



Defiant: The POWs Who Endured Vietnam's Most Infamous Prison, the Women Who Fought for Them, and the One Who Never Returned

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Winner of the Georgia Author of the Year Award in History

During the Vietnam War, hundreds of American prisoners-of-war faced years of brutal conditions and horrific torture at the hands of North Vietnamese guards and interrogators who ruthlessly plied them for military intelligence and propaganda. Determined to maintain their Code of Conduct, the POWs developed a powerful underground resistance. To quash it, their captors singled out its eleven leaders, Vietnam's own "dirty dozen," and banished them to an isolated jail that would become known as Alcatraz. None would leave its solitary cells and interrogation rooms unscathed; one would never return.

As these eleven men suffered in Hanoi, their wives at home launched an extraordinary campaign that would ultimately spark the nationwide POW/MIA movement. The members of these military families banded together and showed the courage not only to endure years of doubt about the fate of their husbands and fathers, but to bravely fight for their safe return. When the survivors of Alcatraz finally came home, one veteran would go on to receive the Medal of Honor, another would become a U.S. Senator, and a third still serves in the U.S. Congress.

A powerful story of survival and triumph, Alvin Townley's *Defiant* will inspire anyone wondering how courage, faith, and brotherhood can endure even in the darkest of situations.

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From Reader Review Defiant: The POWs Who Endured Vietnam's Most Infamous Prison, the Women Who Fought for Them, and the One Who Never Returned for online ebook

Dachokie says

Sobering and Though-provoking ...

This book was reviewed as part of Amazon's Vine program which included a free advance copy of the book.

Growing up in Va. Beach during the 70s, I distinctly remember wearing my mother's POW bracelet to school in 1st grade, even though I had no clue what it really meant. I also vaguely remember Jeremiah Denton's celebrated return (he was stationed in Va. Beach) in 1973. But, aside from reading Denton's "When Hell Was in Session" ions ago and the occasional media quip simply reminding us that John McCain was a POW, I really never received a proper understanding of the suffering experienced by American POWs in Vietnam until I read Alvin Townley's DEFIANT. Townley's collective account of eleven men who stood united and strong after almost a decade of unimaginable physical and mental torture proved to be an emotional read from beginning to end.

Townley's book details the experience of the "Alcatraz Eleven": eleven men who distinguished themselves as being so defiant to their captors that they were transported to a special prison within the POW system specifically designed to break their will by any means necessary. Paralleling the story of the long-term misery of these men is the account of a different misery experienced by their families back home, desperately trying to learn more about the status of their husbands/fathers but encountering frustrating bureaucratic incompetence and red tape.

DEFIANT is presented chronologically, starting with the first of the "eleven" captured with the remaining men individually brought into the story as they are in-turn captured. Even before the core group of eleven are in the same camp, a hierarchy is established according to military rank and the prisoners are expected to abide by the US military Code of Conduct which details how the men are to behave (resist) in captivity. The leadership quickly incorporates a simplified version of Morse Code that allows prisons to communicate with tapping fingers, broom strokes when sweeping or in Denton's case, blinking the code while being televised for propaganda purposes. From the start, the adherence to the Code of Conduct creates trouble for the captors who begin using torture to break the men's will to resist. When that doesn't work, the eleven key troublemakers/leaders of the prisoner resistance are plucked from the general POW prison (Hanoi Hilton) and transported to a much harsher prison that the men nicknamed "Alcatraz". At Alcatraz, the prisoners live in squalor and endure endless torture that bends but never breaks them. All eleven endure extreme physical pain at the hands of a sadist nicknamed Pigeye, who's proficient in using ropes to bend their bodies to the brink of snapping. Townley provides a fly-on-the wall perspective that allows readers to clearly see ("feel") the misery. What is difficult to fathom is that the torture wasn't occasional, but routine ... not for days, weeks or months, but YEARS. Amid the torture, these eleven prisoners STILL found ways to communicate, resist and endure. The display of ingenuity is amazing how things like loose wire, a small piece of clothing thread, tiny slivers of soap or other seemingly innocuous items became essential tools.

The book smoothly alternates between life in the prison and the desperate attempts of the families back home demanding government intervention to free their husbands/fathers. There is a palpable fear that as public support for the war sours, the POWs will be forgotten. I had no idea that the wives of the "Alcatraz Eleven"

were responsible for creating POW bracelets and the iconic POW/MIA logo. The determination, dedication and courage of POW wives is an oft-overlooked chapter of the home front during Vietnam and Townley does a good job of meshing the two sides of the spectrum (prison/home life) to provide a complete picture of the POW saga. I found the entire book to be an emotional read. While the outcome is known, the book provides the details that still manage to evoke moments of sadness, frustration, fear and jubilation, especially when the families' struggles at home are detailed. The stories of the men and their families doesn't end when they return home, Townley graciously brings readers up-to-date on the lives of those involved, leaving no questions unanswered for readers.

I found DEFIANT to be a thoroughly thought-provoking read from beginning to end. It is a story of patriotism, resilience, dedication and faith. While the Vietnam War may be a fading blemish on America's history, its public unpopularity should never overshadow the dedication to duty of those who selflessly served and the supportive families they left behind. DEFIANT reminds us of the caliber of men/women our country leans on in times of crisis.

Sharon says

I just finished this book this morning, and even as I sit to write a review I am at a loss for words. I did not grow up knowing details of, or understanding much of the Vietnam War. I was not yet alive when this all took place. I know it was a painful time in our country's history that so many have extremely passionate opinions about, and to that I do not assume to hold such an opinion. I always wanted to understand more.

Alvin Townley's "Defiant" allowed me to see through a peephole into the human spirit of men like I can only hope we still have fighting for our country today. The story of the eleven men who were imprisoned in Alcatraz in Northern Vietnam were men of character, courage, faith, integrity and valiance. The torture that was brought to life on the pages of Townley's book forced me to lay the book aside more than once, yet I could not put it down. I am proud to be a part of a country whose history includes these men, along with their wives and families back home who fought tirelessly for their lives and release.

I felt heartache and sickness as I read of the days and weeks of endless torture. I cried tears of joy and pride that welled up in the end as the men returned to lives that had been put on hold for them, luckier than I know many were. Though not often, I did laugh - being a born and bred Texan it made me chuckle to read that Sam Johnson ate Tex Mex for five days straight upon his return to the Lone Star State.

I read a lot, though not a lot of historical non-fiction. However, I would recommend this book to everyone who would like to have a glimpse of this time in our history, or into the lives of these men who served us so well. Alvin, great job on telling their stories to the rest of us!

J says

When I first started reading this book, it was overwhelming.

My initial feeling was that it was too maudlin, but there really is no way to describe the POW experience in

Vietnam. Alvin Townley holds nothing back, and there are some incredibly painful parts to get through. The upshot is that many POW'S survived despite the harsh, inhumane treatment suffered at the hands of their North Vietnamese captors. However of the Alcatraz Eleven, one did not make it out alive - they truly gave their all for America. Their families never forgot them.

Whenever the notion of 'heroes' comes to mind, I cannot imagine a better example than these men who underwent so much torture in service of their commitment to the American Constitution.

I highly recommend this book because it also offers a good oversight of American history during the Vietnam era. I don't care how tough you are, this story will give you pause and you won't be able to hold back the tears more than once.

Jaci says

It's not often that as you are reading book, you realize this is a story and characters who will stay with you the rest of your life. It's even better when the story is true, and the characters are actual people, many of whom are alive today.

This was my experience reading "Defiant," by Alvin Townley.

"Defiant" focuses on 11 Americans interned at the Hanoi Hilton, out of the hundreds of Americans being held and mistreated by the North Vietnamese. These 11 men were pegged by their captors as being the most unruly, the most obstinate – the most defiant – out of all the Americans they held. They were then singled out and transported to a smaller camp they called "Alcatraz," to keep them away from the general population.

"Defiant" introduces us to each of these men – Jim Stockdale, Jerry Denton, Bob Shumaker, Harry Jenkins, Sam Johnson, George McKnight, Jim Mulligan, Ron Stortz, George Coker, Howie Rutledge and Nels Tanner – as they arrive at the Hanoi Hilton. All pilots who lost their planes, from the Navy and the Air Force. A couple of the men were in their 20s when they were captured. The rest range from mid-30s to early-40s.

For nearly a decade, these men endured physical and psychological torture the likes of which I'd only heard vague references to in the past. Every time they claimed their human rights under the Geneva Convention, their condition worsened as their captors were antagonized.

Meanwhile, their families were back stateside, waiting. Some of the spouses had the benefit of a visit from a military chaplain and commander's spouse to tell them their husband was missing or captured. But some didn't, they just knew their husband was gone and couldn't get official confirmation from the government. All of them were told the same thing: "Keep Quiet." Tell no one about your family's situation. Don't talk to the press, don't tell anyone outside of immediate family (if you must even tell them), don't even discuss it with other families on base.

The justification for this unofficial order was, supposedly, the Pentagon was afraid that news of the POWs' capture would embolden the North Vietnamese to mistreat their prisoners and attempt to capture more. Their thinking was, if we don't "embarrass" them on the international stage, they will have no motivation to mistreat the downed pilots.

With that spectre hanging over the families' heads, they dutifully kept silent – for years.

Unfortunately, disgustingly, that wasn't the case at all. Because the North Vietnamese were able to act without any outside scrutiny, there was nothing holding them back from brutalizing their prisoners. They refused to allow the POWs to refer to themselves as "prisoners," only "criminals," as in war criminals. And as war criminals, they were told they had no protection from the Geneva Convention's ban on torture.

Some of the most famous stories from the Vietnam POWs, like the POW who blinked the message of "T-O-R-T-U-R-E" during a televised interview where he "confessed" to (false) war crimes and the one who confessed to committing war crimes under orders from Clark Kent, come from this group of men.

I'm not someone who watches Holocaust movies (never watched "Schindler" and never plan to), the "Saw" movies or anything that I know will involve gruesome depictions of gratuitous violence. Just not my thing. I agreed to read and review "Defiant" with hesitation. I knew it would be rough. Even after it arrived, I didn't pick it up right away.

But then I did. And I am so glad.

This is one of the most inspirational non-fiction reads I've picked up in a while. "Inspirational" might seem like a strange word to describe the story of the Alcatraz 11 and their families, but it's true. To read about the agonies these men endured physically, and what they overcame mentally, is breathtaking. And they didn't only endure for their own sakes – hundreds of other POWs would credit the leadership of the Alcatraz 11 as instrumental in their own survival.

In the same way, the waiting families in the states fought their own battles. Imagine going years without knowing whether your loved one was alive or dead, and being told you weren't allowed to share your burden with anyone else, even within the military community (yes, that's right). Once they discovered they were alive, they were told again to stay silent and wait and hope for the best. The wives courageously disobeyed.

There came a point in the narrative where I suddenly realized, they've been gone for nearly a decade...but they do come home. They'll come home to families that look different than when they left, many to children who don't even know them. What kind of reintegration will that be like? How do you overcome 8 years of separation? The POWs' faith plays an important part in that respect. When Howie Rutledge learns that his son became paralyzed through an accident during Howie's captivity, his response to the news made me cry openly.

There were many opportunities for reflection while I read through the Alcatraz 11's experience. Probably the biggest takeaway for me personally was being reminded that in the end, I am my soldier's #1 advocate. The US government was on the path to pulling out of Vietnam without securing the return of our own POWs until the POW/MIA organization – formed by these POWs' families – put the pressure on the Pentagon and White House to get firm commitments from the North Vietnamese government.

I've already gone on longer than I do for most book reviews, and I could continue with twice this much again. I loved "Defiant," I will definitely read it again, and I strongly encourage each of you to grab it ASAP. It is time well-spent.

Van Reese says

This was one of the most difficult and inspiring books I have read in a long time. Difficult due to the extreme torture these men went through. Inspiring because of their extreme courage, their devotion to their country, their devotion to God, their families, and to each other.

There were hundreds of POWs by the end of the war in Vietnam. The large majority were heroes by any measure. This book focuses on 11 men who were singled out for their leadership in resisting the Camp Authority. These men would stand as great American heroes in any time, and in any place. It is unfortunate that most Americans do not know of these remarkable men. Now I know, and can never forget. It is rare that a book affects me the way this book has.

The author does a great job of telling the difficult facts without making it seem gratuitous. I liked how he was able to combine the story of the equally remarkable women who actually made it possible for these men to survive and "Return with honor". I highly recommend this book; everyone should know this story.

Steven says

By April 1, 1974, 456 American servicemen held as POW's in North Vietnam would pass through Clark Air Base; 27 died in captivity. Of those in the Hanoi Hilton, 11 leaders were banished to a separate facility they called "Alcatraz" The first member of the Alcatraz 11, Bob Shumaker, spent 8 years and 1 day in captivity. George Coker, one of the 11, spent his worst days reciting the Scout Oath and Law after everything else faded, including scripture. He said he could only remember the Oath and Law and that helped save his sanity. One of the prisoners, Jerry Denton, blinked with his eyes, T-O-R-T-U-R-E in morse code during a rigged television interview. They spent years in solitary confinement - but they devised ways to communicate - morse code tapping on the walls-leaving notes written on toilet paper in strategic places. They would not relent to the torture - they maintained a code of conduct. Amazing.

Alice M Crowley says

My uncle was a POW in Japan during WWII. He survived the Death March of Bataan and 3 years in a Japanese camp. I grew up aware of the after effects in his life, although I didn't yet know the term yet - PTSD. Regardless of our stance on the government's involvement in Vietnam or other military engagement, we Americans must acknowledge the sacrifice others make to defend our freedom to disagree.

Steven Z. says

For those individuals who were in awe of Laura Hillenbrand's description of the imprisonment of Louis Zamperini in her book UNBROKEN, the emotions that you experienced will be repeated many times over should you choose to read Alvin Townley's new book DEFIANT: THE POWS WHO ENDURED VIETNAM'S MOST INFAMOUS PRISON, THE WOMEN WHO FOUGHT FOR THEM AND THE ONE WHO NEVER RETURNED. Townley recreates the experiences of America's POWs from the Vietnam War. Instead of presenting a general account that encompasses all POWs, Townley focuses on eleven men, who became known as the "Alcatraz eleven," ten of whom returned from their ordeal and one who did not. The author takes you inside the North Vietnamese prison system during the war as we follow each individual

from their training, their war experiences, culminating in their being shot down over North Vietnam and their capture and imprisonment. The men were imprisoned and tortured by their captors and the story Townley relates is one of the human spirit overcoming the most unimaginable events that one might create in one's imagination. Jerry Coffee, one of the POWs summarized their feelings in conversation with James Stockdale, the ranking leader of the "Alcatraz eleven" by quoting from the poem "Invictus:"

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul. (259)

From the outset of the book Townley addresses the controversies that surround America's involvement in Vietnam. Through the eyes of Commander James Stockdale we experience the chaos of August 4, 1964 and the reported North Vietnamese attacks on the USS Turner Joy and USS Maddox. Stockdale witnessed events in the cockpit of his F-8 Crusader and saw little evidence of the attack on the USS Maddox. These events were manipulated by President Lyndon Johnson to force through Congress the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (passed the Senate 98-2) and put the United States on a course that would result in the quagmire of Vietnam. Townley does an excellent job integrating the political and military events that took place throughout the incarceration of the POWs. The author provides analysis and cause and effect decisions that affected the men. The Johnson administration's policy of having the families of the downed fliers "keep quiet" did not allay the daily anxiety faced by the spouses and ended in the formation of the League of Wives of American Vietnam Prisoners of War in 1967 under the leadership of Sybil Stockdale and Louise Mulligan. The role of the wives is integral to the story that is recounted as these women refused to accept government stonewalling. Finally, at the end of the Johnson administration they took it upon themselves to educate and bring to the attention of the American people the plight of their husbands. With the election of Richard Nixon they found an administration that was more open to their requests. Though manipulated at times for domestic and diplomatic reasons, the actions of the US government changed and it carried over to the prisons in and around Hanoi and engendered a change in the torture policy pursued by Camp authorities employed against their husbands.

The book provides moving description of the torture that the POWs experienced. The North Vietnamese government's "Enemy Proselytizing Department's" goal was to gain information from the POWs that could be used as propaganda against the United States. When individual POWs were brought individually for interrogation they tried to follow the four rules of conduct that the prisoners developed under the leadership of Stockdale. When they refused to speak, using the Geneva Convention as a shield they were told by their captors that "you are not a prisoner of war... Your government has not declared war upon the Vietnamese people. You must answer my questions. You are protected by no international law." (55) Their rationale was that the POWs were criminals and that justified the application of torture. Townley goes into intimate detail describing the torture techniques and their affect on the men. All eleven were broken mentally and physically at one time or another and gave in to their captors demands. This provoked tremendous guilt on the part of the POWs as they felt they had let their country and comrades down. Part of the reason they were able to survive the demeaning conditions and mental and physical cruelty they suffered was the bond that was fostered under the leadership senior officers. These officers helped develop a communication system within the prison through the use of a code employed during the Korean War. One of the captives, Captain Carlyle "Smitty" Harris had overheard the use of a five by five alphabetic grid during an Air Force Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape School he attended before he was deployed, and helped educate the others in its use. The communication network relied on tapping and other ingenious methods to keep as many prisoners in the loop as possible. The North Vietnamese officials tried repeatedly to end all communication by torturing the men but were never able to shut it down. The ability to communicate provided the men companionship and sanity throughout their ordeal and reflects the amazing resourcefulness they developed in

captivity.

Townley discusses all eleven POWs but focuses the most on senior officers, Commanders James Stockdale and Jeremiah Denton. By 1966 the North Vietnamese camp authorities told them “to choose the path of cooperation and lenient treatment or the path of resistance and punishment; they sought to separate the potentially cooperative from the stubbornly intransigent.” (113) all eleven men chose the path of “resistance and punishment” and paid dearly for their decisions. In a sense as the POWs pursued their intransigent attitude they became role models for each other and they looked at each other as positive examples which allowed them to cope with all attempts to break them physically and mentally.

In October, 1967 the men left the “Hanoi Hilton” and were transferred to a former French citadel one mile away. The conditions were brutal, the torture increased, and many were subjected to further isolation; this prison was nicknamed, Alcatraz. The rhythm of captivity was ongoing, for example, a POW would be asked to write an apology or condemnation of American policy. The POW would refuse and then he would be subjected to the most gruesome torture techniques. Finally, the POW would succumb to write whatever he was ordered to. This would continue in Alcatraz over and over for all eleven captives. The only let up took place when Ho Chi Minh died on September 2, 1969 and was replaced by Le Duan in the North Vietnamese hierarchy. In addition to Ho’s death, Sybil Stockdale and Louise Mulligan’s organizational pressure on the Nixon administration led to a press conference where the US government finally went public with the information they had on prisoner treatment. As a result in December, 1970, for the first time, Hanoi released the names of 368 POWs. (301) Though torture was rare in the final years of captivity, the affects of imprisonment remained.

As the negotiations in Paris finally bore fruit the men were released and returned to their families in February, 1973. The question that dominated my thinking as I read Townley’s account was how these men survived their experience, some as many as eight years in captivity. According to James Stockdale it was not his training, “rather [it was] his mind, the faith shared among prisoners, and the love of family, who now awaited his imminent return had kept him alive during the horrid term of imprisonment.” (348) Upon their release Townley artfully brings the reader to the tarmac as the POWs arrive home to meet their spouses and children, some of whom they did not know since they were babies when they left. As you read the authors description of the reunions it is very difficult to maintain dry eyes. This is a book that should be read by all as not to forget the 58,000 deaths and over 300,000 wounded that the Vietnam War caused, as well as the trials that our current military families have suffered in the two wars that the United States has fought since 2001.

Rick says

Alvin Townley has done a great service to Vietnam Veterans by showing the true nature of who the enemy was. At times I find it difficult to read because it was so sad but I had to because Townley wrote such a compelling story. The amount of torture faced by American servicemen in Hanoi is disgraceful and the story is encouraging about how they generally worked together to support one another. One thing I found very disgraceful was the Johnson administration's head in the sand approach towards the issue and really lack of concern for the POWs.

This is an unheard story of American military history and I strongly suggest you read it!

Stephanie Giegerich says

Incredible! Couldn't put it down. Very well written. Hard to believe the author hadn't been there himself. Very moving and inspirational. Some parts difficult to read. The least I could do was read them since I didn't have to suffer through it myself. So much admiration and respect for all soldiers and vets but especially for these guys.

Jas says

Detailing the tortuous experiences of the leaders of the POWs in the prisons of North VietNam from beginning to their lives afterward.

Mike Raymond says

Just finished reading 'Defiant: The POWs Who Endured Vietnam's Most Infamous Prison, the Women Who Fought for Them, and the One Who Never Returned.' It brought back memories of me, as a seven year old in my apartment on Delores St. , watching servicemen on TV stepping off the plane and into the waiting arms of their family. This was their 'return with honor.'

During those broadcasts, I had hoped to see my dad walking off that plane. A couple of decades later, I found myself undergoing POW (or SERE) training at Fairchild AFB. Suffice it to say that I had an abiding interest in this book. This book surprised me in many ways, and not entirely because it depicts the genesis of the POW/MIA movement...started by several of the wives from these incorrigible eleven who made up the 'Alcatraz Gang.'

These eleven downed flyers, whose strict adherence to the Military Code of Conduct were so meddlesome to their North Vietnamese captors that they were set aside in an isolated prison (that the prisoners named Alcatraz). Needless to say, their treatment there was particularly harsh, even by North Vietnamese standards. I am moved enough by their bravery to include their names here: Coker, Denton, Jenkins, Johnson, McKnight, Mulligan, Rutledge, Shumaker, Stockdale, Storz., Tanner. All returned home except Storz, who died in captivity.

I knew of Stockdale (who was awarded the Medal of Honor) and Denton (who blinked T-O-R-T-U-R-E using Morse Code while being televised), but I really didn't know much about the other nine who led the resistance. Also, the book highlights the Paris peace talks, and how the prisoners became (as a result of their wives' insistence) a condition for U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam. Lastly, the book echoed a sentiment that I had always felt but could never adequately express: that no matter how one felt about that conflict (and, yes, there was much division within the country), people were and have been generally united in their sentiments toward the Vietnam POW's, who incidentally became the longest held American captives of any of our conflicts – many as long as 8 years.

They endured captivity and torture, in unspeakable conditions, in the defense of our freedom, never lost faith and, most important to this story, they returned with honor!

Dara says

I had a hard time putting this book down.

Jeri says

Very well written. The book brought it all back for me. I wish everyone would read it.

Elmwoodblues says

At the USAF Museum in Dayton, Ohio, there is a reproduction of the 'cells' from the 'Hanoi Hilton'. They are inhumane on many levels, but the sounds of the crowd and all the static displays soon draw you back to the exhibits, and your life. Townley does a good job of relating how the discomfort of such a small cell was possibly one of the least-inhumane aspects of what the Vietnam-era POW's had to endure.

Solitary confinement, torture, subsistence-level nutrition: the list of cruelty goes on *ad nauseum*. (Perhaps too long, if that does not sound overly callous from a pampered reader typing in a cushioned chair while sipping coffee.) Much like 'Unbroken', another true POW story set in Asia, 'Defiant' illustrates not only the depths of human cruelty but the heights of resilience.

Like any book on war, there is enough outrageous waste and unfairness to go around, and one should leave politics at the door in order to enjoy this story for what it is: a story told from one side, about incredible ordeals suffered and surmounted by members of that side.
