

HONOR BOUND¹REVIEWED BY COLONEL FRED L. BORCH²

This is truly the definitive work on the American prisoner of war (POW) experience in Southeast Asia, and no book could have been more thoroughly researched or provided more detail on American men (and women) held captive by the North Vietnamese, Viet Cong, Pathet Lao, and Communist Chinese between 1961 and 1973. The authors, Stuart Rochester, a professional historian at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Fred Kiley, a retired Air Force officer who teaches at the Air Force Academy, wrote *Honor Bound* as part of their official duties at the Department of Defense. The official nature of their research and writing meant not only that they had virtually unlimited access to official POW records (classified and unclassified), but also meant that they had ready access to the soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and civilians held as POWs during the Vietnam conflict.

Despite the tremendous volume of factual information in *Honor Bound*, the book is never tedious or boring. On the contrary, it is both riveting and compelling. Riveting because the dispassionate writing in *Honor Bound* has the opposite affect; the stories it tells of terrible suffering and incredible courage catch hold of the reader and do not let go. Compelling because what Stuart Rochester and Fred Kiley have written has a powerful and irresistible affect on the reader. Thus, for example, while many who read this book know that retired vice admiral and former vice presidential candidate Jim Stockdale was horribly brutalized by the North Vietnamese, the pages of *Honor Bound* leave no doubt why Stockdale was awarded the Medal of Honor after more than seven years as a POW. Stockdale's experiences—and those of men like John McCain, Bud Day, Nick Rowe, and others described in the book—are simply electrifying.

While much of *Honor Bound's* narrative focuses on the experiences of individual combat captives—which is more than enough reason to read the book—what really makes the monograph important is the “big picture” view it presents of the POW experience in Southeast Asia. For example,

1. STUART I. ROCHESTER & FREDERICK KILEY, *HONOR BOUND* (1999); published in Annapolis, Md. by the Naval Institute Press, 706 pages, \$46.00.

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Rochester and Kiley demonstrate conclusively that those Americans held in Laos and South Vietnam suffered more—and had markedly lower rates of survival—than those Americans held in Hanoi. It was better to be held by the North Vietnamese than suffer the “peculiar blend of bondage and vagabondage”³ that was the lot of POWs held in South Vietnam. But it was still better to be held prisoner by the Viet Cong rather than the Pathet Lao, whose poor treatment of American captives, combined with the “hostile environment”⁴ of Laos, made survival difficult at best.

Similarly, *Honor Bound* shows that American civilians taken prisoner in Southeast Asia suffered the same deprivations and brutal mistreatment as their military colleagues. For example, civilian pilot Ernest Brace, taken prisoner by the Pathet Lao in 1965, became “the longest-held civilian prisoner of war and the longest-held survivor, civilian or military, to return from Laos.”⁵ Finally, to ensure that the reader understands the full ramifications of life as a POW, *Honor Bound* includes a line drawing⁶ in explaining how the North Vietnamese tortured Americans in their custody.

Judge advocates will be particularly interested in the legal aspects of the POW experience in Southeast Asia. While *Honor Bound* does discuss the applicability of the Geneva Prisoners of War Convention, some readers will wish that Rochester and Kiley had explained more fully the evolution of American and South Vietnamese thinking about the legal status of POWs. Early in the Vietnam conflict, there was little interest in POWs or in the laws of war relating to combat captives. This was because the South Vietnamese took the view that the Viet Cong were bandits deserving prosecution and punishment as criminals. The decision to afford POW status to combat captives came only when large numbers of Americans began to be captured by the enemy.

Recognizing that Americans were not going to survive as POWs unless they obtained the protections of the Geneva Conventions, Army lawyers like Colonel George Prugh, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) Staff Judge Advocate from 1964 to 1966, led efforts to persuade the South Vietnamese that their conflict with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese was no longer an internal civil disorder. As a direct result of Prugh’s work, the military, and later the Government of South

3. ROCHESTER & KILEY, *supra* note 1, at 478.

4. *Id.* at 278.

5. *Id.* at 283.

6. *Id.* at 147.

Vietnam, acceded to the American view that the insurgency was an armed conflict of an international character, and that the benefits of the 1949 Geneva Prisoners of War Convention should be given all captured Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers. This was a public relations coup for the South Vietnamese.

At the same time, applying the benefits of the Convention to those combat captives held in South Vietnam did enhance the opportunity for survival of U.S. service members held by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. While the enemy never officially acknowledged the applicability of the Geneva Convention, and treatment of American POWs continued to be brutal, more U.S. troops were surviving capture. Gone were the days when an American advisor was beheaded, and his head displayed on a pole by the Viet Cong. On the contrary, the humane treatment afforded Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army prisoners exerted constant pressure on the enemy to reciprocate, and the American POWs who came home in 1973 survived, at least in part, because of a change in the law.

But, while *Honor Bound* might have benefited from more legal history, that arguably is specialized information that goes beyond the scope of the monograph. In any event, in the first eighty-five pages of their monograph, Rochester and Kiley do examine the experiences of French (and American) POWs held by the Viet Minh from 1946 to 1954, and also discuss the fate of prisoners held by the Viet Cong from 1961 to 1964. Consequently, the reader gets more than enough of a historical setting for the 500 pages that follow.

Honor Bound has received rave reviews in *The Washington Post* and other widely read newspapers and journals.⁷ The only criticism of note is worth mentioning if only to demonstrate its foolish character. After conceding that the book “contains just about any detail that a careful researcher could want,” the reviewer in the respected *Journal of Military History* complains that Rochester and Kiley fail to include information about deserters who, after absenting themselves from the American forces, remained in South Vietnam after hostilities ended.⁸ Certainly, it would have been interesting to learn what happened to the unknown number of Americans who intentionally were “Missing in Action.” But to criticize

7. See, e.g., Duane E. Frederic, *Official History Records the Valor of American POWs in Southeast Asia*, ARMY MAG., May 1999, at 61 (reviewing *Honor Bound*).

8. Merrill L. Bartlett, Book Review, *Honor Bound*, 63 J. MILITARY HISTORY 1043-44 (Oct. 1999).

Honor Bound for failing to examine this issue is misplaced. The clear focus of *Honor Bound* is on POWs—those held as combat captives against their will—and not on criminals.

Worth mentioning are the three appendices in *Honor Bound*. The first provides useful comparative data on POW numbers in World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. Appendix 2 provides locations of all POW camps in North Vietnam. While both are valuable, Appendix 3 is a treasure: a twenty-page alphabetical list of all U.S. personnel captured between 1961 and 1973. The list includes data on time spent as a prisoner and, where applicable, whether the POW died in captivity, escaped, or was eventually released. The reader will refer frequently to this appendix to discover the fate of each person discussed.

As Jim Stockdale writes in his Afterword to *Honor Bound*, the American POW experience in Southeast Asia was a “grim, sustained, and bloody struggle.”⁹ The irony is that while hundreds of thousands of American men and women could not prevail against the North Vietnamese and their allies, the POWs won their war through sheer determination. As the story of their fight, *Honor Bound* belongs in every library. It deserves the widest possible readership. It belongs on the bookshelf of everyone interested in the triumph of the human spirit—and the war in Vietnam.

9. ROCHESTER & KILEY, *supra* note 1, at 593.