

REMARKS OF WING COMMANDER JAMES B. STOCKDALE TO THE PILOTS OF CARRIER AIR WING 16 ABOARD USS ORISKANY ON 29 APRIL 1965, AT SEA, EN ROUTE TONKIN GULF, ONE WEEK BEFORE THEY ENTERED COMBAT.

....having reviewed for you the terrain of Vietnam, the enemy's order of battle, the rules of engagement, and to some extent the modern history of the conflict and the evolution of America's strategy, I think I owe you in addition a straight from the shoulder discussion of pilots' mental attitudes and orientation in "limited war" circumstances. I saw the need for this last summer aboard TICONDEROGA - after the start of the war had caught us by surprise and we had gone through those first, exciting days pretty much on adrenaline. In the lull that followed, as we prepared for a next round, I could sense that those fine young men who had measured up so well in the sudden reality of flak and burning targets wanted to talk and get their resources and value systems lined up for the long haul. Like most of you, they were well read, sensitive, sometimes skeptical - those educated in the American liberal tradition to think for themselves - those who are often our most productive citizens - and just as often, our best soldiers. They realized that bombing heavily defended targets is serious business and no game - that it is logically impossible, in the violence of a fight, to commit oneself, as an individual, only in some proportion of his total drive and combative instinct. It has to be all or nothing; dog eat dog over the target. I think they were asking themselves, as you might - Where do I as a person, a person of awareness, refinement and education, fit into this "limited war", "measured response" concept?

I want to level with you right now, so you can think it over here in mid-Pacific and not kid yourself into imagining "stark realizations" in the Gulf of Tonkin. Once you go "feet dry" over the beach, there can be nothing limited about your commitment. "Limited war" means to us that our target list has limits, our ordnance loadout has limits, our rules of engagement have limits, but that does not mean that there is anything "limited" about our personal obligations as fighting men to carry out assigned missions with all we've got. If you think it is possible for a man, in the heat of battle, to apply something less than total personal commitment - equated perhaps to your idea of the proportion of national potential being applied, you are wrong. It's contrary to human nature. So also is the idea I was alarmed to find suggested to me by a military friend in a letter recently: that the prisoner of war's Code of Conduct is some sort of a "total war" document. You can't go half way on that, either. The Code of Conduct was not written for "total wars" or "limited wars", it was written for all wars, and let it be understood that it applies with full force to this Air Wing - in this war.

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(going all out)

What I am saying is that national commitment and personal commitment are two different things. All is not relative. You classical scholars know that even the celebrated "free thinker" Socrates was devoted to ridiculing the sophist idea that one can avoid black and white choices

in arriving at personal commitments; one sooner or later comes to a fork in the road. As Harvard's philosophy great, Alfred North Whitehead, said: "I can't bring half an umbrella to work when the weatherman predicts a 50% chance of rain." We are all at that fork in the road this week. Think it over. If you find yourself rationalizing about moving your bomb release altitude up a thousand feet from where your strike leader briefs it, or adding a few hundred pounds fuel to your over target bingo because "the Navy needs you for greater things," or you must save the airplane for some "great war" of the future, you're in the wrong outfit. You owe it to yourself to have a talk with your skipper or me. It's better for both you and your shipmates that you face up to your fork in the road here at 140° East rather than later, 2000 miles west of here, on the line.

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Let us all face our prospects squarely. We've got to be prepared to obey the rules and contribute without reservation. If political or religious conviction helps you do this, so much the better, but you're still going to be expected to press on with or without these comforting thoughts, simply because this uniform commits us to a military ethic - the ethic of personal pride and excellence that alone has supported some of the greatest fighting men in history. Don't require Hollywood answers to "What are we fighting for?" We're here to fight because it's in the interest of the United States that we do so. This may not be the most dramatic way to explain it, but it has the advantage of being absolutely correct.

I hope I haven't made this too somber. I merely want to let you all know first of all where this Wing stands on Duty, Honor and Country. Secondly, I want to warn you all of excessive caution. A philosopher has warned us, that of all forms of caution, caution in love is the most fatal to true happiness. In the same way I believe that "caution in war" can have a deleterious effect on your future self respect, and in that sense, surely your future happiness. When that Fox Flag is two-blocked in the Gulf, you'll be an actor in a drama that you'll replay in your mind's eye for the rest of your life. Level with yourself now. Do your duty.

Bert Russell

FOOTNOTE:

No one came forward with reservations. By the time ORISKANY returned to San Diego in December 1965, her pilots had earned a record total of military decorations for Vietnam carrier deployments. Of the 120 pilots addressed in this talk, 13 did not return with the ship. (8 were killed in action, 1 is still unaccounted for, and 4 - including the speaker - spent 7½ years as POW's in Hanoi.)