

# STOCKDALE



Operation Pierce Arrow by R.G. Smith. In F-8E NF 101, Cdr. James Stockdale leads the first strike against North Vietnamese bases on August 5, 1964. Limited Edition print is available from U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD 21402.

**V**Adm. James Stockdale's stirring story of survival, loyalty and courage as a POW is well-known. He received the Medal of Honor for legendary examples of leadership in the Hanoi Hilton. But there is much more to his personal story. Originally a carrier-based ASW aviator, he graduated from Test Pilot School and eventually became one of the first F-8 Crusader pilots. In fact, he was the first to achieve 1,000 hours in Vought's trend-setting fighter.

It was in the cockpit of an F-8E that then-Cdr. Stockdale, CO of VF-51, participated in the first U.S. strikes against the North Vietnamese. Flying from USS *Ticonderoga* (CVA-14), he led four Crusaders against Communist PT boats on August 2, 1964, after they had attacked the U.S. destroyer *Maddox*. Three days later, in Operation Pierce Arrow, aircraft from the *Tico* and *Constellation* (CVA-64) attacked North Vietnamese PT boat bases. Cdr. Stockdale led that raid, too.

He assumed command of Air Wing 16 in USS *Oriskany* (CVA-34) on February 18, 1965. The carrier deployed to Vietnam that May, and for the next four months, CVW-16 was involved in heavy combat as American participation in the Vietnam War increased. While flying an A-4E on September 9, he was shot down and began his incredible period of confinement as a POW.

After his release in 1973, he resumed his Navy career and eventually retired in 1979. He remains busy and is in constant demand as a speaker and consultant. The admiral spoke with us from his office at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

*Approach: Admiral, how would you answer the following question: "In war, safety is...?"*

**VAdm. Stockdale:** In war, safety is just another skill needed to keep the squadron flying and fighting. When the war starts, put those "Safety is paramount" signs in your bottom drawer. Nothing is para-

mount but mission accomplishment.

*Approach: Certainly you don't disregard safety.*

**VAdm. Stockdale:** Oh no, of course not. But it has to become second nature. You have to internalize things like systems knowledge. I knew a test pilot named Bud Holcombe who used to say, "Think

big and basically. Don't get rattled and you'll live forever." You have to become part of the machine; you're part of it and the systems are part of it. You're obviously not going to get back if you don't know how to handle emergencies.

A very bright young pilot, Ltjg. Dick Hastings, was with me when we made the first run on the PT boats on August 2, 1964. We were going after different boats and we attacked in such a manner that he could see me, but I couldn't see him. We pulled off almost simultaneously and he said, "I've been hit!" I joined on him and looked at his wing. It was damaged, but he wasn't losing any fluid—hydraulics or gas—and there were no burn marks. I realized then that he'd probably overstressed the airplane.

He was on his first cruise and this was the first live run made in the war. His inexperience and excitement caused him to try to pull the wings off the Crusader. That was his first mistake. Then, he thought, because the metal was loose and rattling, that he'd been hit. I knew that wasn't the case so I told him to hold there and I went back and made some more runs on the boats until I was down to bingo state. We were about 350 miles from the ship and the damaged plane had additional drag, so he couldn't fly the same bingo profile we were on. He safely recovered at Da Nang.



Cdr. James B. Stockdale as Commander, Air Wing 16.

Dick Hastings didn't make any big mistakes. He could've thought he was on fire and ejected, but he didn't. One of the things he didn't realize was the bingo cards were no good with unprogrammed drag. But, Dick was a fine kid and I thought well of him. He asked me about the LSO business and I told him he'd make a good one. I thought that much of him as a pilot. I was shot down the next cruise in September 1965, and I came home to find out that he did get LSO-qualified. Unfortunately, he was waving

at night and an F-8 hit the ramp and he wound up with some metal in his skull. He died later aboard a hospital ship off Vietnam from the wounds.

**Approach:** *Once the shooting started, did you find yourselves checking your survival gear more closely?*

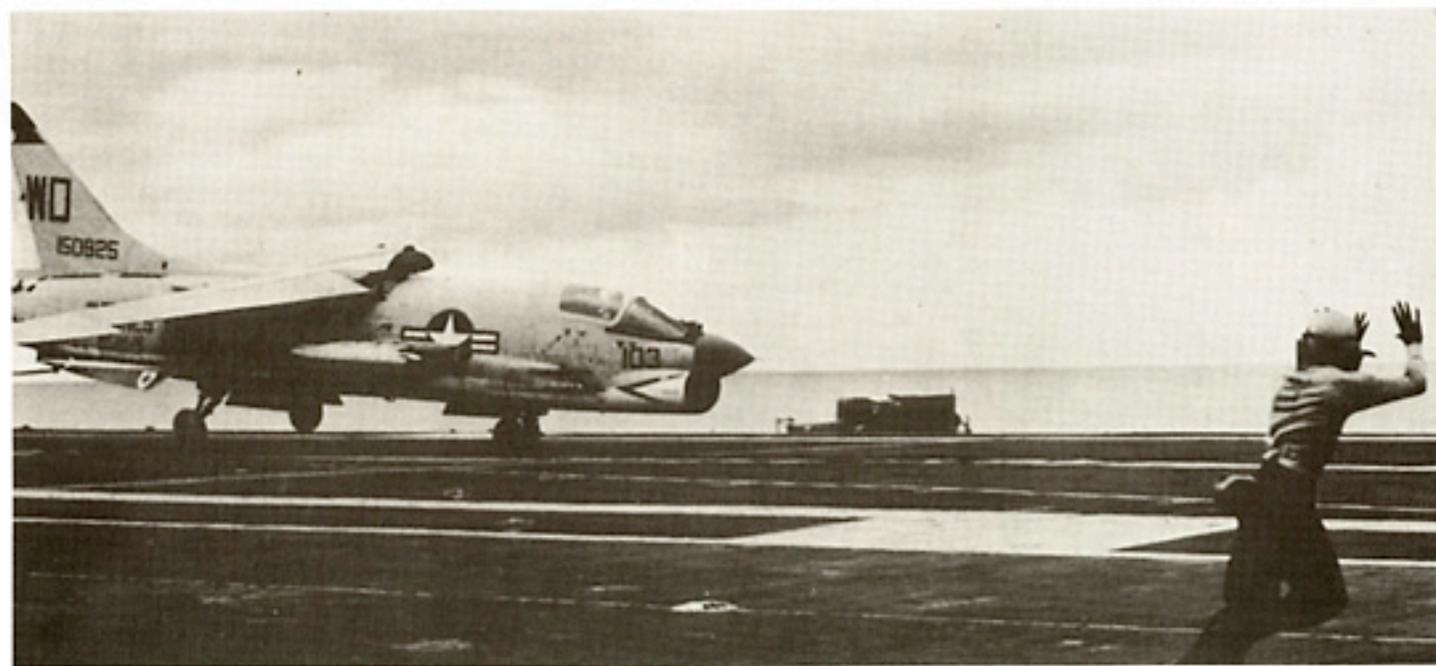
**VAdm. Stockdale:** Yeah, of course we did. We had one guy, LCdr. Bill Powers, who was later killed, who was a sport jumper. He gave us talks on how to handle ripped chutes. Suddenly, there was a great interest in this and he was in demand.

**Approach:** *Obviously, you have to modify peacetime safety concerns once the war breaks out.*

**VAdm. Stockdale:** To be honest, as CO, I wouldn't know until I knew the pilots working for me. Once the shooting starts, some guys are quite nervous and spring-loaded to have a problem. You've got to calm them down. Some guys are slothful, or wiseguys. You've got to scare them. There's no average guy there.

**Approach:** *So basically, it's up to the CO to recognize the differences in his aviators.*

**VAdm. Stockdale:** Yes, I think that's it. I've never talked about this before, but I know two aviators that were perfect examples of this: Dick Hastings and Tim Hubbard. They were opposites. Lt. Tim Hubbard was a natural, had a good feel



As the deck crewman signals a successful trap, this F-8E of VMF(AW)-212 returns from a combat mission during *Oriskany's* 1965 cruise. Cdr. Stockdale was CAG-16 at this time and often flew the F-8s of the two fighter squadrons in his wing.

for flying. He pushed his luck. He had a lot of experience and knew the systems, but he wasn't into the mechanical side of flying.

Dick Hastings was an engineer. He was very serious. You had to pump confidence into him. "It's gonna go all right. Don't worry if that flickers, that's normal." Or, "Yeah, I know what the book says, but don't get excited until something really goes wrong." Hubbard was just the opposite. "Dammit, you've got to pay attention to those gauges, because they're trying to tell you something. You've got a real problem and you're getting out of range," and so forth. It's a good safety touch to be a psychologist. (*Flying with VF-211, then-LCdr. Tim Hubbard shot down a MiG-17 on July 21, 1967.—Ed.*)

One of the best at this was the skipper of my first F-8 squadron, LCdr. "Red Dog" Davis. He had a standing order that new guys were not to talk to any Safety Officers or Operations Officers until they'd had two days alone with him. He'd break out the schematics and show the new guys what the books didn't tell them. He did it for effect. It would really draw the new people in and get them thinking on their own. He'd say, "I don't want these new guys getting scared to death at the all pilots meetings and the safety talks until they have their two days with me. I'll tell them what's important and what's not." He went on to four stars. He would have been head of the Blue Angels, but, in those days, they weren't letting any Naval Academy guys be Blue Angels because it was a recruiting tool for the Naval Aviation Cadet program.

I have to say that for some reason, today's safety statistics are light years better than when I was shot down. We used to go out for carquals in the F-8 and have to bring two or three duds back every week. Rates are way down; somebody's doing something better than I could have. I would never have anticipated this kind of improvement.

**Approach:** Senator John Glenn pointed out the F-8's lifetime mishap rate was 46.6.

**VAdm. Stockdale:** Well, John was the F-8 class desk officer at BUAIR, so he'd know those things. He was also a Test



Cdr. Stockdale, CAG-16, waits in his F-8 before a mission in 1965. Crusader belongs to VMF (AW)-212, the last Marine carrier-based squadron in combat until 1971.

Pilot School classmate of mine and he's not a bookish fellow. He's a practical guy. He came into the program as a major but he didn't have the college degree that was normally required. He knew he was going to have to burn the midnight oil, so he left his wife at home in Ohio. He'd be in the study room after hours all alone. If you were at home and you forgot what the assignment was, you could always call down there and ask John.

His flying was all seat-of-the-pants. Before the school started, he took me flying in whatever had two seats. I was full of theory and no practice in jets and he was the other way around.

The first time we flew together, we went on a cross-country to get some instrument time in a TV-1. I hopped in the back seat and he showed me how to get things hooked up. I'd never really seen the inside of the plane.

He said, "We're going down to Masters Field in Miami. Here's the book. You can do some navigating." He was kinda just being nice to me because I was the new guy and he was a good fellow.

We got down there and there were thunderstorms all around when we

landed. It had just turned dark. We were eating a hot dog and drinking a Coke in front of the line shack when he said, "Why don't you fly it back."

I said, "OK, John, but I've never been in that front seat." I noticed the lightning all around. He told me I could handle it.

He got me strapped into the front seat and then he stood up on the back and said, "OK, Jim. Do you see that handle down there? No, not that one, the red one. Now, push that outboard. Now you've got it. Now hit that button. That's your ignition. Hold that for just a minute. Now when it comes up to 15 percent, go around the horn." He had to start shouting once the motor started up and he yelled, "OK, I'll get in and put the canopy down."

He talked me out and all the way home. But, you can't do that stuff now. Those times were different.

**Approach:** Sounds like he had the makings of a good RIO.

**VAdm. Stockdale:** (laughs) He was a natural pilot. He knew systems and he was part of the system. His safety record speaks for itself.

— Lt. Ward Carroll and Peter Mersky