

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973<sup>1</sup>**

Alice A. Booher<sup>2</sup>

In the decade since *Honor Bound* first became available, it has become the seminal volume about this special facet of the Vietnam War, the imprisonment of American Prisoners of War (POWs).<sup>3</sup> The reading public should consider itself fortunate to have this new trade paperback edition, as the earlier hardback copies have become as scarce as the proverbial hen's tooth, and often permanently reside on some historian's shelf as a primary resource tool.

*Honor Bound* is textually intricate and of substantively staggering weight. It is no wonder that it took 20 years to write,<sup>4</sup> including many declassifications,<sup>5</sup> but the authors, who are meticulous, recognized

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<sup>1</sup> STUART I. ROCHESTER & FREDERICK KILEY, *HONOR BOUND: AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1961-1973* (1st paperback ed., Naval Inst. Press 2007) (hereinafter *HONOR BOUND*). *See also*, *HONOR BOUND: THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1961-1973* (1998) (first published by the Government Printing Office for the Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense); *HONOR BOUND: AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1961-1973* (Naval Inst. Press 1999).

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<sup>3</sup> Note the abbreviation "PW," commonly used by the military services, is used throughout the book, rather than "POW." *HONOR BOUND*, *supra* note 1, at ix, n.\*.

<sup>4</sup> *HONOR BOUND*, *supra* note 1, at xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Goldberg, *Foreword to HONOR BOUND*, *supra* note 1, at viii.

military scholars,<sup>6</sup> have maximized all available data to provide a fluid and compelling history. While acknowledging that the opinions are their own, they nonetheless amass raw data that is unyielding and self-sustaining. Some details are excruciatingly complex, and the aggregate is unlike any other current volume even vaguely attempting to chronicle those years. Then Secretary of Defense William Cohen observed in 1999 that the book was “a conversation with men of hope . . . humor . . . [and] history,”<sup>7</sup> and that description remains valid if not intensified.

Many of the POWs from the Vietnam Era have individually written their own credible books, but *Honor Bound* tells the story of all of them, both well-known and unknown.<sup>8</sup> The authors reflect at the outset that there is “no single, monolithic [POW] experience,”<sup>9</sup> and that recollections and opinions may well differ.<sup>10</sup> Honest memories in even non-pressured souls may be at some variance, but the book endeavors to address circumstances, settings, and players in an evenhanded light. That said, *Honor Bound* tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive of idiosyncratic “warts” among the POWs,<sup>11</sup> but without berating and in a remarkably nonjudgmental manner. The stories are set in a historical perspective (which for Southeast Asia goes back virtually forever) and the book excels at grasping the totality of the roots of much of what occurred during captivity.

It is gratifying that the several hundred servicemen and civilian men and women patriots, from a variety of nonmilitary/government groups, who fought and sometimes died in their own horrific and often

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* (noting that Frederick Kiley, Ph.D., is a retired Air Force officer who served as a professor of English at the Air Force Academy, an adviser to the Vietnamese Air Force in Vietnam, and Director of the National Defense University Press, and who has published articles on prisoners of war and other subjects; and that Stuart I. Rochester, Ph.D., taught history at Loyola College in Baltimore before joining the OSD Historical Office, and has authored books and articles about military history).

<sup>7</sup> William S. Cohen, Secretary of Defense, Remarks at Pentagon in Commemoration of HONOR BOUND (Jan. 25, 1999), <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=330>.

<sup>8</sup> HONOR BOUND, *supra* note 1, at xv-xvi (listing all former prisoners of war whose accounts of their experiences were included in the book).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at xi.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at xiv (acknowledging that “countless hours” of research “have not clarified all the confusion, resolved all conflicts, or filled in all gaps.”).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

bizarre battles in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, are equitably addressed, often for the very first time in print, forthrightly and credibly, in a scholarly manner. Let there be no doubt, this is one serious, massive compilation, but the subject is nonetheless sympathetically and honorably addressed.

*Honor Bound* has received all sorts of prizes, including U.S. Naval Institute book of the year in 1999.<sup>12</sup> But ongoing efficacy often comes with availability, and the recent issuance of this soft cover will measurably benefit those who have had a hard time getting their hands on it otherwise.

If for nothing else but the research wealth, exhaustive appendices include the names of the camps in North Vietnam and all POWs' names, services, dates of capture and release, and status.<sup>13</sup> This is a book for everyone, from serious scholars to the merely puzzled, as an extraordinarily complete and objective source of fact/truth, both as an explicative and a life-long instrument for insights and, when necessary, perhaps, absolution.

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<sup>12</sup> E-mail from Judy Heise, Publicist, Naval Inst. Press, to Alice A. Booher, Counsel, Board of Veterans' Appeals (Sept. 24, 2008, 08:00 EST) (on file with VETERANS LAW REVIEW).

<sup>13</sup> HONOR BOUND, *supra* note 1, at apps.