

THE ALCATRAZ ELEVEN

*The American POWs Sentenced to Vietnam's Most Infamous Prison
And the Extraordinary Women Who Brought Them Home*

By Alvin Townley ▪ St. Martin's Press, New York ▪ Winter 2014

Overview

Hundreds of brave Americans were held captive during the Vietnam War. From those, the North Vietnamese singled out the eleven most uncooperative, influential, and subversive prisoners and exiled them to an isolated prison the POWs named Alcatraz for the loneliness, suffering, and torture they endured there. As these men valiantly waged war from their tomblike cells, the defiance, resilience, and unity of THE ALCATRAZ ELEVEN became legend.

While North Vietnam imprisoned these men for more than seven years, their remarkable wives soldiered on at home; some didn't learn their husbands' fate for more than four years. These women also led a struggle with the U.S. and North Vietnamese governments alike to secure the safe return of their loved ones. Their legacy lives on in the National League of POW/MIA Families, which they founded.

THE ALCATRAZ ELEVEN recounts the epic and inspiring triumph of courage, faith, and honor in the darkest of circumstances.

The Alcatraz Eleven during Vietnam



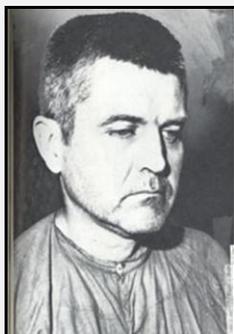
Bob Shumaker becomes the second POW in North Vietnam (1965).



American POWs endure a public march through violent mobs in Hanoi.



Jerry Denton blinks "Torture" in Morse Code in a TV interview.



Medal of Honor recipient Jim Stockdale, an Alcatraz leader.



Sybil Stockdale, POW activist and a founder of the National League.



The National League, founded and led by Alcatraz Eleven wives.



Operation Homecoming (1973): POWs return home after up to eight years as prisoners in North Vietnam.

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The heroes of Alcatraz



Left: The men and women of the Alcatraz Eleven (2002): George & Suzanne McKnight, Sam & Shirley Johnson, Nels & Sara Ann Tanner, Jim & Louise Mulligan, Bob & Lorraine Shumaker, Jeremiah & Jane Denton, George & Pam Coker, Jim & Sybil Stockdale.

Below: The eleven heroes of Hanoi's infamous "Alcatraz" prison. The North Vietnamese identified these men as among their most subversive American captives.



George Coker



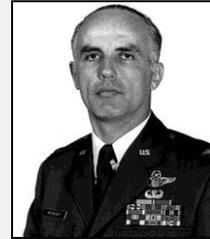
Jeremiah Denton



Harry Jenkins



Sam Johnson



George McKnight



Jim Mulligan



Ron Storz



Howie Rutledge



Bob Shumaker



Jim Stockdale



Nels Tanner

Alvin Townley



Best-selling author Alvin Townley has traveled the world to discover inspiring stories of leadership, adventure, and purpose. His journeys have led to his nationally-acclaimed books, *Legacy of Honor*, *Spirit of Adventure*, *Fly Navy*, and *The Alcatraz Eleven*. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

President **Jimmy Carter** said, "*Legacy of Honor*...will inspire readers to become leaders in serving others." Defense Secretary **Robert Gates** called it "inspirational." Quarterback **Peyton Manning** noted, "*Spirit of Adventure* tells a compelling story about America's future," and Commander of Naval Air Forces Admiral **Tom Kilcline** said, "*Fly Navy* crystallizes the imagination of flight into true inspiration."

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The story in brief

As the air war raged over North Vietnam, hundreds of U.S. airmen found themselves in the POW camps of Hanoi where they faced a cadre of interrogators and henchmen who would inflict such agony upon them that had they known what horror awaited them inside Hỏa Lò Prison – the *Hanoi Hilton* – many would have chosen to perish with their airplane. Yet deep in their very souls, they found the strength to endure and overcome, day after day, year after year, for more than seven years.

At home, families often received no news from Hanoi about their loved one's fate; many suffered alone, in silence and isolation imposed by their very own government. In time, these remarkable women would find each other and fight for their families when it seemed nobody else would. They finally and boldly broke the government's "keep quiet" policy and founded the National League of POW/MIA Families which brought worldwide attention to North Vietnam's disregard of the Geneva Convention. Together, these women would inspire a nation and bring their husbands home.

The North Vietnamese locked many Americans in solitary confinement, keeping them in leg irons, feeding them a starvation diet, and plying them for information and propaganda. The Americans resisted valiantly, adhering to the U.S. military's Code of Conduct and refusing to surrender information and compromise their honor. But under the orders of interrogators nicknamed Cat, Rat, Mickey Mouse, and Rabbit, a sadistic guard known as Pigeon tortured countless Americans into submission. Nobody could resist indefinitely. The POWs fought losing battles, yet courageously summoned their resolve and dwindling strength to resist time and again. Ironclad faith in God, country, and each other saw them through the hardest times.

POWs throughout Hanoi became a veritable army under Alcatraz leaders like Medal of Honor recipient Jim Stockdale, future U.S. Senator Jerry Denton, and future (and current) Congressman Sam Johnson. They desperately battled their enemies in torture rooms and jails named New Guy Village, the Zoo, Little Vegas, Stardust, and the Mint.

From these hundreds of POWs arose a group of eleven individuals whose boldfaced defiance and unwavering leadership never ceased to infuriate and confound the North Vietnamese. The captors considered these rogues – these leaders, resistors, escape artists, subversives, incorrigibles – their worst POWs; America would consider them among her best.

The Camp Authority opened a special facility to isolate these irrepressible captives; they called this darkest of dungeons "ALCATRAZ." The eleven Americans sentenced to its 4'x 9' concrete cells constantly battled boredom and torture. These aviator-POWs became known as THE ALCATRAZ ELEVEN, the most honored and unique group of Vietnam War POWs.

When America's POWs finally returned home in 1973 – after up to eight years in captivity – they became a rare positive glimmer in a long and unpopular war. Their return helped a nation heal. Their homecoming brought America true heroes who had endured brazen inhumanity, but who persevered and returned home with honor. Rarely have such committed servicemen and families sacrificed and endured so much for so long.

A story of survival and triumph in the vein of Laura Hillenbrand's UNBROKEN and BAND OF BROTHERS, THE ALCATRAZ ELEVEN will inspire anyone wondering how courage, faith, and brotherhood can endure even in the darkest of situations.

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