

**Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale Leadership Award Winners:
A League of Extraordinary Officers and Gentlemen**

By Captain Mike Lambert



Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale
Portrait painted by Margaret Holland Sargent
(Used with her permission)

There are few topics in the Navy that are debated, studied, or written about as much as leadership. Navy leaders are said to be on a career-long leadership continuum that begins with recruitment and in many cases ends following retirement. Various Chiefs of Naval Operations have asserted that “every Sailor is a leader.” The history of the U.S. Navy is draped with the rich fabric of the threads of leadership – trust, judgment, authoritative speech, strengthening of others, optimism, enthusiasm, resolution, and positive example. No one in the Navy has woven these threads of leadership into a stronger fabric than CDR James Bond Stockdale during his nearly 8 years as a Prisoner of War in Hoa Lo prison in North Vietnam.

The Secretary of the Navy, Hon. Edward Hidalgo was so impressed with the inspirational leadership and selfless service of Medal of Honor winner VADM James Bond Stockdale that he established an award in VADM

Stockdale’s honor shortly after the Admiral’s retirement in 1979. Established in 1980, the award has been earned by 53 naval officers over the past 27 years. The heroics of this Medal of Honor winner while imprisoned in the infamous ‘Hanoi Hilton’ in Vietnam are legendary. The naval officers who have earned the inspirational leadership award in his name are extraordinary – though, to a man, I believe each would deny they were. Most of the winners that I contacted denied it outright – all acknowledged their crews’ contributions to command successes. These men uniformly displayed humility and a genuine willingness to self-critique; each considered himself to be an “ordinary man”. (To date, no woman has won the award and only one has been nominated – Captain Babette Bolivar, USNA 1985; 2006 Pacific Fleet Finalist.)

The Criteria

Annually, two Naval officers (one from the Atlantic and one from the Pacific) are selected from a group of peer-nominated Commanding Officers below the grade of Captain who best exemplify the enduring inspirational leadership characteristics of VADM Stockdale. The award seeks to recognize those officers who best represent the five roles of leadership that VADM Stockdale exhibited himself. Those roles¹ are

- **Moralist.** Commitment to a personal code of conduct which emphasizes strong moral ethics, courage, resolve, and humility as demonstrated by personal and professional service to members of the Naval service.
- **Jurist.** Ability to establish policy, which can be implemented and obeyed, and to make those hard decisions, based on the policy, in those difficult situations, which portend endless complications.
- **Teacher.** Example of self-discipline, sensitivity to others, and ability to place the major issues in proper prospective while creating the

¹ OPNAVINST 3590.23F, THE VICE ADMIRAL JAMES BOND STOCKDALE LEADERSHIP AWARD, 26 FEB 07

motivational command climate essential for job satisfaction and organizational pride.

- Steward. Example of competence, proper regard for the rights of others, and personal commitment to the development and maintenance of accepted standards, unit loyalty, and esprit de corps.
- Philosopher. Ability to reason, understand and explain the essence of reality and recognize the need for forethought in dealing with uncertainties.

The Process

The nomination and selection processes² are fairly simple and straightforward – nearly completely devoid of the typical bureaucracy associated with most awards. Award nominations are limited to 100 words – typed or handwritten by an eligible nominating Commanding Officer. Nominated officers must be in command of a single ship, submarine, or aviation squadron, SEAL team (or naval special warfare squadron) SEAL delivery vehicle team, special boat team, explosive ordnance disposal mobile unit, mobile diving, and salvage unit, or navy special clearance team during the award cycle at the time of nomination. Candidates are nominated by peers who themselves are eligible for the award. The Fleet Commanders from the Pacific and Atlantic may send forward five nominees each. A CNO sponsored panel selects one winner from each of the two fleets.

CDR Phil M. Quast – The first Pacific winner

On 12 February 2008, coincidentally the 35th anniversary of VADM Stockdale’s release from nearly 8 years of captivity in Vietnam, the author had the opportunity to interview VADM Phillip M. Quast, the first winner of the VADM Stockdale award for inspirational leadership. Separated by hundreds of miles and untold cruelties, LT Quast and CDR Stockdale both courageously served their country in Vietnam. Both men were certainly shaped by their combat experience in Vietnam. At the time, LT Quast was a River Patrol Boat (PBR) commander operating on the Cambodia border during one of his two tours in Vietnam. LT Quast’s bright future career in the Navy was not a certainty – in fact, it was questionable. During his last scheduled Rest and Recuperation (R&R) in Hawaii with his beautiful wife Peggy, they had decided he would turn down his promotion to Lieutenant Commander and resign his commission after his tour of duty in Vietnam. As fate would have it, another remarkable Navy leader stepped in to help the Quasts reconsider their decision. Admiral Elmo Zumwalt was looking for sharp young officers to take back to the OPNAV staff in Washington, D.C. He sent one of his staff

officers into the jungles of Vietnam with LT Quast’s fitness report ready for signature and ADM Zumwalt’s personal request for LT Quast to join him in Washington, D.C. to “bring the Navy into the modern age”. Admiral Zumwalt and young LCDR Quast shared common traits as innovators and risk takers. And the rest, as they say, is history.



27 years of excellence in command

	Atlantic	Pacific
1981	CDR J.J. Coonan	CDR Phil M. Quast
1982	CDR E.L. Watkins	CDR G.R. Fister
1983	CDR J.B. Johnston	CDR W.J. Hancock
1984	CDR F.L. Yusi	CDR E.K. Kristensen
1985	CDR L.L. Ernst	CDR W. Hudson
1986	CDR M.A. Rogers	CDR B.J. Coyle
1987	CDR C.W. Moore	CDR Mike Mullen
1988	CDR W.J. Riffer	CDR J. Grossenbacher
1989	CDR R.M. Wikstrom	CDR T.B. Fargo
1990	CDR J.C. Holloway	CDR A.R. Gorthy
1991	CDR F.J. Dobrydney	CDR T.L. Travis
1992	CDR B.W. Cavey	CDR J.W. Greenert
1993	None	CDR C.A. Miletich
1994	CDR R.D. Jenkins	CDR R.C. Massey
1995	CDR J.T. Bader	CDR F.M. Drennan
1996	CDR R.D. Holland	CDR J.P. Wisecup
1997	CDR J.L. Clark	CDR M.W. Kenny
1998	CDR M.E. Kosnik	CDR C.E. Haney
1999	CDR W.E. Carter	CDR B.E. Grooms
2000	CDR M.D. Davis	CDR R. Hennegan
2001	CDR J. S. Jones	CDR J.M. Richardson
2002	CDR P.H. Young	CDR J.W. Covell
2003	CDR K.J. Kovacich	CDR C.M. Gaouette
2004	CDR S.D. Conn	CDR L.R. Hankins
2005	CDR R.P. Burke	CDR J.W. Kilby
2006	CDR R.L. Clemmons	CDR B.T. Howes
2007	CDR F.J. Olmo	CDR C.A. Clapperton

² IBID

When CDR Quast became the first Pacific recipient of the VADM James Bond Stockdale Leadership Award for inspirational leadership in 1981, he was unaware of its very existence. Nevertheless, he credits the award with shaping the rest of his naval career. Following command of USS Benjamin Stoddert (DDG-22) in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (where he earned the award), he joined a group of typically outstanding mid-grade officers on the OPNAV staff. From that group of impressive individuals, he was the one selected for major command at sea. He was assigned to the AEGIS cruiser, USS Bunker Hill (CG-52), and reported as its Prospective Commanding Officer (PCO) in Pascagoula, Mississippi to see her through all phases of construction. As the 6th Ticonderoga cruiser and first vertical launch System (VLS) to be built, USS Bunker Hill was a 'work in progress' in Pascagoula and Captain Quast had his hands full ensuring she was 'combat ready' when commissioned in 1986, within sight of her battle namesake. Less than a year later, USS Bunker Hill – with Captain Phil M. Quast in command – made her way via the Panama Canal to join the U.S. SEVENTH Fleet in Japan and started her first deployment to the Persian Gulf nearly a full year early to protect U.S. flagged tankers and other international shipping in the Straits of Hormuz. As the first selectee from the Pacific Fleet for the VADM Stockdale Award, CDR Phil M. Quast had unknowingly set a very high standard for all future selectees and motivated himself to even greater levels of performance. Now retired, VADM Quast serves as the Navy's Executive Learning Officer – helping Flag officers and senior executives to achieve their full potential as leaders, innovators and transformational change agents.

Extraordinary officers and gentlemen

The extraordinary officers and gentlemen who followed CDR Quast as VADM Stockdale Award winners are no less impressive. Most have gone on to major command and some have become Flag officers – men such as VADM Charles Moore, VADM John Grossenbacher, ADM Thomas Fargo, RDML Bruce Grooms, ADM Jonathan Greenert and current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – ADM Michael G. Mullen. This remarkable list would suggest that there might be little doubt that other awardees will become Flag officers when they become eligible.

The standard of selection for the award is resolute. In 1993, the Atlantic Fleet selectee was removed from the list. The unspoken reason - he failed to live up to the highest, uncompromising standards set by VADM Stockdale and the previous 24 selectees for the award.

Tested in combat

Many of the winners are combat tested warriors. Some new winners have come from duty in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and ongoing operations in Afghanistan. The conflict in Kosovo brought to light the leadership skills of a talented, self-assured naval officer. CDR Ted Carter was the commanding officer of the fighter squadron VF-14 'Tophatters' (oldest continuously operating squadron in Navy history) when he earned the award. He led his squadron in the early stages of Operation Allied Force over Kosovo where he flew the first Navy strike on 6 April 1999. He led the youngest and least experienced fighter pilots in Carrier Air Wing EIGHT (CVW-8). Despite their youth and inexperience (30% had never made a cruise), the VF-17 Ready Room and maintenance crews performed magnificently – 99.8% Full Mission Capable rate, completing 434 of 435 scheduled sorties. After CDR Carter won the award, VADM Stockdale took the time to write him a personal letter of congratulations and noted that he was the first fighter squadron CO to win the award in recent memory. This most certainly was a point of personal pride for VADM Stockdale who was a fighter squadron CO and Carrier Air Group (CAG) commander, himself. Captain Ted Carter is currently leading more than 4000 Sailors as commanding officer of USS CARL VINSON (CVN-70).

It is apparent that these commanding officers consistently led their commands to a higher level of individual performance and group achievement than most of their contemporaries. As an example, among the awards won by a single command in a single year: Battle "E", Safety "S", RADM Joseph C. Clifton Trophy (best fighter squadron in the Navy), Golden Anchor for exceptional retention and career programs, fighter pilot of the year, weapons officer of the year, maintenance officer of the year, and junior pilot of the year. These are remarkable achievements, but certainly not isolated. Without exception, VADM Stockdale

Inspirational Leadership award winners attributed their personal success to the significant efforts of the men and women assigned to their commands. Most of the winners of the VADM Stockdale award were not even aware of its existence; none sought to win it.

The challenges of command

Command leadership is a challenging undertaking even under the best of circumstances. Being in command of these ships and squadrons is not all about winning awards and accolades. It's about leading Sailors through some of the toughest personal and professional challenges imaginable. Over the past 27 years, among the many common challenges these COs said they faced were:

- the remnants of the 1970s drug culture
- permissiveness of society and racism
- the early phases of integration of women into aviation and shipboard environments
- leading inexperienced young men and women during demanding combat operations
- a sometimes indifferent Chief Petty Officers Mess and wardroom
- keeping ships and aircraft (which were in poor material condition) ready for combat over extended periods
- training their wardrooms – division officers and department heads
- getting their Sailors to believe in themselves, to believe in their ship/squadron' and to believe in their leaders
- maintaining a sense of ownership during crew swaps between the “old” ship and the “new” ship
- understanding the motivations of the Sailors and finding ways to direct their energy to the common good

How did these commanding officers lead their commands to heightened levels of mission accomplishment? There is no magic formula for success, but there is a great deal of commonality in their approach to mission accomplishment, something all of the winners were very good at. Nearly all of these COs:

- insisted that their Sailors, Chief Petty Officers and officers understood the command's mission and got them to support the command philosophy

- aligned Sailors, Chief Petty Officers and wardrooms activities with command, squadron and Navy goals
- developed and mentored their XOs as their replacements
- genuinely valued every individual member of the command and developed them as Sailors
- ensured standards were established, articulated well, understood and enforced without compromise
- networked with other COs to employ lessons learned and ‘best practices’
- valued the contributions of their Chief Petty Officers Mess
- developed their Chief Petty Officer mess and wardrooms – morally and intellectually
- built esprit de corps across the command
- trained, trained and then trained some more
- built positive external relationships with other ships and squadrons – Chief Petty Officers and Department Heads networked with other ships and squadrons

Can the traits be taught?

Are the traits and roles which VADM Stockdale exemplified throughout his career and those represented through the award teachable? Answers from the winners of the award were broad-ranging in response to that question.

Admiral Greenert, Commander Fleet Forces Command, probably captured the essence of the group's response when he said, “(We) **can and should introduce (the concepts) in the classrooms of officer accession training (USNA, NROTC, etc.). However, role models and mentors - leadership in action - accomplish most of this. We believe every unit commander and CO will have ample opportunity to display her/his mettle in these areas. Challenges and opportunities will be there. Our people are watching us. How we handle ourselves in these instances will speak volumes to them.”**

Similarly, Captain Lee Hankins (the 2004 PACFLT winner) noted, “...to answer your question, we can teach some of it...but it is my belief that Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson, John Paul Jones, and VADM Stockdale did not acquire their unique ability to win in a seminar.”

Captain Robert P. Burke (the 2005 LANTFLT winner) offered, "I think they are learned traits, but it requires an observant and perceptive student. I failed to get a number of my officers and chiefs to "get it", but that was likely due to my personal shortcomings – in another set of circumstances, they may have flourished. Classroom training and discussion have their value, but the real learning occurs from true mentoring of seniors to subordinates, which happens with each interaction of OOD to CO, or Duty Officer to XO, and the like - not via "mentoring websites" or discrete one-on-one sessions.

Captain Chuck Gaouette (2003 PACFLT winner) didn't mince words in saying, "The part which cannot be taught, at least not completely, is the human dimension. I think a sense of humility and willingness to self-critique in command are common traits among Stockdale winners. People are either humble or they are not. Regrettably, many in command are not. Not that we want a bunch of self-doubting little old ladies in command of ships...but people that are secure enough so that when something's not right, the first place they look is in the mirror..."

Captain John Covell (the 2002 PACFLT winner), current director of the Command Leadership School appropriately points out, "you can't lead if you don't read, so the CNO reading list is a great guide and a culture that encourages reading is important."

Captain Ted Carter advises, "I believe your conclusion should make the point that no matter how much reading and training we do in leadership, it is the "leader in action" that matters. I also believe strongly that all of these leaders are as unique as each individual. It took me a couple of days in command to understand that there is no copying someone else's leadership style. You do what you know to be right and simply be yourself. You give your folks good guidance and then trust in them to deliver."

And there was the real answer; it was evident all along. I apologize for saving it for the end – the leadership secret of these outstanding commanding officers that probably trumps them all – "GIVE YOUR FOLKS GOOD GUIDANCE AND TRUST IN THEM TO

DELIVER". I think VADM James Bond Stockdale would agree with Captain Ted Carter on that; it certainly reflects the leadership style of the extraordinary officers and gentlemen who have won the annual award given in his name.

"Leadership must be based on goodwill. Goodwill does not mean posturing and, least of all, pandering to the mob. It means obvious and wholehearted commitment to helping followers. We are tired of leaders we fear, tired of leaders we love, and most tired of leaders who let us take liberties with them. What we need for leaders are men of the heart who are so helpful that they, in effect, do away with the need of their jobs. But leaders like that are never out of a job, never out of followers. Strange as it sounds, great leaders gain authority by giving it away."

VADM James Bond Stockdale
Military Ethics

"Machiavelli, Management, and Moral Leadership." 1987