduct myself,' remembered Martin, who went on to command the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet and also served as deputy chief of naval operations for air warfare. 'He had incredibly strong leadership that provided me with incredible inspiration at a bad time for me.'

Like Senator McCain, Admiral Martin attributed Stockdale's character to the values that were instilled in him at the academy. 'Though I am reticent to speak of the effect anything had on someone else,' said Martin, 'I will attribute Jim Stockdale's courage to the humility we learned there.'

Martin also credited Stockdale's courage as the reason he and the other Vietnam POWs survived the brutality they endured on a daily basis: 'I was able to leave prison holding my head up high. He is a giant example of what is right in America today.' ♦

Mrs. Sybil Stockdale sent this thank-you card to the author after this story published in *Vietnam Magazine* (Photo courtesy Marc Yablonka)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marc Yablonka is a military journalist and author whose work has appeared in *Stars and Stripes*, *Army Times*, *Air Force Times*, *Vietnam Magazine*, and many others. He is the author of several books, including *Distant War*, *Tears Across the Mekong*, *Vietnam Bao Chi*, and *Hot Mics and TV Lights*.

Marc served as a Public Affairs Officer (CWO-2) in the California State Military Reserve, supporting troops deploying to and returning from Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. His writing and photography appeared in *Soldiers*, *Grizzly*, *Hawaii Army Weekly*, *Army Magazine*, and more.

His decorations include the California National Guard Medal of Merit, Service Ribbon, and Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf. He also served two tours with the Sar-El unit of the Israeli Defense Forces and holds a Master's in Professional Writing from the University of Southern California.

Emotions Anonymous



VIETNAM 1967 – A TEAM



U.S. Army General Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., Long Binh, Vietnam, December, 1968. Photo credit: Michael Kopp, Stars & Stripes

By Samuel E. Seetin, Jr., LTC SF USA (Ret.)

***God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.***

Example: We were out numbered by the enemy on a remote fire base in Vietnam, but did what we could to defend ourselves. God took care of the rest.

General Creighton Abrams (Deputy CINC MACV) timely spot inspection directed construction of mortar pit.

NVA observers mistook the mortar pit as strong point rather a show case ready should the general return before CIDG soldiers could be trained-up. Enemy penetrated our camp fortifications and blew up the mortar pit blunting their own attack.

From: Seetin, Samuel
 Sent: Wednesday, March 14, 2001 1:44 PM
 To: Abrams, John GEN
 Subject: Your Dad Saved My Life

Sir,

Early Aug 67, your father made an unannounced inspection of A334 SF Detachment at Ton Le Chon, RVN. Our under strength Camp had recently experienced mass desertion because of the corrupt LLDB, and was reinforced with the Mike Force and a Company from Minh Tan.

As the Executive Officer I reported to him and escorted him around the Fire Base. It was constructed of laterite soil in concentric circles defense perimeters, consisting of an inner and outer berm with an adjacent fortified dependent housing area secured by a fierce platoon of recently galvanized Cambodian of X-Communist POWs.

Your dad jumped into the 81 mm Mortar pit and pointed out that only a few illuminations rounds were ready to be fired. He ask why. I told him that rounds corrode quickly in humid weather and will misfire. He rejected that and told me to fix it. He proceeded to check police of outer barrier, noted trash in the barrier concertina and directed a that CIDG conduct police call.

The last spot correction he made was ordering the immediate emplacement of the 4.2 mortars and ammunition we had just received and to proficiently train u the CIDG to effectively fire the mortars. He departed the Camp indicating he would be back to check on corrective action identified.

Sergeant First Class Jerry Friend and I used a D5 Dozer to dig outside the inner berm a telephoned shaped mortar pit emplaced with two 4.2 mortars connected by a covered tunnel to store over 1000 rounds of HE and White phosphorus. I went up with the a forward air controller piloting a light fixed winged aircraft and registered the guns on road crossings in the area. We did this to get ready for re-inspection. The 165th NVA Regiment Recon elements noted our activity and identified mortar pit as strong point.

Just after midnight the morning of 7 Aug 67 a reinforced 165 NVA Regiment launched a vicious attack our Camp penetrating the barrier fence. The enemy Sapper combat engineer team set off the huge assortment mortar rounds stored in our mortar pit using Chinese communist C-4 that caused a huge explosion, unintentionally blunting their own attack, and killing several hundred or more NVA soldiers. It gave us time to counter-attack, call in Air Force fighter and Artillery

supporting fires, and re-establish our defensive perimeter. Your Dad's spot correction accidentally saved the lives of everyone on the Team and many of CIDG soldiers we advised.

During Operation Desert Shield build up, I was a LTC SF assigned to (MOSO-DC) in the Army Operations Center you were my Senior Rater. I wanted to tell you the story but didn't think you would believe it. I have thanked your Dad in my prayers, now I'm thanking you.

WVGR,
 Sam Seetin,
 LTC(Ret), SF USA

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From: Abrams, John GEN
 Sent: March 15, 2001 8:29 AM
 To: Seetin, Samuel
 Subject: RE: Your Dad Saved My Life

Sam, thanks you for sharing the experience of my father. He had a major influence on so many of us in his lifetime. Thanks for all the help you gave us in the AOC for ODS, we made a difference for our soldiers and their leaders for which you should take great pride in being part of. If you don't mine I'll pass this story on to my mother and brothers and sisters. We will keep you in our prayers. R/ John Abrams.

.....

Update from Sam Seetin: I also shared this story with GEN Abrams' youngest son. By the way, a friend of mine Anh Nguyen a RVN refuge visited Ton Le Chon battle site last month and identified the location burial site of NVA and CIDG soldiers on the map that I gave him. In October the military Vietnamese authorities and Professor from Hanoi will use a donated ground penetrating radar to uncover the remains of those buried which will bring closure to grieving families. Our foe is now our friend. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LTC Samuel E. Seetin served 53 years in combined military and Army civilian service. A Special Forces officer with combat tours in Vietnam, he later held key leadership roles in logistics, communications, and aviation readiness worldwide. His awards include the Legion of Merit, two Bronze Stars (one for valor), the Vietnam Gallantry Cross, Meritorious Service Medal, and the Distinguished Service Medal for Civilians (awarded by Secretary of the Army). Learn more about him by visiting this link to his interview on the Library of Congress website: <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.109225/#>.

Key is gaining wisdom on what you can change—and what you can't. Serenity in the face of what you *can't* change shouldn't mean utter complete desperation, but it comes from the comfort of knowing that Our Maker holds those unchangeable things in His hands. He shall work due diligence on changing them in His own time and own way.

SFA Chapter 78 July 2025 Chapter Meeting

Photos by James McLanahan, How Miller, and Debra Holm



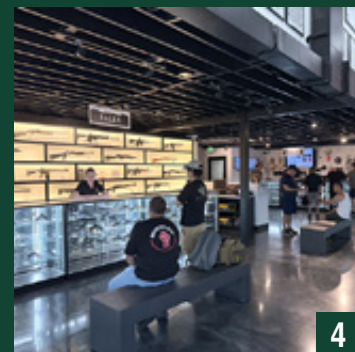
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Fun at the Range Iron Mike's Guns

1–4 “Iron Mike” Healy is the owner of Iron Mike's Guns—a full-service shooting range and training academy in Yorba Linda, CA. Mike shares his nickname with his grandfather, Major General Michael D. Healy, whose portrait is featured in a mural on the shop's wall.

Iron Mike's is a true one-stop shop for “home defense” needs, offering a wide selection of top-quality firearms, gear, and training. Certified instructors with real-world experience provide courses for all skill levels.

The facility, which features 13 state-of-the-art lanes in two bays, is open to the public with memberships available. Learn more at iron-mikes.com.

We had a great experience and appreciate Mike Healy's generosity — along with the outstanding support from his staff — during our event. We look forward to returning to Iron Mike's!

5 After the “meeting” portion of the day and a quick safety briefing, members hit the range for some friendly competition in the “Coin Challenge.”

6 Cody, nephew of VP James McLanahan, made the trip from Oregon, where he's a student at Klamath Falls High School.

7 James McLanahan proudly displays his results.

8 A warm handshake between James and Gemma Healy — “Mrs. Iron Mike” — proud mom of six!

9 Gus Populus introduced his guests: his wife, Patty, and his brother, Phillip.

10 James greets Brent, a guest of Tom Golden. Brent served with 5th Group and later as an advisor to 19th Group.

11 James with Jerry Guzetta, author of *I Walked with Heroes*, his memoir of serving as a Green Beret in MACV-SOG.

12 James with Ally Lloyd, guest of Johann Hindert. Ally is currently interning with Apex Service Partners.

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